

Lee Kuan Yew at the Barbecue: When Social Enrichment Interacts with Propositional Content

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Social enrichment occurs when socially indexed linguistic variation is used to convey social information about the speaker. As [1] argues, this information is distinct from propositional content, though the mapping between linguistic variants and social properties often depends on the linguistic context. In this study, we consider a special case of context dependence in which this mapping is predicted to interact productively with the propositional content of the utterance. Specifically, in certain cases of dialect contact (i) the propositional interpretation can depend on which social properties are attributed to the speaker, and (ii) the potential for (propositional) miscommunication can influence how interlocutors coordinate regarding social enrichment.

Our starting point is Singapore English (SgE), which as an edge prominence language [2], does not use pitch accents to mark focus [3]. Consequently, object pronouns are prosodically prominent regardless of how they refer. This contrasts with stress accent varieties (e.g., American), in which pronouns can refer to the subject or object of the previous clause depending on whether they are accented. Crucially, SgE speakers have substantial contact with stress accent varieties. Listeners make limited use of pronoun accentuation to decide reference, and this tendency can be modulated by implicit cues to national identity [4]. Some speakers even modify their prosody towards stress accent varieties to mark a cultural affiliation or because of time abroad. A listener's decision about pronoun reference may therefore depend on which identity they attribute to the speaker.

Singaporeans are notorious style-shifters. A matched guise study [5] showed that the use of colloquial features (e.g., reduced morphological marking) is associated with solidarity, likely because those features index a shared Singaporean identity. Standard features, which are largely shared with non-Singaporean varieties, were associated with status. A close parallel can therefore be drawn between the use of (ING) in AmE to index competence or friendliness [1], and the use of standard versus colloquial features in SgE to index status or 'Singaporeanness' (solidarity). The key is that if interlocutors do not converge with respect to the latter, pronoun reference (and therefore propositional content) may not be successfully communicated.

Assuming that propositional content carries a high value relative to social properties, this has at least two important consequences for the type of analysis in [1]. First, it can affect the set of personae that constitute equilibria. Table 1 shows the payoff matrix from [1, Table 6] with personae replaced by Singaporean equivalents. In general, the persona {low, -Sing} is not a Nash equilibrium, but when propositional content is at stake, it is. Equations (1) and (2) show the expected utility profile for the use of verb morphology both without and with propositional content at stake. Crucially, the presence of this factor changes which form yields the highest expected utility. The interaction becomes more complex if the cost of propositional miscommunication is not arbitrarily high, or if the choice of prosodic patterns itself is treated as socially meaningful. Our initial results, however, clearly show that propositional content and social enrichment are not independent.

Table 1. Payoff structure for SgE context with values at odds. Personae are composed of STATUS (high/low) and SINGAPOREANNESS (+/- Sing). Dark grey: *mis*-coordination relative to STATUS (i.e., opposite choices). Light grey: *non*-coordination relative to STATUS (i.e., at least one party makes no choice). Nash equilibria: bold outline.

	{high, +Sing}	{high}	{+Sing}	{low, +Sing}	{high, -Sing}	{low, -Sing}	{low}	{-Sing}
{high, +Sing}	2.5, 1.875	2, 1.5	2, 1.5	1.5, 1.5	1.5, 1.5	1, 1.5	1, 1.5	1, 1.5
{high}	2, 2	2.5, 2.5	1.5, 2	1.5, 2	1.5, 2	1, 2	1, 2	1, 2
{+Sing}	2, 1	2, 1	2.5, 1.25	1.5, 1	1.5, 1	1, 1	1, 1	1, 1
{low, +Sing}	2, 1	2, 2	2, 1	1.875, 1.25	1.5, 2	1, 1.5	1, 1	1, 2
{high, -Sing}	2, 1.5	2, 1.5	2, 1.5	1.5, 1.5	1.875, 2.5	1, 1.5	1, 1.5	1, 1.5
{low, -Sing}	2, 1	2, 1	2, 1	1.5, 1	1.5, 1	1.25, 1.25	1, 1	1, 1
{low}	2, 1	2, 1	2, 1	1.5, 1	1.5, 1	1, 1	1.25, 1.25	1, 1
{-Sing}	2, 2	2, 2	2, 2	1.5, 2	1.5, 2	1, 2	1, 2	1.25, 2.5

Table 2. Hypothetical speaker beliefs (prior probabilities) regarding listener strategies for the verb morphology variable (MORPH) in Singapore English.

<i>Personae</i>	$\rho(+MORPH)$	$\rho(-MORPH)$
{High, +Sing}	0.2	0.5
{High, -Sing}	0.4	0
{Low, +Sing}	0	0.3
{Low, -Sing}	0.4	0.2
other	0	0

Equations 1. Expected utility for (MORPH) – propositional content not at stake.

$$(a) EU_S(+MORPH, \{high, +Sing\}, \varrho) = (0.2*2.5) + (0.4*1.5) + (0.4*1) = 1.5$$

$$(b) EU_S(-MORPH, \{high, +Sing\}, \varrho) = (0.5*2.5) + (0.3*1.5) + (0.2*1) = \mathbf{1.9}$$

Equations 2. Expected utility for (MORPH) – propositional content at stake (cost of propositional miscommunication = -10).

$$(a) EU_S(+MORPH, \{high, +Sing\}, \varrho) = (0.2*2.5) + (0.4*1.5) + (0.4*-9) = \mathbf{-2.5}$$

$$(b) EU_S(-MORPH, \{high, +Sing\}, \varrho) = (0.5*2.5) + (0.3*-8.5) + (0.2*-9) = -3.1$$

References

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