

*bhodata* to the company. 23. The price of cotton *bushirts* has gone up. 24. The *undertrials* were remanded to police custody. 25. Four notorious *child-lifters* were arrested from Jimmah Super Market on Thursday. 26. The culprits were *chargesteeted* by the police. 27. The *rickshaw-wallahs* asked for twenty rupees. 28. The flood *afectees* were shifted to safe grounds. 29. The *faithfuls* entered the mosque for prayer. 30. The *lady newscaster* read the news in detail. 31. The organization called for a *wheel-jam strike*. 32. Hundreds of students protested against the non-receipt of *admit-cards*. 33. The *sweepers* did not come to work this morning. 34. In Kalash, the squalor borne of poverty is being *musemised* in name of culture. 35. The *denter* was not able to repair the mudguard. 36. I agree with you *cent percent*. 37. Washing will *de-shape* your woolen garments. 38. The *death anniversary* was observed with great solemnity. 39. He bought the *guess papers* from the Urdu bazaar. 40. We were served *bed-tea* in the morning. 41. Cases of *dacoity* are on the rise in the country. 42. The *CCI* has not yet been convened. 43. Many *Ravians* have achieved successful careers. 44. They had already left to attend a *marriage party*. 45. The *law and order situation* is deteriorating daily. 46. Both the *SM* and the *ASM* were found responsible. 47. The student was awarded a *freeship* to study abroad. 48. The dacoits were taken to the *police thana*.

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## WHY YOU TALK LIKE THAT?: THE PRAGMATICS OF A WHY CONSTRUCTION IN SINGAPORE ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper, we examine one *wh*-construction in Singapore English, which signals a demand for justification, and show that there is a systematic correlation between its structural and pragmatic properties. We suggest that this *wh*-construction is based on the imperative, and inherits the structural properties associated with the relatively more polite version of the imperative. In Singapore English, this is the version that makes explicit mention of the second person subject, whereas in Standard English the use of *you* in the imperative decreases politeness. After a careful comparison of the pragmatics of the imperative in Standard English, Singapore English and Chinese, we conclude that the asymmetry between the *why*-construction in Standard English and in Singapore English can be accounted for by substrate influence from Chinese, from which the Singaporean construction has inherited its politeness constraints.

### 1. Introduction

Research on *wh*-questions in Singapore English has focused mainly on their structural properties, and possible substrate influence from local languages.<sup>2</sup>

1) An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Fourth International Conference on World Englishes held in December 1997 in Singapore. The names of the authors appear in alphabetical order.

2) See, for example, Platt and Weber (1980), Tay (1979), Chow (1994), and Gupta (1994), among others. On substrate influences on particular features of Singapore English, see the references cited above, and Kwan-Terry (1989), Ho (1992), Bao (1995), Bao and Wee (1998a,b), and Alsagoff and Ho (1998).

The formal approach to the study of interrogatives, though important in helping us understand Singapore English, typically ignores the pragmatic functions these constructions perform in the use of the language. In this paper, we examine a specific *wh*-construction in the colloquial variety of Singapore English (CSGE), a specimen of which appears in the title. For lack of a better term, we will call it the *why* construction. Our approach is comparative. We begin by noting various features of the *why* construction in CSGE. We then compare it with a similar construction in standard American, British or Singapore English (StE).<sup>3</sup> By adopting the comparative orientation, we hope to bring out properties which are common, as well as peculiar, to the two varieties of English. We then show that the unique properties of the *why* construction in CSGE are due to substrate influence from Chinese.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we introduce the *why* construction in CSGE. In Section 3, we discuss the same construction in standard English. In sections 4 and 5 we compare the *why* construction with the imperative, in StE and CSGE, respectively. In Section 6 we discuss the pragmatics of the same constructions in Chinese, and show that it is identical to the unique properties of CSGE. Section 7 is the conclusion.

## 2. The CSGE *why* construction

CSGE has a *why* construction that presents an interesting case study. This construction essentially signals a demand for justification. In (1a) the speaker implies that unless there is good reason to do so, the subject should not paint the house. Likewise in (1b) and (1c), the implication is that the subject should not eat so much or run every day.

- (1) a. Why you paint the house?  
b. Why you eat so much?

3) The abbreviations CSGE and StE are used in their usual senses. The English situation in Singapore is a contentious issue. It has been described as a continuum (cf. Platt 1975; Platt and Weber 1980), or diglossic (cf. Gupta 1991; Pakir 1991). We do not wish to engage in a debate about this issue. For our purpose, CSGE corresponds to the basilectal and mesolectal varieties of the English continuum, and to the L variety of the diglossic model. For recent discussion of the English language in Singapore, see Foley *et al.* (1998).

- c. Why you run every day?

There are a number of features about this construction that are worth noting. First, the subject can either be in the second person, as in (1), or in the third person, as shown in (2).

- (2) Why he paint the house?

However, although the subject can appear in these two forms, the second person is more typical. So, while (2) is acceptable, (1a) is preferred. In this paper, we will consider sentences in which the subject is *you*.

Second, the verb is usually in the bare form, although, again, there are rare instances when the verb takes a progressive *-ing* form:

- (3) a. Why you eat so much?  
b. ?Why you eating so much?  
c. \*Why you ate so much?  
d. \*Why you eaten so much?

Other than the *-ing* form, we have not encountered any evidence that the verb can take either a past tense *-ed* form, or the perfective *-en* form. So, (3c, d) are marked with “\*” to indicate that they are not acceptable.

Third, the construction requires a dynamic interpretation. Thus, (4a, b) are odd because they favour a stative interpretation. (5a, b), being dynamic, are grammatical:

- (4) a. \*Why you hear this song?  
b. \*Why you own this car?  
(5) a. Why you listen to this song?  
b. Why you buy this car?

Finally, as mentioned earlier, the *why* construction is not an unmarked question. It signals a demand for justification. That is, the speaker, in using the construction, indicates that

- i. he/she thinks that the action being described should not be performed by the addressee;<sup>4</sup>
- ii. he/she thinks that the addressee intends to perform or is performing the action; and
- iii. he/she demands that the addressee provide a justification for the performance of the action.

Interestingly, the CSgE *why* construction is very similar to a *why* construction in StE, described by Gordon and Lakoff (1975).

### 3. The *why* construction in standard English

Gordon and Lakoff (1975) note that in StE *why* utterances such as the ones in (7), in which the subject has been omitted, are pragmatically loaded.

- (7)
- a. Why paint the house?
  - b. Why eat meat?
  - c. Why drive a Volvo?

These differ from those in (8), which have overt subjects.

- (8)
- a. Why did you paint the house?
  - b. Why do you eat meat?
  - c. Why do you drive a Volvo?

The constructions in (8) are less marked and can serve as genuine or neutral questions. Utterances like the ones in (7), on the other hand, imply to the addressee that unless he/she has a good reason for doing so, he/she should not paint the house, eat meat, or drive a Volvo. This is a demand for justification, just like the CSgE *why* construction discussed earlier.

We may note a few salient properties of the StE *why* construction. First, the verb must occur in the bare form. Hence, the sentences in (9a-c) are not acceptable.

- (9)
- a. \*Why painted the house?
  - b. \*Why painting the house?
  - c. \*Why eaten meat?

Second, the subject is understood to be the second person *you*. Hence it would not be possible for the subject to be interpreted as being anything but the addressee.

Third, only dynamic verbs can be used, which explains why (10a) is odd while (10b) is not:

- (10)
- a. \*Why know French?
  - b. Why learn French?

The main difference between the CSgE and StE *why* constructions is that *you* can be used in the former, but not in the latter. We will return to this point in Section 5.

### 4. The StE *why* construction and the imperative

The form of the StE *why* construction raises a number of questions. First, why is it that the construction requires its subject to be absent, and the verb to be in the bare form? Second, given its pragmatics as a demand for justification, is there any correlation between the pragmatic and structural properties? In this section, we argue that the StE *why* construction does, in fact, inherit properties associated with the imperative.

We begin by noting that in the imperative, the subject is typically omitted and the verb is in the bare form.

- (11)
- a. Paint the house.
  - b. Eat meat.
  - c. Drive a Volvo.
  - d. Learn French.

Also, the imperative typically requires a dynamic interpretation (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 827), as shown by the oddity of the sentences in (12).

- (12)
- a. ?Know French.
  - b. ?Hear this song.
  - c. ?Need some cash.

4) In most cases, the addressee and the subject of the construction are co-referential. When the subject is the third-person *he* or *she* (and the plural *they*), it is the addressee, not the subject, that is asked to provide the justification.

These properties of the imperative — the omission of the subject, the bare form of the verb, and the requirement of a dynamic interpretation — suggest that there is a direct correlation between the imperative and the *StE why* construction. We suggest that the *StE why* construction is based on, or motivated by, the imperative construction,<sup>5</sup> due to the similar pragmatic functions of the two constructions. Quirk *et al.* (1985: 87) note that the typical illocutionary force associated with the imperative is that of a directive (Hatch 1992: 122). Directives are essentially commands issued to an addressee concerning the performance of an action. In conjunction with a negative marker, directives indicate that an action should not be performed.

- (13) a. Don't learn French.  
 b. Don't paint the house.  
 c. Don't drive a Volvo.

In the *StE why* construction, the speaker wishes to draw attention to the performance of an action by the addressee. The drawing of attention to the performance of the action is a precondition for the demand for justification. In other words, before demanding that the addressee give reasons why an action should be performed, sufficient attention should be drawn to the relevant action. The use of the imperative, because of its association with the directive, serves this purpose.

Of course, while the most common form of the imperative omits the subject (14a), it is possible, although rare, for the subject to be realized (14b).

- (14) a. Paint the house.  
 b. You paint the house.

The *StE why* construction, however, disallows the use of *you*. To explain this, we again appeal to the pragmatics of the construction. A demand for justification is a potentially aggressive speech act. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, a demand for justification threatens both the addressee's negative and positive faces. This is because, by demanding justification, the speaker could be implying, among other things, that the addressee's intention to perform the action is ill-advised. This has implications

for the addressee's desire to publicly appear as a reasonable individual, and therefore constitutes a threat to the addressee's positive face. Simultaneously, the implication that the action is ill-advised is a constraint on the addressee's intention to perform the action and hence to act freely. This is a threat to the addressee's negative face.

Because of the threats to the addressee's positive and negative faces, this means that, pragmatically, (14a) is much more polite than (14b). The face-threatening potential of the demand for justification makes it crucial that appropriate mitigating measures be taken. Given a choice between (14a) and (14b), the more polite version is taken as the basis for the *StE why* construction. This explains why the construction omits the subject.

##### 5. The *CSGE why* construction and the imperative

Extrapolating from our analysis of the *StE why* construction to the *CSGE* version, we argue that the *CSGE why* construction, too, inherits its properties from the imperative. As noted, the main difference between the *StE* and *CSGE* versions is that the former requires the absence of the subject while the latter prefers that the subject be present. This difference follows from the difference between the two varieties of English in the pragmatic forces of the imperative. In *CSGE*, the more polite version of the imperative is the one where the subject is present. In other words, for *CSGE* speakers, (14b) is considered more polite than (14a). The following conversational fragments are commonly heard in *CSGE*:

- (15) a. Receptionist: You hold on, OK? (over the telephone)  
 b. Secretary: You wait for a while, can or not?  
 c. Receptionist: You sit down first.

For American and British visitors these forms are rather rude.<sup>6</sup> But Singaporeans do not generally take offense at these utterances. For them, the imperative construction where the subject is present is considered more polite. It is the version which the *CSGE why* construction is based on. The difference between *StE* and *CSGE* in the preferred structure of the *why*

5) For detailed discussion of the notion of motivation or constructional inheritance, see Lakoff (1987) and Goldberg (1995), among others.

6) We thank our American colleague Tim White for this observation.

construction has the same underlying cause: the need to minimize the face-threatening effect of the illocutionary force of the *why* construction, that is, the demand for justification.

## 6. Politeness and the Chinese imperative

In the preceding sections, we established that the CSGE imperative has the following two salient properties:

- Property 1. The second person pronoun *you* is optional.  
 Property 2. The presence of *you* is considered more polite than the absence of *you*.

And the *why* construction in CSGE inherits these two properties. *Why you paint the wall white?* is a more polite way of talking to the addressee than *Why paint the wall white?* These two properties are just the opposite of the properties of the same constructions in StE, where, as we have remarked earlier, the rare presence of *you* makes the imperative more face-threatening. Where do the CSGE constructions acquire these properties? In this section, we want to explore the possibility of substrate influence. We will show that exactly the same observations can be made about the corresponding constructions in Chinese. The pragmatic inference associated with the grammatical constructions is derived from the substrate source.

The imperative in Chinese, like its counterpart in English, often appears without the implied second person pronoun *you*. (16) shows two typical examples (Zhu 1982: 206–7):

- (16) a. *ba chuanghu guangshang*  
 BA window close  
 'Close the window'  
 b. *bie shuo hua*  
 not say words  
 'Don't talk'

In (16a), *ba* is a particle used with a fronted object. Unlike the imperative in English, the Chinese imperative allows the use of the second person pronoun. The sentences in (16a,b) are equivalent to the ones in (16a',b'):

- (16) a'. *ni ba chuanghu guangshang*  
 you BA window close  
 b'. *ni bie shuo hua*  
 you not say words

And the CSGE conversational fragments in (15) have their direct reflexes in Chinese, shown in (17):

- (17) a. Receptionist:  
*Ni bie gua dianhua*  
 you not hang-up telephone  
 'Hold on' (literally, 'don't hang up the phone')  
 b. Secretary:  
*Ni deng yihui*  
 you wait a while  
 'Wait for a while'  
 c. Receptionist:  
*Ni xian zu-xia*  
 you first sit-down  
 'Sit down first'

The presence of *you* makes no difference in the syntactic well-formedness of the imperative sentences. Pragmatically, however, the use of *you* quite often reduces the face-threatening illocutionary force of the imperative construction. This is just the opposite of what we find in standard English, where, through the use of *you*, the speaker is able to increase the face-threatening force by singling out the addressee. This difference has been noted in the literature. Chu (1983: 195) writes, "the addition of a second-person pronoun *ni* 'you (sing.)' or *nimen* 'you (pl.)' does not increase the 'sternness' of the tone as the addition of *you* would in English".

In other words, the use of the second-person pronoun is face-negative in standard English, but face-neutral in Chinese. In fact, there is evidence which suggests that the use of *you* is face-positive in Chinese. We will consider three cases.

First, politeness markers such as *qing* 'please' and *laojia* 'trouble' are typically used with *ni* 'you (sing.)' or *nimen* 'you (pl.)' (cf. Chao 1968; Li and Thompson 1981; Chu 1983). This is particularly true with the polite form of the second-person pronoun, the singular *nin* and the plural *nimen*.

These are exemplified below:

- (18) a. *Ninyin qing zuo*  
 you please sit  
 'Please take a seat'
- b. *Laojia ninyin bang wo yixia*  
 trouble you help me once  
 'Please give me a hand' (lit. 'Trouble you to give me a hand')

The position of *ninyin* is different for the two markers, since *laojia* 'trouble' behaves like a normal transitive verb. The combined use of the second person pronoun and the politeness marker reduces the force of the imperative construction.

Second, the imperative in Chinese can be used with another politeness marker, *neng-bu-neng* 'can-not-can', to present a particular speech act as being more a request than a command:

- (19) a. *Ninyin neng-bu-neng zuo?*  
 you can-not-can sit  
 'Please take a seat' (lit. 'Can you sit down or not?')
- b. *Ninyin neng-bu-neng bang wo yixia?*  
 you can-not-can help me once  
 'Please give me a hand' (lit. 'Can you give me a hand or not?')

Syntactically, the sentences in (19), and indeed all sentences with *neng-bu-neng*, are ambiguous. They can be construed as questions or as polite requests, i.e. imperatives. The intended meaning for (19) is that of a request. The use of *ninyin* reinforces the politeness of the request being conveyed in the imperative construction. Not surprisingly, it is correlated with the social distance between the interlocutors. In Zhang's (1995) study of the pragmatics of requesting in Chinese, the second person pronoun, particularly *nin*, is invariably used in requests made by the speaker to someone of higher social status.

Third, in conversation, the second-person pronoun is often used to blunt the force of the imperative. The two conversational fragments in (20) are adapted from Tao (1996: 169–70), which is a study on the structure of Mandarin conversation.

- (20) a. *Wo na qu*  
 I take go  
 'Let me get it'.  
*na lai gei ni kankan*  
 take come give you see:see  
 'and you to take a look at it'.  
 → *Ni kan xia*  
 You see once  
 'Have a look at it'.
- b. *Ni bu shi*  
 You not be  
 'Well,  
*shenme ren qu dang jingcha ma*  
 what people go act police Particle  
 what kind of people who are in the police force?'  
 → *Ni xiangxiang kan*  
 You think:think see  
 'Just think about it'.

In (20), the arrows point to the imperatives, which express polite requests to the addressee.

On the strength of the evidence presented above, we conclude that in Chinese, the presence of the second-person pronoun reduces the face-threatening potential of the imperative construction, whereas in English, it increases it.

We summarize our results below.

	neutral to more polite	neutral to less polite
Chinese	with <i>ninyin</i>	without <i>ninyin</i>
CSGE	with <i>you</i>	without <i>you</i>
English	without <i>you</i>	with <i>you</i> (rare)

It is clear that the pragmatics of the imperative construction in CSGE is influenced by Chinese, the substrate language, not English. Since the *why* construction is derived from the imperative, its pragmatics in CSGE is indirectly influenced by Chinese as well.

## 7. Conclusion

In the preceding sections we investigated the syntactic and pragmatic properties of the *why* construction, and the construction on which it is based, namely, the imperative. We noted that the *why* construction in StE does not allow the use of *you*, whereas its counterpart in CSgE does. This difference between the two varieties of English is a direct result of the politeness force associated with the *why* construction and its base, the imperative construction. In StE, the use of *you* in the imperative decreases politeness, whereas in CSgE, it increases it.

This curious asymmetry in the pragmatics of the *why* construction needs explanation. We analyzed the pragmatics of the corresponding constructions in Chinese, and showed that in Chinese, the use of *you* reduces the face-threatening force of the imperative and its derivative, the *why* construction. After carefully comparing the pragmatics of the imperative in CSgE, StE, and Chinese, we conclude that the asymmetry between the CSgE and StE *why* construction is due to the substrate influence of Chinese on the grammar of CSgE.

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### TEXT: A SERMON I SCOTS

#### PREACH'T AT KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL,

AIBERDEEN, MEY 1996

ALASDAIR ALLAN  
*University of Aberdeen*

### Lessons

#### Micah 6 (after New International Version)

Wad it please the Lord gin A gied him thoosants o tups, wi ten thoosant rivers  
o eyle?  
Wull A gie up ma auldest bairn for the wrangs A hae wrocht, the fruit o ma  
bodie for the sins o ma sowel?  
He haes shawen ye, oh man, whi is guid. An whi is 't the Lord wad hae o ye?  
Ti dae justitie, ti luive mercie, an ti walk hummle wi yer God.

#### John 20 (after Lorimer)

Ane o the twal, Tarnmas, at wes cawed 'The Twun', wesna wi them whan  
Jesus cam; an whan thay tellt him at thay hed seen the Lord, he said ti them,  
"Gin A dinna see the sted o the nails in his hauns an dinna stap ma finger inti  
the place, an ma haun intil his syde, A's ne'er believe sic a thing!"  
A sennicht efterhin, his disciples wes inby again an Tarnmas wes wi him,  
whan Jesus cam an stuid i thair mids, for aw the doors wes lockfast, an said,  
"A blissin on ye". Syne he said ti Tarnmas, "Rax here yer finger an leuk at  
ma hauns, rax oot yer haun an stap it inti ma syde; an dinna be misdoutin nae  
mair, but believin".  
"Ma Lord an ma God!" said Tarnmas.  
"Hae ye believed because ye hae seen?" said Jesus. "Blissit is thaim at haesna  
seen but haes believed!"