

## Tenses and *will/would* in a corpus of Singapore English

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### **Introduction**

There has been considerable previous discussion on the verb forms found in Singapore English (SgE). For example: Tongue (1979:41–44) discusses various issues, including the use of *will* and *would*, the occurrence of the past perfect, and the meaning of *used to*; Ho & Platt (1993) report on a detailed investigation of tense usage in a corpus of recordings of 100 subjects; Brown (1999:221, 244–247) discusses tenses and the use of *would*; Ziegeler (2000) analyses differences in the perceived meanings of *will* and *would* by Singaporean and Australian respondents; and Alsagoff (2001) provides a useful survey of many aspects of tense and aspect usage in SgE.

The current study investigates the tenses, and the use of *will* and *would*, in a corpus of the spoken language of 36 well-educated young Singaporeans. Particularly illuminating are the subsequent comments of the speakers in explaining why they used one form or another. One feature about the data analysed here is that the corpus is on-line, so scholars are welcome to check the transcriptions and build on this investigation.

### **Data**

The data for the current study comes from the NIE Corpus of Spoken Singapore English. In this chapter, the language of a total of 36 subjects is investigated, most of them Singaporeans training to become teachers and studying at the National Institute of Education. (The only ones who are not trainee teachers are M2, who is a doctor, and M12, who is already a teacher.) Of the speakers, 24 are female (numbered F1 to F24), and 12 are

male (M1 to M12). All are well educated with a high competence in English. They were recorded in the Phonetics Laboratory at NIE for five minutes talking to their tutor, the author of this chapter. The conversation started with a question about the experiences of the subjects during their last vacation, and it then progressed to other topics. Further details of the recording conditions can be found in Deterding & Low (2001).

There are some disadvantages in using spoken data such as this. For example, it is not always possible to determine what was said with complete confidence. In contrast, for written data it usually is possible to be reasonably certain about the contents of the text.

However, there are substantial advantages in the use of the current data. Firstly, many of the speakers were available for further discussion, to elucidate why they used a particular form. Although personal explanations are not always completely dependable, the comments of the subjects in this case did provide some invaluable insights. Secondly, the utterances are all in context, which is available for researchers who want to find out more. The data is all on-line at:

[www.arts.nie.edu.sg/ell/davidd/niecsse/index.htm](http://www.arts.nie.edu.sg/ell/davidd/niecsse/index.htm)

In the examples quoted below, the speaker, extract and time location are all indicated, so 'F17-b:20' would represent speaker F17, extract b, and time location 20 seconds.

### Analysis

A total of 2,613 finite verbs were used by the Singaporean subjects in the 36 recordings. Of these, 241 instances were modal verbs: 66 *will*, 62 *would*, 82 *can*, 17 *could*, 2 *may*, 8 *might*, 3 *must*, and 1 *should*. Of the non-modal finite verbs, 715 were past tense and 1,657 were present.

However, these figures need to be treated with considerable caution, as there are many factors that contribute to uncertainty. Firstly, there are some irregular verbs, such as *cut* and *put*, where the past form of the verb is identical to the present form. For example, in 1, there is no way to determine whether the verb *put* is present or past tense.

- 1     how sweet it is depends on how much sugar you put ... in it  
      (M4-g:41)

Secondly, even with repeated careful listening to these high-quality recordings, it is not always possible to tell whether a past form or present form is used. For example, in 2 one cannot be sure if the verb is *spent* or

*spend*, and in 3 it is not possible to be certain if the second verb is *liked* or *like*.

- 2 I just spen(t/d) my time at home lazing around (M3-a:07)
- 3 but when I was in secondary school, I like(d) to read a lot of erm ... Mandarin (F22-h:34)

And finally, even when it is clear that a past tense *-ed* suffix has not been used, we cannot tell if this is for syntactic reasons, because of the use of a present tense instead of a past tense, or for phonetic reasons, because of the omission of a final plosive. In 4, the subject is talking about a job she did during the vacation, and there is no audible *-ed* suffix on *process*. But there is simply no way to determine if this is because the present tense of the verb is used, or because of final consonant cluster simplification, a process that is commonly found in SgE pronunciation (Deterding & Poedjosoedarmo 1998:158).

- 4 I process e-commerce ... orders ... for the company (F5-a:08)

Because of these kinds of indeterminacy, no statistics for tense usage will be analysed here. Instead, trends will be investigated using utterances where the usage is clear. In particular, examples will be discussed where an unexpected verb form is used and some clear reason for this can be suggested.

### **Avoidance of /ɪd/**

In all varieties of English, the past tense *-ed* suffix is pronounced as /ɪd/ if the base form of the verb ends in /t/ or /d/, but as /t/ or /d/ elsewhere (Deterding & Poedjosoedarmo 1998:142). However, in the SgE data studied here, there seems to be a tendency to drop this /ɪd/ suffix, even when other past tense forms are found. In 5, notice the use of *rest* rather than *rested* even though the preceding and following verbs are all in the past tense.

- 5 basically I did ... I I rest a lot, I rest a lot ... I was actually um quite ... stress at first, I told you about it (M1-a:03)

Similarly, in 6 where the speaker is discussing his production of a play, he uses past tense forms throughout with the single exception of the omission of the /ɪd/ suffix on *last*.

- 6 it was called Renewal ... umm ... it last for ... around twenty minutes and after that we had a ... short feedback session with the audience (M4-a:15)

And finally in 7, there is the use of *chat* rather than *chatted*.

- 7 they were making so much noise and having a lot of fun and and basically they chat through the night (M6-g:06)

Ho & Platt (1993:87) report that verbs with an /ɪd/ suffix are less likely to be marked for past tense than verbs that undergo a vowel change, though they also find that verbs with a /t/ or /d/ suffix are even less likely to be marked for past tense.

### Present tense for things that are still true

One tendency in the current data is the switching to the present tense to describe something that is likely still to be true, even though it occurs while recounting a story, where consistent use of past tense might be expected in Standard English (StdE). In 8, the speaker is describing an event during a holiday in Australia, and though the dynamic verb (*ate*) is in the past tense, the stative verb (*is*) is in the present tense. As the speaker is unlikely to go to Hungry Jacks again, in StdE it is more likely that *was* would have been used instead of *is*.

- 8 we ate at this place called Hungry Jacks which is um ... some sort of Burger King (M2-b:15)

Ho & Platt (1993:86) suggest that stative verbs may be less likely to occur in the past tense than some other kinds of verb in SgE. Another possibility, confirmed by discussions with some of the speakers, is that Singaporean speakers believe that it is appropriate to use the present tense for situations that may still be true. In 9, the speaker is describing a trip to Thailand, and even though she is never likely to meet the tour guide again, she uses the present tense. If a StdE speaker were recounting this story, it is likely that past tense forms would be used throughout.

- 9 the tour guide ... he speaks ... Mandarin (F5-d:13)

The conviction that the present tense is appropriate in such situations is confirmed by instances of self-correction. In 10, the speaker corrects herself, even though the use of the past tense might be quite acceptable in

StdE in a situation such as this of telling a story about a trip abroad.

- 10 because I had a relative ... I have a relative there (F5-d:02)

In a further instance of self-correction from past tense to present tense, in 11 the speaker is discussing a teaching camp where she worked during the vacation. It seems that she feels that the present tense is necessary because the camp is likely to occur again, even if she will no longer be involved.

- 11 it was ... er it is a ... day camp, nine to five (F6-b:08)

However, some switches to the present tense are harder to explain in terms of situations that are still true, so it may be necessary to consider the nature of the verb. In 12, note that *see* is a stative verb while *went* is not.

- 12 we went to the Surfers' Paradise market as well ... we went there to shop, and then we see a lot of ... you know ... so called er ... something we don't see in Singapore (F23-b:07)

### Habitual *will*

In StdE, the simple present form of the verb is generally used to refer to something that occurs repeatedly (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990:48). In SgE, *will* is often used in these situations, and it has been suggested that this usage may be influenced by the Mandarin Chinese *hui* (Deterding 2000).

Such use of *will* to describe habitual actions is common in the current data. In 13 the speaker is talking about her journey to school every day; 14 is a description of what the speaker tends to do in the evenings; 15 involves a discussion of what happens if you try to speak French to local people in Paris; and 16 concerns typical activities during the holy month of Ramadan.

- 13 it's about ... one-hour forty-five minutes ... so to and fro you will chalk up about four hours (F20-e:05)
- 14 I do studying like after dinner after watching some TV shows and ... after talking to friends, then I will start studying (F19-f:38)
- 15 they appreciate it for the fact you try ... and then they will just speak to you in English (F8-d:28)

- 16 at night we will ... most of us will go to ... mosque ... and ...  
we have to pray (F4-c:07)

Note that the final example involves a Malay speaker, which suggests that the influence on the SgE use of *will* may not be just from the Chinese *hui* but also from the Malay *akan*.

### **Tentative *would***

There is a widespread belief in Singapore that *would* is similar in meaning to *will* but is more polite (Tongue 1979:42). Brown (2003:50) discusses this as a common myth about the English language held in Singapore.

Alsagoff (2001:86) argues that tentativeness is a logical extension of the polite use of *would*, and she gives the example sentence *I will help you, but I am not sure if my brother would*, where the speaker has control over his own willingness to help but is less certain about his brother.

The use of *would* to express uncertainty in this way is common in the current data, though the tentativeness inherent in the usage may not always be immediately obvious. In 17, the speaker is discussing the use of self-help books in improving relationships, and she subsequently explained that she used *would* because she could not tell whether the knowledge was helpful or not, so she felt a need to hedge the claim.

- 17 I feel that the knowledge would help (F24-d:45)

In 18, the speaker is listing the ages of her four children, and she later explained that she used *would* because of a momentary inability to remember for certain the age of her second child.

- 18 my oldest is eleven ... erm number th- three ... sorry number  
two would be she's six now (F15-b:01)

Slightly different is 19, where the speaker is discussing the possibility of studying while taking the train on her journey to and from classes every day. Initially she uses *can* but then switches to *would*, and she later suggested that she used *would* because her failure to study reflected badly on herself.

- 19 if I'm not too tired, I can do some readings ... but on the way  
back usually it's er ... fruitless because I wouldn't, I would not  
be able to concentrate (F20-e:19)

Sometimes the intended distinction in meaning between *will* and *would* is quite subtle. In 20 the subject is discussing plans to go diving and who she will go with.

- 20 I think er ... it would be a group but ... my husband will be my ... buddy, yeah (F16-c:25)

At first sight, it is hard to detect any difference in meaning between the use of *would* and *will* in 20, but the speaker subsequently explained that she was certain that her husband was going to be her diving buddy, but she was not so sure about the group so she was expressing more tentativeness when referring to the group.

In addition to its use to express tentativeness, there are many instances where *would* is used to indicate regular actions, rather similar to the habitual *will* discussed above. In 21, the speaker is responding to a question about what she usually does in the evenings.

- 21 I usually would ... study in school until the evenings (F14-h:04)

## **Conclusion**

Careful examination of data on SgE usage has revealed differences in tense and modal usage from that of StdE. These differences should not be regarded simply as errors, as they contain subtle systematic shifts in meaning, including the use of the present tense in a narrative to represent something that may still be true, use of *will* to represent something that occurs regularly, and use of *would* to indicate tentativeness.

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