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Diglossia and register variation in Singapore English

BAO ZHIMING* and HONG HUAQING**

ABSTRACT: Colloquial Singapore English is an outer-circle variety that exhibits contact-induced linguistic change. It has been characterized as the L variant in diglossic opposition to standard English. In this paper, we address two related issues: (1) the extent to which the Singapore English diglossia is supported by corpus data, and (2) the extent to which the diglossia is reducible to register variation. We investigate the usage pattern of two linguistic variables which have acquired novel grammatical meanings, and show that our data support the Singapore English diglossia, but the variation is greater than what is normal in register variation. The diglossia of which one variant is an outer-circle variety does not reduce easily to register variation.

INTRODUCTION¹

It is generally accepted in the scholarly literature that the English language in Singapore comprises two major varieties, the vernacular variety called Colloquial Singapore English, and the formal variety called Standard Singapore English, and that the two varieties are diglossically opposed in the classic sense of Ferguson (1959). Platt (1977) is among the first to expand the notion of diglossia to describe the complex language situation in Singapore. Singapore English, Platt argues, is a case of polyglossia with multilingualism. Conceptually, Platt's notion of polyglossia is based on the tenets of the classic diglossia of Ferguson (1959), which demands genetic affiliation between the variants, and those of the extended diglossia of Fishman (1967), which allows the variants to be distinct languages. Obviously, the relationship between English and the indigenous languages – Chinese, Malay, and Tamil – is non-genetic, and that between the formal Standard Singapore English (henceforth, SSE) and the informal Colloquial Singapore English (henceforth, CSE) is presumed to be genetic.² The latter position is taken up in later works focused exclusively on the English-speaking community, among them Richards (1977) and Gupta (1994). According to Gupta (1994), SSE does not differ in any meaningful way from the standard variety of English elsewhere; it is, therefore, an inner-circle variety. CSE, by contrast, has undergone substantial substrate-influenced grammatical restructuring, which has already been extensively documented in the literature. From the perspective of the post-creole continuum (DeCamp, 1971), SSE is the acrolect, and CSE comprises the mesolectal and basilectal varieties. Despite the presence of grammatical features appropriated from the substrate languages, CSE is regarded as a variety of English by scholars and speakers alike. The English-speaking speech community in Singapore is diglossic in the Fergusonian sense, analogous to the French and Haitian

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Creole diglossia cited in Ferguson's 1959 paper. We will examine this position in the following pages.

In the literature on diglossia, Hudson (1994, 2002), following Ferguson (1991), argues that the notion of diglossia should be used in the narrow, genetic sense of Ferguson (1959), and that genetic diglossia is a special case of register variation. Ferguson (1991: 222) writes, "If we assume that there are only two basic dimensions of variation in language, dialect variation correlating with the place of the speaker in the community and register variation correlating with occasions of use, then the H and L varieties of diglossias are register variants, not dialect variants." Following Hudson and Ferguson's line of reasoning, we can characterize the SSE-CSE diglossia, as described in Gupta (1994), as a case of register variation, with CSE used for conversational purposes, and SSE used on other, more formal occasions. This is an oversimplification, of course, given the enormous variability in English proficiency within the English-speaking community (Pakir, 1991). There are people whose conversational English does not resemble CSE, and there are people who have no effective control of SSE. But among people who control both CSE and SSE, the functional differentiation between them is clearly noticeable even to the casual observer.

The discussion on the SSE-CSE diglossia has to date been conceptual and qualitative, based on keen observations of scholars interested in the development of the vernacular CSE as an outer-circle variety. There has been no quantitative study that bears on the issue. This state of affairs is not limited to the English language situation in Singapore, of course. The French-Haitian Creole diglossia cited in Ferguson (1959) is not without controversy; but the debate is qualitative and does not rely on quantitative data.³ Part of the reason is the lack of computerized corpora large enough to support reliable comparative studies.

The International Corpus of English (ICE) provides a useful source of quantifiable data to fill the gap. In this paper, we use the Singaporean and British components of the corpus to address two issues concerning the SSE-CSE relationship: the extent to which the SSE-CSE diglossia is (1) reflected in the corpus, and (2) reducible to register variation. To do this, we need a measure of variability between the two diglossic variants. Since the crucial structural difference is the presence of non-genetic features in CSE, we choose two linguistic variables, *already* and *also*, that have, in addition to their original lexical meanings, acquired substrate-derived grammatical meanings. We show that the quantitative data from the Singaporean component of the ICE support the SSE-CSE diglossia, but the higher than usual variability calls for caution in treating the diglossic pair as register variants. Given the presence of non-genetic grammatical features, the functional differentiation between outer-circle varieties (i.e., CSE) and the inner-circle standard variety (i.e., SSE) has characteristics of both the genetic diglossia of Ferguson (1959) and the non-genetic diglossia of Fishman (1967). In other words, the composite diglossia in which one variant is an outer-circle variety is not reducible to register variation.

DATA

In this section, we first introduce the design of the ICE and then discuss the substrate-derived grammatical meanings of the two variables, *already* and *also*, that have been reported in the literature. The quantitative profile of the variables is based on the British and Singaporean components of the IC, ICE-GB and ICE-SIN.

The International Corpus of English

The ICE project was initiated by the late linguist Sidney Greenbaum in a short notice published in *World Englishes* (Greenbaum, 1988). The corpus samples English varieties from countries where English is the first language, as well as varieties from countries such as India and Singapore, where English is “an official additional language.” The bulk of the data in the ICE corpora was collected in the early 1990s. The data in the corpus have allowed scholars to produce works on various aspects of the English language, with early results published in edited volumes (Greenbaum, 1996; Nelson, Wallis and Aarts, 2002), and in two special issues of *World Englishes* devoted to the ICE (volume 15(1), 1996 and volume 23(2), 2004). In the context of the global spread of English, the ICE is an indispensable tool not only for the description of individual varieties that make up the corpus, but also for the comparative studies of changes that have occurred in response to new linguistic and cultural environments. Unfortunately, with the exception of the contributions in the special issues of *World Englishes* 15(1) and 23(2) (see Nelson, 2004), there have been few comparative studies based on the data in the corpus since it took shape in the 1990s.

To facilitate comparison, the constituent components of the ICE follow the same design structure. Each country subcorpus is composed of 500 texts of 2,000 words each, for a total of 1,000,000 words. The texts are grouped into 32 categories, which are in turn grouped into three major registers: DIALOGUE (private 100 texts, public 80 texts), MONOLOGUE (scripted 50 texts, unscripted 70 texts), and WRITING (printed 150 texts, nonprinted 50 texts) (Greenbaum and Nelson, 1996). For the purpose of this paper, such fine-tuned classification is not necessary. Other than PRIVATE DIALOGUE, which samples spontaneous conversations, most other registers in the ICE, such as interviews (a PUBLIC DIALOGUE register) and student essays (a NONPRINTED WRITING register), are rather formal. Since the novel grammatical meanings of the two variables occur mainly in informal context, as noted in the literature, we would expect no significant difference in usage pattern in registers which require some degree of formality. Take *already* for example. Table 1 displays the percentage figures from ICE-GB and ICE-SIN of *already* occurring in medial position of a sentence or fragment (e.g., *he’s already spent the money*) in six registers.

Except for PRIVATE DIALOGUE, *already* exhibits no significant difference in usage pattern between British English and Singapore English in the remaining five registers, where the usage pattern in Singapore English closely follows that in British English. For this reason, we will not make further distinction within the MONOLOGUE and WRITING registers. The two types of DIALOGUE, however, exhibit distinct usage pattern. In the ICE, PRIVATE DIALOGUE

Table 1. Percent of *already* in medial position in the six major text categories of ICE-GB and ICE-SIN

	GB	SIN
PRIVATE DIALOGUE	80	29
PUBLIC DIALOGUE	88	83
SCRIPTED MONOLOGUE	93	81
UNSCRIPTED MONOLOGUE	90	82
PRINTED WRITING	97	93
NONPRINTED WRITING	91	88

includes face-to-face as well as telephone conversations, and PUBLIC DIALOGUE includes lessons, broadcasts, debates, legal cross-examinations, and business transactions. Since private conversations are spontaneous and informal, whereas public dialogues involve some degree of planning, we will keep them distinct. In all, for our study, we group the 37 ICE text categories into four registers, as follows:

- (1) a. PRIVATE DIALOGUE, 100 texts, 200,000 words;
- b. PUBLIC DIALOGUE, 80 texts, 160,000 words;
- c. MONOLOGUE, 120 texts, 240,000 words;
- d. WRITING, 200 texts, 400,000 words.

We will examine how the two variables, *already* and *also*, are used in the four registers.⁴ The quantitative data will help shed light on the nature of the putative SSE-CSE diglossia.

Already

The use of *already* in Singapore English has been analyzed extensively in the literature, see, among others, Kwan-Terry (1989) and Bao (1995). It marks the perfective and inchoative aspects, as shown in the two examples below:⁵

- (2) Perfective:

- a. I bought a place *already*.
- b. They have all moved towards disposables *already*.

Inchoative:

- c. Are you spring-cleaning *already*?
- d. It's like kind of oldish *already*.
'It is oldish now.'/*'It was/has been oldish.'

The perfective aspect emphasizes the completion of an event, which in English is encoded in the simple past or the perfect. The inchoative aspect emphasizes the change or start of a state, which explains why (2d) cannot be rendered in the simple past or the perfect in English. The Chinese origin of the two aspectual meanings expressed by *already* is not in doubt; see references cited above. Given its Chinese-derived aspectual meanings, *already* can co-occur with negatives, as in (3) (*lor*, particle):

- (3) a. If reject then she wouldn't get her PP *already lor*.
'If (her proposal is) rejected, then she wouldn't get her PP.'
- b. My boss *already* did not give me a lot of work.
- c. You want some more or not or don't want *already*?

In English, *already* is assertive, and cannot occur within the scope of negation (Quirk *et al.*, 1972; Biber *et al.*, 1999).⁶ In ICE-GB, we do not find a single instance of *already* being used in a negative sentence.

In our study, we focus on two aspects of *already*: its position and its use in negative sentences, which only happens in Singapore English. *Already* may occur in initial, medial and final positions of a sentence or a sentence fragment. Some typical examples are shown below:

- (4) a. Initial: *Already* it has been taken that day.
- b. Medial: That one I *already* got.
- c. Final: Enough *already*.
- d. Negative: I cannot remember *already*.

The ICE-SIN contains one token of lone *already*, which is counted as clause-initial. In (4d), *already* occurs within a negative sentence. It counts as negative, and will not be counted again as final. In the substrate-influenced meanings illustrated above, *already* is predominantly, though not exclusively, sentence-final, a tendency that has not escaped the notice of scholars (Brown, 1999). In our frequency counts, we will not attempt to determine the precise interpretation of a given token. Such an attempt is not necessary, given the fact that *already* retains its lexical meanings alongside the newly-acquired grammatical meanings, and that the lexical and grammatical meanings are closely related. The position-relevant frequencies of *already* across registers will suffice for our purpose. The frequencies of *already* per text (2,000 words) in the four registers are given in Table 2.⁷

Also

We now examine the additive adverb *also*. Like *already*, *also*'s preferred position in English is sentence-medial (Biber *et al.*, 1999: 802). In Singapore English, as noted in Brown (1999), *also* normally appears in sentence-final position, where *too* or *as well* is the more natural choice in English; compare *He also sells cars*, *He sells cars too* and *He sells cars also*. In addition to the difference in position, *also* has acquired subtle grammatical meanings when used with universal quantifiers or with the adverb *even*, which expresses additive and concessive meanings in English (Quirk *et al.*, 1972; Biber *et al.*, 1999). These are illustrated below (*what*, hedging particle):

(5) Universal:

- a. *Everything I also want* (title of local comic strip)
- b. *Every day also have to go through this what*

Concessive:

- c. *Even Mandarin is also not standard.*
- d. *After sixty-five even if you want to pay also we don't want to accept the money.*

Table 2. Frequencies of *already* per text in ICE-GB and ICE-SIN. The *Other* column includes tokens of *already* found in negative sentences.

	Initial	Medial	Final	Other	Total
PRIVATE DIALOGUE					
GB	0.02	0.35	0.07	0.00	0.44
SIN	0.06	0.84	1.94	0.10	2.94
PUBLIC DIALOGUE					
GB	0.03	0.59	0.05	0.00	0.67
SIN	0.01	1.11	0.18	0.03	1.33
MONOLOGUE					
GB	0.03	0.80	0.03	0.00	0.86
SIN	0.03	0.62	0.12	0.00	0.77
WRITING					
GB	0.00	0.74	0.04	0.00	0.78
SIN	0.04	0.78	0.03	0.00	0.85

Here, *also* reinforces the universal quantification meaning in (5a, b), and the concessive meaning of *even* in (5c, d). This use of *also* is derived from Chinese, specifically Cantonese, one of the Chinese dialects still spoken in Singapore. In Cantonese, the particle *dou* 'all, too' expresses both the quantification and additive meanings. The examples below are typical:

- (6) a. mo-ye ngo *dou* oi
 everything I want
 'I want everything'
- b. Yingmen *dou* m tsun
 English not standard
 'English is also not standard'

See Matthew and Yip (1994) for a full treatment of *dou* in Cantonese.⁸

In our study, we will focus on the Cantonese-derived use as illustrated in (5), and on the position of *also*. These are exemplified below:

- (7) a. Initial: *Also* in Holland Village.
 b. Medial: Kang Heng *also* lost the bet to us.
 c. Final: He'll run away *also* what.
 d. Formulaic: *Also* can.

Table 3 displays the frequencies of *also*. In the table, the *Other* column includes counts of the quantifier and concessive uses of *also* (5) and formulaic expressions (7d), which are peculiar to Singapore English. As in the case of *already*, double counting is avoided. Tokens of *also can* are not counted as instances of initial position. Incidentally, the profile of *also* in ICE-GB parallels that reported in Biber *et al.* (1999: 802), which puts the percentage figure of *also* in medial position at 80 percent.

DISCUSSION

Based on the usage profile of the two variables in British and Singapore English, we can make four observations, all of which point to the sharp division of labor in Singapore

Table 3. Frequencies of *also* per text in ICE-GB and ICE-SIN. The *Other* column includes tokens of quantifier/concessive and formulaic uses.

	Initial	Medial	Final	Other	Total
PRIVATE DIALOGUE					
GB	0.24	0.77	0.00	0.00	1.01
SIN	0.45	1.30	1.47	0.36	3.58
PUBLIC DIALOGUE					
GB	0.18	1.61	0.06	0.00	1.85
SIN	0.33	4.39	0.28	0.03	5.03
MONOLOGUE					
GB	0.23	2.63	0.03	0.00	2.89
SIN	0.29	4.70	0.06	0.01	5.06
WRITING					
GB	0.16	3.21	0.01	0.00	3.38
SIN	0.29	4.76	0.01	0.00	5.06

Table 4. Percent of *already* and *also* in ICE-GB and ICE-SIN. The numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding and, in the case of ICE-SIN, to the omission of numbers in the *Other* column in Tables 2 and 3.

			Initial	Medial	Final
PRIVATE DIALOGUE	<i>already</i>	GB	5	80	16
		SIN	2	29	66
	<i>also</i>	GB	24	76	0
		SIN	13	36	41
PUBLIC DIALOGUE	<i>already</i>	GB	4	88	7
		SIN	1	83	14
	<i>also</i>	GB	10	87	3
		SIN	7	87	6
MONOLOGUE	<i>already</i>	GB	3	93	3
		SIN	4	81	16
	<i>also</i>	GB	8	91	1
		SIN	6	93	1
WRITING	<i>already</i>	GB	0	95	5
		SIN	5	92	4
	<i>also</i>	GB	5	95	0
		SIN	6	94	0

English between PRIVATE DIALOGUE and the other registers. First, the two variables with the acquired novel meanings are found in PRIVATE DIALOGUE, and rarely, if at all, in the other registers. Second, the actual frequency counts of the variables, especially of *also*, are higher in Singapore English than in British English, but the gap is wider in PRIVATE DIALOGUE than in the other registers. Third, in terms of the relative proportion of the three positions, PRIVATE DIALOGUE also stands out from the other registers in Singapore English. Table 4 re-casts the data in Tables 2 and 3 in percentage terms. In British English, the dominant position for both *already* and *also* is medial in all registers. In Singapore English, the dominant position is final in PRIVATE DIALOGUE, and medial in the other registers.

Finally, although frequency counts are divergent between British English and Singapore English, as noted earlier, the proportion of tokens occurring in medial position, and consequently initial and final positions, exhibits significant variation only in PRIVATE DIALOGUE, as shown in Table 5. The proportion of *already* in medial position is practically identical in PUBLIC DIALOGUE and WRITING registers, and that of *also* in all three registers.

Table 5. Percent of *already* and *also* in medial position in ICE-GB and ICE-SIN

	<i>already</i>		<i>also</i>	
	GB	SIN	GB	SIN
PRIVATE DIALOGUE	80	29	76	36
PUBLIC DIALOGUE	88	83	87	87
MONOLOGUE	93	81	91	93
WRITING	95	92	95	94

The four characteristics of the usage patterns of *already* and *also* distinguish PRIVATE DIALOGUE apart from the other registers, which are by nature more formal and require more user planning than is typically the case for spontaneous private conversations. In fact, the figures in Table 5 suggest that the preference for medial position in both British and Singapore English varies along the cline of formality PRIVATE DIALOGUE–PUBLIC DIALOGUE–MONOLOGUE–WRITING. Ignoring the difference between PUBLIC DIALOGUE and MONOLOGUE in ICE-SIN, we can say that the more formal the register is, the higher the chance of *already/also* being used in medial position. This state of affairs is not at all surprising, since the variables are chosen for their substrate-influenced meanings and usage patterns. Given the close parallel in the more formal registers, we conclude that the substrate-influenced usage of *already* and *also* has not diffused in any significant degree beyond the narrow domain of private conversation.

The quantitative data provide strong and clear evidence in support of the SSE-CSE diglossia: CSE as the vernacular L variant associated with informal occasions and SSE as the local standard H. It has been observed in the literature that SSE does not differ much from standard English elsewhere (Tay, 1982; Gupta, 1994). Our data support this observation. The usage pattern of *already* and *also* associated with formal occasions does not vary between Singapore English and British English. The substrate-derived grammatical meanings of the two variables are distinctive markers of CSE. Whether the diglossia is reducible to register variation is less clear. The variability observed in Singapore English PRIVATE DIALOGUE is dramatic when compared with that in the more formal registers of Singapore English, and in all registers of British English. The variation is caused by the newly-acquired, non-genetic grammatical meanings of *already* and *also*. The original lexical meanings of the two variables do not exhibit unusual variation. Registral variants are by definition genetically related. To the extent that the functional differentiation is driven by non-genetic grammatical features, the SSE-CSE diglossia does not easily reduce to register variation.

The problem of diglossia involving an outer-circle variety of English is not new. It ultimately boils down to the degree in which the outer-circle variety (i.e., the L variant) can be analyzed as genetically related to inner-circle English (i.e., the superposed H variant). In terms of structural affinity, there is a cline of diglossic situations between the genetic diglossia of Ferguson (1959), which can be reduced to register variation, and the extended diglossia of Fishman (1967), which cannot. Our quantitative study of the substrate-influenced variables in CSE suggests that the diglossia between the outer-circle variety and the inner-circle standard occupies the space in the middle of this cline, determined by the extent of grammatical restructuring that has taken place in the outer-circle variety. We may refer to this sort of situation as split diglossia: genetic as measured by shared grammatical features, and non-genetic as measured by linguistic neologisms unique to the outer-circle variety.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we presented a quantitative analysis of the variation of *already* and *also*, two words which have acquired substrate-derived grammatical meanings. The quantitative analysis complements the qualitative analyses that dominate the current literature on Singapore English, and indeed the contact linguistics literature generally (see Thomason, 2001 and Winford, 2003 for recent summaries of the field). We have shown that the SSE-SCE diglossia is well supported by corpus data, but its nature is complicated by the presence of non-genetic features in the restructured grammar of CSE. It is these

non-genetic features which are responsible for the high degree of variability between the informal and formal registers in Singapore English.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Third International Conference on Chinese Sociolinguistics in 2004, Nanjing, China, which was jointly organized by Nanjing University and the National University of Singapore. The work is partially supported by the National University of Singapore faculty research grants R103-000-035-112 and R103-000-049-112. The paper benefited from the comments of the anonymous reviewers, for which we are grateful. All errors of fact and interpretation are our own.
2. A note on language labels is in order. For our purpose, Singapore English comprises the two varieties just mentioned, SSE and CSE. We use Chinese as a cover term for the southern dialects spoken by the majority of early immigrants to Singapore. The three leading dialects are Hokkien, Teochew, and Cantonese. Thanks to the government's language policy, Mandarin is now the dominant spoken language in the Chinese community, followed by English; see the Literacy and Language section of the Singapore Census of Population 2000, available from the Government of Singapore website (www.gov.sg).
3. Valdman (1968) and Winford (1985) represent the opposing views on the diglossic status of French and Haitian Creole. Valdman (1968) looks at the non-genetic grammatical features in Haitian Creole and considers French and Haitian Creole different languages. Emphasizing sociocultural evidence, Winford (1985) argues in favor of identifying the French-Haitian Creole diglossia in the genetic sense of Ferguson (1959). He writes, "the concept of *diglossia*, which simultaneously brings into focus the question of how language systems are differentiated and how this differentiation is anchored in social life, applies most appropriately to creole continua" (Winford, 1985: 355).
4. The four registers given in (1) are broad text categories in the ICE. For example, the 200 WRITING texts are grouped into eight sub-categories: student essays, 20 texts; social and business letters, 30 texts; learned, 40 texts; popular, 40 texts; reportage, 20 texts; instructional, 20 texts; press editorials, 10 texts; creative, 20 texts. Although there is meaningful variation between different types of writing (see Biber, 1988), given the relatively small size of an ICE country corpus, further differentiation is not necessary nor is it advisable.
5. Unless otherwise indicated, all Singapore English data in the paper are cited from ICE-SIN, and English data from ICE-GB. Singapore English sentences will be glossed only when their meanings are not transparent.
6. Quirk *et al.* (1972: 499) write, "*already* can never come within the scope of clause negation except in questions and it normally cannot precede negation." They give the examples below to illustrate the typical use of *already* in English:
 - (i) Declarative positive:
I *already* like him
 - (ii) Negative:
*I *already* haven't spoken to him
*He can't *already* drive
 - (iii) Interrogative:
Have you *already* seen him?
Haven't you seen him *already*?
7. The usage profile in Table 2 is supported by data from a corpus of 10,000 SMS messages collected in Singapore by researchers at the School of Computing, National University of Singapore. The SMS corpus has 125,000 words. The profile of *already* is as follows:
 - total number of tokens: 263
 - frequency per 2,000 words of text: 4.21
 - total number of tokens in final position: 212
 - percent in final position: 80.2
 The higher incidence of *already* is due to the abbreviated style of writing typical of SMS texts.
8. In Mandarin, the two functions of the Cantonese *dou* are lexically separate: *dou* 'all' for universal quantification, and *ye* 'too' for the additive meaning.

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