The cultural conceptualisation of obligation in Singapore English

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Abstract:
Cultural conceptualisations do not only influence the use of metaphors, but also the grammar of a variety. Singapore English shows a significantly higher use of modal expressions of obligation than British English, including a higher frequency of the modal verb must. This modal verb has been on the decline for the last decades in British English (e.g. Leech et al. 2009), a decline that has been explained by a general cultural change towards “more democratic” ways of speaking in Western societies (cf. Leech 2003: 237). This almost canonical explanation has also been mentioned in the context of non-Western varieties of English (e.g. Rajalahti, Parviainen & Klemola 2012, Loureiro-Porto 2013). I argue that this cultural explanation cannot and should not be transferred to varieties of English that have developed in a different cultural setting. Instead, differences in the cultural conceptualisation of mutual social obligations in Singapore should be recognised in order to understand the localised use of the modal verbs of obligation within that cultural setting. Markus & Kitayama’s (1991) comprehensive metastudy shows that individuals in Western cultures tend to construe themselves as independent from the group, while individuals in Eastern cultures tend to construe themselves as interdependent with the group. This difference in the construal of self may lead to very different conceptualisations of obligations in these cultures. While the expression of strong obligation towards an individual constitutes a marked case in Western societies, where the individual seeks to be free from the imposition of others, it seems to be less marked in societies with an interdependent construal of self, where expressions of strong obligation may be seen as strengthening the ties between individuals. This fundamental difference in the cultural conceptualisation of mutual social obligations may be at the heart of the different cultural scripts for asking people to do things in the Anglo and the Singaporean culture (Wong 2014: 172). In Anglo cultures, speakers are supposed to do something of their own volition and not out of obligation, whereas “it is unproblematic for people to do things out of obligation” (Wong 2014: 172) in Singapore. This may mean that the strong modal must is socially more acceptable for Singaporean speakers of English than for British speakers, accounting for its higher frequency. This analysis shows that a cultural linguistics perspective is indispensable in world Englishes in order to avoid a Western-biased analysis of non-Western varieties of English.

References:
Loureiro-Porto, Lucía 2013. '[T]he figure sixty forty seven forty five...': Modals of necessity in Hong Kong and Indian English. Paper presented at the ICAME 34, Santiago de Compostela.

