

COPULA DELETION IN SINGAPORE ENGLISH

The distribution and behavior of the copula in Colloquial Singapore English (CSE) has been shrouded in mystery for some time. The copula is omitted in several environments in CSE; however, its omission is often described as ‘random’ or ‘optional’ in the literature. This characterization of the phenomena is not far off from the truth, for copula deletion in CSE *is* probabilistic; in other words, there is no one context where it is obligatory. I examine CSE copula deletion in light of Labov’s (1979) seminal work on copula deletion in Black English Vernacular (BEV) – based on the assumption that deletion is an extension of the process of copula contraction in an ordered set of phonological rules. I also examine the influence from Chinese on CSE copula deletion. Ho (1993) shows the similarities between Chinese and CSE in terms of copula constructions. However, the nature of the influence is not clearly stated; in this paper, I clearly refine the scope of transfer of properties from Chinese to CSE.

The copula is a universal concept in language and can be characterized functionally in several ways. I refute the hypothesis that the copula is semantically empty, and suggest that the copula is simply a feature carrier. However, it does not only carry features such as Tense, Number and Person; it also carries features such as Affirmation, Negation, Emphasis, Focus and Contrast.

We see that Chinese influence on CSE is responsible for transferring the property of Topic Prominence to CSE. Also, the function of the copula in Chinese to denote Emphasis, Focus and Contrast is transferred to CSE. The strongest evidence for this is Copula Floating in CSE, which is identical to what is found in Chinese. The copula function of being a morphological feature carrier is not present in Chinese; likewise, it is not always present in CSE. The copula’s behavior in CSE is not the result of simply mimicking either StdE, or BEV, or Chinese on the surface; instead, it is determined by the feature strengths of a set of universal copula functions. I will also show that a chiefly phonological account of copula deletion adopted by Labov runs into trouble with the CSE data.

The hypothesis that CSE strategies should straightforwardly follow that of its superstrate or substrate languages (English and Chinese) is misleading. CSE exhibits a different and unique strategy of copula deletion. Copula deletion is not something unique to CSE, nor should it always be a natural conclusion for language contact situations. Copula deletion is a probabilistic phenomenon in CSE because of the conflict between influence from the superstrate and the substrate, as well as natural variation over time in the language.