

Until in Singapore English

ZHIMING BAO* and LIONEL WEE**

This paper investigates the syntax and semantics of one word, *until*, in Standard British English and Singapore English. We show that while *until* is used in similar fashion in both varieties of English, it has uses in Singapore English which are not available in Standard British English. After having analyzed the syntax and semantics of one particle in Chinese, namely *dao*, we show the parallel between *until* in Singapore English and *dao* in Chinese, and argue that the additional meanings of *until* in Singapore English are due to the substrate influence of Chinese. It has been extensively documented in the literature that substrate influence is structural in character. Our finding is significant in this respect. The function words of English, as exemplified in the conjunction/preposition *until*, may undergo change under the influence of the linguistic substratum.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we investigate the grammatical and semantic properties of one word, *until*, in Singapore English (SgE),¹ and show that in addition to the way it is used in standard English (henceforth, StanE), SgE *until* also displays a number of different uses so that, compared to its StanE usage, it is much more polysemous. We argue that the additional polysemy of SgE *until* is due to the substrate influence of the Chinese word *dao*.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we establish the differing uses of *until* in StanE and in SgE. Then, in section 3 we discuss the use of *dao* in Chinese, and show that the additional polysemy of SgE *until* is similar to it. Further discussion of the relationship between SgE *until* and *dao* is provided in section 4. Section 5 is the conclusion.

2. *Until* IN STAN E AND SGE

2.1 *Until* in StanE

According to Quirk *et al.* (1985), *until* is categorially either a conjunction or a preposition. Semantically, Quirk *et al.* also treat *until* as having two main uses, expressing either the temporal point or the result of the situation introduced in the matrix clause. As a conjunction, *until* introduces phrases which can express either the temporal point or the result. But as a preposition, an *until*-phrase expresses only the temporal point. Examples follow (Quirk *et al.*, 1985):

- (1) a. *until*-clause, temporal point
They will live in Chicago *until* William finishes his thesis
- b. *until*-clause, result
She massaged her leg *until* it stopped hurting
- c. *until*-noun phrase, temporal point
We camped there *until* September

*Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260. e-mail: fasbaozm@nus.sg

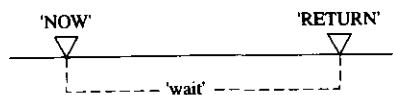
**Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260. e-mail: ellweeha@nus.sg

For ease of reference we will use the term 'until-phrase' to refer to phrases introduced by *until*, whether clausal or nominal.

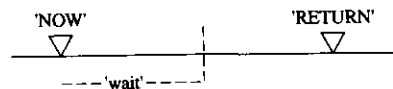
The temporal point and result uses are quite similar. Essentially, the similarity lies in the fact that the situation described in the matrix clause ceases to hold the moment the result or temporal point described by the *until*-phrase takes place. In other words, what unites the two uses of *until* is the condition that the matrix clause situation and the *until*-phrase situation do not overlap; the action in the matrix clause continues up to the point expressed by the *until*-phrase but not beyond. We will refer to this as the consecutive use of *until*.

The consecutive use of *until* is recognized by Quirk *et al.* (1985), who capture the temporal relationship between the matrix clause and the *until*-phrase – the latter's 'forward span' – by way of the diagrams in Figure 1.

- (2) a. He waited *until I returned*



- b. He didn't wait *until I returned*



- c. He didn't arrive *until I returned*

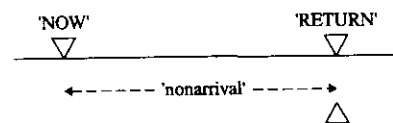


Figure 1. The temporal relationship between the matrix clause and the *until* phrase

In the diagrams, NOW marks the speaker's time of reference. As a forward span adjunct, the *until*-phrase interacts with the temporal characteristics of the matrix verb. In (2a), the matrix verb *wait* has durative meaning, therefore the temporal span of the action extends all the way to the point specified by the time adjunct. In this case, the end point of waiting coincides with the beginning point of returning. When the matrix verb is negated, as in (2b), the end point of waiting falls before the point of returning.² With non-durative verbs, the *until*-phrase can be used only when the matrix verb is negated, cf. (2c). Removing the negative *didn't* produces an anomaly, as shown in (3).

- (3) *He arrived *until I returned*

As the above examples show, in StanE, for both the result and temporal interpretations, the matrix action does not extend beyond the point specified by the *until*-phrase. In (1a), they will not continue to live in Chicago after William has finished his thesis; in (1b), the massage stops once the result has been obtained; and in (2a), the waiting stops after the return. For the non-durative predicate *arrive* in (2c), the non-action ('non-arrival') stops, or the action ('arrival') takes place, on 'my return.'

We can see this semantic condition of consecutivity associated with StanE *until* in the following discourse fragments:

- (4) a. *He waited *until I returned*, and continued waiting
b. He waited *until I returned*, and went home

In (4a), *and continued waiting* contradicts the meaning of *until*; in (4b), *and went home* does not. When the matrix verb is negated, we obtain the following contrast:

- (5) a. I won't eat *until John arrives*
b. *I won't eat *until John arrives*, and then he arrives I still won't eat
c. I won't eat *until John arrives*, and when he arrives I'll start

As the examples show, the *until*-phrase in StanE specifies the end of the temporal span for the matrix clause, at which point, the matrix situation no longer obtains. In other words, the situation described by the matrix clause and the situation described by the *until*-phrase cannot be concurrent. As we will see below, SgE *until* permits a concurrent meaning, in addition to the consecutive meaning.

2.2 Until in SgE

By and large, *until* in SgE retains much of the usage in StanE. Examples follow.

- (6) a. I run *until I (am) tired*
b. I won't run *until you say so*

In SgE, the copula *be* is optional. These two sentences are not surprising; their meanings are expected: running will stop at the point of being tired (6a), and will start only when you say so (6b). In both cases there is no overlap between the situation described by the *until*-phrase and that described by the matrix clause.

Consider now the following sentences:

7. a. I waited *until I (was) angry*
b. I ate *until I (was) sick*

In the two sentences, the *until*-phrase functions as an adjunct of result: in (7a), being angry is a result of waiting, and in (7b), being sick results from eating too much. All this is expected; *until* in SgE retains the meaning it has in StanE.

But in addition to the meanings found in StanE, the meanings of the two sentences in (7) show an interesting twist. Surprisingly, the situation described by the matrix verb (*eat*, *wait*) can continue to exist even after the result has been obtained. (7a) might be used in a context where the speaker is writing in a government office, gets angry because he/she has been kept waiting for a long period of time, but has no choice except to keep on waiting. (7b) might be used at a buffet where the speaker feels that to get his/her money's worth, he/she must keep on eating even if it makes him/her sick. The following discourse fragments are not anomalous in SgE, although they are in StanE:

Compared with *until*, the range of *dao* is indeed wide. It expresses not only time (12b), but also destination (or direction, cf. (12a)), the 'success' aspect (cf. (12c)), and degrees or results (cf. (12d)).

To better understand the properties of *dao*, consider the following sentences:

- (13) a. wo qunian dao xinjiapo
I last year reach Singapore
'I came to Singapore last year'
- b. huoche dao le
train reach ASP
'The train arrived'
- c. wo zou dao haibian
I walk DAO sea-side
'I walked to the seaside'
- d. wo zou dao xiawu san dian
I walk DAO afternoon three o'clock
'I walked until three o'clock in the afternoon'

In (13a,b), *dao* is used as a verb, either transitive with a destination object (13a), or intransitive (13b). In (13c,d), *dao* loses its verbal meaning, and is used adpositionally to express the destination or time of the action described by the main verb *zou* 'walk.' In all cases, though, *dao* marks the termination of the main verb action. For example, in (13d), it is understood that at three o'clock, the subject stops walking. These uses of *dao*, then, are united by the interpretation that the main verb action ceases, and in this sense, are analogous to the consecutive meaning of *until* found in both StanE and SgE.

For our purpose, it is the degree or result use of *dao* that is of interest. We will argue that this is the substrate source of the additional polysemy of *until* in SgE. We will return to this point in the next section. For the moment, a few observations can be made about *dao*. First, for the degree or result meaning (cf. (12d)), the interpretation of the *dao*-phrase depends on the main predicate and the context in which it is used. The two examples, cited from Zhu (1982), have the degree interpretation. For the sentence below, the result interpretation is more natural:

- (14) ta ku dao dajia dou liu le lei
he cry DAO everyone all shed ASP tear
'He cried [so much] that everyone shed tears'

As a degree/result expression, *dao* can take adjectival phrases as well:

- (15) ta shuo dao hen jidong
he talk DAO very agitated
i. 'He talked in an agitated manner'
ii. 'He became agitated from talking'

The sentence is potentially ambiguous between the degree reading (15i) and the result reading (15ii). As an expression of degree or result, *dao* is capable of taking a phrase of any type, as long as the phrase is semantically compatible with degrees or results.

Second, syntactically, the position of the *dao*-phrase is post-verbal and fixed. Preposing the *dao*-phrase in (12c,d) produces ungrammatical sentences:

- (16) a. *dao hen duo beike, jian
DAO very many shell pick
b. *dao shenti, kaolu
DAO health consider
c. *dao zhe-zhong chengdu, hutu
DAO this degree confused
d. *dao lian ziji de mingzi ye want le, hutu
DAO even own 's name also forget ASP confused

For the first two uses exemplified in (12a,b), the *dao*-phrase can be preposed; however, the meanings change completely. Compare the sentences in (12a,b) with the ones below, where the *dao*-phrase is preposed:

- (17) a. dao youju, zou
DAO post-office walk
'go to the post-office to walk';
b. dao ban ye, tan
DAO half night talk
'(wait) until midnight to talk'
c. dao tian liang, tan
DAO sky bright chat
'(wait) until the sky is bright, (and then) chat'

As the glosses indicate, preposing the *dao*-phrase changes the nature of the construction, and the meaning.³ For the intended meaning, the *dao*-phrase has a fixed, post-verbal position.

Third, as an expression of time, *dao* is superficially similar to *until* in StanE. But upon close examination we see a crucial difference. The temporal span of *dao* differs from that of *until* shown in (2a), where the final point is the end point of the action. In Chinese, the action can continue beyond the temporal point expressed by the *dao*-phrase, as the following discourse fragment illustrates. In other words, *dao* allows a concurrent reading while StanE *until* does not.

- (18) tamen tan dao ban ye, hai zai tan
they talk DAO half night still PROG talk
'they talked until midnight, and were still talking'

So, the temporal span of *dao* is more like (19) in Figure 3:

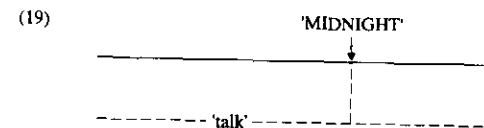


Figure 3. The temporal span of *dao*

This is different from the temporal span of StanE *until*, illustrated in (2a) of Figure 1. The same temporal span is shown in the following discourse fragment:

- (20) ta shuo dao hen jidong, hai bu-ting-de shuo
 he talk DAO very excited still not-stop talk
 'He talked so that he became very excited, and kept on talking non-stop'

The temporal structure of the discourse fragment is quite straightforward. 'He' starts talking, becomes excited, and continues talking in the newly acquired state of being excited (see Figure 4).

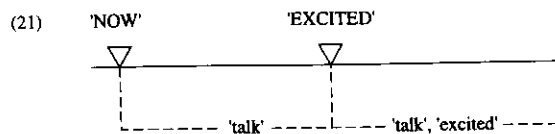


Figure 4. Temporal structure of the discourse fragment

This is identical to the temporal span of SgE *I waited until I (was) angry* (cf. (9)). In other words, the two events (talking, and getting excited) take place concurrently after the point marked 'EXCITED' (the point expressed by the *dao*-phrase).

We summarize the use of *dao* as follows:

(22) use	temporal span	syntactic position
time	consecutive, concurrent	post-verbal
degree/result	consecutive, concurrent	post-verbal
destination/direction	—	post-verbal
'success'	—	post-verbal

Only the time and degree/result uses of *dao* can involve more than one event, which creates the possibilities for consecutive or concurrent interpretations. The destination/direction and 'success' uses do not allow such variable interpretation.

The fact that both Chinese *dao* and SgE *until* allow consecutive and concurrent readings suggests the possibility of a substrate influence. In the next section, we explore this possibility further.

4. *Until* AND *Dao* COMPARED

SgE is a variety of English which arises through language contact. Like all languages in contact, mutual influence is unavoidable. Given the unique language situation in Singapore, the exact status of SgE, even its very description, is somewhat controversial. Nevertheless, the substrate influence, particularly from Chinese, remains obvious (Platt and Weber, 1980; Ho, 1992; among others). To be sure, SgE *until* retains the basic meanings of StanE *until*. The two uses of *until* that Quirk *et al.* (1982) identify in StanE are indeed found in SgE as well. And in many contexts the word is used with the same temporal span in both varieties of English. The issue here is not that *until* in SgE has changed into an entirely different word. Rather, it has acquired additional meanings which are not found in its English origin. In Sections 3 and 4, we have established the parallel between SgE *until* and Chinese *dao*. The additional meanings of *until* are due to the substrate influence of Chinese.

This influence comes in three forms. First, in terms of semantic function, *until* in SgE is able to express degree. This semantic function is not found with StanE *until*, but Chinese *dao* allows it. Thus, the ability to express degree is an additional semantic function that finds its parallel in Chinese *dao*. Second, the temporal span of SgE *until* is the same as the temporal span of *dao*. It crucially differs from that of StanE *until* in the availability of the concurrent interpretation. That is, the situation described by the matrix clause can extend beyond the point expressed by the *until*-phrase. As noted earlier, this is not possible with StanE *until*, which only allows a consecutive interpretation. Third, syntactically, both the *dao*-phrase and the *until*-phrase in SgE, and to a lesser extent in StanE, appear after the main verb. They cannot be moved elsewhere without rendering the sentences ungrammatical or changing the meaning entirely.

The influence, of course, is limited. As we have seen, *dao* can be used to express destinations, and the aspectual meaning of 'success.' These two uses are central to *dao*, with its lexical meaning of 'reach/arrive.' SgE *until* cannot be used to express these two meanings.

We summarize our findings on the use of *until* and *dao* in (23a); and their temporal span characteristics in (23b) (Figure 5).

- (23) a. The functions of *until* and *dao*

	StanE <i>until</i>	SgE <i>until</i>	Chinese <i>dao</i>
time	yes	yes	yes
result	yes	yes	yes
degree	no	yes	yes
destination	no	no	yes
'success'	no	no	yes

- b. Temporal spans of StanE *until*, SgE *until*, and Chinese *dao*

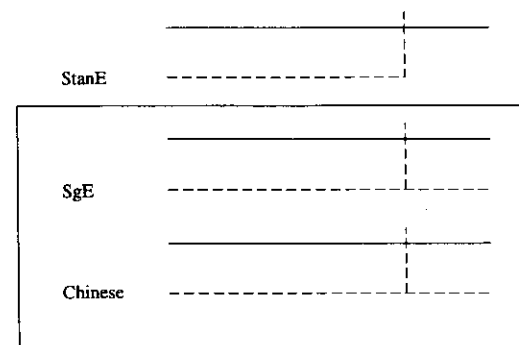


Figure 5: The functions and temporal span characteristics of *until* and *dao*

The vertical line in (23b) represents the point specified by the *until/dao*-phrase. The substrate influence is highlighted in the box.

Apparently, in the case of *until*, speakers of SgE whose primary language is Chinese analogize the word to *dao* since there is a strong semantic similarity between the two: both *until* and *dao* indicate the point at which the situation described by the main verb terminates. However, once the similarity is established, further properties associated with *dao*, but not with StanE *until*, are transferred to *until*. As the new uses of *until* spread among the community of SgE speakers, cutting across ethnic boundaries to speakers of Malay and Indian origins, the result is what we see today: an *until* which is unique to SgE.

5. CONCLUSION

In the preceding pages we investigated the syntax and semantics of *until* in SgE and StanE, and showed that the uses of *until* which are unique to SgE are due to the substrate influence of the Chinese word *dao*. Our conclusion adds to a growing body of research on the grammar of SgE which shows substrate influence of various types (see, for example, references cited in footnote 1, and contributions in Foley (1988), Gopinathan *et al.* (1994), and Teng and Ho (1995)).

It has been observed in the creole literature that the nature of substrate influence is largely structural, and the nature of superstrate influence is lexical (see contributions in Muysken and Smith (1986) and Mufwene (1993)). SgE evolves through language contact between the superstrate English on the one hand, and the substrate languages of Chinese, Malay and Tamil on the other. Not surprisingly, we find strong substrate influence on the grammar of SgE, from the aspectual system (Kwan-Terry (1989) and Bao (1995)) to relative clause formation (Alsagoff (1995)). Our research on *until* in SgE further corroborates the structural nature of substrate influence.

NOTES

We have benefitted from discussions with colleagues and students in the Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore; in particular, Lubna Alsagoff, Gerard Lim, Vincent Ooi, and Peter Tan. We are grateful to an anonymous *World Englishes* reviewer for the detailed and insightful comments which improved the quality of the argument. The names of the authors appear in alphabetical order.

1. Singapore's linguistic diversity does not allow a simple characterisation of the status of SgE; see Pakir (1991, 1995) for discussions of the language situation in Singapore. The very name 'Singapore English' is problematic. Some scholars consider SgE a continuum, dividing it roughly into the acrolect, the variety closest to standard English, the mesolect and the basilect (see, for instance, Platt (1975), Tay (1979), Platt and Weber (1980), Platt *et al.* (1985), Ho and Platt (1993)). Other scholars reject such a characterization, and opt for a diglossic distinction between the high variety and the low variety (for example, Gupta 1991). Here, we will not address this issue, and will use the term 'Singapore English' (or SgE) to refer to the variety of English one commonly hears in Singapore, from taxi drivers to university students.
2. (2b) is potentially ambiguous. It could have the interpretation analogous to (2c), whereby the non-waiting takes place up to the point marked by RETURN, and waiting starts from that point. The ambiguity is due to the scope of negation. Following Quirk *et al.*, we will not consider scopal ambiguity here.
3. It is worth noting that the use of *dao* in (17a,b) also allows a more literal interpretation. The sentences can be glossed as follows:

- a. dao youju, zou
 DAO post-office walk
 'reach the post-office, [and then] walk'

- b. dao ban ye, tan
 DAO half night talk
 'reach midnight, [and then] talk'

The availability of the dual interpretation of *dao* in these two sentences is consistent with our claim that *dao* is the substrate source for the use of SgE *until*. We are grateful to an anonymous *World Englishes* reviewer for pointing this out.

REFERENCES

- Alsagoff, Lubna (1995) Colloquial Singapore English: the relative construction. In Teng and Ho (1995).
 Bao, Zhiming (1995) *Already* in Singapore English. *World Englishes*, 14(2), 181–188.
 Chao, Yuen Ren (1968) *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
 Foley, Joseph A. (1988) *New Englishes: the Case of Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
 Gopinathan, S., Pakir, Anne, Kam, Ho Wah and Saravanan, Vanithamani (eds.) (1994) *Language, Society and Education in Singapore*. Singapore: Times Academic Press.
 Gupta, Anthea F. (1991) Acquisition of diglossia in Singapore English. In *Child Language Development in Singapore and Malaysia*. Edited by Anna Kwan-Terry. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
 Ho, Mian-lian (1992) The semantics of some verbs of movement in Singapore English: bring/take, send, follow and fetch. In Pakir (1992).
 Ho, Mian-lian and Platt, John T. (1993) *Dynamics of a Contact Continuum: Singapore English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 Hu, Yushu (1981) *Xiandai Hanyu* (Modern Chinese). Shanghai: Shanghai Education Press.
 Kwan-Terry, Anna (1989) The specification of stage by a child learning English and Cantonese simultaneously: a study of acquisitional processes. In *Interlingual Processes*. Edited by Hans W. Dechert and Manfred Raupach. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag.
 Lu, Shuxiang (1981) *Xiandai hanyu babai ci* (Eight hundred words in modern Chinese). Beijing: Commercial Press.
 Mufwene, Salikoko S. (1993) *Africanisms in Afro-American Language Varieties*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
 Muysken, Pieter and Smith, Norval (eds.) (1986) *Substrata versus Universals in Creole Genesis*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
 Pakir, Anne (1991) The range and depth of English-knowing bilinguals in Singapore. *World Englishes*, 10, 167–179.
 Pakir, Anne (1992) *Words in a Cultural Context*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
 Pakir, Anne (1995) Expanding triangles of English expression in Singapore: implications for teaching. In Teng and Ho (1995).
 Platt, John (1975) The Singapore English speech continuum and its basilect 'Singlish' as a 'creoloid'. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 17, 373–374.
 Platt, John and Weber, Heidi (1980) *English in Singapore and Malaysia: Status, Features, Functions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 Platt, John T., Weber, Heidi and Ho, Mian Lian (1985) *The New Englishes*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
 Quirk, Randolph, Greenbaum, Sidney, Leech, Geoffrey and Svartvik, Jan (1992) *ACGL*. London: Longman.
 Tay, Mary W. J. (1979) The uses, users and features of English in Singapore. In *New Varieties of English*. Edited by Jack C. Richards. Singapore: SEAMCO Regional Language Centre.
 Teng, Su Ching and Ho, Mian Lian (eds.) (1995) *The English Language in Singapore: Implications for Teaching*. Singapore: Singapore for Applied Linguistics.
 Zhu, Dexi (1982) *Yufa jiangyi* [Lecture notes on grammar]. Beijing: Commercial Press.

(Received 24 January 1997.)