Until in Singapore English

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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), 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 StanE and SgE

2.1 Until in StanE

According to Quirk et al. (1985), until is categorically 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

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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

\[ \text{NOW} \rightarrow \text{RETURN} \]
- 'wait' -

b. He didn’t wait until I returned

\[ \text{NOW} \rightarrow \text{RETURN} \]
- 'wait' -

c. He didn’t arrive until I returned

\[ \text{NOW} \rightarrow \text{RETURN} \]
- 'nonarrival' -

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. 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 Williams has finished his thesis; in (1b), the massage stops once the result has been obtained; and in (1c), 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.
These differences and similarities raise the question: How does SgE until acquire the additional uses? In what follows, we argue that it is due to the substrate influence of Chinese. More specifically, the additional uses result from analogizing until along the lines of the Chinese verb dao.

3. Dao

In Chinese, many words which denote aspectual properties can also be used as predicates. In this section, we will describe in detail the use of one such word, namely dao, which can be used as a verb and as an aspectual marker. We will show that it is this word that motivates the presence of the additional, concurrent reading found in SgE until. The references on dao are quite numerous; most grammar books include some description of this word or words with similar functions (see Chao, 1968; Hu, 1981; Lu, 1981; Zhu, 1982, among many others). When used as an aspectual marker, the lexical category of dao is a matter of some controversy. But since we are not concerned with the categorial status of dao, we will refer to the aspectual use of this word as 'aspectual dao.'

According to Zhu (1982), the aspectual dao has the following uses:

(12) a. dao expressing destinations: pa dao xian shang walk DAO post-office 'climb to the top of the mountain'
   b. dao expressing time: zhu dao shi er shi grow DAO ten years 'grow to 12 years of age'
   i. with noun phrases zhang dao ban ye talk DAO half night 'talk until midnight'
      ii. with sentences yi zhi chang dao chi wanfan non-stop sing DAO eat supper 'sing non-stop until dinner time'
   c. dao expressing successful action: jiu dao ben duo bei ke pick DAO very many shell 'find many shells'
      i. with noun phrases huo dao tian qing bu hao consider DAO weather not good 'take into consideration the fact that the weather is not good'
      ii. with sentences huo dao lian zhi ye wang le 'confused DAO his own name also forget ASP' 'confused to the extent that (he) forgets his own name.'
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 qu nian dao xinquapo
    I last year reach Singapore
    'I came to Singapore last year'

b. bu tuoche dao le
    train reach ASP
    'The train arrived'

c. wo zou dao han bian
    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 limited 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 polysemic 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-phrasal 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 da jia dou liu le kei
    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 zuo 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.

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:

(16) a. *dao hen dao 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. 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.

(19) ------ talk ------

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:
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. This 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_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>StanE <em>until</em></th>
<th>SgE <em>until</em></th>
<th>Chinese <em>dao</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>time</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>result</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>degree</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>destination</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'success'</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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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 characterisation, 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(b) 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 youji, zou
   DAO post-office walk
   ‘reach the post-office, and then’ walk

REFERENCES


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