Influences of Chinese and Malay on the written English of secondary students in Singapore

Josephine Yeo Nyuk Peng and David Deterding

Introduction

The English used in Singapore has been influenced by a range of other languages, including various Chinese dialects, Malay and various Indian languages (Gupta 1994). Moreover, as all schoolchildren in Singapore are required to learn one other language, generally Mandarin Chinese, Malay or Tamil, in addition to English, it is likely that Singapore English continues to be influenced by these languages.

When listening to conversational English, it has been shown that Singaporeans can successfully identify the ethnic group of a Singaporean speaker on the basis of an utterance just ten seconds long, with an accuracy rate of over 90% for identifying young educated speakers as either Chinese or Malay (Deterding & Poedjosoedarmo 2000). However, this is likely to be based mostly on intonation (Lim 2000), and it is not known whether the differences between the language of the various ethnic groups extend into the realm of sentence structure.

Naturally, the grammar of Mandarin, Malay and Tamil differs substantially both from one other and also from English. One might ask, then, whether the ethnic language of school students, the language that they are required to learn as their 'mother tongue' in school, has any influence on their written English.

In this chapter, which is based on the research of Yeo (2001), the written English of secondary students in Singapore is investigated, firstly to determine if there are any differences between the grammar of ethnically Chinese and Malay students, and secondly to see if any such differences can be detected by Singaporean readers. (This research does

not consider students whose ethnic language is Tamil, because the data was collected from a school with only a small number of Tamil-speaking children.)

The grammar of English, Mandarin and Malay

There are many potential areas where the grammar of Mandarin or Malay might influence the structure of written English. Here, the focus is on two areas: the use of passives, and the placement of adverbials. These two areas were chosen because they reveal substantial differences between Mandarin and English, while the patterns of Malay are quite similar to those of English. We can therefore treat the writing of the Malay students as a kind of control group, in the expectation that their English in these two areas will not have been influenced by Malay, and then see if the English of the Chinese students shows any differences, on the assumption that any such differences must arise due to the influence of the grammar of Mandarin. Before the data for investigation is introduced, we will briefly discuss the grammar of passives and adverbials in English, Mandarin and Malay.

Passives

In English, a passive sentence is constructed by putting the Patient into the subject position and moving the Agent to a post-verbal position preceded by the preposition *by*. The structure of a Malay passive is quite similar, with *oleh* preceding the Agent. The following example is from Liaw (1999:308):

Kereta   itu   akan   dibeli   oleh   Encik   Anwar   besok.
car   that   will   bought   by   Mr   Anwar   tomorrow
'The car will be bought by Mr Anwar tomorrow.'

In Mandarin, a passive sentence usually includes the passive marker *bei*, and the equivalent sentence in Mandarin might be:

(?)   Ming-tian   che-zi   hui   bei   An   xian-sheng   mai.
tomorrow   car   will   by   An   Mr   buy

However, this sentence is highly dubious, because the use of the *bei* construction in Mandarin usually expresses some kind of adversity (Li & Thompson 1981:493). For example, in Mandarin while it is possible to use the *bei* construction to express the fact that someone was criticised, it

would be very unusual to use this construction to state that someone was praised.

The question then arises, for the purposes of the current research, whether Chinese students might be more reluctant to use the passive construction in their English essays than their Malay classmates as a result of the influence of their familiarity with Mandarin.

Adverbials

In English, adverbials of time and place are highly mobile. Typically, they can occur at the end of the sentence or at the beginning of the sentence. In this respect, Malay is rather similar to English. The following example involving an adverbial of time in final position is from Liaw (1999:199).

Dia   tiba   pagi   ini.
he   arrive   morning   this
'He arrived this morning.'

Alternatively, the adverbial of time could occur at the start:

Pagi   ini   dia   tiba.
morning   this   he   arrive
'This morning he arrived.'

In contrast, as Mandarin is a head-last language, there is a strong preference for the use of premodifiers rather than postmodifiers (Deterding & Poedjosoedarmo 2001:205), so adverbials of time must occur before the verb (Li & Thompson 1981:22), though there is flexibility whether they occur before or after the subject.

Ta   jin-tian   zao-shang   dao-le.
he   today   morning   arrive-ASP
(?) 'He this morning arrived.'

Jin-tian   zao-shang   ta   dao-le.
today   morning   he   arrive-ASP
'This morning he arrived.'

Note, crucially, that the equivalent with the adverbial of time occurring after the verb would be ungrammatical in Mandarin:

*Ta   dao-le   jin-tian   zao-shang
he   arrive-ASP   today   morning

Adverbials of place behave in a similar fashion, with both English and Malay allowing them to occur in initial or final position, but Mandarin mostly requiring them to occur before the verb (Li & Thompson 1981:22).

Once again we can ask whether the pattern of Mandarin might have some influence on the English writing of Chinese students, with a preference for placing adverbs in a pre-verbal position, in contrast to their Malay classmates whose home language is unlikely to have any influence on their English.

Data

Secondary Two students from the Express Stream of a government school in Singapore were asked to write an expository essay of about 200 words on 'The Uses of Flowers'. The average age of the students was 13.7 years. A total of 80 compositions are analysed here, 40 written by Malay students and 40 by Chinese students. All these essays are available on-line at:

www.arts.nie.edu.sg/ell/davidd/yeo-2001/index.htm

A full description of the data and the methods of collection can be found in Yeo (2001).

Analysis

The occurrence of passives and adverbials was analysed separately for the Malay and Chinese pupils.

A verb was counted as a passive if it included the passive *be* auxiliary and an attempt at the past participle. The following is a typical example of a passive from the data. (All examples include M for Malay or C for Chinese, followed by the essay number and then the line number.)

1   It is commonly used as a form of decoration. (M12:1)

In some cases, an incorrect form of the past participle of the main verb was found, but this was treated as a spelling mistake (maybe influenced by pronunciation), and thus counted as a passive:

2   However, it will never be use for unsuitable ceremony. (C12:4)

The two examples above illustrate that many of the passives involved

the verb *use*. However, a wide range of other verbs was also found:

3   For example, frangipani are given during a funeral … (M25:12)
4   Flowers can also be collected as hobbies … (C9:7)

For adverbials, it is sometimes hard to identify what exactly constitutes an adverbial. However, it is relatively easy to identify a prepositional phrase so, to ensure consistency of analysis procedures, only prepositional phrases functioning as adverbials were considered in this study. The analysis then simply counted all prepositional phrases functioning as adverbials of time and place, and recorded whether they occurred before the verb they modify or after it. Typical examples of pre-verbal adverbials are:

5   At home, flowers are being arranged … (M37:21)
6   … because flowers on that day are very expensive. (C4:14)

And typical examples of post-verbal adverbials are:

7   … the person may suffocate at night … (M18:26)
8   Flowers were also decorated in the house. (C1:4)

Results

The usage of passives by the two different groups of students is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Usage of passives

	Active		Passive	
	No.	%	No.	%
Malay	869	81	202	19
Chinese	1,020	86	165	14

It can be seen that the use of the active predominates for both groups of students, but that they both also did use the passive fairly regularly. It can further be seen that the use of the passive was a little more common among Malay students. Although the difference is small, with 19% of all verbs being in the passive for Malays against 14% for Chinese, if we regard the probability of any verb being passive as 0.19 for Malay and 0.14 for Chinese pupils, this difference is statistically significant ($z = 3.173$, one-tailed, $p < 0.01$).
The usage of adverbials of time is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Usage of prepositional phrases
functioning as adverbials of time

	Pre-verbal		Post-verbal	
	No.	%	No.	%
Malay	15	34	29	66
Chinese	21	39	33	61

Both groups of pupils used both pre-verbal and post-verbal adverbials of time, and for both groups of pupils, nearly two-thirds of the adverbials of time occurred in a post-verbal position. This tendency for use of post-verbal adverbials of time appears to be a little greater for the Malays (66%) than for the Chinese (61%), but because of the small number of tokens (44 Malay and 54 Chinese), this difference is not statistically significant ($z = 0.51$, ns).

The use of adverbials of place is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Usage of prepositional phrases
functioning as adverbials of place

	Pre-verbal		Post-verbal	
	No.	%	No.	%
Malay	11	8	131	92
Chinese	20	20	79	80

Both groups of pupils had an overwhelming preference for the use of post-verbal adverbials of place. However, this tendency is a little stronger for the Malays (92%) than the Chinese (80%), and this difference is statistically significant ($z = 2.841$, one-tailed, $p < 0.01$).

We can conclude that there was a slightly greater use of passives and a slightly stronger preference for post-verbal use of adverbials of place among Malay pupils in comparison with their Chinese classmates, though there was insufficient data to draw any statistically significant conclusions about adverbials of time.

We might then ask if the differences that were found are noticeable by readers, or if they are too small to be detectable.

Perception experiment

Samples of the compositions on 'The Uses of Flowers' were given to a group of trainee teachers to see if they could detect whether they were written by Malay or Chinese pupils, and we found that they could easily detect the ethnicity of the writers at an accuracy rate of about 70%, but

that this was based almost entirely on cultural aspects, specifically the way that each group described how flowers are used. We therefore decided to collect some more essays on a more neutral topic.

The original students were not available for further research, so instead, a class of Secondary One pupils (average age 12.9) were asked to write an essay on 'Pros and Cons of E-mailing'. It was hoped that there would be fewer cultural differences for this topic. A total of ten essays were selected, five written by Malay pupils and five by Chinese. This supplementary data is available on-line at:

www.arts.nie.edu.sg/ell/davidd/yeo-2001/sec1/index.htm

(Readers are invited to see if they can guess the ethnic identity of the writer of each essay.)

A total of eight trainee teachers studying at NIE were asked to try to identify whether each of these ten essays was written by a Malay or Chinese pupil. The results indicated an average success rate of just 31%, which is even worse than chance! Clearly, the ethnicity of lower secondary pupils in Singapore schools is not detectible by ordinary readers.

Discussion

It has been shown that certain patterns of grammatical usage are slightly different for Malay and Chinese secondary pupils in Singaporean schools, indicating that there may be some influences from the ethnic language that they learn in school. However, this difference falls below the threshold that would make it detectible by readers.

In discussing phonological variation between groups, Labov (1972) has suggested that there are three kinds of dialectal differences: stereotypes, which are widely recognised by the speakers themselves; markers, which subconsciously affect the judgements of listeners, but which people are not generally aware of; and indicators, which can be measured but are not generally noticed by people, even subconsciously. The differences reported here in the written language of secondary pupils might therefore be classified as indicators.

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