Singapore: English in contact, sociocultural aspects, and new perspectives (project leaders: Edgar W. Schneider, Sarah Buschfeld)

For the last half century, many important sociolinguistic developments have been going on in the Indo-Pacific region and in most of these cases English has played a crucial role and was indeed the driving force in the (re-)formatting of these sociolinguistic realities. Singapore is just one of many examples of where such changes have taken place; yet it is certainly one of the cases in which such developments have been most far-reaching and have taken place at an unprecedented pace when considering the country's comparatively short history. These changes were not only motivated by Singapore's colonial past, but, even more importantly, by factors which became effective during its aftermath, such as the following: Singapore's unique language policy of "English-based bilingualism" (Tickoo 1996: 438, quoted in Schneider 2007: 153); the ethnic neutrality of English; the growth of a colloquial variety ("Singlish") and some public reactions towards it; the country's multilingual setup; questions of language dominance and choice with respect to home languages and speakers' attitudes in general. Many of these aspects and especially the linguistic characteristics of Singapore English (SingE) that have emerged as the result of these sociolinguistic developments have been thoroughly investigated and documented. Yet, these developments and also the way researchers have approached the context of Singapore and SingE as a variety of English (from a theoretical perspective) still offer – and in fact require – further research into so far neglected facets of its development and alternative approaches.

The project at hand attends to these under-researched aspects of SingE in a twofold way. First, it looks into the acquisition of SingE as a first language (L1) by Singaporean children. Even though this is not a completely new development and has been noted several times already, and was partly investigated by Gupta as early as in 1994, it has not yet been investigated systematically and comprehensively, making use of adequate methodology, i.e. an approach which considers both the sociolinguistic realities of L1 SingE as well as the psycholinguistic aspects of its acquisition. Part of the project is to understand these new realities and therefore to bridge the existing research gap. This is approached on the basis of a large-scale empirical investigation of language choice and use in Singaporean families, the acquisition background of Singaporean children (touching on issues such as language dominance), as well as of structural characteristics of L1 SingE. The data come from 37 bi- and multilingual children living permanently in Singapore, aged 1;4 to 12;1. They were elicited by means of a parental questionnaire on language choice and use and in video-recorded task-directed dialogue between researcher and child, consisting of several parts: a grammar elicitation task, a story retelling task, elicited narratives, free interaction, and a picture naming task. The focus here is on the acquisition of subject pronouns (zero vs. realized), past tense marking (marked vs. unmarked verbs), and the acquisition of the vowel contrasts in the lexical sets KIT and FLEECE, LOT and THOUGHT as well as FOOT and GOOSE (Wells 1982). First results show that Singaporean children produce both zero as well as realized subject pronouns as well as both marked and unmarked verbs, and that vowel contrasts are clearly reduced, though the data do not confirm a strict merger of corresponding long and short vowels (as has been sometimes argued in the literature on L2 SingE). The data has revealed a high degree of intra- as well as inter-speaker variation, which can

party be explained in terms of an age effect (i.e. the younger children produce a higher amount of zero subjects and unmarked verbs than the older children), partly in terms of ethnic differences (with the children of Chinese descent producing a higher rate of zero subjects and unmarked verbs than the Indian children). Further results will be worked out to validate these findings and the project aims to offer interpretations and explanations of these observations. What seems to be clear is that L1 SingE is a heterogeneous system, not (yet?) systematized, and still "in the making".

Secondly, the project taps into another comparatively new research trend. It looks into reflections of cultures in language, focusing on Singapore as a case in point. The project investigates whether or to what extent differences between cultures find formal manifestations in language form as compiled in electronic text collections. A strong focus is on Singapore, as reflected in the ICE-Singapore corpus, but other Asian Englishes and World Englishes are also considered for comparison. It is suggested that manifestations of cultural differences can be found mainly on three different, increasingly abstract layers of analysis: first, localized terms and objects, in line with a material "culture-as-content" approach; second, "dimensions of cultures" as posited in the discipline of "cross-cultural analysis" rooted in anthropology and sociopsychological research; and thirdly, preferences for specific linguistic patterns (schematic constructions) which might be motivated by differences between cultural perspectives on agency and individuality. Examples from each level are investigated and worked out.

Selected references:

Gupta, A.F. 1994. *The Step-Tongue. Children's English in Singapore*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Schneider, E.W. 2007. *Postcolonial English. Varieties around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tickoo, M.L. 1996. "Fifty years of English in Singapore: all gains, (a) few losses?" In J.A. Fishman, A.W. Conrad & A. Rubal-Lopez (eds.), *Post-Imperial English: Status Change in Former British and American Colonies 1940-1990*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 431-455.

Wells, J. C. 1982. *Accents of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.