From tag to question marker: Functional transfer and syntactic variation of "is it" in Colloquial Singapore English

Mie Hiramoto
National University of Singapore

Abstract

This talk examines the functional expansion and syntactic change of the tag-question marker *is it* in Colloquial Singapore English (CSE). Although superficially similar to the canonical English tag *isn't it*, previous work has shown *is it* behaves differently in CSE, appearing both clause-finally and clause-initially with pragmatic and interrogative functions (Gonzales et al., 2023). Building on this, we ask: (a) How is *is it* distributed across structural positions and discourse functions today? (b) Has this distribution shifted over the past two decades? (c) What sociolinguistic or contact-induced factors explain observed changes?

Data come from the Corpus of Singapore English Messages (CoSEM, version 1), a 3.6-million-word collection of WhatsApp chat logs from 2016–2019, complemented by a diachronic comparison with the spoken Grammar of Spoken Singapore English Corpus (GSSEC, 1998–1999) and a 500-token sample from the British National Corpus. All 1,902 CoSEM tokens of *is it* were coded for polarity, clause position, and discourse context, and analyzed using chi-square and Fisher's exact tests.

Results show invariant, non-polarity-observing tags represent 88% of *is it* tokens, while canonical polarity-observing tags, standard in British English, are minimal (12%). Notably, 20% of tokens appear clause-initially, a pattern unattested in British data. Diachronically, clause-initial *is it* increased significantly, from 7% in GSSEC to 20% in CoSEM ($p < 0.01$). We argue this expansion indicates both functional broadening (from confirmation-seeking tags to general yes-no question markers and affective pragmatic devices) and contact-induced change. Following Siegel's (2008) Functional Transfer framework, we propose that parallel tag constructions in Sinitic substrates (e.g., Mandarin *shi bu shi*) provided semantic and syntactic templates facilitating this reanalysis. Younger Chinese Singaporeans propagated the innovative clause-initial form, which then diffused among non-Chinese speakers through everyday interactions.

Overall, this study contributes to contact linguistics and Asia-Pacific variation studies in three ways: (1) documenting ongoing morpho-syntactic change in a multilingual, digitally-mediated community; (2) using corpus evidence to differentiate functional from diachronic variation; and (3) providing a systematic account of substrate influence on English varieties beyond phonology and lexicon. Ultimately, *is it* illustrates how language contact, youth identity, and computer-mediated discourse reshape Singapore English grammar.

Keywords

Colloquial Singapore English; tag question; yes-no question; CoSEM (Corpus of Singapore English Text Messages); substrate transfer