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[Review of: D. Ziegeler (2015) *Converging Grammars: constructions in Singapore English*]

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Publication date

2016

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

LINGUIST List

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

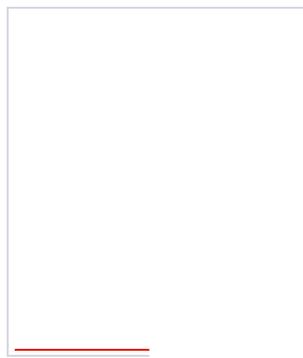
Aalberse, S. P. (2016). [Review of: D. Ziegeler (2015) *Converging Grammars: constructions in Singapore English*]. *LINGUIST List*, 27(2318). <http://linguistlist.org/issues/27/27-2318.html>

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LINGUIST List 27.2318

Mon May 23 2016

Review: Lang Doc; Socioling: Ziegeler (2015)

Editor for this issue: Sara Couture <sara@linguistlist.org>

Date: 08-Jan-2016

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Subject: Converging Grammars

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Book announced at <http://linguistlist.org/issues/26/26-3326.html>

AUTHOR: Debra Ziegeler

TITLE: Converging Grammars

SUBTITLE: Constructions in Singapore English
SERIES TITLE: Language Contact and Bilingualism 11
PUBLISHER: De Gruyter Mouton
YEAR: 2015

REVIEWER: Suzanne Pauline Aalberse, University of Amsterdam

Reviews Editor: Robert Arthur Cote

SUMMARY

“Converging grammars: Constructions in Singapore English” by Debra Ziegeler provides a detailed analysis of four constructions in Singapore English that the author claims provide a problem for existing theories of language contact. The author works in a construction based framework, and her first goal is to adapt construction based approaches so that they can deal with contact varieties. A central claim in construction based approaches is that syntax and the lexicon are unified and that constructions are language-specific and variety-specific. This very tight connection between syntax and the lexicon and its language specificity seem to be problematic when one wants to explain relexified languages, e.g. languages that use the lexicon of one language and the grammar of another language. Singapore English is such as language as it is sometimes claimed to have an English lexicon and a Chinese/Malay grammar. How are the lexicon and the syntax related in these instances? The solution that Ziegeler ends up with is the ‘merger construction’ hypothesis that will be explained below.

The author’s second goal is to explain features of the grammar of Singapore English which are not so readily transparent in the grammars of the substrate and the adstrate via this unified new approach of the ‘merger construction’. She argues for the role of English also beyond the lexicon. The book is of very direct relevance to researchers in the usage based framework and researchers of contact linguistics and is also interesting for researchers in the wider field of multilingualism. The case studies in the book (chapters four through seven) were published in other sources previously.

Chapter 1 introduces the book, defines the terms used, and gives an overview of the subsequent chapters. Chapter 2, “Singapore English”, summarizes work by others on the languages of Singapore and their sociolinguistic status. It discusses which languages were and are spoken in Singapore. It describes how Mandarin is now taking over other Chinese languages such as Hokkien and Cantonese and how it is spoken alongside Malay and English. The chapter focusses on the varieties of English spoken in Singapore and provides an overview of interpretations of the relation between Standard Singapore English (SSE) and Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), which is also referred to as Singlish. Standard Singapore English (SSE) is closely connected to other standard varieties of English. SCE is much more influenced by the use of substrate languages such as the Chinese languages and Malay. The choice between the use of Singlish and SSE (and all variants on the continuum) depends on factors such as formality of the situation and educational level of the speaker. It discusses criteria to distinguish the two variants and shows

difficulties in distinguishing the two. For example, does using a Chinese pragmatic particle like ‘lah’ as illustrated in (1) and taken from Alsagoff 2010: 338) make the utterance SCE even if the rest of the grammar is very standard like?

(1) She’s given him the correct file, lah.

Chapter 3, “Construction grammars and the paradox of ‘mixed’ construction types”, gives an overview of grammaticalisation research and construction grammar, which both share the hypothesis that meaning and form cannot be separated. It shows how the approaches are related, presents terminology used in these studies, and discusses the problem of identifying a construction. Constructions have been defined at many levels and by different aspects of the construction (the meaning, the form, and the function), which makes it hard to determine what is NOT a construction. Ziegeler posits that constructions are sense packages. She shows what is not a construction. For example, [if the] is not a construction because there is no meaning that is associated with [if the] that cannot be derived from the meaning of the two separate items [if] and [the]. She claims the notion of construction coincides with chunks: non-compositional meaning that cannot be explained otherwise. This chapter builds up to the one of the central questions of the book: how to tease apart the anatomy of a construction based on mixed languages.

Chapter 4, “Transitivity and causativity”, is based on co-authored work with Sara Lee from 2006 and 2009 and discusses the use of the conventionalized scenario constructions in Singlish. The conventionalized scenario construction looks like a regular transitive construction, but the causee is not expressed. The term conventionalized scenario was introduced by Goldberg (1995). Compare for example (1) and (2):

- (1) Bush bombed Baghdad.
 (2) Suzanne cut her hair.

World knowledge helps the language user to realize that Bush did not himself bomb Baghdad, but he ordered others to do so. If you know me and my hair looks reasonably well-cut, you know I did not cut it myself but it was the hairdresser.

Results of an elicitation survey are also reported in this chapter. In the elicitation procedure, participants from Singapore as well as the United Kingdom were asked to answer questions such as: “What do you do when your hair gets too long?” Additionally, supplementary questions were asked such as “who is your favorite hairdresser?” to disambiguate between two interpretations of the answer “I cut my hair”. The first one being the regular transitive interpretation (I myself cut my own hair), and the second one consisting of the conventionalized scenario interpretation (someone very obvious, namely the hairdresser, cut my hair). The two most important findings of the survey are that speakers in Singapore are four times more likely than speakers in England to use the conventionalized scenario construction and that they do so in more contexts. Speakers in England do NOT use the construction if the direction of the causative force is away from the speaker. Take, for example, the question

“What would you do if you had a bad tooth and your dentist says it cannot be saved?” Speakers in Singapore could answer “I remove it” meaning that the dentist removed it for the speaker, whereas speakers in England resort to constructions like “I have it removed”. Important for Ziegeler is that the conventionalized scenario is also used in pre-contact English. She relates the extension of its use to substrate influence, but she stresses the important role of the lexifier language.

Chapter 5, “Experiential aspect”, describes the use of the adverb ‘ever’ as an experiential marker in Singapore English. This use is illustrated by examples from literature and from internet sources. A telling example in (3) comes from Ho & Wong (2001: 80):

(3) A Your husband ever bring fish home to eat or not?
B Ever.

This kind of use of the adverb ‘ever’ matches with the use preverbal aspect markers in the substrate languages such as «bat» in Hokkien and «pernah» in Malay and it matches the use of Mandarin postverbal «guo». What makes this case study relevant to Ziegeler’s book is the selection of the adverb ‘ever’. Rather than directly calquing the meaning of «bat» or «guo» (‘pass’) or «pernah» (something like ‘once’), the adverb ‘ever’ is selected and its use is extended. The question is what motivated this selection process. Crucial for Ziegeler is the shared meaning of repeatability between experiential markers such as ‘bat’ and ‘pernah’ and adverb ‘ever’. She posits that the use in negative polarity context, for example in ‘I have not ever seen him’, used emphatically, with the meaning ‘not even a bit’ extends to mean minimal necessity -occurring at least one possible time- and then further extends to mean ‘at least one necessary time’ making it an experiential marker. She describes how the same process took place in Dutch. Furthermore, she shows that the meaning of repeatability of ‘ever’ is traceable to older stages of English. Ziegeler stresses that the relation between the substrate experiential verbs and the use of ever is not direct. Rather we see universal patterns of grammaticalisation (the same thing happened in Dutch) and semantic continuity with the pre-contact variety.

Chapter 6, “The past tense construction”, analyses the occasional use of the past tense in Singlish in environments in which Standard Singapore English used the present tense. See for example (5) taken from the flowerpod corpus in Ziegeler (2015: 161) corpus based on social media.

(5) For me i want to stay with my parents becós i am used to it le. ... although we ‘kept’ quarrel over small things but i think its fun with them ard.... heehee.

Whereas some have suggested that the use of the past tense is an error, Ziegeler suggests that the use of the past tense construction is systematic. She claims that the past tense construction indicates precedence, eg. it expresses perfectivity and it implies recurrence. These meanings of perfectivity and recurrence explain the functions the past tense construction has in Singlish, namely indicating, habituality such as in (5), performativity

as shown in (6) and anteriority where the past tense construction indicates that the verb it encodes precedes the action of the next verb such as in (7).
Ya I 'agreed'. And recently it isn't easy to get a job.

(6) Whenever i 'saw' girls wearing boots, i can't help but take a 2nd look.
It's lovely lo! Stylish.

Ziegeler shows how perfectivity is connected to similar functions cross-linguistically and thus again shows that the relation with the substrate is indirect and the rise of new constructions is connected to similar matching of meanings across languages.

Chapter 7, "Bare noun constructions" discusses the use of bare nouns in Singapore English based on uses in the Flowerpod Corpus and in advertising flyers and street signs such as (7).

(7) BEWARE OF PEDESTRIAN (Ziegeler 2015: 194)

Although superficially the bare noun construction looks as the direct influence of Chinese languages, which allow for more bare nouns than English, there is a difference between the use of bare nouns in Chinese and other substrate languages and its use in Singapore English. Ziegeler argues that whereas in the substrate languages bare nouns can be used for specific and non-specific nouns, the use of bare nouns is restricted to mark non-specificity in Singlish. Specific indefinite nouns are either marked with the numeral 'one' or the article 'a' such as in:

(8) 'One' lecturer came in and ask uh uh ask me to help him lah. (Ziegeler 2015: 198)

(9) I got them from a shop in Braas Basah Complex (Ziegeler 2015: 198)

Reference to non-specific nouns such as in (9) where no specific hotel room is intended can be left bare

And my bf [boyfriend] was thinking of booking 'hotel room' to boink boink (Ziegeler 2015: 196)

Ziegeler shows that some creole languages show a similar distribution where specific indefinites like in (7) and (8) get an article like marker and non-specific nouns are left bare. Important for Ziegeler is the fact that this construction does not come directly from the substrate languages and follows universals tendencies. She related the use of bare nouns as indefinites to the use of bare nouns as mass nouns. Mass nouns like 'beer' are left bare in English such as in (10)

(10) She bought beer.

If count nouns are left bare in English they receive mass interpretation as can be seen from (11) where apple means something like 'apple-material'.

(11) You have apple on your shirt (Ziegeler 2015: 204)

Ziegeler shows that bare nouns in Singapore English do not get a mass interpretation, eg. ‘beware of pedestrian’ which she found written on a street sign in Singapore means that one should watch out for a non-specific pedestrian, not for some pedestrian material. Although use of the bare noun in pre-contact English and Singapore English differ, Ziegeler explains the use of bare nouns for indefinite non-specifics in Singlish via the semantics of bare nouns in pre-contact English. Mass nouns have the meaning of unboundness and that meaning is shared in the non-specific indefinites.

Chapter 8, “The Merger Construction: A model of construction convergence”, aims at a general theory that sheds light on the presented case studies and that can be applied to other contact languages. All case studies show the extended application of forms used in other varieties of English. Chapter 4 showed more frequent and broader use of the conventionalized scenario construction ‘She cut her hair’. Chapter 5 shows the extension of the use of the adverb ‘ever’. Chapter 6 illustrated innovative uses of the past tense construction and Chapter 7 described the use of bare nouns. Ziegeler interprets all these innovations as an expansion of the functional inventory of the replica language (the standard language) without necessarily increasing the construction inventory and as such as a kind of economy. The substrate language feeds the need for a certain function. The semantics of this function are matched with the semantics of a form in the lexifier language via polysemy. For example, the function ‘experiential’ has the meaning of repetitiveness. This meaning is present in the form ‘ever’ and the language user merges the construction via the meaning of ‘repetitiveness’. Ziegeler shows that for all four case studies we see merger construction achieved by polysemic meaning.

EVALUATION

This is a very rich, interesting, thought-provoking, and sometimes funny book (in the selection of examples). It advocates a central role for semantics and a more important role for ‘lexifier’-like languages such as English in mixed languages. In terms of Muysken (2013), the book advocates a stronger role for the L2 (if we can see English as the L2) and universal principles (UP), while it downplays the role of the L1 (if we can call Malay and Chinese the L1). It claims that existing forms in the lexifier language extend their usage via a semantic pivot that matched the meaning of a function of the substrate language. It also raises the theoretical question what a construction is in an enlightening way.

The empirical claims in the book are supported by data from the Flowerpod Corpus (data on social media), diary data, 10 years of saved advertisements, the corpus of Singapore English, an elicitation test, street signs, text messages, and data present in other literature. The sources are varied, gathered very creatively and interesting, but sometimes more suggestive than providing with a strong statistical basis. Another critical note is that ideas about the substrate are assumed and not empirically tested. For example, how sure can we be that Chinese itself does not use a numeral to encode specific indefinites? It might be the case that Singlish and Chinese are closer

together than what is suggested here. Testing what speakers do in the other languages they speak would be relevant extra information.

Ziegeler's work raises many new questions such as how likely is the matching of certain function with a certain form? For example, there are contact varieties of Malay and Dutch such as Petjoh and Steurtjestaal (Van Rheedem 1995, 1999), where Dutch is claimed to be the lexifier language, and Malay and Javanese respectively are the substrate languages. To what extent do we see similar choices and different choices than in Singapore English? Are all functions transferred or only some? What functions can be transferred most easily? What makes transfer likely or unlikely? Ziegeler herself asks what the diachrony of Singapore English is.

The book raises questions that go beyond the study of language contact. For example: what is an error and what is a new variety? Moreover, it begs the question if we see the rise of new grammatical functions in other multilingual settings such as child bilingualism and heritage studies (see Moro 2016 for the rise of new grammatical structures in heritage languages and Matthews & Yip 2009 for innovative grammatical structures in child bilingualism). All in all it is a thought-provoking and inspiring book which deserves a central place in the discussion on language contact and multilingualism in general.

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Page Updated: 23-May-2016



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