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From Malay to Colloquial Singapore English: A case study of sentence-final particle *sia*

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1. Introduction

Colloquial Singapore English (CSE), also known as Singlish, is a linguistic variety used predominantly in multiracial and multilingual Singapore (Khoo 2015). It began to emerge in the British colonial period (1819–1942), becoming a lingua franca among speakers of different linguistic backgrounds including Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay, and Tamil. Research on CSE played an important role in the development of the world Englishes paradigm since its early days. Scholars started publishing on CSE at least a decade prior to the formation of the International Committee of the Study of World Englishes, which took place in 1988 (e.g., Richards and Tay 1977; Tongue 1979; Platt and Weber 1980; Platt et al. 1983). After the formation of the committee, investigations on CSE flourished even more, and extensive research has been conducted on diverse linguistic properties (for example, phonetics: Lim 2009; Starr and Balasubramaniam 2019; morphosyntax: Bao 2015; Erlewine 2018; semantics: Bao 2009; Hiramoto and Sato 2012; pragmatics: Gupta 1992; Hiramoto 2012), and on the CSE speech community and how speakers may project their knowledge of CSE in relation to other linguistic varieties within the Singaporean language ecology (for example, language identities: Leimgruber 2013 Wee 2018; language attitudes: Bokhorst-Heng 2005; Siemund, Schulz and Schweinberger 2014; linguistic landscape: Tan 2014; Leimgruber 2018; advertisements: Lazar 2010; Hiramoto 2019; acquisition: Gupta 1994; Starr 2019b). Among topics of CSE features, sentence final particles (SFPs) are one of the most investigated features. Although detailed findings differ from one study to another, SFPs' functions have been shown to vary depending on social variables such as formality, context, age, gender, and ethnicity (e.g., Lim 2007; Smakman and Wagenaar 2013; Botha 2018; Leimgruber et al. 2021).

Although studies focusing on CSE's structural and pragmatic features tend not to delve into its internal variation except for a handful exceptions (e.g., Bao and Wee 1999; Leimgruber 2016), scholars, especially sociolinguists, generally agree that CSE varies across generations and racial groups, and has likely been changing constantly over the course of its history (see Leimgruber 2014; Lim 2015; Hiramoto 2019; Starr 2019a). For example, we notice frequent introductions of new lexical items and expressions in CSE as they come and go, and some even stay by replacing existing ones. A rise in computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as those taking place on social network platforms, has made the full-of-life nature of CSE all the more salient. This is especially the case as Singapore netizens are known to be vocal and robust in their netspeak. Paying attention to this phenomenon of CSE communication, some scholars have recently started to employ CMC as a data source for linguistic investigations (Botha 2018; Deuber, Leimgruber and Sand 2018). Likewise, we suggest that employing CMC-based data is necessary to capture both diachronic and synchronic trajectories of CSE features, and to advance research in the field. Thus, this study uses the Corpus of Singapore English Messages (CoSEM), a large-scale new corpus in the making, composed of texts collected by local university students (see Gonzales et al. 2021 for details). In order to investigate use of *sia* as a

newly emerged SFP, we use the text message data in electronic messaging service found in CoSEM.

In what follows, we offer a preliminary report of the ongoing CoSEM project by focusing on the SFP *sia*. This particle is a good example of CSE's fluidity based on its distribution and usages patterns. Our goal is to demonstrate a developmental path of *sia* as well as the corpus's advantages and disadvantages. For the latter, we are concerned particularly with the practical and ethical considerations of collecting and using online text message data, and possible future directions for the project. Before moving on to the discussion of the study, we will share some sociohistorical background information that is relevant to Singapore's language ecology.

1. Sociolinguistic Background

Singapore is a multi-ethnic city-state located in Southeast Asia at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula just 1 degree north of the equator. Its physical size is small; around 720 square kilometers while the resident population is around 5 million (Singapore Department of Statistics 2019). While settlements of regional significance have existed on the island nation for several centuries, the history of modern Singapore is usually taken to begin with the arrival of the British in 1819, at which point the island was populated almost entirely by the indigenous Malays, except for a few dozen Chinese (Turnbull 1989). Due to the fact that Singapore faces the Malacca Straits, a key point on the trade routes linking China and Europe, the British invested heavily in their presence there. Quickly after their arrival, they established a tariff-free port in order to run the lucrative and strategically important trading businesses. In the company of this development, migrants started to travel from various places of the world to the port city. Given the colonist background, some were brought in more forcefully than others (e.g. convicts out of British India); however, many others were drawn by the colony's economic opportunities mainly from other parts of Asia (see Leimgruber 2013: 3–4). While the Malays remained the majority in the first census in 1824, merely three years later, immigrants from southern China arrived in massive numbers to become the leading ethnic group in the city, now composing about 74% in the resident population (Leimgruber 2013: 3). These Chinese migrants came from heterogeneous regions within China that were "perceived as culturally and linguistically distinctive" (Chew 2013: 47). Although the languages they spoke were typically southern Chinese varieties such as Southern Min (Hokkien/Teochew, Hainanese) and Cantonese, they were largely mutually unintelligible. As a result, this caused a high level of internal heterogeneity that was salient enough to establish separate school systems run by the respective ethnolinguistic groups (Starr and Hiramoto 2019: 5). Later, with an onset of the Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979, Mandarin gradually became a common language among Chinese Singaporeans (Bokhorst-Heng 1999; Starr and Kapoor 2020; Lim, Chen and Hiramoto 2021).

Even though the Malay population of Singapore was ultimately the majority at the time of the colonial foundation, it was relegated to minority status quickly since then, at 42% by the first census in 1824, and 13% today (Singapore Department of Statistics 2016). In the early days, the Malays in Singapore originated from different parts of the Malay Archipelago, and spoke various Malayo-Polynesian languages of the Austronesian family including Malay, Boyanese, and Javanese (Cavallaro and Ng 2020). Chew (2013: 38–43) notes that members of these various ethnic groups, like the Chinese immigrants, initially also considered themselves independent, with a pan-Malay identity evolving slowly but surely. Unlike southern Chinese languages among the Chinese immigrants, however, the Malay language is resolutely entrenched in the Malay group, with 78% reporting its use at home in a 2015 household survey (as opposed to 62% of Chinese reporting using any Chinese variety). According to Cavallaro and Ng (2020), language shift within the Malay population, where it exists, is exclusively in

the direction of English. The Malay language, with its official and national status, nonetheless, has seen little change in use rates over the last sixty years' censuses.

The third-largest ethnic group with official recognition is the Indian group. At 9%, it is the smallest (Singapore Department of Statistics 2016) and the most linguistically diverse community. Indian languages are lumped together under two language families, namely, the Dravidian (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, etc.) and Indo-Aryan (Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, etc.). Tamil is the local official language representing the Indian population, and is spoken by 38% of Singaporean Indians (Starr and Balasubramaniam 2019). Indians are also the ethnic group with the highest percentage reporting English as a dominant home language (44% in 2015).

English, over the course of Singapore history, has had greatest success in terms of language shift to it from other languages. It enjoys the unofficial status of the country's 'working language' and is the sole medium of instruction in national institutions including schools and the armed forces. As it is of the official language of the government it is generally used at any white-collar workplace. While language shift towards English is not the declared goal of policy-makers, educational and socioeconomic pressures combine to make the acquisition of English the most viable target and the one into which the most resources are invested (e.g., see Pak and Hiramoto 2020 for recent attitudes of young Singaporeans about the political economy and education). As a result, the latest Household Survey from 2015 indicates that English has now become the most common home language in Singapore (Singapore Department of Statistics 2016). Regardless of the reasons behind this shift towards English, the fact is that English has become either a 'dominant home language' (as per the census measure), as a first language outside the home, or as an additional language used in a variety of settings over the last few decades. When used in casual and everyday interaction settings, a variety of English used by locals is CSE, which is well-spread to large parts of the population. The existence of CSE has long been considered a problem by the state, mostly due to a belief that it has a negative influence on Standard English competence. The standard form of English is, without a doubt, the one encouraged by authorities as key to maintaining the country's capability on par with its global competitors. Conversely, CSE is mainly used in informal contexts as everyday language, resulting in what Gupta (1994) identifies as a classic diglossia situation. Leimgruber et al. (2021: 5) notes that the "cultural and national indexing facilitated by CSE is also what affords it a certain amount of covert prestige" (see the attitudes expressed in Leimgruber 2014; Siemund, Schulz and Schweinberger 2014; Leimgruber, Siemund and Terassa 2018).

2. Sentence Final Particles in Colloquial Singapore English

The substrate languages present in Singapore explained in the previous section have contributed in playing different donor language roles for CSE at varying degrees over the years. With regard to SFPs, transfers from Chinese languages (Lim 2007) as well as Malay (Yap et al. 2016) have been discussed whereas Indian languages typically are excluded. In general, substrate features from the local languages, including the ones originating from India like Tamil, are minimal beyond some lexical items. Given the sociolinguistic context discussed in the preceding section, we now turn to an explanation of the SFPs, a vital feature of CSE in most documentations of the variety. For example, the SFP *lah* appears in nearly all accounts of CSE going back to the pioneer works (e.g. Richards and Tay 1977; Kwan-Terry 1978; Bell and Ser 1983). While *lah* is undoubtedly of non-English origin, we highlight that the class of SFPs in CSE also includes common English discourse markers such as *you know*, *I mean*, *well*, or *man* (see e.g. Gupta 1992; Choo 2016). In the following paragraphs, the focus will be on SFP *sia*, which is of non-

English origin and fulfils the clause-final requirement. In order to show how SFPs work in CSE, we leave some typical examples from online text messages from the CoSEM database:

(1) [Someone's name] talk in another language **ah** (Chinese male, 53)

'[Someone's name] speaks another language, I see.'

<COSEM:18IF05-16473-53CHM-2016>

(2) I don't think we were that old **lah** (Indian male, 53)

'I don't think we were that old yeah?.'

<COSEM:18IF05-2973-53INM-2014>

(3) MGK sign up free **meh**? (Chinese male, 46)

'It's free to sign up at MGK [a sports club]? I didn't know that.'

<COSEM:18CM08-7965-46CHM-2016>

(4) I don't understand this pic **leh** (Chinese female, 52)

<COSEM:18CF52-21376-52CHF-2017>

'I really don't understand this picture.'

(5) k **lor** u don't come **lor** (Eurasian female, 21)

'Fine, fine, you're not coming. Suit yourself.'

<COSEM:18OF02-362-21EUF-2016>

(6) I weak **sia** (Malay female, 19)

'I have no energy.'

<COSEM:19MF01-550-19MAF-2016>

Existing works on CSE SFPs primarily discuss these particles in order to describe their semantic and pragmatic properties. Table 1 provides an overview of some of the more commonly described SFPs and their definitions, as provided in published works. It is important to keep in mind that sometimes scholars fail to agree on an exact definition although some of the definitions are quite straightforward.

Table 1. Representative particles of Colloquial Singapore English and their definitions for the examples above (adopted from Leimgruber et al. 2021: 7)

Example	SFP	Definition
1	*ah*	signals continuation and keeps interlocutors in contact; softens command; marks a question expecting agreement […] [or] requiring response (Lim 2007)
2	*lah*	draws attention to mood or attitude and appeals for accommodation; indicates solidarity, familiarity, informality (Lim 2007)
3	*meh*	indicates skepticism (Wee 2004)
4	*leh*	marks a question involving comparison; is equivalent to 'what about?' (Platt 1987); or marks a tentative suggestion or request (Wee 2004)
5	*lor*	indicates a sense of obviousness as well as resignation (Lim 2007)
6	*sia*	serves as an intensifier or to mark coarseness (Khoo 2012); denotes youth identity, coolness (Hiramoto, Lee and Choo 2017)

Regarding the origins of the particles, Lim (2007) presents a convincing historical sociolinguistic account for selected traditional SFPs, identifying two categories that can be distinguished diachronically. Most of the existing studies of SFPs tend to treat them as a fairly fixed and closed category despite their fluid and dynamic nature. That is, new SFPs do come and go but this kind of adaptable nature is usually underscored except for some work describing the less documented particles such as *know* (Wee 2003) or *bah* (Leimgruber 2016). In this chapter, we discuss a recent spread of *sia* (Hiramoto, Lee and Choo 2017; Khoo 2012), which entered the CSE SFP category fairly recently and is still underexplored.

3. Discussion of *sia*

The origin of SFP *sia* is reported to be the colloquial Malay phrase *sial* (Khoo 2012), which is a vulgar term translated to English as 'stupid dumbass' (Urban Dictionary 2008 *sial*). The early documentation of *sia* includes an entry in a playful online gloss *A Dictionary of Singlish and Singapore English* (2004 *sia*/*siak*). It notes that *sia* was used in local newspapers in 2005 as a formulaic expression *power sia*! which means 'so powerful'. Today, the only extensive study of *sia* is a final year research paper by Velda Khoo when she was at Nanyang Technological University. She reports that, at the time of her research, *sia* was used as an intensifier, seemingly due to its Malay definition. She also made a remark that *sia* functioned as a group solidarity marker despite being considered crude and offensive among young Singaporeans, more males than females, such as National Service men or other military-related people as well as university students (Khoo 2012: 29). However, from our observations of CoSEM data, this does not adequately explain all occurrences of the *sia* token that were collected after Khoo's (2012) study. We will thus propose that today, *sia* has expanded beyond the meaning tied to its Malay origins and no longer functions exclusively as an intensifier. Although it still can be used as an emphatic marker, our data show that it is also used as a generic SFP, and it has gained massive popularity among today's youth within a course of a decade or so based on a time span between Khoo (2012) andrecently selected CoSEM data. By generic usage, we mean instances of *sia*

that can be replaced by other SFPs with weak illocutionary force that are used primarily for phatic-marking or channeling purposes such as *ah* or *lah* in Table 1.

To demonstrate sample use of *sia* today, we present preliminary analysis of CoSEM data collected between 2016 and 2019 in this chapter. There are a total of 5392 tokens of *sia*. *Sia* is used in both emphatic (strong illocutionary force) and generic (weak illocutionary force) ways by all major racial groups, and examples are given from (7) to (18). Below are representative data of *sia* from CoSEM for female and male Chinese, Malay, and Indian Singaporeans. Since it is hard to determine clear-cut nuances for an intensifying/emphatic meaning as opposed to a more generic meaning, we selected the obvious ones. Note that there are many examples that cannot be categorized under the 'intensifying/emphatic' and 'generic' meanings because of their ambiguous nature.

(7) *Wah damn sian sia* (emphatic: Chinese female, 19)

'Wow, that's super tiresome!'

<COSEM:18CF54-13726-19CHF-2015>

(8) *i have too many green shirts sia* (generic: Chinese female, 21)

'I have too many green shirts, you know.'

<COSEM:18CF49-3910-21CHF-2016>

(9) *Friggin awesome show sia* (emphatic: Chinese male, 23)

'That's a friggin' awesome show!'

<COSEM:18CF41-27553-23CHM-2017>

(10) *I wanna sleep sia* (generic: Chinese male, 21)

'I just want to sleep…'

<COSEM:17CF12-79185-21CHM-2016>

(11) *Damn hot sia today* (emphatic: Malay female, 23)

'Today's super hot!'

<COSEM:18MF03-18930-23MAF-2017>

(12) *I wanted to wear fbts also Sia* (generic: Malay female, 20)

'I wanted to wear FBTs [sports brand], too, you know.'

<COSEM:17CF25-4290-20MAF-2016>

(13) *Wtf all the obikes here spoil sia* (emphatic: Malay male, 23)

'WTF, all the O-bikes [rental bikes] here are broken damn it!'

<COSEM:18CF48-4750-23MAM-2017>

(14) *I stupid sia* (generic: Malay male, 21)

'I'm stupid, you know.'

<COSEM:18CF39-8603-21MAM-2016>

(15) *Wth Moe...Moe don't deserve your Sis sia...* (emphatic: Indian female, 20)

'WTH, Ministry of Education (MOE)… MOE doesn't deserve your sister at all!'

<COSEM:17CF09-2160-20INF-2016>

(16) *She makes me sick sia (generic*: Indian female, 20)

'She makes me feel bad, you know.'

<COSEM:17IF03-8590-20INF-2016>

(17) *Damn culture shock sia* (emphatic: Indian male, 21)

'It was a big culture shock!'

<COSEM:17IF01-5288-21INM-2016>

(18) *Long time no see sia* (generic: Indian male, 23)

'Long time no see yeah.'

<COSEM:17CF08-351-23INM-2014>

The distributions of *sia* by the different racial groups are presented in Table 2. Due to the difficulty of distinguishing the intensifying/emphatic or generic meanings of all instances, we simply present the numbers of tokens used by different racial groups here. Following the overall distributions in Table 2, Table 3 shows results of the logistic regression test. For readers reference, we remind that the current population of Singapore is composed of about 74% Chinese, 13% Malay, 9% Indian, and 4% Others. Table 2 further breaks down the "Other" category into "(Singaporean resident) Other" such as mixed ethnicity locals like Eurasians and Chindians and "Non-Singaporeans", which are largely made of foreign students. Nonetheless, these groups minimally contribute to use of *sia*. For this reason, we exclude these groups from discussions of our statistical analysis below.

Table 2. Use of *sia* by different major racial groups based on CoSEM data

	Female	**Male**	**Total**
Chinese	1,644 (30.49%)	2,719 (50.43%)	4,363 (80.92%)
Indian	121 (2.24%)	321 (5.95%)	442 (8.2%)
Malay	100 (1.85%)	318 (5.9%)	418 (7.75%)
Other	1 (0.02%)	32 (0.59%)	33 (0.61%)
Non-Singaporean	104 (1.93%)	32 (0.59%)	136 (2.52%)
Total	1,970 (36.54%)	3,422 (63.46%)	5,392 (100%)

Table 3. Logistic regression results (dependent variable = *sia* vs. no *sia*, no random intercepts, n = 15317, R2 Tjur = 0.059)

Predictor	*Log-Odds*	*Std. Error*	*CI*	*p*
Intercept	2.47	0.41	1.70 – 3.31	**<0.001**
Age - Categorical (Young vs. **Older**)	-0.14	0.07	-0.27 – -0.01	**0.031**
Age - Continuous	-0.11	0.01	-0.14 – -0.08	**<0.001**
Sex (Female vs. **Male**)	2.09	0.77	0.60 – 3.60	**0.006**
Ethnicity (Chinese vs. **Non-Chinese**)	-0.44	0.25	-0.94 – 0.06	0.086
Ethnicity (Malay vs. **Non-Malay**)	0.54	0.68	-0.76 – 1.91	0.424
Ethnicity (Indian vs. **Non-Indian**)	-1.52	0.62	-2.69 – -0.23	**0.014**
Ethnicity (Other vs. **Non-Other**)	6.39	2.74	1.18 – 12.04	**0.02**
Age - Categorical : Sex	-0.38	0.2	-0.76 – 0.01	0.051
Age - Continuous : Sex	-0.12	0.03	-0.18 – -0.06	**<0.001**
Ethnicity (Chinese) : Age - Cat	0.28	0.07	0.13 – 0.42	**<0.001**
Ethnicity (Chinese) : Sex	0.02	0.33	-0.63 – 0.67	0.952
Ethnicity (Malay) : Age	-0.02	0.03	-0.08 – 0.03	0.374
Ethnicity (Malay) : Sex	8.42	2.54	3.39 – 13.38	**0.001**
Ethnicity (Indian) : Age	0.03	0.02	-0.02 – 0.08	0.204
Ethnicity (Indian) : Sex	8.55	2.12	4.44 – 12.79	**<0.001**
Ethnicity (Other) : Age	-0.3	0.13	-0.58 – -0.05	**0.021**
Ethnicity (Other) : Sex	11.29	119.47	-13.04 – NA	0.925
Ethnicity (Chinese) : Sex : Age	-0.07	0.21	-0.49 – 0.33	0.728
Ethnicity (Malay) : Sex : Age	-0.43	0.12	-0.67 – -0.19	**<0.001**
Ethnicity (Indian) : Sex : Age	-0.4	0.1	-0.60 – -0.20	**<0.001**

Our preliminary findings in Table 3 demonstrate that *sia* has the following tendencies: (a) in terms of speakers' age and sex, younger people, especially males are more likely to use *sia* in general whereas older people, especially females are much less likely to use *sia*. (b) Concerning age and race, younger Chinese Singaporeans are more likely to use *sia* than other groups. (c) Lastly, regarding race, male Malay Singaporeans are likely to use *sia* while female Malay Singaporeans, especially the older group, are least likely to do so. We present Figures 1 to 3 below for the interpretations of the key information in Table 3

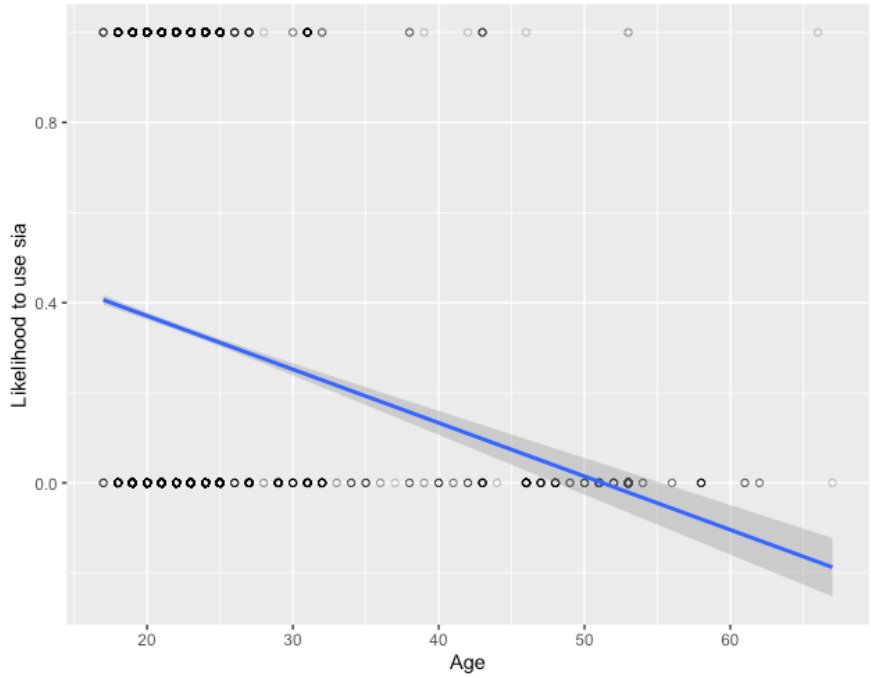

Figure 1. Likelihood to use *sia* by age

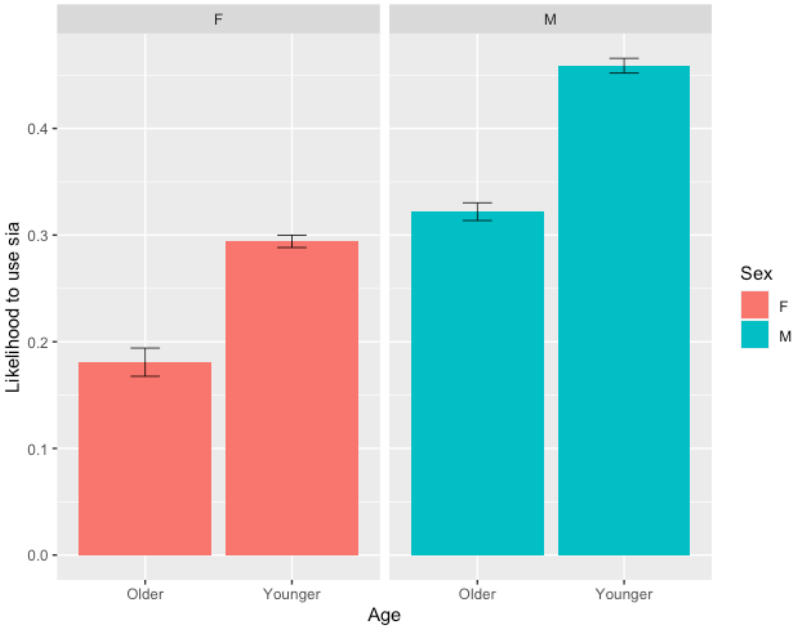

Figure 2. Likelihood to use *sia* by sex

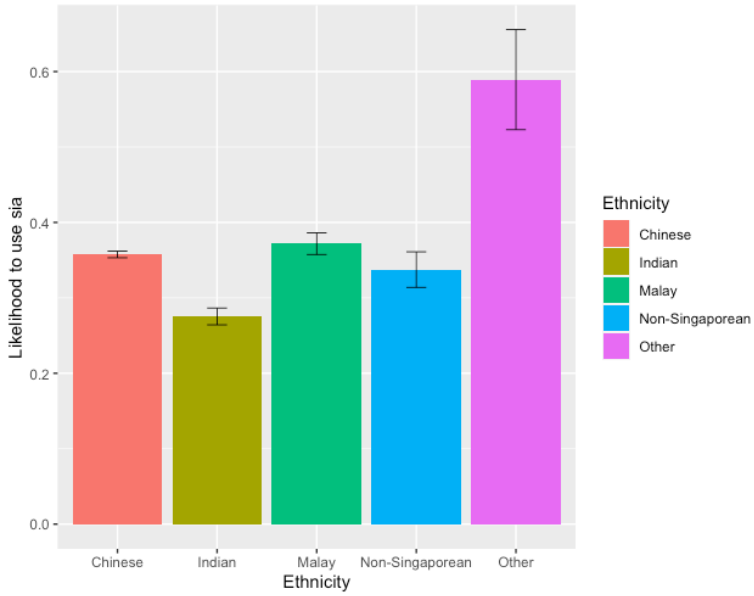

Figure 3. Likelihood to use *sia* by race/ethnicity

On the whole, we find that *sia* is noticeably popular among younger speakers, and less frequently used among female Malay Singaporeans. Regarding the racial factor, since *sia* originated from Malay, its pejorative meaning has most likely carried over from Malay to CSE, especially among Malay-English bilingual speakers. Assuming that female speakers are taught to behave more conservatively and politely than men in their language use, their avoidance of *sia* in CSE (as reflected in the lower rates of *sia*) can be accounted for. Anecdotally, in a casual interaction with Malay Singaporeans, more than a few female speakers informed us that they are told explicitly not to use the SFP *sia* in CSE because of the stigma it has in the Malay language. For example, the following sentence was given by a native Malay-speaking Singaporean in an explanation of how *sia* used in Colloquial Malay.

(19) *Siapa dia sial/sia*? (data by Filzah Rahman 2018)
who 3PS SIA
'Who the hell is he?'

Male Malay Singaporeans; on the other hand, showed a higher rate of *sia* usage. This is expected as they would be prone to employ masculine speech style and *sia* is associated with the coarseness, which can be interpreted as manly. Further on this point, in our everyday interactions with Chinese and Indian Singaporeans, we learned that many of them did not know the origin of *sia* even though they sensed it to be newer, edgier or even vulgar-ish and masculine. Without knowing the etymology, a large number of non-Malay Singaporeans readily adopted *sia* into their CSE usage. All in all, it is not surprising that Chinese and Indian Singaporeans accepted *sia* more easily than female Malay Singaporeans since the former are less informed about the original stigmatized meaning of *sia*.

Based on our observation, we propose that while it started off as a SFP 'with an attitude' from Malay, CSE *sia* has spread rapidly to non-Malay populations especially with the recent rise in computer-mediated communication. Relatedly, another notable finding about *sia* is that it is almost exclusively used by younger Singaporeans. Although CoSEM has more data from younger speakers as they come from undergraduate students attending a local university, it does

have a sizable proportion of older speakers' data. Nonetheless, for the *sia* instances reported in this chapter, the oldest user of *sia* is 31 years old, and majority of the users are under 25. Thus, we claim that CSE *sia* works as a marker of local identity among today's youth generation who want to project a different local identity from the older generations. That is, when they do have the option of using existing SFPs (also used by older generation Singaporeans), younger generation Singaporeans have a tendency to use *sia* and not other SFPs. This preference is notable for more generic-type of existing SFPs with weaker illocutionary force such as *ah*, *lah*, or *leh*, which are typically used by the older generation. While the existing SFPs have their own pragmatic contributions, *sia* can replace them when speakers need a generic SPF that primarily conveys phatic marking to channel with their interlocutors.

4. Conclusion

Our preliminary look at *sia* used in CoSEM data revealed that it is robustly used by younger generation Singaporeans, and distinctly avoided by female Malay Singaporeans. Together with our sociocultural observations, we conclude that the *sia* particle will keep growing prevalently among young CSE speakers. We also predict that this direction of usage will lead further strenthen its illocutionary force from being 'strong' to 'weak' in CSE. Our investigation of *sia* contributes to recent findings that show that the class of discourse particles in CSE continues to be receptive to newcomers (Lim 2007; Leimgruber 2016), while challenging the traditional notion that discourse particles are a closed class of lexical items. The rise of *sia* in CSE also challenges the traditional idea of substrate influences (e.g., Siegel 1999) as well as the founder principle (e.g., Mufwene 2001) that linguistic features of contact varieties are influenced by those languages that had early contact with the lexifier. These observations indicate that CSE is a dynamic repertoire that continually evolves through young Singaporeans' current engagement with their language use as suggested by Schneider in his life's work.

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