Bridging corpus and survey data:
Ethnicity and age impact on Singapore English modals

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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 *bixu*, which has not yet grammaticalized to epistemic uses. The second approach explores modality through the lens of contact-grammaticalization theories (Heine and Kuteva 2005). Building on 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 paper 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, for the first time in the literature, 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?

Survey results reveal that ethnicity does not affect epistemic/non-epistemic *must* production, thus challenging Bao (2010) and supporting Basile (2023). Age exhibits, on the contrary, significant variance [$p < 0.001$]. Following an apparent-time approach (Labov 1963), the paper shows that the survey data confirm a declining trend for *must* and a sharp increase of *need to* in SgE (cf. also Hansen 2018, Loureiro-Porto 2019, and Basile 2023, 2024). The rise of NEED *to*, in particular, is presented as an effect of substrate reinforcement from a parallel construction in Mandarin.

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