Grammatical Implicatures in Singaporean English

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1. Introduction

A recent study, Langacker (1988: 15) uses the term 'compositional value' to refer to the constituents of a 'usage event' which, as a combined semantic unit, cannot derive algorithmically the individual meanings of its constituents (ibid: 18). Although the term was originally devised to describe the component meaning of entire *expressions, it would be useful to extend its usage to refer to the inherent senses contained within a single grammatical feature.* Many of these inherent meanings are reflective of diachronic grammaticalisation processes which have taken place as part of the historical semantic development of the feature. For the most part, such meanings have been 'bleached' out of the composite meaning as grammaticalisation progresses (Bybee 1996) and as the meaning of the feature becomes more abstract and less reflective of its lexical origins. However, in some cases, older, lexically-based meanings will continue to influence the distributional range of the grammaticalising item, restricting its use in certain contexts: this phenomenon has been described as 'retention' (Bybee & Pagliuca 1987).

The underlying hypothesis for the present study is that in certain cases, retained senses reflective of earlier stages in the historical development of a grammaticalising feature may be influencing the native speaker's intuitions regarding the well-formedness of an utterance, and so inhibiting the production of overgeneralisations so common in the dialects of L2 speakers. The study reviews recent studies relevant to the variation in the marking for hypothetical and modal expressions in an L2 variety, Singaporean English, and, using the hypothesis outlined above, offers an explanation for some of the variability in terms of the grammaticalised implicatures which derived hypothetical meanings from past stative verbs in more established varieties of English. By means of a brief questionnaire, it is further hoped to demonstrate that the acquisition by Singaporean speakers of English of grammaticalised implicatures expressing hypotheticality may be seen to correlate with length and possibly frequency of exposure to such phenomena over a prolonged time period.

2. English in Singapore

English has long been used in Singapore as a lingua franca between groups of different ethnic and first language backgrounds, and as such it has acquired the status of a nativised and locally-institutionalised variety with a further important role as the language of law, administration, traditional areas of government, and as the main medium of education at all levels (Newbrook (ed.) 1987: 10-11). Formal features reflective of its origins as a second language (L2) variety do distinguish Singaporean English as an independent dialect, and such features have been found to vary in frequency according to educational level. The features under investigation in the present study will be confined to the more educated varieties.

2.1 Tense marking in Singaporean English

Perhaps one of the most frequently-cited areas of variation in the descriptions of less-educated varieties of Singaporean English is found in past tense marking; this has been the basis of an exhaustive study by Ho & Platt (1993). In the study, they

examine the frequency of past-tense marking, correlated with such factors as educational level of the subjects, phonological interference, and lexical aspect of the verb forms used (whether or not the verb is punctual, non-punctual, i.e. used duratively or iteratively, or stative). The most significant finding of this study was that punctual verbs are marked for past more frequently than stative, and stative verbs more frequently than non-stative, non-punctual verbs. Frequency of past tense marking was also found to increase with educational level (the sample consisted of speakers ranging from those with only primary education through to tertiary graduates). The findings were related to the studies of Bickerton (1981), who finds similar patterns for past tense marking in his data from Guyanese Creole and Hawaiian Creole English, but Ho & Platt do not discount the possible influence of substratum features from languages such as Chinese, which also appears to distinguish morphologically punctual and non-punctual verbal aspect (1993: 150-1).

Previous studies on the acquisition of Spanish as an L2 by English speakers (Andersen 1991) and the acquisition of English as an L2 by multilingual groups of learners (Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds 1995) also indicate that lexical aspect of the verb plays a significant role in determining which verb classes will be the first to be marked for past tense for the learners acquiring the languages, and that verbs with inherent punctual or telic aspect are the first to acquire marking for past tense in the learners' interlanguages. Andersen attributes these findings to the operation of a principle of Relevance (following Bybee 1985), by which grammatical inflections denoting past meaning are more readily attracted to verbs with lexical meanings relevant to past time, such as punctual and telic verb types.

Furthermore, typological evidence from Bybee, Pagliuca & Perkins (1994: 92) shows that in some languages perfectives do not apply at all to stative verbs. In their data, pasts are regarded diachronically as further developments from perfectives, and perfectivity, which refers to temporal boundedness (ibid: 54), is entailed in the meaning of punctual and telic verb types. Bybee et al further predict that although pasts initially develop from non-stative perfectives, they gradually increase their range of environments to include statives as well. If the diachronic processes proposed by Bybee et al can be verified, then it may be that the L2 learner's acquisition of past forms in a single language synchronically reflects the historical patterns of the grammaticalisation of past tense cross-linguistically, with the earliest-acquired uses of past tense occurring with non-stative verbs. Similar instances of parallels between diachronic and ontogenic processes have been predicted in previous studies; for example, the acquisition by children of the English present perfect (Slobin 1994) and of Chinese classifiers (Erbaugh 1986). It would be reasonable, therefore, to draw the same conclusions with regard to the grammaticalisation of past tense in Singaporean English.

2.2 The Expression of Hypotheticality in Singaporean English

A previous study using 60 tertiary-educated Chinese L1 speakers in Singapore and eliciting written Singaporean English data (Ziegeler 1994[1]) found that there was a vast range of variation possible in Singaporean English for the expression of past counterfactual conditionals, 77% of which diverged from ways of marking counterfactual conditionals in standard English.

The use of modal forms in the hypothetical complement clauses of verbs of 'wishing' also appeared to be in a state of flux in the Singaporean English data, as the following examples demonstrate:-

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[1] This study will be referred to throughout as "Study A".

(i) I wish there is peace in the world.
(ii) I wish that there will be peace in the world.
(iii) I wish that there would be peace in the world.

These examples were produced by three different subjects in the study. The explanation for the unbackshifted verb form in (i) can be explained with reference to the punctual/nonpunctual distinction as discussed in [2.1]: that statives and nonpunctuals are less frequently marked for past. The alternation between *will* and *would* in the study was thought to be an overgeneralisation, the use of a modal auxiliary in such environments being considered redundant since the appropriate meaning could be derived from the use of a subjunctive non-modal form: *I wish there were (was) peace in the world*. Naturally, though, there are dialectal differences relating to the use of modals in such environments; for this reason a number of similar examples were put to the test of the intuitions of a group of native speakers of Australian English (see Ziegeler forthc.[2]), along with examples similar to others which appeared overgeneralised in Study A such as:

(iv) *I wish that I would earn lots of money ...* .

The results of the survey showed that, although many such uses of *would* in hypothetical environments were grammaticalising rapidly amongst speakers of some dialects, the common cause for the constraints on the grammaticalisation patterns was attributed to the 'retention' of older, historical meanings associated with the lexical origins of the modal i.e. meanings of volitional intent. When such constraints are less salient, or even absent from the compositional value perceived in the meaning of a grammaticalising item, the form may be overgeneralised by some non-native speakers to new environments; this is especially notable in the dialects of L2 speakers.

3. Past Modals and Irrealis Implicatures

Previous grammaticalisation studies have mainly focussed on the process of the strengthening and conventionalisation of conversational implicatures as a motivation for many of the meaning changes which take place during the development of a grammaticalising item (e.g. Traugott (1989) and Bybee, Pagliuca & Perkins (1994)) . The conventionalising of conversational implicatures also appears to have motivated the development of hypothetical meanings from past tense modal forms in English (Bybee 1995): hypothetical past modal forms (e.g. *would*) have been found to have developed directly from their deontic origins as past forms of stative verbs, and did not evolve from the past forms of grammaticalised future modals. Under Bybee's analysis, the development of irrealis meanings from past modals is the result of the use of past tense with the original modal forms which were in most cases stative lexical verbs. Because of their stativity, there is no aspectual boundedness in their inherent lexical meaning, and the use of a past tense form leaves open the possibility that either the state has terminated or that it is not known whether it continues beyond past into the present (Bybee 1995: 506). The irrealis meanings produced are actually grammatical conversational implicatures, and this can be ascertained from the fact that such meanings can be cancelled (cf. Grice 1981); e.g.

(v) She was a teacher, and in fact she still is (may be) one,

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2 This study will be referred to henceforth as "Study B".

with the use of a stative verb in the past, conveys no definable sense of temporal boundedness inherent in such examples as the following:

(vi) He kicked a goal, *and in fact he is still kicking it.

The implicature which developed out of the combination of past tense with stative verbs is most likely due to the constraining effects of the retention of former meanings: it was discussed above [2.1] that pasts were believed to have first grammaticalised out of perfectives, and then at later stages past tenses gradually generalised to cover imperfective, including stative environments (Bybee et al 1994: 92). The association of irrealis implicatures with past stative verbs is highly likely to be a by-product of the process of the generalisation of pasts to stative environments, with statives still retaining in some uses the former senses of perfectivity associated with the earlier functions of past meaning. Since states cannot be associated with an inherent lexical meaning of boundedness, the sense of perfectivity retained in the grammatical meaning of a past stative must be pragmatic rather than semantic, thus producing a implicature.

It is further claimed that pragmatic meanings are at the basis of most interpretations of a counterfactual conditional, and that the counterfactuality is attributable to the presence of a conversational implicature (Comrie 1986). Moreover, there are many languages in which degrees of hypotheticality, including counterfactuality, are not marked in conditional constructions: Comrie names Indonesian (which is virtually indistinguishable from Malay) and Chinese as examples (ibid: 91). It is worth noting that neither of these two languages has a grammaticalised past tense category, and both Malay and Chinese are major substratum languages in Singapore. This is not to suggest that an absence of tense marking can be correlated generally with an absence of grammaticalised ways of marking hypotheticality; however, more research in this area could prove interesting.

4. The Study

4.1 *Methodology*

The study to be reported here is part of a longer and more comprehensive survey conducted in Singapore and using primarily L2 speakers of English. The data were collected mostly in the classroom from four groups representing a total of 148 educated Singaporean speakers. They had all completed at least 10 years of English-medium education and were currently engaged in full-time education when the survey was taken.[3] The four groups are listed as follows:-

1) (Sec.4 Express) Secondary 4 Express students from Bukit Merah Secondary School, Singapore. This group was considered by the teaching staff to be of a higher standard than the Cambridge O-Level class in the same school. The total number of the students was 47 (comprising 2 classes) and the average age was 16. They were in their tenth year of English-medium education.

2) (Sec. 4) Secondary 4 and O-Level students from Bukit Merah Secondary School. The total number was 28. The average age for these students was 16.5 (some were as

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[3] The secondary 4 groups included 11 subjects whose primary education was in Indonesia. This factor was monitored closely, and the results of these subjects were checked carefully for any likelihood of skewing due to the subjects' having less exposure to English and English-medium education. Since there were not found to be any significant differences between their results and those of the remainder of the secondary 4 group, they were not eliminated from the study.