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Already in Singapore English

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ABSTRACT: In this article I show that *already* in Singapore English expresses two aspectual properties: the completion of an action (perfectivity) or the beginning of an action (inchoativity). The sentence *My son go to school already* is potentially ambiguous: it could mean that my son has already gone to school, or my son now goes to school, having reached the school-going age. The perfective (or completive) use of *already* is consistent with its lexical meaning in Standard British English, but the source of the second, inchoative use, I argue, is the Chinese particle *le*, which expresses perfectivity and inchoativity, depending on its position within the sentence.

It has been observed and well-documented in the literature that Singapore English (SgE) is heavily influenced by Chinese,¹ not only in terms of its vocabulary but its syntax as well (see Platt and Weber, 1980; Ho, 1986; Ritchie, 1986; Platt and Ho, 1989; Gupta, 1991; Pakir, 1991; Ho and Platt, 1993). Words with Chinese origin are readily available in daily usage, two common examples being *cheemology* 'profound' (from *cheem* 'deep' + (*o*)*logy*) and *kiasu* 'fear of losing out to competition' (from *kia* 'afraid' and *su* 'loss'). Sentences which show clear Chinese syntactic influence also abound in SgE. An example of this is the slogan used in McDonald's advertisement:

(1) Everything also want

The McDonald's tongue-in-cheek advertising campaign features the proverbial success-driven young man who is afraid of losing out to competition. The sentence in (1) describes how the *kiasu*-crazed young man is unsatisfied with what he has already amassed. Syntactically, it shows influence from Chinese in two ways. First, the subject is missing. Subjectless sentences are common in Chinese; but in Standard British or American English (henceforth SBrE), the subject is mandatory. In sentences where no plausible subject exists, as in *It rains* and *It is clear that John is clever*, a dummy nominal expression, in this case, *it*, must appear. In this respect SgE is like Chinese in that it allows subjectless sentences.

Secondly, the object *everything* does not appear post-verbally, as should be the case in SBrE, but appears in what is commonly referred to as the topic position. Topic-comment construction is common in Chinese, but not as common in SBrE.² The sentence in (1) can be readily translated into Chinese, word-for-word, as follows:

(2) shen me dou yao
 everything all want.

See references cited above for more examples.

At the level of discourse, Platt and Ho (1989) show that Chinese influence is considerable as well. This is manifested in the frequent use of discourse particles *a*, *lah*, *le*, *lo*, *ma*, etc. These particles are readily used in Chinese, particularly *a*, *lah* and *ma*, and they are used in the same function in SgE as they are in Chinese (see also Kwan-Terry, 1978; Tay,

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1979; Platt and Weber, 1980; Platt *et al.*, 1984; Gupta, 1991). These particles typically perform a pragmatic function of expressing emotive overtones on the part of the speaker to the information being conveyed, although the exact emotive response is not easy to pin down. Thus, the particle *lah* (and its variant form *la*), as in *Wrong lah*, conveys 'solidarity' between the speaker and hearer (Richards and Tay, 1977; Platt and Ho, 1989), or introduces 'coldness' and 'social distance' into the interaction (Bell and Ser, 1983), or carries 'the additional emotive meaning of obviousness' (Kwan-Terry, 1978). (Gupta, [1991] contains a succinct synopsis of the various positions on the use of *lah* in SgE.) Evidently the exact communicative function of the particles is determined by the tone and intonation in which they are uttered, and nonlinguistic factors. As with evocative particles, their exact emotive meaning is a function more of the context in which they are used than their intrinsic lexical meanings, if any.

An obvious property of the particles like *a/lah* which come into SgE from Chinese (if Kwan-Terry and Gupta are right) is that their functions and pronunciations in Chinese are more or less intact. One question arises as to whether there exist particles in SgE which are regular words in SBrE, but assume the grammatical or pragmatic functions typically performed by particles in languages spoken in Singapore, mainly Chinese, Malay and Tamil (Pakir, 1991), but not in SBrE. In a thorough and systematic study of children's acquisition of the tense/aspect system of SgE, Kwan-Terry (1989) shows that the use and function of the sentence-final *already* in SgE come from Chinese, particularly *yi-jing* 'already' and *le* (an aspectual marker). In this short article, I examine the use of *already* in SgE and *le* in Chinese, and show that they function in their respective languages to express not only the completive/perfective aspect, but also the aspectual property of inchoativity, i.e., the beginning of an action or state of affairs. In SBrE, the word *already* emphasizes the completion of an action, i.e., the fact that a particular action took place in the past, and is normally used in sentences with the past tense or the perfective (e.g., *She left already* or *She has left already/She has already left*). Thus, the inchoative use of *already* in SgE, which has nothing to do with past actions, is surprising. In what follows I will first document the completive and inchoative uses of *already* in SgE and *le* in Chinese, and then show that the dual aspectual function of *already* comes from the Chinese particle *le*. My analysis parallels Kwan-Terry's work, and strongly supports her position.

1. ALREADY

The use of *already* as an aspectual marker has been noticed in the literature. Platt and Weber (1980: 65–66) treat *already* as marking the completive aspect, which is expressed in SBrE by the past tense or the perfective (*have Ved*). Two of their examples are quoted below (the primed examples are their respective Standard British English equivalent as identified by the authors):

- (3) (a) I work about four months already
 (a') I have (already) been working for four months
 (b) I stay in X seventeen years already
 (b') I've lived in X for seventeen years

Platt and Weber noted that this use of *already* is analogous to the Hokkien particle *liaú* (p. 66):

- (4) Gún tháuke trīg chhù liaú
 Our boss return home already
 Our boss has returned home

In Hokkien, *liaú* expresses a past action; its use corresponds with the past tense or the perfective in SBrE, with or without *already*. Obviously the completive use of *already* in SgE is motivated by lack of tense marking on the verb, as exemplified in (3).³ Lack of tense inflection may also be the reason behind the use of the word *before* in the sentence below (Tay, 1979: 104):

- (5) Everybody down there see me before

Before resolves any tense-related ambiguity that may arise. The completive use of *already*, in lieu of past tense or perfective marking, differs in grammatical function from its usual use in SBrE. Nevertheless, it is consistent with the meaning of *already*. It is conceivable that this word, not some other word, is drafted to perform the tense-related function in SgE, which in SBrE is done through verbal inflection (*see* vs. *saw/seen*).

So far I have been using the terms 'completive' and 'perfective' interchangeably. Perhaps 'perfective' is the better term, which is evident in the SBrE glosses of SgE sentences in (3) (the primed examples). Thus, (3a) reports that the subject has worked for about four months, but at the time of utterance the work may not have been completed, and may continue. There is no doubt that *already* is used to indicate the completion of an action at or before the time of utterance, as in *I eat the cake already* (Kwan-Terry, 1989: 39); but in *Drink already ah, cannot sleep*, which the speaker utters to decline the offer of coffee, *already* does not mean the completion of (coffee) drinking, it merely sequences the temporal order of the two events (drinking and sleeping). Perfectivity better captures the function of *already*. However, in accordance with common practice in the literature, I will continue to use the terms 'completive' and 'perfective' interchangeably.

The second use of *already*, which Platt and Weber (1980) do not mention, is to signal the beginning of an action which has not taken place before the time of utterance. This use is exemplified by sentences in (6):

- (6) (a) My son go to school already
 (b) My baby speak already
 (c) The patient eat food already

All the sentences in (6) are ambiguous, due to the ambiguity of *already*. On the completive use, the sentences in (6) can be paraphrased in SBrE as in (7):

- (7) (a) My son has left for school
 (b) My baby talked
 (c) The patient has eaten food

On the inchoative use, the same sentences can be paraphrased as follows:

- (8) (a) My son has started school
 (b) My baby has started to speak
 (c) The patient has started to eat food

SBrE does not encode inchoativity in its verbal morphology, and resorts to words like *start* to express it. In the inchoative reading of the SgE sentences in (6), the action of going to school, speaking, or eating need not have taken place at the time of utterance. What is emphasized is the *onset* of the action, not the completion of it. On this interpretation, the

sentence *My son go to school already*, uttered (say) before the start of a new semester, could be true even if the boy did not go to school at all, provided that he is of school-going age and will start school when the semester begins. Similarly, the statement *The patient eat food already* can be interpreted as a progress report on the condition of the patient: he has started to eat solid food, and was formerly on glucose. On the inchoative reading, the beginning of the food-eating state is emphasized. Kwan-Terry (1989: 40) notes this use of *already* in the speech of a 3½-year-old child. In the utterance *The tongue red already, you see?*, the predicate is adjectival, and the sentence signifies the start of 'a new situation or state.'

The inchoative use of *already* is often found with volitional verbs such as *want* and modal verbs such as *can(not)*. Thus, one often hears sentences of the following type:

- (9) (a) I (don't) want to eat durian already
(b) I cannot go inside already
(Kwan-Terry 1989: 40)

The (a) sentence does not mean that the volitional action (or state) of (not) *wanting* took place in the past; on the contrary, the sentence expresses the *onset* of the volitional action of (not) *wanting* to eat durian. Similarly, the (b) sentence means the inability of 'going inside' which prevails at the time of utterance, and implies that 'I' was able to go inside prior to the time of utterance. *Already* here denotes the aspectual property of inchoativity.

The two uses of *already* are polar opposites along the temporal dimensions, with the completive use indicating the completion of an action, and the inchoative use indicating the onset of an action. This aspectual duality of *already* is not evident in its lexical meaning in SBrE, where it expresses the two aspectual properties only with the help of other lexical or grammatical devices:

- (10) (a) My son has already left for school (completive)
(b) My son has already started school (inchoative)

It is fair to say that in these sentences, it is the perfect inflection in (10a) and the verb *start* in (10b) that convey the aspectual properties of perfectivity and inchoativity. This contrasts sharply with *already* in SgE, where it conveys the two aspectual properties by itself. The question is where the dual use of *already* comes from. Following Ho (1986), Kwan-Terry (1989), and Ho and Platt (1993), I argue that it comes from the Chinese particle *le*.⁴

2. LE

The particle *le* can occur in two positions within a sentence: sentence-medially (that is, after the verb and before the object) or sentence-finally. They are exemplified below:

- (11) (a) wo chi le liulian
I eat LE liulian
I ate durian
(b) wo chi liulian le
I eat durian LE
I now eat durian

As the glosses indicate, when *le* occurs after the verb but before the object, it signifies the completion of an action (here, the action of durian-eating); when it occurs at the end of the sentence, it signifies the onset of durian-eating – i.e., the completion of the transition from

the state of non-durian-eating to the state of durian-eating. The sentence in (11b) means that I am now a durian-eater, which I was not before the time of utterance. It does not imply that I have eaten the fruit at all anytime in the past, and it would still be a truthful statement even if I did not eat any durian in the past at all. The two sentences in (11) have different truth conditions: the fact that I have eaten the fruit is a precondition for (11a), but not for (11b). In cases where post-verbal position coincides with sentence-final position, *le* renders the sentence ambiguous (Shi, 1990: 96):⁵

- (12) ta lai le
he come LE
(a) He came/has come (completive)
(b) He now comes (inchoative)

Le can occur in both positions in the same sentence:

- (13) wo chi le liulian le
I eat LE durian LE

The truth condition for the sentence is the same as that for (11a): I must have eaten durian for the sentence to be true. The post-verbal *le* takes priority over the sentence-final *le*.

3. LE AND ALREADY: A COMPARISON

We have seen the aspectual ambiguity of *le* in Chinese and *already* in SgE. Their similarity is striking, and does not stop there. The ambiguity of *le* and *already* can be disambiguated in the same way in SgE and Chinese – by the nature of the predicates involved. If they are used with verbs of motion (such as *go*, *run*), or verbs with instantaneous finish (what Vendler [1967] calls *achievement* verbs, such as *reach*, *arrive*), *le* and *already* are no longer ambiguous:

- (14) Chinese *le*:
(a) ta qu niuyue le
he go New York LE
He went to New York (perfective)
*He now goes to New York (inchoative)
(a') ta qu le niuyue
he go LE New York
He went to New York (perfective)
(b) ta daoda niyue le
he arrive New York LE
He arrived in New York (perfective)
*He starts to arrive in New York (inchoative)
(b') ta daoda le niyue
he arrive LE New York
He arrived in New York (perfective)
- (15) SgE *already*:
(a) he go to New York already (perfective/*inchoative)
(a') he already go to New York (perfective/*inchoative)
(b) he arrive in New York already (perfective/*inchoative)
(b') he already arrive in New York (perfective/*inchoative)

In (14a, b), * means that the inchoative reading is not available, even though the sentence-final *le* ought to induce it. In (14a', b'), where *le* occurs sentence-medially, the inchoative

reading is not possible regardless of verb types. The corresponding SgE sentences in (15) are not ambiguous either. The inchoative reading is systematically lacking in verbs of motion or achievement in the Chinese *le* and SgE *already*.

Another striking similarity between the Chinese *le* and SgE *already* involves verbs of volition. We said earlier that in sentences with such verbs *already* gives rise to only the inchoative reading. Interestingly, *already* can occur only sentence-finally, as in (9), but not sentence-medially, as in (16):

- (16) (a) ??I already want to eat durian
 (a') ??I want already to eat durian
 (b) ??I already don't want to eat durian
 (b') ??I don't already want to eat durian

Similarly in Chinese: the particle *le* can only occur sentence-finally, giving rise to the inchoative reading:

- (17) (a) wo xiang chi liulian le (= 9a)
 I want eat durian LE
 I now want to eat durian
 (b) wo bu xiang chi liulian le (= 9b)
 I not want eat durian LE
 I now don't want to eat durian

but not sentence-medially:⁴

- (18) (a) *wo xiang le chi liulian (= 16a, a')
 I want LE eat durian
 (a') *wo xiang chi le liulian
 I want eat LE durian
 (b) *wo bu xiang le chi liulian (= 16b, b')
 I not want LE eat durian
 (b') *wo bu xiang chi le liulian
 I not want eat LE durian

Sentence-medial *le* induces the completive reading in Chinese. Therefore, with *want*-type verbs, *le* and *already* cannot be used to express the aspectual property of completivity. Although this state of affairs is a bit curious, it nevertheless points out the similarity between *le* in Chinese and *already* in SgE, supporting the argument that the aspectual function of *already* is derived from *le*.

The parallel between *le* and *already*, however, is not complete. In Chinese, sentence-final *le* induces the inchoative reading for most types of predicates, and sentence-medial *le* induces the completive reading. There is no ambiguity between the two *les*. *Already*, however, is ambiguous when it occurs sentence-finally, and sentence-medially (*already* cannot occur between the verb and its object):

- (19) The patient already eat food

The sentence is ambiguous in the same way that *The patient eat food already* (cf. 6c) is, although my informants prefer the completive reading to the inchoative reading. This preference is influenced by the speech context and the type of predicates involved. In the two sentences in (20), the perfective reading is preferred in (a), while the inchoative reading is preferred in (b):

- (20) (a) My son already go to school
 (b) My baby already speak

It must be emphasized that the other, less preferred, reading is readily available given the appropriate environment. For example, the perfective reading is called for when (20a) is used to answer the query, 'Where is your son?', whereas the inchoative reading is compelling when answering the question 'How old is your son?' Similarly for (20b).

4. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it is clear that the completive (or perfective) and inchoative uses of *already* in SgE parallel those of *le* in Chinese; as such they lend further support to the conclusions of Ho, Kwan-Terry and Platt. The differences and similarities can be summarized as follows:

- (21) With *want*-type predicates
- | | <i>le</i> | <i>already</i> |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Sentence-finally | inchoative | inchoative |
| Sentence-medially | non-inchoative | non-inchoative |
- With other types of predicate
- | | <i>le</i> | <i>already</i> |
|-------------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Sentence-finally | inchoative | completive/inchoative |
| Sentence-medially | completive | completive/inchoative |

With *want*-type predicates, *le* and *already* have identical aspectual functions. It is only in sentences with non-volitional predicates that the differences between the two emerge. Whereas the aspectual function of *le* depends on the syntactic position in Chinese, *already* is ambiguous regardless of where it occurs in the sentence. This is not surprising, given the fact that *already*, being a word in SBrE and SgE, has its usual meaning and syntactic position. What *already* is lacking in SBrE is the ability to mark inchoativity. In SgE, *already* retains its SBrE meaning and use, and acquires the additional ability of expressing inchoativity. This additional function, which is aspectual in nature, has its source in the Chinese particle *le*.⁵

NOTES

1. The term 'Chinese' is a general term which covers a whole range of mutually unintelligible dialects, although the unintelligibility is largely due to phonological or lexical factors. The dialects most commonly spoken in Singapore are Cantonese, Teochow, and Hokkien, although Mandarin is now gaining currency due to the government's 'Speak Mandarin' campaign. Since our concern is mainly syntactic, where dialectal difference is minimal, I use the cover term 'Chinese' to refer to any Chinese dialect, including Mandarin. I will use dialect names when the occasion warrants it.
2. There are numerous works on Chinese grammar. Among the more popular and more readily available ones on Chinese grammar in general, and topicalization in particular, are: Chao (1968), Li and Thompson (1981), and Xu and Langendoen (1985).
3. Lack of tense marking on the verb is not a consistent feature in SgE, partially due to the fact that SgE is not a stable grammatical system the way SBrE is. For discussion of the SgE 'speech continuum', see Platt (1975), Tay (1979), and Platt and Weber (1980).
4. The Hokkien particle *liáu* is the same morpheme as Mandarin *le*, and they share the same character. In Mandarin *le*, which is toneless and never stressed, is the reduced form of *liao* (*liáu*). In Hokkien, *liáu* has its own tone and is not reduced.
5. Shi (1990) uses the term 'perfective', instead of 'completive'. This is not a mere terminological issue. Both the completive aspect and the perfective aspect express past actions; but the actions' relevance to the present is

emphasized by the perfective, but not the completive. For our purpose, however, this difference is of marginal importance. I will therefore continue to use the term 'completive' in places where Shi would use 'perfective'.

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Syntactic variation in West African English

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ABSTRACT: The major focus of this paper is a description of syntactic variation in West African English with examples from West African English literature. The following categories of syntactic variation in West African English are identified and described: subjectless sentences, deletion of the *-ly* morpheme in manner adjuncts, omission of function words, reduplication, formation of interrogatives without changing the position of subject and auxiliary items, tag questions, the use of the progressive aspect with mental processes, non-distinctive use of reciprocal pronouns, substitution of prepositions in idiomatic usage, and focus constructions. The fact that many of the syntactic features of West African English are also found in other varieties of non-native Englishes around the world indicates that, contrary to the speculation of some scholars, the new Englishes have acquired some stable linguistic characteristics and that their usage cuts across various educational and socio-economic strata in countries where English is used as an institutionalized second language. However, more comparative studies need to be done to uncover additional facts about the mutual linguistic relationships among the new Englishes.

INTRODUCTION

Syntactic variation in West African English (hereafter, WAE) has received considerable attention from linguistic scholars. For example, with particular reference to Nigerian English, Bamgboṣe (1992: 155) has noted the following variations: certain types of pluralization (e.g. *equipments*), antonyms (e.g. *indisciplined*), and adverbials (e.g. *singlehandedly*); dropping of 'to' from the infinitive after certain verbs, e.g., 'enable him do it'; a preposition may be employed where native English will avoid or will use a different preposition, e.g. *voice out* instead of 'voice'; a focus construction is often used, involving the subject of the sentence as focus and an anaphoric pronoun subject, e.g. 'The politicians and their supporters, they don't often listen to advice.' Like Bamgboṣe (1992), Todd (1982) points out that the majority of syntactic patterns in educated WAE are identical with those found elsewhere but she notes the following differences in the use of some phrasal verbs, e.g. *cope up with* for 'cope with'; in prepositional usage, e.g., 'He drove around with a view to picking passengers'; the tag questions *isn't it?* or *not so?* are very common, e.g. 'he loves you, isn't it/not so?' or 'it doesn't matter, not so/isn't it?'; occasional failure to distinguish between countable and non-countable nouns (*an advice, behaviors, firewoods*). Todd (1982) further claims that a few syntactic patterns reflect the structure of the vernaculars such as the use of *I am coming* for 'I'm going away now but I'll be back soon', *sorry* (used as an empathy formula), and *I can hear an awful smell* for 'I smell something.' However, as explained in Bamiro (1994), such translation equivalents and semantic underdifferentiation are lexico-semantic rather than syntactic.

With particular reference to Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Kenyan Englishes and following Bamgboṣe (1971), Kirk-Greene (1971), Sey (1973), Angogo and Hancock (1990), and Zuengler (1982), Bokamba (1992: 128–134) observes the following syntactic variations in African English: omission of function words, e.g. 'I am going to cinema'; semantic extension of certain lexical items from African languages to cover various meanings and

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