

Ethnicity as a variable in Singapore English

Jakob R. E. LEIMGRUBER
Bangor University
jakob.leimgruber@bangor.ac.uk

Recent studies of Singapore English (SgE) have found differences in the way in which language is used among the country's various ethnic groups, although most work has focused on pronunciation (Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo 2000, Lim 2000). Some early scholars such as Platt (1987) suggested variation in the way SgE's substrate-derived discourse particles are used — a claim refuted by Gupta (1992), whose data does not suggest anything of the kind (see also Lim 2007).

My own data from 2006–2007 seems however to show at least some non-phonological support for ethnic varieties of SgE. Discourse particles, among other variables, provide some evidence: while none of the nine particles in this study are categorically restricted to any particular ethnic group, there are nonetheless statistically significant differences in occurrence rates. For instance, the particle *ah*, by far the most frequent, is used at a much higher rate by Malay informants, in both formal and informal settings.

These findings, complementing the existing ones on ethnic accents, highlight the danger of treating SgE as a single, primarily Chinese variety of English. Studies that investigate SgE as a whole need to be aware of the variety's heterogeneous character. While this does not invalidate recent approaches trying to model the variation inherent to SgE (Alsagoff 2007, Leimgruber 2008), there is room in these models for taking the ethnic variable into consideration.

This paper argues for a multidimensional approach to variation in SgE, modifying the aforementioned models to account for ethnicity. Recent research into indexical fields (Eckert 2008) will inform this re-analysis.

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