

# Language contact in English

## Substrata in Asian Englishes

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## Introduction

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## Introduction to language contact

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Often these languages are not of equal **prestige**.

This is especially true in **colonial** contexts when one language is imposed as a *lingua franca* for education, or where many adult **L2** speakers converge on one language.

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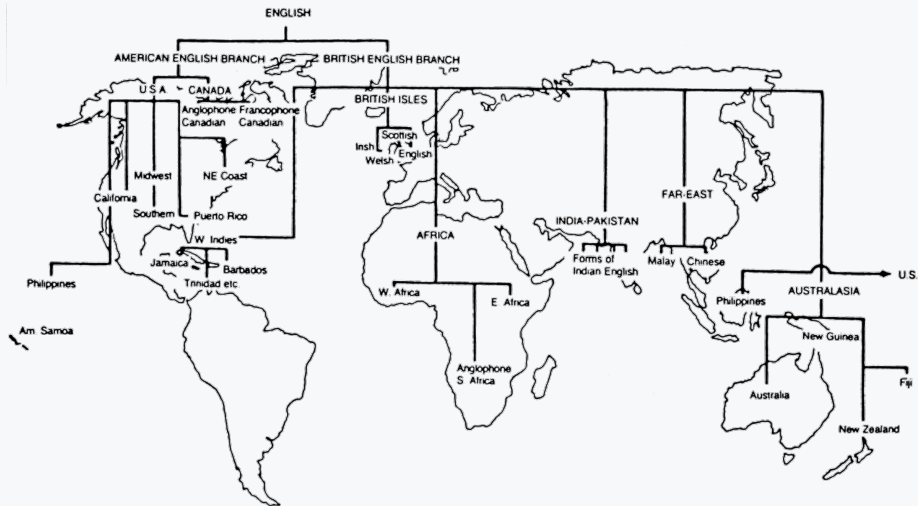
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Language contact can influence **pronunciation, syntax, vocabulary**, and even **semantics**\*

For English, British Colonialism has resulted in many such local Englishes.

Today we will investigate **two such examples**.

e.g. German *Arbeit* 'work' borrowed into Korean as 아르바이트 for 'part-time job'



From: Strevens, 1992. "English as an International Language: Directions in the 1990s"

## Singaporean English

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# Singaporean English (SgE)

In both of the examples we will discuss, English is the **superstratum** - the higher-status language

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- and later, **Cantonese** (Lim 2007)



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The main effects that **mark** SgE are the **prosody** (or intonation\* and cadence), and the use of **modal particles** or 語氣詞.

Correct use of the modal particles is a significant **shibboleth** or indicator of being a proficient or native speaker (Wong 2004).

\* And in some cases, maybe even developing a tonal system (Ng, 2008)



## Modal particles

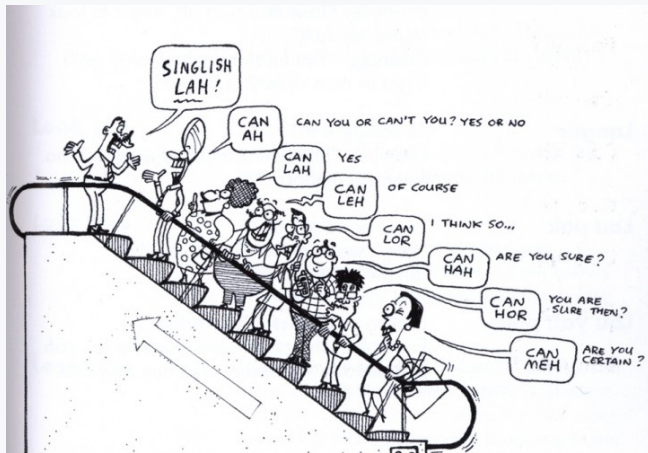
In languages like Mandarin, where **intonation** is less significant (or available) for conveying moods, **modal particles** are an alternative way to convey the speaker's attitude.

- 你來吧 general command
- 你來呀 friendlier
- 你來囉 surprised
- 你來嘛 impatient / expected

English does not use these, but rather relies on intonation.

Except, of course, English varieties with much stricter **prosody**, such as SgE

# Singapore English



From: [globalliteratures.wordpress.com/2016/02/11/writing-singlish/](http://globalliteratures.wordpress.com/2016/02/11/writing-singlish/)

## Modal particles in Singaporean English

Some of the more common particles are directly taken from Chinese languages:

1. **lah** functions as emphasis, softening, confirmation-seeking
2. **meh** conveys disbelief, borrowed directly from Cantonese to include the tone
3. **lor** indicates dismissiveness and a degree of speaker knowledge

These three are old, but new forms are still being introduced into SgE.

For example, **sia** used by younger speakers to express shock or disbelief.

Modal particles in SgE are an important marker of **national identity**, showing clear and sometimes intentional **substratum** influence.

## Prosodic features of SgE

English dialects often differ considerably in **prosody**.

For example, Australian English has much more pitch changes than northern American English

Likewise, Singaporean English features predictable **word-final high tones** on content words, *regardless* of underlying stress placement.

This means less prominent English *word-level* stress patterns, and much greater importance of *phrase-level* pitch marking. English, commonly described as **stress timed** is, in Singapore more similar to being **syllable timed**\*

\*note that *isochrony*, the notion of regularity in rhythm, is a useful concept but not a hard truth

## Conclusions around Singaporean English

1. SgE presents an interesting case of a heavily conforming variety of the language, showing features from **Malay** and **Sinitic**.
2. While **ethnolects** are still found in Singapore, the dialect's wide-spread use is not restricted only to speakers of those backgrounds, especially among younger speakers.
3. It is a good example of a **substratum** / **superstratum** situation where the source languages are easily detected (even precisely in some cases e.g. Cantonese).

## Indian English

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# Indian English (IndE)

English has been a common *lingua franca* in many parts of India although Hindi is now being pushed by the ruling party.

It has a number of interesting features which are often **calques** of forms from other South Asian languages.



*Calques* are near-direct translations between languages, e.g. *long time no see* from 好久不見

## Adjectival reduplication in Indian English

One example is the highly **productive** use of **reduplication**, particularly for the purpose of **intensification**.

That is, rather than using a word like “very”, IndE speakers will often repeat an adjective or adverb.

- “hot hot coffee” - very hot coffee
- “long long hair” - very long hair
- “slowly slowly” - very slowly

While IndE is not a monolith, and different forms do exist, adjective reduplication is a typical morphosyntactic construction across varieties (Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006)



## Verbal reduplication in Indian English

Reduplication of verbs can also be used to convey emphasis or warmth, depending on the context.

- "Come come!"
- "Sit sit!"
- "Go go!"

More often than not this results in a warmer sense similar to particles like 呀 in Mandarin.

Verbs can also be reduplicated to indicate **continued action** or **repetition**, as well as other common features of reduplication found cross-linguistically.

## Indian-Chinese typological parallels?

Other expressions found in English may be more familiar to Mandarin speakers, such as “three four days”, expressing approximation or a range of numbers.

Compare 「三四天」 with the same function.

In American or British English this would more usually require “*or*” to be deemed correct.

As with reduplication, these are functions found in the regional **substrate** languages. It’s found in Hindi, Bangla, Punjabi and other Indo-Aryan languages.

It is also not random, but is **pragmatically conditioned** and semantically significant.

IndE also shows similar prosodic effects due to substrata, as with SgE.

## Pragmatic functions

Like with Chinese and Singaporean English **modal particles** (語氣詞), the use of **reduplication** in Indian English serves the purpose of:

1. softening language. *longer is often considered softer, cross-linguistically*
2. conveying cultural norms across languages, and
3. providing additional stylistic choices in speech

It's also much less common in formal **registers**, typically being limited to spoken communication.

**Is there a Taiwanese English?**

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## Taiwan English?

**Corpus**-based studies point to certain features such as a lack of plural marking (Rüdiger, Leimgruber, & Tseng, 2023)

Yang (2012) points to “relaxing of the unstressed word-final /i/”

However, this is also the case among Mandarin L1 speakers in general.

These may be better understood as production errors rather than English dialectal signifiers.

## Why only production errors?

Taiwan lacks the same historical context of being a British Colony.

English was never a significant trade language here unlike e.g. colonial Shanghai

Colonial effects on the language are rather in the form of *shinjitai* 新字體\*  
or other contact effects relating to the Colonial past.

The features we see are not **systematic** or wide-spread, especially not in any way that is unique to Taiwan.

\*e.g. 關 → 関

## Could we predict features of a Taiwanese English?

There is evidence of Mandarin-L1-specific markers.

We might predict Taiwanese *Mandarin* features such as pre-verbal 「有」 marking perfectivity to show up, except this is already the case in English “have”.

Notably pre-verbal 「有」 is also an effect of contact with Hokkien.

But many features already reflect a more English-like pattern, especially following the reforms around the 五四運動 period in the early 1900s.

But these should also be expected with speakers of Nanjing Mandarin, and even pre-verbal 有 is becoming more common in China due to Taiwanese media.

## Conclusion

- World Englishes often show clear features of **substrata**, reflecting the language spoken in the region prior to the arrival of English
- In many cases, this is directly tied to the use of *English as a colonial language*, rather than just local accents or production errors.
- Taiwan's lack of British colonial history precludes such a situation.
- The high levels of **L2** English in Taiwan, along with efforts by the NCD and other political entities at promoting English in Taiwan ensures that we will not likely see specific **markers** of Taiwanese English, especially as development continues.



**Thank you!** Questions?

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