Charting modal change in Singapore English:
evidence from contemporary corpus and survey data

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The contact variety of English spoken in Singapore (SgE) has undergone significant grammatical restructuring, influenced by other languages spoken on the island, namely Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. One domain that has witnessed a distinctive development compared to inner-circle varieties of English is modality. At least two approaches have been proposed to explain SgE modality: the substratist and the contact-grammaticalization approaches. The substratist approach (Bao 2010) suggests that features from the lexifier language (English) may converge with equivalent features in the substratum language, adopting their functions. For example, the restriction to non-epistemic uses of *must* in SgE is attributed to the substratum influence of the Mandarin deontic particle *bìxū*, which has not yet grammaticalized to epistemic uses. The second approach explores modality through the lens of contact-grammaticalization theories (Heine and Kuteva 2005; Ziegeler 2014). Basile (2023) argues that some over-generalized uses of modal verbs can be explained by a recapitulation of earlier diachronic stages in the lexifier. The frequent non-epistemic use of *must* in present-day SgE can be seen as a replica of past dynamic/generic meanings of *must*, observed since Early Middle English times (Gregersen 2020).

These two approaches show that the influence of lexifier and substrate languages is crucial in assessing different contact phenomena. Nevertheless, past studies on the modal system of necessity and obligation in SgE (e.g. Bao 2010; Hansen 2018; Loureiro-Porto 2019; Basile 2023) have all been conducted on corpora, such as ICE, lacking metadata able to distinguish the substrate languages of their contributors. Importantly, the common production of a marked feature by different ethnic groups sharing different substrates would indeed pose a threat to the substratist approach.

Building on Basile (2023), the present talk re-explores the use of (semi-)modal constructions of necessity and obligation (i.e. *must*, HAVE *to*, (HAVE) *got to*, *gotta*, NEED *to*) in SgE by incorporating a sociolinguistic survey intended to elicit their production among participants belonging to different ethnicities (Chinese, Malay, Indian) and age groups (18-29, 30-49, 50+). Participants were asked to tell what they would say in a series of imaginary situations, such as (1) and to select the most natural modal constructions from given alternatives.

(1) Your daughter had a party yesterday and left the house in a mess! You need to receive guests in an hour. What would you say to your daughter to make her clean the house immediately?

Results show that ethnicity does *not* significantly affect the epistemic/non-epistemic distribution of *must*, challenging the substratist account. However, age correlates strongly with modal choice ($p < 0.001$), indicating an ongoing shift: *must* is declining, while *need to* is gaining prominence, confirming trends reported in earlier corpus studies (Hansen 2018; Loureiro-Porto 2019; Basile 2023, 2024).

Given the role of age and ethnicity in explaining grammatical variation, this talk also introduces the brand-new *YouTube Corpus of Singapore English Podcasts* (Coats et al., *forthcoming*), featuring transcribed, diarized speech from over 1,300 episodes by Singapore-based creators. This resource

offers robust empirical grounding for future research, with the potential to incorporate speaker metadata, and contributes to broader inquiries into areal norms and constructional variation in SgE.

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