

THE INFLUENCE OF FIRST OR OTHER LANGUAGES IN THE USE OF PREPOSITION IN SINGAPORE ENGLISH

Dwi Wulandari
Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Universitas Diponegoro

Abstrak

Preposisi adalah salah satu kelas kata yang sulit untuk diajarkan, karena bisa jadi preposisi memiliki makna yang abstrak, apalagi dalam konteks bahasa kedua, seperti pada kasus Singapura, dimana ada lebih dari satu bahasa yang digunakan dalam kegiatan sehari-hari. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kesalahan penggunaan preposisi pada bahasa Inggris Singapura dalam kaitannya dengan pengaruh bahasa ibu dan bahasa lain yang juga digunakan secara bersama-sama. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa terjadi kesalahan penggunaan preposisi terutama untuk preposisi yang menunjukkan makna abstrak. Selain itu proses generalisasi dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris juga menunjukkan bagaimana kesalahan penggunaan preposisi bisa terjadi. Bahasa Melayu dan bahasa Cina memberikan pengaruh yang besar dalam pemahaman makna preposisi. Preposisi bahasa Inggris yang digunakan seringkali masih mengacu pada makna asalnya dalam bahasa melayu, dan digunakan sebagaimana mereka menggunakan partikel dalam bahasa Cina.

Kata kunci : Preposisi, bahasa Inggris Singapura, makna abstrak, generalisasi, bahasa ibu.

1. INTRODUCTION

As function words, prepositions do not have a clear lexical meaning of their own, but they assist to vary the function of lexical words with which they appear (Francis, 1958). Because of this, people who learn English as a second language mostly have difficulty in understanding and using prepositions. It is difficult for non-native speakers to use words that do not have clear lexical meaning but that have such important functions in the sentence. For non-native English speakers such as Singaporeans, the use of prepositions is a problem. Because they learn English as foreign language, they are not able to develop the full sense of English in the way native speakers do; especially in the use of function words such as prepositions. In addition, the influence of the first language or other languages spoken in Singapore serves as the reason that Singaporeans are not able to use prepositions the way native speakers do. To search further into these matters, this paper will discuss the history of preposition use in Britain in order to compare it with the facts found in Singapore English. Also, the history of Singapore English

as well as other languages spoken in Singapore will be discussed in order to have a better understanding of how these languages influence the use of prepositions in Singapore English.

2. ENGLISH PREPOSITION

Prepositions appeared as early as the Old English (OE) period. However, OE does not have as many prepositions as Present Day English (PDE) because the syntactic relations in OE were made clear by the use of case endings (Millward, 1996). In this way, prepositions, which also function to clarify syntactic relations, were not always necessary. OE prepositions were also in the category of uninflected words, as in PDE. Some of them continue to be used in PDE such as 'to,' 'for,' 'in (on),' and 'under'; some others retain the meaning but are used in different form in PDE, such as *mid* 'with,' *burh* 'through,' or *ymbe* 'around.' During the Middle English (ME) period, the number of prepositions in English usage increased quite a lot. Because many of the inflected words in OE were lost during the ME period; hence, prepositions were created to fill the gap.

Many prepositions used in ME were no longer used during the EMnE period, especially those that were borrowed. Instead, many new prepositions were created by compounding two existing prepositions plus another word, such as 'because of,' or 'in spite of.' The compounding practice continues until PDE period; in fact this becomes the only way to add to the number of prepositions. The basic prepositions that had existed since the OE period, such as 'in,' or 'on,' are used still in the same spelling but have more connotations than ever before. Because by compounding prepositions, the original meaning of each preposition may expand.

From time to time, prepositions are used to show the relationship between the noun (or pronoun) and another word in a sentence (Burchfield, 1996). It is easier to understand the meaning of prepositions in mediating the words when the sentence shows concrete images. For example, when we say that 'the book is on the table,' it is clear that the preposition 'on' in that sentence is showing 'where the book is.' In other words, 'on' clearly connects the verb 'is' and the noun 'the table.' However, prepositions are also used to show the relationships between abstract images. So, in this case, the use of different prepositions may conflict, again because prepositions do not have a clear meaning. The example 'Both parties in Washington swore on all that is holy not to touch the... federal budget surplus' (*N.Y. Times* 23 Dec, 2001 in *OED*) shows how 'on' is used to relate abstract images. For native speakers, there is probably no question that 'on' should be used in such a sentence instead of other prepositions, such as 'about.' In contrast, for non-native speakers who do not have a sense of the language find it difficult to understand that we 'swear on something' but we do not 'swear about something.' Hence, the use of different prepositions relates to the difficulty of non-native speakers, such as Singaporeans, to understand the sense of the language.

3. ENGLISH AND OTHER LANGUAGES IN SINGAPORE

English was introduced in Singapore during the British occupation in the eighteenth century, which is also during the EMnE period. At that time Singapore was part of Malaysia. Malays is the majority ethnic group, so the Malay language (Malay) was widely spoken. However, in 1819, the British established the East India Company in Singapore, which gradually took over the influence of other colonial powers such as the Portuguese and the Dutch. The British Colonial Government continued this rule and maintained policies similar to other British colonies such as Malay, China, and India. Because of this, many people emigrated from China and India. Based on the latest census (2000), Singapore's population consists of 77% Chinese, 14% Malay, 8% Indian, and 1% other (European, Japanese, Arabic, or Jews). Hence, it is understandable that Singaporeans developed multicultural communities and that each ethnic group spoke its own language, but gradually they were influenced by other ethnics groups' languages.

During the colonial period, the British government established schools which used English as the medium of instruction. Although the schools progressed slowly at the beginning, during the first twenty years of the twentieth century, these schools became popular and were upgraded to secondary schools and colleges for both boys and girls (Platt and Weber, 1980). These schools continue to develop up to the present. Because of this, English has become a widely spoken language in Singapore and replaces the pidginized variety of Malay, *Pasar Melayu*, that was spoken almost by everyone in Singapore.

When Singapore gained its independence, English was declared as one of the official languages along with Tamil and Chinese (both Mandarin and Hokkien), while Malay was declared as the national language. Thus, English is used interchangeably with other languages in Singapore. In fact the use of English is more widespread than the other languages, and nowadays English is one of the first languages learned by about half of the current pre-school children (Gupta, 1994).

4. PREPOSITION IN SINGAPOREAN ENGLISH

4.1. Problems in Preposition with abstract images/meaning

English spoken in Singapore is somehow different from Standard British English (SBE), although originally, it is SBE that was taught in schools. In comparison with SBE, the spoken Singapore English, especially the informal one, has different intonation, grammar structure, word choice and so on. Although Singaporeans tend to be more careful in writing in order not to deviate from SBE, there are still some differences. One of the distinctive features is the use of prepositions. Crewe (1977) shows that Singaporean writers may use different prepositions from SBE in their published literature works such as novels, newspapers, and scholarly writing. In other words, a Singaporean may use a preposition in a sentence, while SBE will suggest different preposition for the same sentence. For example, he finds the use of the preposition 'to' in 'It is all very convenient to them' written in local newspapers. He believes that the SBE sentence would use the preposition 'for' in that sentence. Also the use of the

preposition 'with' instead of 'about' in the sentence 'Was he being off-handed with his past?' This sentence also shows that the use of the preposition 'with' is a deviation of SBE rules.

The reason for the above examples is that because prepositions that are used in the above sentences represent abstract images. Within these kinds of sentences, it is more difficult to understand the meaning of prepositions. It is not easy to create an abstract image to portray the relationship between the noun (or pronoun) and another word. Therefore, it is also difficult for Singaporeans to construct sentences using prepositions to illustrate abstract images. Even when their command of English is better, the question of how to use the appropriate preposition in such sentences is still a problem. Crewe shows that even scholars and politicians use inappropriate prepositions for depicting the abstract sense.

When encountering written text that uses prepositions to represent abstract images, Singaporeans may go on reading it without paying too much attention to the prepositions themselves. Because they can understand the meaning of the whole sentence by knowing the lexical meaning of the content words, and because the existence of certain prepositions in the sentence does not really disrupt their understanding, Singaporeans may not notice what preposition is used for relating the words in the sentence. For this reason, although they become more fluent in using English both orally and in writing, their sense of using the appropriate prepositions does not develop in the same pace as their other language skills.

4.2. Problems due to Generalization Process

Another issue for using prepositions inappropriately is attributable to the generalization process. It is well-known that foreign language learners, such as Singaporeans learning English, undergo the generalization process (Hadley, 2000). For instance, they may use the past form of 'go' as 'goed' instead of 'went.' Ellis (1995) explains that this is only a stage toward fluency, and later when the learners have higher proficiency, they will pass this stage. However, if the degree of difficulty is higher, then this stage is fixed. In addition, in foreign language setting, teachers' concerns in correcting students' mistakes will cause the generalization to be passed or fixed. Gass and Selinker (2000) mention that most English teachers are more concerned with correcting mistakes in the area of tense, aspect, or content words than with mistake in other areas, such as function words. As prepositions do not have clear lexical meaning, especially in the abstract sense, teachers do not always pay attention in teaching this subject. Also because of their unclear lexical meaning, prepositions have a higher degree of difficulty. Putting it this way, generalization of prepositions is commonly fixed. The examples 'I have too much of work to do' and 'A figure of eight' (Crewe, 1977) show how Singaporeans generalize the use of the preposition 'of' with its use in defining possession such as 'The work of the society' or 'The pupil of Jesus.' Crewe points out that these sentences are written in literary works, suggesting that even among the speakers with a higher level of proficiency, this kind of mistake still occurs.

Another example related to generalization is that Singaporeans are likely to place the preposition at the end of an interrogative sentence, although they have

already mentioned it at the beginning of the sentence. Platt, et al. (1983) shows some examples such as ‘To what did both girls draw attention to?’, and ‘For what did you do that for?’ These examples illustrate that Singaporeans generalize prepositions as words that relate to the noun. In the above examples, the complete answer will be ‘both girls drew attention to *something*’ and ‘I did that for *something*,’ respectively. Expecting that the short answer will be ‘*something*,’ the speakers feel the necessity to provide the prepositions at the end of their interrogative sentences so that these prepositions may generally lead to the direct answer. However, they are not aware that they have already placed the prepositions at the beginning of their questions in complying with the SBE rules. Hence, by repeating the preposition they are violating the SBE rules.

4.3. Problems Related with Native or/and Other Languages Spoken in Singapore

Because there are several ethnic groups in Singapore, Singaporeans are likely to be multicultural. Because of this multicultural background, almost every Singaporean is able to speak more than one language, with many people speaking three or four languages altogether (Gupta, 1994). Consequently, the languages that they use may influence one another. Whether they speak English because they are studying it at schools or acquiring it as a native language, their ability to use English orally and in writing is also influenced by other languages. If English is not their native languages, there is likely that the first language affects their ability to communicate in English. Even if English is their native language, their English is also influenced by other languages because English is acquired as native language together with other languages. Moreover, during the earlier stages of language development, between 2 – 5 years (Krashen, 1982), children are very sensitive to the languages to which they are exposed. If there are many languages that they are exposed to within this age of development, children will be able to acquire almost all of them. However, their proficiency in each language depends on the amount of language exposure. Thus, the other languages spoken in Singapore are considered as the reason for the deviation of Singapore English from SBE.

The influence of the native language can also be observed in the use of prepositions in Singapore English. For example, a Singaporean may say “I want to get down from the bus” (Milward, 1996). In their first language, especially those who have Malay as their native language, the idea of ‘get out of the bus’ means ‘step down from the bus door to the pavement,’ so rather than using preposition ‘out of’ they say it as ‘down from.’ This is similar to the case found in Platt and Weber’s study. They find that Singaporeans say ‘if you go up the bus, they talk to you in Hokkien.’ Again, because the meaning of ‘get on the bus’ is comprehended literally as ‘go up to enter the bus,’ Singaporeans are likely to say ‘go up’ rather than ‘get on.’

Another influence from Malay is the misuse of preposition ‘over’. The examples ‘it comes to the same-hundred over dollar’ and ‘He was in here two years over now’ are found in Crewe’s study. Platt, et al. also provide a similar example: ‘it costs about fifty dollars over.’ All of these examples show that

preposition 'over' is misused, as SBE will suggest using 'over' before the object noun. In Malay the equivalent of the word 'over' is placed after the object noun. For this reason, Singaporeans also place the preposition 'over' after the object noun.

The preposition 'after' is also used differently by Singaporeans. Many Singaporeans say 'I am after doing it' to mean 'I have done it' (Lim, 2004). Because the present participle of 'have done' carries the meaning of 'after' in Malay, Singaporeans tend to replace 'have to' with 'after' either unconsciously or consciously in order to get their point across more easily.

Besides Malay, Chinese also influences Singapore English greatly. According to Wikipedia, one of the features of Chinese is that many single-syllable morphemes can stand alone as individual words. In fact, in Old and Middle Chinese almost all of the single-syllable morphemes are considered individual words due to greater variability in possible sounds. This is the reason that Chinese is called a monosyllabic language. In Modern Chinese, however, many of these possible sounds are lost. Consequently, multisyllabic words emerge to compensate the loss. Nevertheless, Chinese words are still considered shorter compared to English or Malay (Richard and Tay). Having 77% of Chinese in the population, the Chinese language is used extensively, especially in informal oral communication. Owing to the fact that Singaporeans may speak shorter sentences in Chinese, when they need to speak in English, they are likely to shorten their English too. An example is taken from Wikipedia, stating that Singaporeans may say 'I on the TV' which means 'I switch on the TV.' In the SBE sentence, the preposition 'on' may not be used to relate the subject ('I') and the object ('the TV'); instead, 'on' relates the verb 'switch' and the noun 'the TV.' In Chinese, the meaning of 'switch on' or 'switch off' is clearly differentiated by the preposition 'on' and 'off.' Accordingly, rather than saying the complete form 'switch on,' Singaporeans tend to shorten the form and say 'on' only.

The most common feature of Chinese in Singapore English is the use of particle. Kolln, (1982) mentions of particles as preposition-like words. In SBE particles are taken from prepositions, but function differently. If a preposition can have its own meaning, a particle can have its meaning only by attaching it with verbs or other prepositions (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2005). Thus, the preposition 'up' can have different meaning if it is used as the particle in 'stay up.' Because of this, learning how to use particles for non-native speakers is harder. They have to understand the prepositions and particles, and need to understand the distinction use between them. Moreover, the influences of other languages add to the difficulty in using particles.

The unique observable fact from Singapore English is the use of 'la' at the end of the sentence. This word serve as particles in the sense that it is used in the same way as other particles in English, except that particles can have particular meaning when combined with certain verbs. Originally, the word 'la' is from Chinese and has specific grammatical function. Mandarin Chinese acknowledges the word 'la' as one of the final particles that function as a marker of the entire mood of the sentence (Richard and Tay, 1977). Thus, by having a different final particle, the meaning of the sentence will also be different. Richard and Tay list several differences in the use of different final particles such as *Ni hen mang ma?*

(Are you very busy?), *Ni hen mang ba!* (You are probably very busy, aren't you?), *Ni hen mang a!* (How busy you are!), and *Ni hen mang la!* (You are really very busy). All the '*Ni hen mang*' sentences are said in the same tone, so the idea that the meaning is different because of the tone is eliminated. Therefore, the different final particles used in the sentences cause the different meaning. In Hokkien Chinese, however, the particle 'la' is used more often in various sentences. Besides having grammatical function, such as stating cause-effect, marking enumeration and persuasive attitude, the particle 'la' in Hokkien is also used to give sense of finality (Richards and Tay, 1977)

The final particle 'la' in Singaporean English does not have any grammatical function. By having the final particle 'la' or not, the meaning of the sentence does not change. Only one rule applies to the use of 'la'; that it may not be said in interrogative sentence (Lim, 2004). Many studies describe the use of the particle 'la' as a marker of solidarity, familiarity, and informality. (Lim, 2004; Richard and Tay, 1977; Wikipedia, Gupta, 1994). The final particle 'la' occurs frequently in spoken Singapore English. Hence, although 'la' does not contribute to differ the meaning, it shows sociolinguistic relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

Though particles in SBE and in Chinese have grammatical meaning, Singaporeans seems to generalize the use of particles as a discourse marker. The shifting from having grammatical function to the loss of the function may be attributed to both issues; the difficulties of using particles correctly and the influence of other languages. Malay has a particle 'lah' which is attached to a word to mark emphasis. 'Lah' in Malay is not a specific category, hence it can occur with any content word, such as *inilah* (this is it), *ayolah* (come on), or *sayalah* (it is I). Because 'lah' in Malay can occur with any type of content words, and is used to mark emphasis, Singaporeans may bring this rule to their English. In addition, because 'la' in Hokkien is used to mark finality, the Singaporeans will also bring this rule in their English in order to create an easier meaning to replace the difficult use of English particles. Mandarin Chinese is a high language in Singaporeans' society, which means that Mandarin is mostly used in formal setting. 'La' in Singapore English is used to mark informality, hence it is only used for informal setting. This is the reason that 'la' in Singapore English does not have grammatical meaning. Because rather than taking the meaning of Mandarin 'la', Singaporeans refer the use of 'la' as in Hokkien; to mark finality. As language develops, the use of particle 'la' in Singapore English becomes fixed as the mark the finality in any type of sentences, except for interrogative sentence, and informs informality.

References

- Burchfield, R.W. (1996). *Fowler's Modern English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crewe, William. (1977). "Singapore English as a Non-Native Dialect." In William Crewe (ed.). *The English Language in Singapore*. Singapore: Eastern University Press.

- Ellis, R. (1985). *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Francis, W.N. (1959). *The Structure of American English*. New York: The Ronald Press Company.
- Gass, M. Susan, and Larry Selinker. (2001). *Second Language Acquisition*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gupta, A.F. (1994). "Singapore Colloquial English." In <http://www.une.edu.au/langnet/singlish.htm>
- Hadley, Alice Omaggio. (2000). *Teaching Language in Context*. USA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Kolln, Martha. (1982). *Understanding English Grammar*. New York: Macmillan.
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. London: Pergamon.
- Lim, Lisa. (2004). *Singapore English: A Grammatical Description*. Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing Company.
- Millward, C.M. (1996). *A Biography of the English Language*. Boston, MA: Thomson Wadsworth. 1996
- Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. 11th edition. USA: Merriam-Webster Incorporated. 2005.
- Oxford English Dictionary* <http://www.oed.com>
- Platt, John, Heidi Weber, and Mian Lian Ho. (1983). *Singapore and Malaysia*. Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing Company.
- Platt, John, and Heidi Weber. (1980). *English in Singapore and Malaysia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Richards, J.C. and Mary W.J. Tay. (1977). "The *La* Particle in Singapore English." In William Crewe (ed.). *The English Language in Singapore*. Singapore: Eastern University Press.
- Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singlish> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/chinese>.
- Singapore Statistic*. (2000). <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/keystats/people.html#demo>.