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NOTES AND DISCUSSION

Constraints on substrate transfer revisited[1]

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In an article in this journal, Bao (2005) proposes a constraint on functional transfer that he claims accounts for features of colloquial Singapore English (and other language contact varieties) better than the congruence constraint proposed by Siegel (1999) and subsequently developed in later works (e.g. Siegel 2003, 2008a). More specifically, Bao argues that the requirement of surface syntactic similarity for transfer is too strong. His analysis uses Mandarin to exemplify the Chinese substrate languages that were the source of transfer, following the view that there is a universal Chinese grammar (Chao 1968: 13). However, the present article shows that Bao's claim is unjustified because the actual source of transfer was a variety of Chinese that differs significantly from Mandarin in the area of grammar he examined.

Functional transfer is a kind of cross-linguistic influence occurring in individual speech that can lead to contact-induced language change in a community. In this kind of transfer, the functions of a grammatical morpheme from a source language are applied to a word in the recipient language that normally does not have a grammatical function (Siegel 2003, 2008a). For example, the Chinese substrate languages spoken in Singapore – Hokkein and related Southern Min dialects, Cantonese and Mandarin – all have a postverbal marker of completive or perfect aspect (often called perfective (PFT) in Sinitic studies). In Mandarin, this is *le* (Bao 1995: 185):[2]

(1) ta qu niuyue **le**.
3SG go New York PFT
'He went to New York.'

[1] I would like to thank Vicki Knox and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

[2] Note that Bao (1995) and some of the other sources of examples used in the present article do not indicate tone. Where tone is indicated, authors' various systems of diacritics are preserved here as in the original publications.

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In the variety of Hokkien spoken in Singapore and Malaysia, the perfect marker is *liau* (Platt & Weber 1980: 66):

(2) Gún tháùke tńg chhù **liaú**.
our boss return home PFT
'Our boss has returned home.'

In Singapore English, these functions have been transferred to the English adverb *already*, which has become a completive or perfect aspect marker, as in the following examples:

(3) (a) I only went there once or twice **already**. (Platt & Weber 1980: 66)
(b) I work about four months **already**. (Bao 1995: 182)

Other postverbal aspect markers, such as continuous, are also found in all the Chinese substrate languages (Chappell 1989, 1992), but there is no evidence of their functions being transferred to English words and incorporated into Singapore English. This can be accounted for by a proposed constraint on transfer (Siegel 1999, 2003, 2008a). For a feature to be transferred, there must be somewhere to transfer to (Andersen 1983) – a morpheme in the RL (recipient language; here, English) that can be assigned the functions of a grammatical morpheme or structure in the SL (source language; here, one of the Chinese substrate languages). In addition to being perceptually salient and having a function or meaning related to that of the corresponding SL feature, this RL morpheme must occur in the same surface syntactic position, at least in some contexts. The absence of such structural congruence will constrain transfer.

In the case of continuous aspect, for example, English has a perceptually salient morpheme with a meaning related to that of the Chinese markers – i.e. *keep* as in *keep running*. But this occurs before rather than after the verb. Since the English and Chinese forms are not syntactically congruent, individual transfer did not occur, and so there is no postverbal continuous marker in Singapore English. This congruence constraint also accounts for the absence of various substrate language features in Melanesian Pidgin (Siegel 1999), Tayo (a French-lexified creole spoken in New Caledonia) (Siegel, Sandeman & Corne 2000), Australian Kriol (Munro 2004) and Hawai'i Creole (Siegel 2008b).

However, Bao (2005) argues that in Singapore English the properties of the Chinese marker of experiential (EXP) aspect *guo* (meaning 'happened at least once in the past') have been transferred to the English word *ever* – as in the following:

(4) (a) I **ever** tried this type of fruit before.
'I have tried this type of fruit before.'
(b) Last time I **ever** bought something on sale.
'I have bought something on sale in the past.'
(Bao 2005: exx. (17a, c))

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But the experiential aspect marker follows the verb in Chinese whereas *ever* precedes the verb in English – for example (244):

(5) wǒ chī **guo** Rìběn fàn
I eat EXP Japan food
'I've eaten Japanese food (before).' (Bao 2005: ex. (18a))

Therefore, according to the congruence constraint outlined above, transfer would not have been expected.

Bao (2005: 258) proposes a constraint that is not as strict as congruence, and would allow for such transfer. First, his view is that an entire grammatical subsystem transfers, not just particular items from the system. So, for example, he argues that the entire Chinese aspect system was transferred to Singapore English, thus accounting for *already* as the perfect marker *ever* as the experiential marker, and other preverbal aspectual markers. The main constraint is the 'lexifier filter' – that the lexifier 'acts as a filter, sifting out those categories of the transferred subsystem for which its grammar cannot provide straightforward morphosyntactic exponence' (pages 237–238). Thus, the Chinese aspect markers that have equivalents in Singapore English are the ones that can be expressed by similar morphosyntactic means in both Chinese and English – that is, with preverbal or postverbal functional morphemes. The Chinese aspect markers that do not have equivalents in Singapore English are those for which the lexifier has no similar morphosyntactic means of expression. For example, tentative aspect is indicated by reduplication in Chinese, but reduplication is not a productive morphological process in English, so this aspect is not found in Singapore English (page 262). Bao says (page 260) that the lexifier filter constraint is 'weaker than congruence' in that it allows for transfer of the V + *guo* experiential aspect marking as *ever* + V, and therefore it better accounts for the data.

The problem is that Bao (2005) bases his analysis on only one variety of Chinese, Mandarin. And although he says (page 238, footnote 2) that Mandarin is now the dominant Chinese dialect in Singapore, it was hardly spoken in the 1950s, when education in English became more widespread (Lim & Foley 2004: 4) and Singapore English had already begun to develop. In 1957, only 0.1 percent of the population spoke Mandarin as their first language, as opposed to 53.2 percent speaking Southern Min varieties (30.0% Hokkien, 17.0% Teochew, 5.2% Hainanese, 1.0% Foochow) and 17 percent speaking Cantonese (Kuo 1980: 41), as well as 11.5 percent speaking Malay. Widespread promotion of Mandarin as the lingua franca among the Chinese did not begin until after independence in 1968 (Bao 2005: 238, footnote 2), and accelerated with the Speak Mandarin Campaign, which began in 1979 (Bokhorst-Heng 2003). The first published grammatical description of Singapore English appeared in 1974 (Tongue 1974). Thus, it seems clear that when Singapore English was developing, the dominant variety of Chinese was not Mandarin, but Hokkien and closely related

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Southern Min varieties, which were spoken by more than three quarters of the Chinese population.

It would seem logical then to examine the influence on Singapore English of the Min dialects rather than Mandarin. However, Bao takes the view, following Chao (1968: 13), that all the varieties share a 'universal Chinese grammar'. This is despite arguments to the contrary presented by Ansaldo (1999) and Matthews & Yip (2001). With this regard, Bao states (page 238, footnote 2) that '[t]heir arguments, however, do not affect the aspectual system'.

This view is contradicted, however, by the work of Chappell (1989, 1992). She demonstrates that the preferential strategy for marking aspect in Southern Min is with preverbal adverbs or auxiliaries as opposed to the use of suffixes in other varieties of Chinese. With regard to experiential aspect, Southern Min most often uses a preverbal marker *băt* or *băk*, unlike Mandarin and Cantonese, which always use a postverbal marker, *guo* and *kwo* respectively. While some Southern Min dialects also have a postverbal experiential marker *kè* or *kuè* due to the influence of Mandarin, the use of preverbal *băt* is preferred. And although Mandarin has a preverbal adverb *ceng* which is similar in meaning to *băt*, unlike *băt* it is not used on its own to indicate experiential aspect. Chappell (1989: 17) gives the following example:

(6) Guă **băt** k'i
I EXP go
'I've been (there before)'

In later work, Chappell (2001) analyses preverbal *băt* in Southern Min as an evidential marker.

Ho & Wong (2001: 84) also mention this preverbal marker in Hokkien, and note that it 'provides an exact semantic and grammatical fit with *ever* in SgE [Singapore English]'. This includes the use of the marker in affirmative sentences, unlike existential *ever* in other varieties English (see Israel 1998). Ho & Wong (2001: 85) provide the following example (glossing the experiential marker as EVER):

(7) Goa **bat** khi Jitpun.
I EVER go Japan
'I've been to Japan (before).'

Further evidence that *ever* is more likely a result of transfer from Hokkien rather than Mandarin is found in affirmative responses to yes/no questions in Singapore English that include *ever* – for example (Ho & Wong 2001: 80):

(8) Q: You **ever** go Japan (or not)?
A: (Yes), **ever**.

(9) Q: Your husband **ever** bring home fish to eat or not?
A: **Ever**.

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This matches what is done in Hokkien (Ho & Wong 2001: 85):

(10) Q: Li **bat** khi Jitpun bo?
you EVER go Japan not
A: Bat.
EVER

This contrasts to responses in which the postverbal experiential aspect marker (EXP) is used, which require the verb as well as the marker – for example in Mandarin (Ho & Wong 2001: 84):

(11) Q: Ni qu **guo** Riben meiyou?
you go EXP Japan not
A: Qu **guo**.
go EXP

Furthermore, in Malay the preverbal marker *pernah* also has properties similar to those of *ever* in Singapore English. This can be seen in the following examples from Ho & Wong (2001: 85), in which they gloss *pernah* as EVER, as they do with Hokkien *bat* in examples 7 and 10 above.

(12) Saya **pernah** pergi ke Jepun.
I EVER go to Japan
'I've been to Japan (before).'

(13) Q: Awak **pernah**-kah pergi ke Jepun?
you EVER-QP go to Jepun
A: **Pernah**.
EVER

Thus, transfer from Malay could have complemented or reinforced that from the Southern Min varieties of Chinese.

In conclusion, the evidence presented here demonstrates that the properties of the preverbal aspect marker *ever* in Singapore English were very likely the result of transfer from the experiential (or evidential) aspect markers in the substrate languages. Since these markers, like *ever*, occur preverbally in substrate languages spoken by nearly 65 percent of the population (53.2% Southern Min varieties, 11.5% Malay), there is no reason to believe that transfer occurred from Mandarin, which has a postverbal marker, especially when it was spoken by only 0.1 percent of the population. Therefore, there is no reason to dismiss the congruence constraint as being too strong, and no need to propose an alternative weaker constraint.

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