

CHAPTER 4

Grammatical Simplification

This section provides an analysis of grammatical or structural innovations in Maniam's works based on Wong's discussion of *Simplification Features in the Structure of Colloquial Malaysian English*¹. According to Wong, simplification involves the adaptation of complex linguistic systems of the standard, formal, native-speaker variety of English in order to facilitate communication. She states that 'the process of simplification may ... be better viewed as a multi-faceted phenomenon, with at least five aspects or angles', namely: *overgeneralization* (4.1), *omission* (4.2), *reduction* (4.3), *substitution* (4.4), and *restructuring* (4.5). (definitions are given below).

Textual analysis of the grammatical or structural innovations in the dialogue of Maniam's works has revealed that they fall into Wong's five categories; examples are given accordingly. It should be noted that examples may fall into more than one category. Examples are taken primarily from *The Return*, as this novel contains large sections of dialogue which represent a wide range of Malaysian sociolects and ethnolects. *In a Far Country* also contains large sections of dialogue, but as much of this consists of the exchanges between the narrator, Sivasurian and Zulkifli, it will be used mostly in the next chapter to illustrate discoursal or stylistic creativity. Some examples are also taken from *Ratnamuni*, *The Third Child* and from the short story *Mala*.

4.1 *Overgeneralization*

In second language acquisition, the learner masters general grammatical rules before considering the exceptions to these rules. However, as English in the Outer Circle may have a restricted range of functions, speakers are often more

concerned with achieving communication rather than with grammatical accuracy and consequently overgeneralization occurs. Wong states that:

... for many second and foreign language learners, whose need for the language may be merely instrumental, many of these generalizations prematurely acquire the status of *invariable rules*, reinforced by the fact that adequate communication results are nevertheless still obtained. (Emphasis is mine.)

Wong illustrates overgeneralization with reference to two linguistic features, inflection of uncountable nouns to form the plural, and word order (i.e. the speaker masters the general rule of subject-verb-object and applies it unflinchingly). While very few instances of the former are evident in Maniam's works², the latter regularly occurs, particularly in the area of questions, which would normally require subject-verb inversion. As the following examples show, basilectal Malaysian English retains the subject-verb word order, omitting the auxiliary 'do' (this overlaps with *omission*). As in Tamil, the rising intonation at the end of the sentences marks them as questions:

'You want to check the clothes?' I said. (*The Return*, p39)

Here this form is appropriate in the language of Ravi the schoolboy to address the wife of hospital superintendent, Menon. Also, this exchange occurs *before* Ravi completes his English education. Ravi's father, an *uneducated* Indian worker also uses this speech form:

'I want some money to buy a book,' I (Ravi) said one evening.

'You think money grows on trees?' he growled. (p81).

Ravi's father is seen addressing Karupi:

"You want me to skin you?" my father said, turning on Karupi. (p88)

Interestingly, the educated Ravi continues to use this speech form when addressing his family:

"You want me to stop going to school?" I said. (p102)

In addition, the placing of adverbials at the beginning of a sentence or clause lends dialogue a distinct Malaysian English flavor. The following example is taken from the hospital workers' dialogue in *The Return*:

"Ratnam," he said, "Go quickly to bed. The Ayah is angry with you." (p68).

The placing of 'then' in sentence-initial position gives Naina's speech a dramatic, non-native feel:

"Then it was that I said the words that struck the man in his face," my father said, recounting the episode to Pather. (p127)

The next example, taken from an exchange between Ravi and his Tamil playmates, is significant in that it demonstrates *language choice* in colonial Malaya. Ravi reveals an awareness of the need to change lect; standard English would not be appropriate for addressing his playmates, who share his social status:

"Long time you no catch us," one of them said.

The language grated on my ear - it was the English we lapsed into after school hours.

"Long time I no play," I said, reluctantly. (p42)

As standard English or the acrolectal Malaysian variety of English are an indicator of social status and authority, the Tamil children in *The Return* are actively encouraged to use the basilectal variety:

... I remember my anxiety to speak English again ... The English we spoke in the long verandah of the houses was a defiant version of English, mingled with and sounding very Tamil. The minute we broke into "pure" English, we were scolded.

"You'll have Ayah's anger on our heads!" (pp75-76)

In *The Third Child*, Maniam has one of his characters, a schoolteacher named Robert, comment on the basilectal English of the main character Velu. This example also reveals that individuals of Velu's social status would be *expected* to speak basilectal English:

“Velu, this is Robert.”

“Glad to meet you, man,” Velu said.

“Why, he speaks a nice brand of English. You went to school?” Robert said.

“No, a Eurasian did teach me a few things. Do you like to drink something.”

(p180)

Also in *The Third Child*, there are several examples of word order which mark Velu and Vasanthi’s speech as basilectal:

“... That woman has really (standard English = really has) the magic to come all the way from India to trouble him in his sleep,” Velu said. (p163)

“... This place has great, strong mosquitoes. They can suck blood from a skull even (standard English = they can even).” (p164)

“Why didn’t you pull away the cane from me (standard English = the cane away from me)?” (p169)

“... Have you heard on my tongue another man’s name? (standard English in sentence final position) (p169)

4.2 Omission

This entails the deletion of grammatical constituents from standard formal English:

... without any loss of referential denotative meaning, since there are many constituents used in its sentences which are required for purely grammatical considerations and have little or no semantic value at all.

Standard formal English provides a lot of scope for omission, and Wong discusses the following, all of which are found in the dialogue of *The Return*: omission of auxiliaries (including ‘to do’), object pronouns, expletives and tense marking. In addition to the omission of object pronouns, there are also

several instances of omission of subject pronouns in Maniam's works. Article omission is also frequent.

Some examples of omission of the auxiliary have already been given under *overgeneralization*. Further examples include the following, found in the speech of the Chinese shopkeeper in *The Return*. In this incident, the strong basilect/Chinese ethnolect enhances the comic effect:

... The Chinese, in his blue drawers and white singlet shuffled up to us.

"What you want, *Ayah*," he said politely to my father.

"My son, he goes to English school," my father said.

"Yes, yes. Very good. So going to be great scholar," he said ...

"He wants medicine for the teeth," my father said ...

"You Indian got strong white teeth. Ha! Ha! This joke!" (p33).

The speech of May, Chinese prostitute and former concubine, in *In A Far Country*, provides a similar example of omission of the copula, subject pronouns and tense marking:

"... He think I don't know. Send me back home for holiday. How to go back to family, ah? The small town call me whore, bitch even. These words. Always shouting these words. Whore! Whore! Bitch! Bitch! Give me some more. That what he wanted. He tired now. Can't give me what I want." (p52).

It should be noted that in Chinese ethnolect in particular, omission may occur due to the fact that meaning is also conveyed through intonation. Consider also the following example from the Indian ethnolect of a schoolboy in *The Return*, in which the particle 'ah' appears to provide the force of exclamation; Maniam appears to use this speech form to convey Tamil speech – presumably humor - in English:

"Whew! What a smell!" the teacher whined in a high, unnatural voice.

"She no backside ah?" one of the swabbers said in Tamil. (p23)

According to Wong, colloquial, informal Malaysian English often uses the verb 'got' to replace the expletive + copula construction. *The Return* has a clear example of this in the following exchange between Ravi and his playmate Ganesh:

"Why you pull me away?" I asked in panic.

"You not man enough to play in some other place?" Ganesh said ...

"I play anywhere," I said.

"This body got words! See, got action!" Ganesh jeered. (p42)

According to Wong, in agreement with Tongue, and Platt and Weber, the omission of object pronouns is a feature peculiar to colloquial Malaysian English, 'especially where they would be the semantically empty *it* in standard formal English or where the context of the utterance makes the mention of the object pronoun unnecessary'. This is seen in the speech of the Tamil community in *The Return* :

"Give him once a month", Karupi said (referring to money). (p93)

He (Ganesh) and his brothers filled up their pails with the scummy water and carried them carefully to the furrows.

"Don't spill unnecessarily! Pour only on the roots!" Ganesh commanded. (p119)

Examples of omission of *subject* pronouns are also found in *The Return*:

"But mother, teacher wants toothpaste as well ... ('our' teacher is implied)" (p32).

Interestingly, Miss Nancy the English schoolteacher also omits subject pronouns when speaking to her class:

She fell back to the single word questioning.

"Toothpaste?"

"Yes, teacher"

"Toothbrush?" she said, shaking me a little.

"Yes, teacher".

“Show!” she shouted ... (show ‘me’ is implied). (p35)

The subject pronoun ‘me’ is also omitted in the speech of Vasanthi in *The Third Child*:

“Start the fire. Come and tell (me) everything the customers want.” (p170)

The following example is taken from a conversation between the narrator of *In A Far Country* and Lee Shin, his colleague on a jungle development site. Both characters are able to use standard English, but in a closed exchange between social equals they omit subject pronouns:

“Came (i.e. ‘you’ came) to find out why you aren’t at work,” I said.

“Come to (i.e. ‘you’ have come) trouble me like him?” he said. (p54).

In the letter which Mei, Lee Shin’s fiancée, writes to the narrator, there is also subject pronoun omission. Mei is less proficient in standard English than Lee Shin and this is just one feature of her Malaysian English.

... Then something happened. Stopped writing to me (for ‘he’ stopped writing to me). (p160).

In Maniam’s works, examples of article omission are most often found in the basilectal speech of children or of adults who in reality would *not* be speaking English. In *The Return*, Ganesh taunts Ravi:

“Like (a) girl staying in the house all the time!” (p43)

Finally, regarding the tense system, lack of present and past tense marking, and ‘lack of the –s inflectional suffix to show verb agreement in the present tense with a third person singular subject’ can be considered omission. The speech of May from *In A Far Country* illustrates both of these features:

“... He think(s) I don’t know. Send (sent) me back home for holiday ...” (p52)

Whereas the latter feature is a 'purely grammatical requirement, with little or no semantic content', omission of the former may cause confusion as to whether an action occurs in the present or past. For this reason, Wong states that it is common to use adverbials to *substitute* past tense inflection. In Maniam's prose, this also occurs with reference to *future* tense marking, as in the following example from *The Third Child*:

"Tomorrow, I fast," she said quietly. (p176)

However, it should be noted that there are few instances of this type of omission in Maniam's works, and that further examples of simplification in the tense system will be given under *reduction* below.

4.3 *Reduction*

This is defined by Wong as:

those instances where colloquial Malaysian English has reduced a more complex system of standard formal English to a more simplified and easily manageable one.

Although the reduction process includes omission (see above), it is more radical in that it refers to the simplification of a whole grammatical system rather than the omission of grammatical constituents. Wong illustrates three areas of reduction: reduction of question tags to the two forms '*is it/isn't it*', reduction in the tense system to simple present and present continuous, and reduction in the auxiliary modal system to 'can/cannot' and 'must'. Whereas textual analysis has shown no evidence of question tag reduction in Maniam's works, there is frequent reduction in the tense system and auxiliary modal system to enhance the basilectal speech of Malaysian characters pertaining to all ethnic groups.

Reduction in the tense system occurs as ‘many of the less common tenses in standard formal English have little functional load’. Adverbials, particularly ‘already’ indicate that an action has occurred in the past. The following example is taken from the speech of May in *In A Far Country*. Here it is obvious from the context - May is speaking about her former lover - that the past tense is intended:

“That bastard,” she said, hoarsely, “he teach me all this ...” (p51).

Tense system reduction also occurs in the speech of Wali Farouk in *In A Far Country*, without loss of denotative meaning. His addressee, the narrator, interprets ‘I notice’ as ‘I have noticed’:

“I notice you spend some time with Lee Shin,” he said. (p55).

The use of tense system reduction in Mei’s letter to the narrator enhances her social status, i.e. she is less educated than the narrator and her fiancée. The fact that Mei uses tense markings inconsistently appears to indicate that she is indeed writing to the Indian narrator *in English*, which functions as a link language:

Then I stopped replying to his letters because I don’t know what to say ... He say something about ... (pp159-160).

In addition to reduction in the tense system, Maniam’s characters have a tendency to *substitute* the present continuous for adjectives as in the following example from *In A Far Country*:

“... Come to amma’s house, Mani. Wear your bells again. The sound makes me glad I’m living (i.e. ‘alive’).” (p14)

In *The Return*, the present continuous is used by Ravi’s father instead of the infinitive, and also by the adult Ravi when addressing his family:

“... I break my bones filling (i.e., ‘to fill’) the rice pots every day!” my father cried. (p83)

“I’m afraid of showing (i.e. ‘to show’) my face anywhere,” I said. (p164).

Further to Wong’s observations regarding the increased use of the simple present and present continuous in colloquial Malaysian English, analysis of the speech of Maniam’s characters has also revealed a tendency to reduce the use of *future* tenses, as shown in the following examples from *The Return*:

“No kick the ball on Ayah’s cowshed!” he warned at the beginning of the game. “I cave in your teeth.” (p66) (Here the ‘warning’ ensures that the future tense is understood.)

“I hope I don’t (i.e. ‘will not’ or ‘won’t’) offend you, Ayah, but I’ve something to say ...” (p102)

In the area of modals, Wong observes that the modals ‘can/cannot’ and ‘must’ carry a far greater functional load in colloquial Malaysian English, e.g. probability, possibility, inclination, etc. There are several examples of this in *The Return*. In the first two examples, ‘can’ indicates willingness:

“I can go to prison again! Where’s that iron rod?” Ratnam bellowed. (p72)

“I’ve gone to jail for beating up a man. I can go again.” Ratnam threatened. (p88)

In the next example, ‘can’ indicates ability:

“... See the collection Letchumi has now. Can open a jewelery shop.” (p124)

The following excerpt from the speech of Karupi is an excellent illustration of avoidance of the conditional:

“I want to know what your brother Ravi is good for,” Naina persisted.

“I’ll manage this shop,” I said.

“He can do that. He’s still helping.” (i.e. ‘He could do that. He would still be helping’) (p145)

It is used by Naina to express indignation:

“How can I (i.e. ‘am I meant to’) feed all my children?” Naina said. (p127)

Finally it is used to express inappropriacy, i.e. ‘should not’:

“I’ll dig the grave, Ayah,” the sexton said. “Can’t let a father dig his own son’s grave.” (p161)

‘Must’ is used to express obligation/compulsion as in the following example from *In A Far Country*, in which the narrator talks to Lee Shin:

“I don’t want to be involved,” I said, “but I’ve no choice.”

“Yes, must oblige one’s superiors,” he said. (p55)

It is also used to express certainty/necessity, as in the following discussion from *In A Far Country*, in which the narrator and fellow businessmen, Jimmy Kok and Ramasamy, oppose the destruction of historic buildings by the town council:

He (Ramasamy) had freed his mouth from the wad of sireh before speaking.

“We can’t let it happen,” he said. “Must not happen!” (p70)

4.4 Substitution

In this process, complex systems of standard formal English are *replaced* with - rather than reduced to – simpler alternatives. As shown in the preceding section, substitution is largely used in tandem with reduction. Wong outlines three types of substitution: substitution of complex modals with adverbials such as *probably, surely, maybe, I think/I don’t think*, often in phrase initial position for greater emphasis; substitution of rising intonation with particles such as *ah* or *lah*; and substitution of past tense inflection in verbs with adverbials such as *last week, yesterday*, etc (as this overlaps with *reduction*, see examples in above section).

In the speech of Maniam's characters, modals are regularly substituted with the adverbial 'maybe' (spelled 'may be') and the present tense. The use of this speech form occurs frequently in Malaysian English in general and in Maniam's works it is not restricted to the speech of characters of lower social standing. In the following examples, 'may be' is used to indicate probability or possibility:

"... leave my Anjalai alone," Ratnam said.

"She's not yours. Your son's. May be your toddy blindness stops you from seeing," Letchumi called back. (i.e. Your toddy blindness *must* stop you ...) (*The Return*, p72)

"May be he's right," I told Lee Shin ... "May be you're only imagining all these things." (i.e. He could be right ... You could be imagining ...) (*In A Far Country*, p54).

"... May be a change of scene and activities might be good for him ..." (i.e. A change of scene and activities could be ...) (*In A Far Country*, p55).

Similarly, 'no' used in sentence initial position also allows substitution of complex tense systems. In the following example, use of the imperative is avoided:

"No kick the ball on Ayah's cowshed!" (*The Return*, p66).

In addition to the aspects of substitution outlined by Wong, Maniam's characters appear to use 'won't' to substitute other English verbs, as in the following speech by Naina in *The Return*, where the significance of 'won't' is refusal:

"He (Menon) scolded me in the office in front of all those people," he said. "I won't bend my knee to any one any more ... I won't work under him."

"Then it was that I said the words that struck the man in his face ... I won't work for you." (pp125-127)

In Maniam's works, the substitution of rising intonation – mainly in interrogatives - with particles tends to be a basilectal trait. However, it should be noted that it is also used to foreground ethnicity and to signal in-groupness, e.g. 'ah' is found in the Chinese speech of May (see above examples), and 'lah' tends to be used among colleagues. In *Mala (Sensuous Horizons)* two businessmen comment on a secretary, using 'lah'. Here the 'lah' adds emphasis to the remark and the overall impression is that of two colleagues sharing a joke:

Mala went on with her work, glad if a phone call came through to break the tension.

"This one won't even talk-lah!" one of the young men said as they got up to leave. (p238)

In *In A Far Country*, 'lah' is used by young people in the city, to express admiration of material items:

'Look, that car the man is driving! ... But so expensive lah!' (p135)

In the following example from *The Return*, Ravi's mother substitutes 'ah' for rising intonation in a question:

"So, you won't carry your brother for a while, ah?" she yelled. (p38)

4.5 Restructuring

This process refers to the changing of a more complex structure in standard formal English into a simpler one. Although Wong illustrates several types of restructuring, including the use of the active voice instead of the passive voice, and the use of the question word 'why' to express indignation, only one type of restructuring is prevalent in the basilectal speech of Maniam's characters, namely the 'preposing of the direct object and a variety of other elements in

sentences, usually for purposes of focusing and emphasis'. The following examples are taken from *Ratnamuni*, which is narrated entirely in the broken English of Muniandy. It should be noted that there are three instances in the first paragraph alone, in which Maniam sets the scene:

Repot-kepot, *ayah*. This Bedong I stay all my life I did not come straight. 'Ma-la-ya' I was hearing all the time. My son I have now ... (p1)

These two things (money and pride) he uses on the boy. (p10)

Who is this I want to discover. (p14)

In the next example from *The Sandpit: Womensis*, Santha draws attention to the sari border she is working on:

This one I started a month ago but the work was slow. (p184)

In conclusion, textual analysis has shown that the speech of Maniam's characters closely matches the description of colloquial Malaysian English put forward by Wong. As with lexical borrowings, simplification features enhance the cultural setting of Maniam's works, foregrounding the *Malaysianness*, and - to a greater extent - the social status of his characters, in that they occur most often in basilectal speech. Again, the contribution of this strategy to Maniam's works will be considered in Chapter 6.

NOTES

¹ *Simplification Features in the Structure of Colloquial Malaysian English*, Irene F. H. Wong in *Varieties of English in Southeast Asia*, Anthology Series 11, SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, 1983. This is the source of all subsequent quotations in this section.

² One example is found in *The Dream of Vasantha, Sensuous Horizons*, 'fruits' for 'fruit', "I could have bought all the fruits you want", (p198).