

THE IMPACT OF MODE ON MORPHOSYNTACTIC VARIATION IN ASIAN NEW ENGLISHES

Elena Seoane
Universidade de Vigo
elena.seoane@uvigo.es

Cristina Suárez-Gómez
Universitat de les Illes Balears
cristina.suarez@uib.es

This paper examines the influence of mode on the variation found in the expression of perfect meaning in New Englishes in order to check if the variation which characterizes the spoken mode, as shown in previous studies, has spread to the written mode and has thus become a consolidated pattern of change in these emerging varieties. For this purpose, we will analyse perfect meaning in four East and South-East Asian varieties (India, Singapore, The Philippines and Hong Kong), as represented in the spoken and written components of the International Corpus of English, using the British English component as a reference corpus. We will identify the differences between the corpora in the expression of perfect meaning, identify factors determining the variation found and gauge the impact of mode on such variation.

Keywords: New Englishes, morphosyntactic variation, perfect, written discourse, spoken discourse

1. Introduction

The variation concerning perfect meaning, that is, the expression of actions within “a time span beginning in the past and extending up to now” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 143) has been subject to extensive study in many varieties of English (cf. Miller 2000, 2004 for spontaneous informal English; Elsness 1997, 2009 and Hundt and Smith 2009 for American English; Miller 2004 for Scottish English; Kirk 2009 for Irish English). However, further research is still needed in the field of New Englishes (NEs).¹

In this paper we undertake the analysis of the expression of the perfect in four Asian varieties in particular, those of Hong Kong English (HKE), Singapore (SinE), Philippines (PhilE) and India (IndE), using a parallel corpus of British English (BrE) as benchmark corpus. The goal of this paper in particular is to examine the impact of mode, spoken vs written, on the variation observed in the expression of perfect meaning in these emergent varieties and contrast it with that found in native BrE with the aim of assessing the degree of consolidation of some innovative variants in written discourse. We have shown elsewhere (cf. Seoane and Suárez-Gomez 2010; Suárez-Gómez and Seoane 2011) that, together with the *have* + past participle periphrasis and the preterite, the present/base form and the *have* + base form constructions are fairly frequent to express perfect meaning in the oral mode in these four varieties. As we know, the spoken language is generally considered the most vernacular type of language and the medium in which the greatest variation is found, as well as the locus where most changes in grammar arise (Miller 2006: 679, 689). For this reason we expect to find a

higher number of variants (both type and token) in this mode; such variants, however, can be either innovative forms, e.g., strategies of simplification, typical of NEs (Schneider 2007: 82) which at the same time may constitute potential changes in language (Miller 2006: 689) or simply performance and/or transcription errors. In contrast, the variants found in the written language will probably be those which have undergone some degree of consolidation in the language. In other words, the different range of English proficiency levels renders the analysis of speech data problematic at times, but studying written material avoids this problem (Sharma 2001: 349).

Specific aims of this paper are (i) to identify the differences between NEs and BrE in the expression of perfect meaning (Miller 2006), (ii) to gauge the impact of mode on the variation found, and (iii) to ask to what extent the innovations found in spoken NEs have spread to written NEs, thus representing consolidated variants within the perfect paradigm and confirming the occurrence of a structural change. For this purpose, section 2 describes the corpus used and section 3 presents the analysis of the corpus data. Finally, section 4 outlines some conclusions.

2. The corpus

We examined the totality of the spoken and written components of the *Hong-Kong, Singapore, Philippines and India ICE corpora (International Corpus of English)*, and we used the ICE-GB as a benchmark corpus. This decision was informed by the fact that it is risky to assume that native varieties of English conform absolutely to the standard as it is encoded in grammars (cf. Sharma 2001: 347). The sample comprises around 3 million words of private and public dialogues and scripted and unscripted monologues, and 2 million words of written material (cf. Greenbaum 1996 for details on the composition of the corpus).

In order to study the expression of perfect meaning in spoken South and South-East Asian varieties of English (AsEs for short), we began by analysing all the constructions containing the adverbs *just*, *yet*, *ever* and *never*, since these adverbs, which make the time reference explicit, would unambiguously require the presence of the present perfect according to traditional accounts of standard English. We will follow the widespread, traditional analysis of perfect meaning as presented in Comrie (1976; cf. also Dahl 1985: Ch. 5; 1999: 290-91; Dahl and Hedin 2000: 385-88; Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 143-45; Miller 2000: 327-31; 2004: 230):

1. Use of a verb phrase + *just* to express recent past, as in *She has just arrived*.
2. Use of a verb phrase + (*n*)*ever* to express experiential (or indefinite anterior) meaning, as in *Have you ever lived abroad?*
3. Use of a verb phrase + *yet* to express resultative meaning, as in *I haven't read the book yet*.

We retrieved examples using AntConc 3.2.1, a concordance program which rendered a total of slightly over 15,000 examples of *just*, *yet*, *ever* and *never*. After filtering them manually we obtained 2,044 examples, which were coded and stored in an SPSS file (15.0).

3. The expression of perfect meaning in South and South-East Asian Englishes

In our sample we found more than 13 different forms to express perfect meaning in combination with the relevant adverbs, as Table 1 illustrates.

Form	Asian Spoken	Asian Written	TOTAL ASIAN	GB Spoken	GB Written	TOTAL GB
<i>Have</i> +past participle	619 25.8 (52.4%)	229 11.5 (65.2%)	848 (55.4%)	249 41.5 (63.4%)	91 22.8 (76.5%)	340 (66.4%)
Preterite	402 16.8 (34.0%)	108 5.4 (30.8%)	510 (33.3%)	132 22 (33.6%)	21 5.2 (17.6%)	153 (29.9%)
Present/Base form	51 2.1 (4.3%)	3 0.2 (0.9%)	54 (3.5%)	2 0.3 (0.5%)	0	2 (0.4%)
<i>Have</i> +Base form	31 1.3 (2.6%)	2 0.1 (0.6%)	33 (2.2%)	0	0	0
Preterite/Participle	16 0.7 (1.4%)	0	16 (1.0%)	0	3 0.7 (0.8%)	3 (0.6%)
Participle	14 0.6 (1.2%)	0	14 (0.9%)	0	0	0
Present/Participle/Base form	11 0.5 (0.9%)	0	11 (0.7%)	1 0.2 (0.3%)	1 0.2 (0.2%)	2 (0.4%)
Preterite/Participle/Base form	2 0.1 (0.2%)	0	2 (0.1%)	0	0	0
Base form	9 0.4 (0.8%)	0	9 (0.6%)	0	1 0.2 (0.2%)	1 (0.2%)
Present	2 0.1 (0.2%)	7 0.4 (1.9%)	9 (0.6%)	5 0.8 (1.3%)	0	5 (0.9%)
<i>Has/is</i> +past participle/ base form (lexical verb indicates movement)	13 0.5 (1.1%)	0	13 (0.8%)	4 0.7 (1.0%)	0	4 (0.8%)
<i>Be</i> +past participle/ base form	8 0.3 (0.7%)	0	8 (0.5%)	0	2 0.5 (0.5%)	2 (0.4%)
Other: <i>has+ing</i> , <i>'ll+pple</i> , person <i>have+3rd</i>	3 0.1 (0.3%)	2 0.1 (0.6%)	5 (0.3%)	0	0	0
TOTAL	1181	351	1532	393	119	512

Table 1: Forms used to express perfect meaning in combination with (*never*, *just* and *yet* in spoken and written Asian and British English (number, normalized frequencies per 100,000 words and percentage).

A comparison between Asian varieties and BrE (cf. 'Total' columns) shows that in both varieties the most common way of expressing perfect meaning is by means of the canonical *have* + past participle construction. However, this tendency is more pronounced in BrE, with 66.4% of the cases, than in Asian varieties, where it only

reaches 55.4% of the total. In both varieties the second most frequent form is the preterite, but this is more common, however, in AsEs (33.3% as against 29.9%).

The next two forms, the ambiguous present/base form and the construction *have* + base form, illustrated in examples (1) and (2), seem to represent fairly established innovative forms, since they occur in 3.5% and 2.2% of the cases in AsEs, while their presence in BrE is residual. As for the remaining nine forms in Table 1, they are also less frequent in BrE, where they make up only 3.3% of all the forms expressing perfect meaning, while in AsEs they are selected 5.7% of the times. In summary, AsEs have a larger number of forms to express perfect meaning (13 as against 9), and the forms other than the canonical *have* + past participle are more frequent in these varieties than in the native variety (and almost as frequent as the canonical form, as all of them together amount to 45.6%).

- (1) He used to blame me as if I were the worst person ever live in the world. <ICE-HK:W1B-012#71:2>
 (2) I have just listen to her once. <ICE-HK:W1B-009#98:2>

As for the influence of mode on the use of perfect meaning forms, in BrE there seems to be a strong association between the written mode and conformity to the standard, which favours the use of the *have* + past participle periphrasis to the demise of the rest of the forms, with the exception of the preterite which in any case amounts only to 17.6% of the cases. Regarding the Asian varieties, it is the written mode which comes closer to the native variety, with similar values in the use of the most frequent forms and with the virtual absence of non-canonical forms. The spoken mode, however, concentrates most of the innovative variants and differs greatly from the standard.

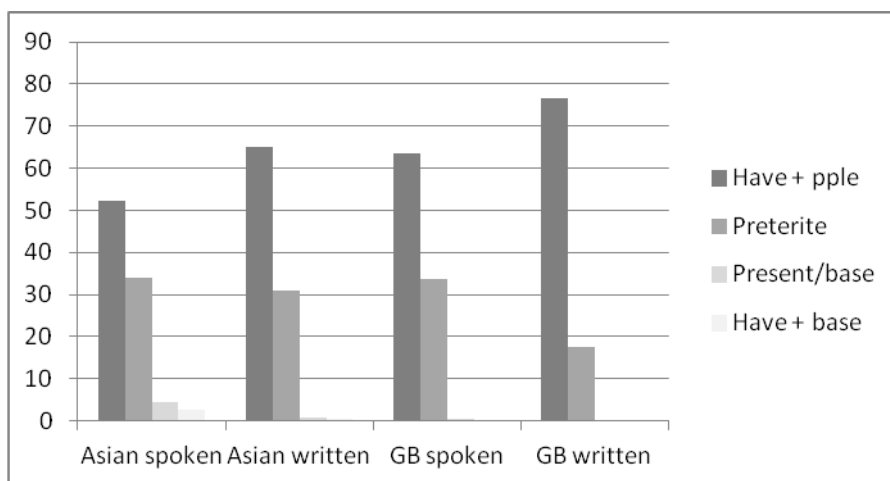


Figure 1: Expression of perfect meaning in spoken and written Asian and British English

Figure 1 shows the proximity between written Asian English and spoken BrE, since both show a similar level of variation. In contrast, spoken Asian and written British English represent the two extremes of a continuum which differs in the number of variants with respect to the expression of perfect meaning.

In what follows we will examine two more variables. Firstly, we will explore the distribution of the different forms according to the adverb used and the meaning expressed. Secondly, we will adopt a transnational perspective and examine differences

between the four Asian varieties. For the analysis of these two variables only the perfect periphrases and the preterite will be isolated, while the others will be grouped under the label 'other'.

Form	Asian Spoken	Asian Written	GB Spoken	GB Written
Present perfect	167 (35.9%)	62 (50.4%)	87 (56.1%)	26 (86.7%)
Preterite	245 (52.7%)	53 (43.1%)	62 (44%)	2 (6.7%)
Other	53 (11.4%)	8 (6.5%)	6 (3.9%)	2 (6.7%)
TOTAL	465	123	155	30

Table 2: The expression of recent past meaning with adverb *just*

The corpus data reveal that the dominant form for the expression of recent past in combination with the adverb *just* in spoken Asian English is the synthetic preterite. In the written mode and in spoken BrE the present perfect predominates, but the frequency of the synthetic preterite is still very high (more than 40%), as opposed to written BrE, a context in which variation is almost inexistent. Once more written AsEs and spoken BrE show similar proportions.

Form	Asian Spoken	Asian Written	GB Spoken	GB Written
Present perfect	272 (52.7%)	109 (66.1%)	112 (59.9%)	31 (62.0%)
Preterite	149 (28.9%)	53 (32.1%)	68 (36.4%)	18 (36.0%)
Other	95 (18.4%)	3 (1.8%)	7 (3.7%)	1 (2.0%)
TOTAL	516	165	187	50

Table 3: The expression of experiential meaning with *ever* and *never*

A comparison among varieties regarding the expression of experiential meaning in combination with the adverbs *never* and *ever* shows that these are the adverbs with which the greatest variation is recorded, since more than 18% of the examples in spoken AsEs are not present perfect or preterite, but alternative forms. Also noteworthy is that both varieties coincide in the form favoured in combination with these adverbs, with *have* + past participle clearly dominating. As can be seen in Table 3, the influence of mode on this variable is much weaker with the adverbs (*n*)*ever* than with *just*.

Form	Asian Spoken	Asian Written	GB Spoken	GB Written
Present perfect	178 (89.4%)	58 (92.1%)	50 (96.2%)	34 (87.2%)
Preterite	3 (1.5%)	2 (3.2%)	2 (3.8%)	1 (2.6%)
Other	18 (9.0%)	3 (4.8%)	0	4 (10.3%)
TOTAL	199	63	52	39

Table 4: The expression of resultative meaning with adverb *yet*

Finally, regarding resultative meaning (instances in combination with *yet*), *have* + past have in previous studies been discovered almost as a 'knock-out context', in spoken discourse (cf. Seoane and Suárez-Gómez 2010; Suárez-Gómez and Seoane 2011) and this tendency is clearly reinforced by written discourse. Very few instances of the synthetic preterite were found in this function, which contrasts with American

English, where the preterite is often reported to be favoured in such contexts (e.g. *Did the children come home yet?* Cf. Hundt and Smith 2009: 53).

4. Conclusions

In this section we will summarise our findings regarding the variation found in the expression of perfect meaning in AsEs. A comparison between AsEs and BrE reveals substantial differences, since AsEs use the prescribed form in significantly different proportions and record several innovative variants which are not registered in BrE. Some of the new variants observed in the spoken mode in AsEs have filtered to the written discourse, which leads us to conclude that they are not performance errors, but productive forms. This is specially the case of *have* + base form and the base form, both of which represent strategies of simplification, which could also point to a grammatical change in progress (Miller 2006; Schneider 2007).

The influence of mode on the variation subject of analysis here has been shown to be highly relevant both for BrE and AsEs. As far as BrE is concerned, the spoken mode drifts away from the prescriptive trend, whereas the written mode conforms to it. As for AsEs, the differences between spoken and written modes are very outstanding: while the written mode parallels spoken BrE, the spoken mode offers the widest range of new variants.

Notes

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