ENGLISH QUESTION FORMS USED BY YOUNG MALAYSIAN INDIANS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of question forms in Malaysian English (ME) by a group of young Malaysian Indians who are considered to be Dominant Speakers of English (DSE). Through the use of a structured questionnaire and a test, four question-types were studied: yes/no questions, wh questions, tag questions and indirect questions. The use of particles in the questions was also analysed. The findings suggest that non-standard forms of the questions were used in most of the question types except for wh questions. Test scores of the four question forms revealed that the subjects were able to identify and use the standard forms of wh questions and yes/no questions. Almost all the subjects were unable to produce standard forms of indirect questions. The findings therefore indicate that (1) speakers possess two systems of question forms in ME: non-standard and standard forms; (2) in most cases they are able to separate the two forms according to their appropriate contexts; (3) non-standard forms for tag questions and indirect questions have spilled over into standard usage. These findings can be used to show how standard and non-standard forms of questions are used in ME and to create awareness among users and teachers about appropriate use of language in context. This would make language learning more 'real' as it acknowledges the students' everyday use of English which is associated with notions of identity, intimacy and solidarity while making them aware of the use of standard forms in more formal written contexts.

Introduction

Malaysian English (ME) is a generic term that comprises all the sub-varieties of English used in Malaysia, ranging from the more *acrolectal* to the *basilectal* form of English (Baskaran, 1994). The former is generally used in more formal contexts including classroom contexts. On the other hand, the *mesolectal* variety is commonly used in informal contexts such as everyday conversations with family and friends

(Baskaran, 1994; Gaudart, 2000; Pillai, 2006). It is a sub-variety also referred to as Colloquial Malaysian English (CME) (Pillai & Fauziah, 2006) or Manglish (Lee, 1998). CME is a non-standard variety and one of the characteristics of this variety is that it is often used to mark camaraderie and solidarity and also to construct ethnic, cultural and social identity. Even Malaysians who are fluent in English have been found to use this sub-variety for informal interactions (Benson, 1990). However, this is the sub-variety of English which is generally considered inappropriate in classrooms or in formal situations. There is also an obvious tension between the use of the more localised CME and the more acrolectal variety of English, with many seeing these varieties as being at two ends of a binary scale rather than as context-sensitive interchangeable varieties (see letters to the newspapers e.g. "Manglish-English dilemma", 2007; "Manglish makes us Malaysian lah", 2009; "The case for Manglish", 1999; "What I can't stand", 2007; "What's there to boast when we're speaking Manglish?", 2009; "Why speak Manglish", 2007; "Speak proper English please", 2008). However, there is a dearth of empirical studies on the use of these two sub-varieties in different contexts by the same speakers.

The present study is an attempt to fill in this research gap, and also to look at the juxtaposition of standard and non-standard forms in the construction of questions. It examines the use of standard and non-standard question forms in Malaysian English (ME) by a group of young Malaysian Indians who are considered to be Dominant Speakers of English (DSE). Four question-types were examined in both informal and formal contexts: *yes/no* questions, *wh* questions, tag questions and indirect questions.

English as a Dominant Language

English in Malaysia is used at different levels with different degrees of proficiency by different people. In general, most Malaysians are at least bilingual if not multilingual, and in the urban areas of Malaysia there are families who are bilingual or trilingual with, for example English and Bahasa Malaysia and their mother tongue (MT) in their repertoire (Gaudart, 1987). There also exists a small group of mostly Eurasians (in the Malaysian context, Eurasians generally refer to Malaysians with Portuguese and Dutch ancestry - see Sta Maria, 1982), Chinese and Indians and some Malays in the urban areas that use English at home (Asmah, 1991; Pillai & Khan, In Press). For this group of people, English may be the first language they acquired growing up making English their L1. For such groups of people, that is for those who have 'lost' the use of their ancestral language, the use of English can "transcend" ethnicity (Gaudart, 1995, p. 26) English dominates almost all aspects of their communication. They speak English at home and at work with friends and

family, in formal and informal situations and are most comfortable and confident using English. Thus, for them, English can be considered their L1 based on the premise that it was the main language they were exposed to since birth or the language that has predominantly been used since they were young (Tay, 1993).

This means that L1 speakers of English would consist of at least these two groups: those residing in Malaysia but who have their origins in ENL countries such as expatriates, Eurasians and those of mixed parentage while the second group would consist of Malaysian Malays, Chinese and Indians for whom English is the first language they acquired. In addition, there are also those who may have acquired their mother tongue first (MT) but subsequently began to increasingly use English, hence making it their dominant language. Both the L1 speakers of English and those who use English more than their MT or any other language can be considered as Dominant Users of English (DSE). Such users therefore use English most of the time or in most situations, and are most comfortable using English even if they are able to use other languages.

The multi-cultural background of this country further contributes to the strains of ME, which is influenced by factors like the users' MT, the socio-economic and geographical background of the users (Kachru, 1992; Platt et al., 1984). Baskaran (1994) notes that at every social level and for every purpose there is a particular variety of ME that is used. Thus, there is a range of sub-varieties on a lectal cline and there is also mobility among these sociolects defined by Baskaran (1994), that is, users are able to move up or downshift along the continuum depending on whether they have the variety in their linguistic repertoire.

The Use of English among the Malaysian Indian Community

Studies on language shift in Malaysia point towards a shift from the ancestral languages or MT to English. Research on language shift in different communities in Malaysia, such as the Tamils (David & Ibtisam, 2002), the Malayalees (Govindasamy & Nambiar, 2003), Malaysians of Portuguese descent (David & Faridah, 1999) and the Sindhis (David, 1996), all show a trend towards MT being substituted with English. The home language of many of these L1 speakers can be expected to be the more mesolectal variety of ME to mirror the informality and intimacy of home discourse (Pillai, 2006). Thus, although English is their L1 or dominant language, the variety used at home may not be the standard variety, which is consistent with what takes place in ENL contexts (Trudgill, 1999). This phenomenon, however, may be affected by users' socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

This group, that is, the DSE, may possess more than one sub-variety of ME and is able to move along the lectal cline of English as appropriate to particular contexts. Among younger DSE, however, the use of the more colloquial variety of ME or CME may be dominant given that this is the variety they probably use at home and among peers. This does not in any way suggest that CME is inferior or deficient. Instead it would be useful to raise awareness of the differences in the linguistic features and appropriateness of use in different situations.

The Present Study

Previous research on ME tended to focus on colloquial usage of ME, often from a deficit point of view. The overlapping use of colloquial and standard forms has not been given much attention despite the fact that the former can find their way into standard usage (Su, 2006). From a sociolinguistic point of view it is also pertinent to examine the use of different sub-varieties according to context of use. Thus, this research aims to provide empirical evidence for the use of standard and non-standard use of English by DSE.

In an attempt to examine the extent to which non-standard forms are used by DSE, this study focuses on question forms used by young Malaysian DSE of South Indian origin in the informal domain to ascertain how systematic these patterns are in ME. Based on findings from previous studies (e.g. Baskaran, 2005; Pillai, 2006), it is assumed that the variety used by the DSEs will exhibit systematic patterns and show evidence of at least two sub-varieties of English at play, that is, the colloquial and standard varieties of ME. In order to examine this phenomenon, this study will focus on question forms. The objectives of this study are to examine the type of structures used to form questions and their patterns of use. This study also sets out to examine the extent to which the speakers are able to use standard and non-standard forms in two different contexts: informal and formal. In particular, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What types of structures are used to form questions by the speakers?
2. What patterns emerge in the use of the different structures by the speakers?
3. To what extent are the DSE able to use the standard forms of questions?

The findings from this study will provide empirical evidence about how questions are formed in ME and more specifically, the extent to which non-standard forms are used, and whether speakers are aware of such usage. Such awareness is useful for speakers as even ESL teachers are likely to use non-standard forms outside the classroom. (Bamgbose, 1992). Further, teachers can highlight the

differences between standard and non-standard forms and make the students aware of the differences and appropriate use of the different forms.

Methodology

Subjects

A preliminary questionnaire was used to obtain information on the potential subjects' use of language and their socio-economic background. Based on the information that was given, a total of 28 subjects were selected based on the following criteria:

- Dominant Users of English
  English as L1 (must have acquired English before the age of 5) and English is the dominant language at home and in social contexts.
- English Language Proficiency
  Proficient in English (obtained A's in all the standardised English examinations taken throughout primary and secondary school education).
- Ethnicity
  South Indian extraction (to ensure similar MT linguistic influences if this was used at home).
- Age
  15-18 years of age.
- Educational Background

  From Malay medium schools throughout primary and secondary school.
- Socio-economic Background
  From higher middle-income families.
- Location of Home and School
  Live in the same urban area in Klang, Selangor and attended the same school.

Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was used to elicit language used in an informal context based on the assumption that the subjects use their informal variety in this context. This method is a convenient way to collect target structures by getting subjects to respond to a situation or stimulus. Although such means of elicitation does not capture actual language use (as opposed to recording naturalistic data), it is based on the assumption that subjects will provide responses that would mirror their actual language use (e.g. Kreutel, 2007; Lee & Ziegeler, 2006).

In the present study, the subjects were not given the questionnaires to fill. Instead, the questions were used as a guide to elicit responses from the subjects (Govindan, 2008). The researcher had the option of ticking the expected responses or noting down novel responses in the questionnaire.

Eight situations were identified in the questionnaire and they were as follows:

A. Basic questions in a classroom (time, homework)
B. Asking about an exam/test
C. Asking about a friend or another person
D. Asking about a new boy/girl in class
E. Asking about food/recess
F. Asking about a teacher
G. Asking about tuition
H. Asking about the purchase of a book.

An example from situation E in the structured questionnaire is a conversation with a friend regarding food and the canteen:

E5. Your friend was late for school today and looks hungry. You think he has not taken his breakfast. Confirm this with him.

The subjects were told that *friend* in this context refers to a good friend from the same age group, and is someone with a similar language and social background as themselves. The expected responses were as follows, and the researcher ticked the response given by the subject or added other responses produced by the subjects in the questionnaire as shown in the example below. The aim of providing the expected responses was to make it easier for the researcher to note down the subjects' responses.

a. *You not yet have your breakfast right?*
b. *You not yet eat your breakfast, correct or not.*
c. *You haven't had your breakfast yet, have you?*
d. *Others* _____

There were six question types in each situation and subjects were prompted to use them:

1. *'wh'* questions
2. *yes/no* questions beginning with *is/are*
3. *yes/no* questions beginning with *has/have*
4. positive tag questions
5. negative tag questions
6. questions in reported speech

Another aim of the research was to examine if the subjects were able to use standard forms of the questions in a more formal context. A written test on the use of question forms was used based on the assumption that it represents a context in which the use of the standard form of English is more appropriate. The test comprised four sections:

Section 1 consisted of six *yes/no* questions where subjects had to choose between the standard and non-standard forms.

Section 2 consisted of ten phrases, five positive and negative tag questions.

Section 3 required the subjects to form *wh* questions.

Section 4 required the subjects to change direct questions into indirect forms.

Results – Informal Context

Wh interrogatives

In total, 62% of the responses were acceptable as standard forms of *wh* questions. Responses that were deemed to be non-standard forms included those that had ellipsis of the auxiliary (73 %), non-fronted position of the *wh* forms (16%) and the wrong use of tenses (11%). Examples of these responses are as follows:

1. Ellipsis of the auxiliary
    e.g.   *Where she going?*
2. The '*wh*' form is not fronted
    e.g.   *She is going where?*
3. Wrong use of tense
    e.g.   *Where did she went?*

The standard form will have the *wh* form in the initial position with the subject and

auxiliary inverted. However, responses with the auxiliary omitted and the verb used in the past tense were found. One such example is as follows:

```
WH        S        V              PP
|         |        |              ┬
|         |        |        _____|_____
What      you      ate       for    recess?
```

instead of

```
WH      AUX    S        V          NP
|        |     |        |          ┬
|        |     |        |     _____|_____
What    did    you      eat     for   recess?
```

The auxiliary in the example given above is omitted. The auxiliary *did* should be followed by a verb in the present tense. However, as the auxiliary is not used, the speaker used the past tense form of the word *eat* instead. Other examples are as follows (the standard form is shown in parenthesis):

F1   *What you all did for Bio?*
        (What <u>did</u> all of you <u>do</u> during Bio?)
H1   *Where you got it from?*
        (Where <u>did</u> you <u>get</u> it?)

In other responses, ellipsis of the auxiliary occurred with the use of the progressive form of the verb, such as in the following examples from situation G1:

Wh + ing verb form

What you doing this afternoon?
(What <u>are</u> you doing this afternoon?)
What you going to do later?
(What <u>are</u> you going to do later?)
What you doing after school today?
(What <u>are</u> you doing after school today?)

Some responses were considered non-standard *wh* questions as these structures did not have the *wh* form in initiall position. All these responses were given for situation D1:

> *That boy is from which school, eh?*
> *That boy is from which school, huh?*
> (Which school is that boy from?)
> *He came from which school?*
> (Which school did he come from?)
> *He from which school, ah?*
> (Which school is he from?)

Such word order changes in the noun phrase, auxiliary inversion in questions and omission of the subjects and pronouns have also been found in other varieties of English (e.g. Bamiro, 1995; Cane, 1994; Wade, 2007).

Three of these responses used the particles *eh*, *huh* and *ah*. All responses end with a rising intonation (based on auditory impression) indicating to the hearer that the speaker is asking a question. Thus, the combination of the use of a sentence with an internal *wh* form, the use of the sentence with a final particle, and the use of rising intonation appear to work in tandem to signal that these utterances are meant to be questions.

Other utterances that were considered non-standard were those with the past tense form of the verb in the question form, such as illustrated in the following examples:

> E1 *What did you bought for recess?*
>   (What did you buy for recess?)
> F1 *What did Pn. May* taught today?*
>   (What did Pn. May teach today?) [*all names have been changed]
> H1 *Where did you bought the book?*
>   (Where did you buy the book?)

This particular non-standard form was produced by the same subject in different situations. Of the eight *wh* questions given, only these three questions required the use of the auxiliary *did*. Thus, it is possible that this particular subject may not know how to construct this question type in the standard form.

In one response, there was ellipsis of the *wh* form and the copula resulting in the utterance being only the subject and the hearer's name. This abbreviated form is common in informal or casual speech, even among native speakers:

> A1 *Raja, time?*
>   (Raja, what is the time?)

In some cases, a *wh* question form, was tagged with non-lexical particles such as *ah, huh* and *eh*, as illustrated in the following examples:

A1	What's the time, **eh**?
B1	What topic's coming out, **eh**?
C1	What's her name, **eh**?
D1	Which school is that boy from, **eh**?
G1	What's your plans **eh**, after school today?

In example G1, the particle *eh* occurs before the prepositional phrase. The question *What's your plans?* can actually stand as a question by itself while the prepositional phrase *after school today* provides additional information. Other particles that were used included *ah* and *huh*:

A1	What's the time **ah**?
D1	Which school is he from, **huh**?
E1	What you bought for recess, **ah**?
G1	What is your plans after school today, **ah**?

In total, 35% of standard *wh* question forms were tagged by particles. However, the use of particles was more prevalent in the non-standard forms of the *wh* question, with almost half of them (49%) being tagged with particles. In these non-standard structures that have particles, 76% were tagged with the particle *eh*.

Yes/No Interrogatives Beginning with Is/Are.

The purpose of these questions is to enquire and not to seek confirmation or to express disbelief. As *yes/no* questions in the negative form may have other connotations (Leech and Svartvik, 1986), only positive questions were asked.

A total of 209 responses were analysed for this type of question. The results show that just over half of the responses (54%) were in the standard form while the rest (46%) were constructed using non-standard forms of *yes/no* questions. The non-standard forms were characterised by structures where the subject and verb were not inversed (45%), ellipsis of the copula verb (34%) or pro-drop with ellipsis of the copula (21%). Examples of non-inversion of subject and verb are as follows:

B2	The test is hard, *ah*?
C2	You told her already, *ah*?
D2	He is from ACS, *ah*?
E2	The canteen's open*, ah*?
F2	He is good, *ah*?
H2	The book is expensive?

A *yes/no* question was also considered as non-standard when there is ellipsis of the copula verb (e.g. *the canteen open today ah?*). There were also cases where there was also a missing subject, such as in the following example:

	Aux	Pro	O	Mod	(Par)
A2.	F	F	*8 o'clock*	*already*	***ah?***
	(Is)	(it)			
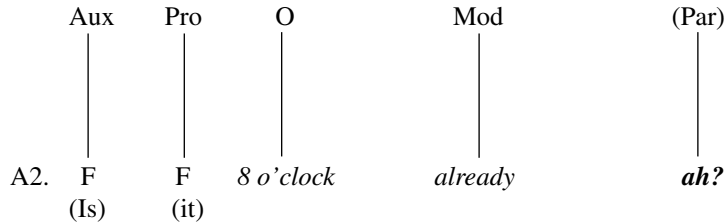
Particles were used more frequently with non-standard forms of *yes/no* questions (97% compared to 24% for standard forms) with the most commonly used particle in both forms being *ah* (88%). This suggests that the formation of non-standard *yes/no* questions beginning with *is/are* is associated with the use of particles. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that the non-standard structures tend to be in the declarative form and as such the particle enables the hearer to recognise the utterance as a question.

Yes/No Questions Beginning with Has/Have

The purpose of a question beginning with *has/have* is to inquire. It is quite similar to questions beginning with *do/does/did.* However, grammatically when the words 'yet' or 'already' are in the question posed, the questions formed should begin with *has/have*. Similarly, the present perfect tense should be used when enquiring about something in the recent indefinite past (Leech and Svartvik, 1986).

A total of 38 (17%) of the responses in this study began with *did* (with and without ellipsis of this auxiliary) as opposed to the auxiliary *have*. Thus, these responses were omitted because the purpose of this section of the research was to determine the structures of *yes/no* questions beginning with *has/have*. While explaining the situations to the subjects, the researcher used the words *already* and *yet* but these subjects still responded using the auxiliary *did* in the frontal position. Perhaps for some of these subjects there was no difference in meaning between the uses of *did* and *have.* This is already happening in some Englishes such as American English (Biber et al., 1999).

The results for this section show that 38% used standard forms of the question while 62% used non-standard forms. Most of the non-standard forms were characterised by omission of the auxiliary verb (74%), the wrong use of tenses (17%) and pro-drop with ellipsis (9%). Unlike *yes/no* questions there were no

instances of non-inversion of the subject and the auxiliary verb.

Similar to *yes/no* questions beginning with *is/are*, omission of the auxiliary verb *has/have* were common in non-standard forms beginning with *has/have*. Examples include:

    B3.   *You sat for the exam already?*
            (Have you sat for the exam?)
    D3.   *Dey, you talked to him already?*
            You talked to him already?
            (Have you talked to him already?)
    E3.   *You had your breakfast today?*
            (Have you had your breakfast today?)
    G3.   *You finished your BM tuition homework?*
            (Have you finished your BM tuition homework?)
    H3.   *You bought the book Pn. Minah asked to buy?*
            (Have you bought the book Pn Minah asked to buy?)

There were also responses where the auxiliary and the pronoun were omitted such as in the following responses:

    A3.   *Finished your homework already?*
            (Have you finished your homework already?)
    B3.   *Finished the exam already?*
            *(*Have you finished the exam already?)
    E3.   *Had your breakfast already?*
            Had your breakfast?
            (Have you had your breakfast?)

The incorrect use of the verb tense generally involved the use of the simple past rather than the past participle form of the verb. This was noticeable, predictably, with irregular verbs, where, since *have/has* is dropped, the latter tends not to be used as illustrated in the following responses.

    F3   *You **saw** Puan Nurul, ah?*
          (Have you seen Puan Nurul?)
    B3   *You **sit** for the exam already?*
          (Have you sat for the exam already?)
    D3   *You **talk** to him already?*
          (Have you talked to him?)

Only 10% of the standard forms used a particle whereas particles were frequently used with non-standard forms. There were three particles used: *ah,*

or not and *or what*. The particle *or not* could be the influence of spoken *Bahasa Malaysia* where this strategy is commonly used to enable the hearer to recognise a question form:

> *Sudah   beritahu   dia   **ke   tidak**?*
> *Already   told   her   **or   not**?*

Tag Questions

The purpose of a tag question is to confirm a doubt or a belief. For example if one says, *"You are happy, aren't you?"* the initial assumption is that the hearer is happy and the purpose of this question is to seek confirmation. The positive statement warrants a negative tag and vice versa. The typical structure for negative tags produced by the respondents was to substitute the tag with *right* or its equivalent (79%).

> A4.   *You finished your homework, **right**?*
> C4.   *They are Susan and Rachel, **right**?*
> E4.   *You bought nasi lemak, **right**?*

Twenty percent of the responses used other particles or phrases in place of the tag. Examples include the following responses:

> A4.   *Have you finished your homework **or not**?*
> B4.   *Was the test easy, **ah**?*
> E4.   *Is that food you bought nasi lemak, **ah**?*
> F4   *He scolded you **isn't it**?*

For positive tags, only two responses were considered as standard forms while 70% of the responses used the word *right* at the end of the statement similar to the phenomenon observed for negative tags. Among the responses were as follows:

> C5.   *That's not Devi, **right**?*
> D5.   *He doesn't mix well, **right**?*
> F5.   *Pn. Melina is not in school today, **right**?*
> H5.   *Not yet finish your work, **right**?*

A total of 29% of the responses used other lexical and non-lexical particles in place of the tag. These include the following responses:

> A5.   You haven't finished your homework **or what**?
> B5.   The test was not easy **ah**?
> D5.   He doesn't mix well **eh**?
> E5.   Not yet eat **ah**?

F5.   Pn Melina is not in school today **or what**?
G5.   You didn't have your breakfast **or not**?
H5.   You haven't finished your work, **correct or not**?

Questions in Indirect Speech

When forming questions in indirect speech, the position of the auxiliary and the subject needs to be inverted. However, the responses indicate that this was not a common phenomenon among the subjects. Only 5% of the 224 responses used the standard structure to form indirect questions. In most of the responses (94%), the subject and the verb were not inverted thus, retaining the declarative form as shown in the following examples:

A6.   *He asked me **why is Wong's working so different**.*
C6.   *He asked me **who is that girl**.*
D6.   *He asked me **who is Ooi's brother**.*
E6.   *He asked me if I knew **when is the recess**.*
F6   *He asked me **where is the English Society meeting today**.*
G6   *He asked me if I know **why was Tan late for tuition yesterday**.*
H6   *He asked me **where is the shop**.*

The initial question structure in the direct form is retained probably due to the process of simplification. Further, the meaning of the question is not altered and thus, the message is understood. This is in contrast to direct *wh* questions where the subjects frequently used the standard form. In the indirect form, the inversion of the subject and the auxiliary verb did not take place resulting in the use of non-standard forms. It is also interesting to note that particles were not used in any of the indirect questions produced by the respondents whereas they were employed in direct questions.

Results: Formal Context

It is assumed that the more standard or acrolectal variety will be used in a test situation compared to, for example, informal conversation among friends. Based on this assumption a test was conducted to identify the subjects' highest variety. Table 1 shows the percentage of standard forms used in the verbal responses and the test.

Table: Comparison of Standard Responses to the Structured
Questionnaire and in the Written Test

Type of Questions	(Structured Questions) Percentage of standard verbal response (%)	(Written Test) Percentage of standard written response (%)
Wh forms	62	98
Yes/no questions	46	99
Tag questions	1	73
Indirect questions	5	18

As can be discerned in Table 1, nearly all the subjects were able to use the standard form of *wh* questions in the test. The subjects' scores in Section 3 of the test, which was on the use of *wh* questions, show that the subjects were able to construct standard forms of these questions. The percentage is much higher than their use of standard forms in the verbal responses (see Table 1). Thus, it is possible that the subjects were downshifting when using the non-standard forms of *wh* questions in the informal context. The ability to distinguish between the use of standard and non-standard forms of *wh* questions by the subjects becomes more evident from their non-usage of particles in the written test.

Similar to *wh* questions, the subjects had no problems using the standard form of *yes/no* questions with nearly all of the responses being in the standard form (compared to 46 % in the informal context). The percentage of use for standard forms declines for tag questions, where 73% of the positive and negative tags used by the subjects were in the standard form. The non-standard forms were characterised by the use of positive tags with positive statements and negative tags with negative statements, and use of the word *right* in place of the tag. Nevertheless, the percentage of standard forms of tag questions is still higher in the test compared to the percentage in the informal context (see Table 1).

The separation between the use of standard and non-standard forms was not as apparent for indirect questions. In this section of the test, only 18% of the responses were in the standard form. This was the lowest score in all the sections tested. All the non-standard forms in this section were due to the non-inversion of the subject and the auxiliary verb. Only one subject obtained a 100% score while 15 of them used non-standard forms for all their responses. Some of the examples from the test responses are as follows:

1. *Peter asked me how old am I?*
2. *Peter asked me where was I going?*
3. *Peter asked me who was I talking to?*

4. *Peter asked me when is the due date for the book?*
5. *Peter asked why are the questions so difficult?*

The low percentages of the standard form in indirect questions in both the formal and informal contexts (see Table 1) may indicate that the use of non-standard forms are more prevalent in this form of questions. Perhaps there may be only one system of rules operating rather than two (the standard and the non-standard) for this question type resulting in one form dominating in both contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the subjects used both non-standard and standard forms of the four types of questions examined. The findings, therefore, reveal that there are two systems for questions in ME: standard and non-standard forms for the different types of questions examined. Based on the literature on ME (e.g. Baskaran, 1994), the assumption would be that the non-standard forms would be used in informal contexts while the standard forms would be used in more formal ones. To a certain extent, this assumption appears to be true as in most question types, non-standard forms were used in informal context, as elicited through the structured questionnaire. In other words, more standard forms were used in the written context (see Table 1). The use of particles associated with colloquial use was also confined to the informal context, never appearing in the formal written context represented by the test.

Therefore, for the subjects in this study who are categorised as DSE, there is an indication that they do possess two systems, which they can select from according to the context of use. While this system may not be stable at this point in time perhaps due to their predominantly more casual use of English, the implication is that they are able to move up and down the lectal cline, which is to their advantage as language users. This is because they generally possess the acrolectal form associated with power (e.g. enhancing their opportunities to obtain jobs), as well as the mesolectal form associated with solidarity, intimacy and identity.

As mentioned previously, this is not to say that they will always use the non-standard form in a particular context but they would more likely use the non-standard in informal speaking contexts and the standard forms in a more formal context like a test. In fact, this system does not seem to apply to all question forms. Instead it is more distinct with *wh* questions, *yes/no* questions, and tag questions as evidenced from the test results. The subjects were able to use the standard forms for the test on *yes/no* questions and *wh* questions and this suggests that the DSE are able to use the standard forms if they deem it necessary for these question types.

This could be because the DSE are more fluent speakers of English.

However, with indirect questions the system is more blurred, and not as distinct as the other three question forms. Unlike the three other question forms, there was more use of non-standard forms in contexts where one would expect the standard forms to be used. Being DSE, it is more likely that the subjects would use standard forms in the test situations but a high incidence of non-standard indirect question forms in the test indicate that they may be unable to use these standard forms for such questions. Thus, the interrogative word order is maintained in indirect questions, which is common in other Englishes as well (Sridhar, 1992; Wade, 2007). This is probably due to the simplification process where it is simpler to maintain the direct interrogative structure especially as the meaning is not compromised.

Based on the findings of this study, the current systems for question forms for the DSE can be represented as in Figure 1.
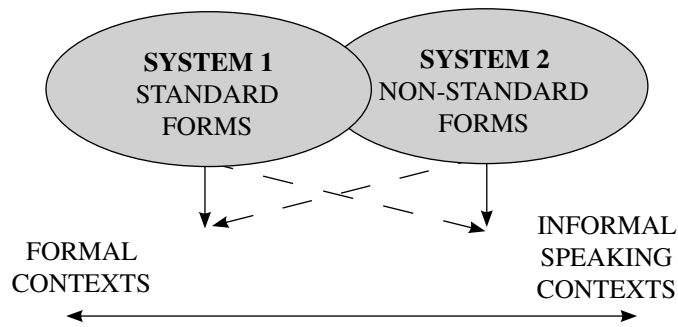

Figure 1: Two Systems for Question Forms in ME

Figure 1 illustrates the two systems that appear to be operating for DSE, that is, one for more informal contexts (e.g. casual speaking context) and the other for more formal one (e.g. a language test). Systems here refer to the possible structures to form questions in each context. The dotted lines indicate that there are occasions where structures characteristic of one system may be more frequently used in a context not normally associated with this system (e.g. standard forms in informal contexts and vice versa). The overlapping oval shapes also represent this phenomenon.

Concluding Remarks

Awareness that Malaysian speakers can switch from more colloquial to standard forms of English (provided they have these sub-varieties in their linguistic

repertoire) helps to shake-off stereotypical views about ME (that is, it does not equal the colloquial variety), and helps to shape more realistic views about notions of correctness and appropriate use of language. Such awareness can provide some form of assurance to speakers that the English that they speak is not necessarily the *wrong* kind of English or *bad* English. It is also of use to teachers of English who can use knowledge of the different sub-varieties to make their students aware of the appropriate use of language. Ultimately, the teacher's aim should be to ensure that while learners, such as the DSE, may already be able to use colloquial ME, they should also be empowered with the standard variety so that they are able to move along the lectal cline more effectively. This is necessary to ensure that learners are not disadvantaged by their lack of ability to use a standard form of English when they are pursuing higher education or seeking employment.

This study, being limited to a small group of young Malaysians of South Indian descent who use English as their dominant language, does not claim to generalise the findings to other Malaysians. It does, however, provide preliminary findings about the possibility of at least two systems operating for some users: standard and non-standard forms and shows particular patterns of use pertaining to the use of question forms in Malaysian English in two different contexts of use.

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