Invariant Tags in Asian Englishes: A Corpus-Based Approach

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1. Introduction

You are a university student, right? I went to see her yesterday, you know. Tags such as "right" and "you know" in English are called invariant tags. Invariant tags, as the name indicates, are tags that do not change their forms depending on the main clause to which they are attached (see, e.g. Bieber, 1999, p.210; Algeo, 2006, pp.302-303, Norrick, 1995; Stubbe and Holmes, 1995). In this study, an invariant tag is defined to have following traits: 1) Its form does not change, 2) It can be used to gain responses or feedback from the interlocutor, and 3) It adds to the propositional meaning of the utterance.

Columbus (2009) offered a detailed analysis of forms of invariant tags in British English, New Zealand English, Indian English, Singapore English, and Hong Kong English. Columbus (2010 a, b) then looked at functions of invariant tags in British English, New Zealand English, and Indian English. The present study aims to build on to Columbus (2009) and investigate invariant tags in four varieties of Asian English. An invariant tag can appear in any position of the utterance, but this study focuses on utterance-final invariant tags so that the data would be comparable with Columbus (2009). Specifically, the present study has two purposes: 1) To describe and compare the forms of invariant tags in Indian English, Singapore English, Hong Kong English, and Philippine English. 2) To describe and compare the use of invariant tags in the four varieties of Asian English.

2. Methodology

This study used the Hong Kong component (ICE-HK: Bolt & Bolton, 2006), the Philippines component (ICE-PHI: Bautisa, Lising, & Dayag, 2004), the Indian component (ICE-IND: Shastri & Leitner, 2002), and the Singapore component (ICE-SIN: Nihilani, Yibin, Pakir, & Ooi, 2002) of the International Corpus of English. The ICE corpora follow the common structure, and thus they are suitable for comparative studies across English varieties (see, Greenbaum, 1996).

First of all, it was necessary to identify invariant tags in the corpora. As this study built on to Columbus (2009), this study focused on utterance-final invariant tags in private dialogues. I first confirmed which of the invariant tags identified by Columbus (2009) appeared in the corpora as invariant tags which matched the definition used in the present study. I then manually analyzed three text files from S1A (spoken private dialogues) from in ICE-HK, ICE-IND, and ICE-SIN to see whether there were additional forms of invariant tags in the corpora. For ICE-PHI, 10 text files from S1A were manually analyzed because Philippine English had not been analyzed by Columbus (2009; 2010 a, b). I also included additional invariant tags in the analysis as I found them while looking for other invariant tags. AntConc (Anthony, 2011) was used for the search after the target forms were identified.

3. Results and Analysis

Table 1 shows the distribution of invariant tags across the corpora. The following invariant tags were identified in at least one of the corpora: accha, ah, ahn, ba, di ba, e, eh, ha, haan, hah, hor, huh, lah/la, leh, lor, mah, meh, na, naman, no, 'no, okay/OK, right, see, wah, yeah, yes, you know, and you see. The numbers in italics are cited from Columbus (2009).

As the table indicates, invariant tags can be classified into indigenous invariant tags and non-indigenous invariant tags. Those which derive from indigenous languages and thus unique to the variety are called indigenous tags. On the other

hand, those which are shared across the varieties with different indigenous languages are called non-indigenous invariant tags. Non-indigenous invariant tags are also used in native varieties of English (i.e. eh, huh, no, okay, right, see, yeah, yes, you know, you see; see e.g. Columbus 2009; 2010 a, b).

Table 1: Frequency of Invariant Tags

	IND		SIN		HK		PHI	
accha	2	0.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
ah	18	2.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
ahn	10	1.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
ba	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	5	0.9%
di ba	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	36	6.6%
e	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	43	7.9%
eh	0	0.0%	5	0.5%	1	0.4%	1	0.2%
ha	0	0.0%	23	2.5%	0	0.0%	45	8.2%
haan	6	0.9%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
hah	0	0.0%	6	0.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
hor	0	0.0%	26	2.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
huh	0	0.0%	20	2.2%	13	4.7%	25	4.6%
lah/la	0	0.0%	241	26.2%	14	5.1%	0	0.0%
leh	0	0.0%	26	2.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
lor	0	0.0%	83	9.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
mah	0	0.0%	11	1.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
meh	0	0.0%	9	1.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
na	109	16.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	25	4.6%
naman	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4	0.7%
no	237	36.1%	1	0.1%	5	1.8%	13	2.4%
'no	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	29	5.3%
okay/OK	12	1.8%	14	1.5%	24	8.7%	43	7.9%
right	12	1.8%	236	25.7%	110	39.7%	196	35.9%
see	2	0.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.2%
wah	0	0.0%	7	0.8%	5	1.8%	0	0.0%
yeah	60	9.1%	0	0.0%	24	8.7%	10	1.8%
yes	4	0.6%	0	0.0%	5	1.8%	0	0.0%
you know	158	24.0%	110	12.0%	70	25.3%	70	12.8%
you see	27	4.1%	101	11.0%	6	2.2%	0	0.0%
Total	657		919		277		546	

Some examples from each variety are provided below along with the function the invariant tag plays in the example. The markup symbols retained in the examples are "<,> short pause," "<[>…</[> overlapping string," and "<{>…</{> overlapping string set." The letter at the beginning of each line (text unit) indicates the speaker. Invariant tags in the examples are italicized.

3.1 Indian English

Among 657 invariant tags in ICE-IND, 22.1% are indigenous (accha, ah, ahn, haan, na) and 77.9% are non-indigenous. The most preferred invariant tag is no (237, 36.1%), followed by you know (158, 24.0%), na (109, 16.6%), and yeah (60, 9.1%).

(1)
B: But the facilities is also there *na* <,>
A: Yeah <,>
        [ICE-IND: S1A-054#139:1:B~ #140:1:A]
A and B already had a shared knowledge about the facilities of the hostel being discussed. "Na" here functioned as a facilitative tag as B tried to elicit A's agreement.

(2)
A: And all sorts of courses are also <{> <[> available </[>
B: <[> Very considerable </[> </{> strength *ahn* <,>
        [ICE-IND:S1A-063#159:1:A~#160:1:B]
B emphasized his comment by adding "ahn," at the same time expressing that he was impressed by what A had told him.

3.2 Singapore English

Among 919 invariant tags in ICE-SIN, 47.0% are indigenous (hah, hor, leh, lor, mah, meh, ha, lah, wah) and 53.0% are non-indigenous. Lah is the most preferred invariant tag (241, 26.2%), followed by right (236, 25.7%), you know (110, 12.0%), you see (101, 11.0%), and lor (83, 9.0%).

(3)
B: You can actually see the number of people inside the room
A: Oh
A: But the suite is just the sofa *lah*
B: Ah
        [ICE-SIN:S1A-014#294:1:B~#297:1:B]
This is an example of what Wong (2004) called the propositional use of "lah" (pp.768-770). This "lah" indicates that A was presenting information to B.

(4)
B: What what did they play
A: Their own music and other people's music *lor*
B: Ya some uh one night I saw rock band
B: Different different types uh
A: Yeah yeah

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A: Like those ones that I was playing on the CD that night *lor*

    [ICE-SIN:S1A-025#326:1:B~#331:1:A]

As Lim (2004) described (pp.122-123), "lor" indicates that the speaker thinks that the information should be obvious to the listener.

3.3 Hong Kong English

Among 277 invariant tags in ICE-HK, 6.9% are indigenous (la, wah) and 93.1% are non-indigenous. The most frequent invariant tag is right (110, 39.7%), followed by you know (70, 25.3%), okay (24, 8.7%), and yeah (24, 8.7%).

(5)

B: But the thing is I'm trying to divide them into groups but before that we have to give them instructions *right*

A: Yah

B tried to make sure that A and B are on the same page by asking for A's response by saying "right" at the end of her utterance.

    [ICE-HK:S1A-095#44:1:B~#45:1:A]

(6)

B: It's not suitable for us and we don't enjoy that that that dinner but this's not that's not cheap *you know*

A: Yeah it it's quite expensive in uh in Europe

    [ICE-HK:S1A-093#174:1:B~#175:1:A]

In this example, B tried to elicit A's agreement by adding "you know" at the end.

3.4 Philippine English

Among 546 invariant tags in ICE-PHI, 34.2% are indigenous (ba, di ba, e, naman, 'no, ha, na) and 65.8% are non-indigenous. Right (196, 35.9%) is the most frequent invariant tag, followed by you know (70, 12.8%), okay (43, 7.9%), and e (43, 7.9%).

(7)

B: Pass the first time we get it *okay*

A: No problem we won't fail the thesis and uhm Mr Largoza told us that we should avoid having our better halves

    [ICE-PHI:S1A-017#179:1:B~#180:1:A]

B put emphasis to his utterance by adding the invariant tag "okay". B also tried to elicit A's consent.

(8)

B: This is not the first time that it happened in De La Salle *di ba*

C: In Liberal Arts

A: I don't know

A: Several cases I guess but I cannot cannot remember a case

    [ICE-PHI:S1A-036#300:1:B~#303:1:A]

B was not sure whether her information was true, so he asked for confirmation by others by adding "di ba" at the end of his utterance.

4. Discussion

The frequency and distribution of invariant tags varies greatly between Asian Englishes (frequency: χ^2=353.905, df=3, p=.000). There are invariant tags which are shared across varieties (non-indigenous), and those which are directly derived from indigenous languages (indigenous). Each Asian English has certain invariant tags which are heavily used. Among non-indigenous tags, "you know" is used fairly frequently (over 10%) across the varieties. "Right" also appears very frequently (over 25%) except in Indian English.

Speakers of Singapore English use invariant tags most frequently and also use a wide variety of indigenous invariant tags. In fact, their most preferred invariant tag is "lah." On the other hand, speakers of Singapore English rarely use the invariant tag "yeah." Speakers of Philippine English also use indigenous invariant tags frequently although "right" and "you know" dominate. They rarely use the invariant tag "you see." Speakers of Hong Kong English do not use invariant tags nor use indigenous invariant tags as often as speakers of the other varieties of Asian Englishes. Speakers of Indian English only use a limited variety of indigenous invariant tags, yet they use one particular form, namely, "na" frequently. Another characteristic is that they do not use "right" as frequently as speakers of the other Asian Englishes. One possibility is that speakers of Indian English use "no" or "na" in the places where speakers of other varieties would use "right."

Indigenous invariant tags add subtle

attitudinal stance to the utterance, which non-indigenous invariant tags or tag questions cannot express. Accordingly, speakers are likely to choose one indigenous invariant tag over another invariant tag to convey the specific attitudinal stance they would like to convey. In addition, the choice of indigenous invariant tags over non-indigenous invariant tags seems to owe to the speaker's habit as well. The same speaker tends to use the same invariant tag repeatedly. Indigenous invariant tags can also mark ethnic identity and solidarity (see, e.g. Meyerhoff, 1994).

The range of main functions invariant tags can express seem to be common to the varieties, yet the preferred form to express that function differs between the varieties as with the case of the use of "no" and "na" in Indian English. Some invariant tags such as "right" seem to ask for feedback more strongly than other invariant tags such as "you know."

5. Conclusion

Speakers of Asian Englishes use a variety of invariant tags in conversations. Each Asian English has both non-indigenous and indigenous invariant tags, and certain invariant tags are preferred over others in each variety. The use of indigenous invariant tags is then one of the characteristics of speakers of Asian Englishes. By adding indigenous invariant tags to their utterance, speakers can tap into the meaning of indigenous tags and express subtle attitudinal stance which is otherwise difficult to express by non-indigenous English tags.

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