

## Title: When to ask is to cause: the use of the ask periphrastic to express indirect causation in Singapore English

A common expression of indirect causation in English is the periphrastic causative construction, i.e., the form ‘X cause verb Y (to) complement’, where the Causer (X) enlists a Causee (Y) to perform some action through non-physical means. Examples are:

1. (a) That's why we're able to *have* you come in and testify. (SBCCE 52.24 54.89)  
(b) On hindsight we should have tried harder to *get* President Suharto to understand that signing the Letter of Intent with IMF was only the first step... (ICE-SIN:S2B-022#127:1:A)

As discussed in many previous works on the syntactic and/or semantic properties of such constructions (e.g., Gilquin 2010), specific causative constructions, i.e., with variant cause verbs, tend to profile distinct aspects of the indirect causation phenomenon. Most studies, however, have looked at such variation within a variety of English.

In this study, I investigate a rarely-focused on aspect of syntactic variation – differences in usages of constructions that express indirect causation that occur across English dialects. Using sub-corpora consisting of various English dialects (British English, American English, New Zealand) from the International Corpus of English (ICE) series as well as one I created using a corpus design similar to ICE for American English since the US component of ICE is not yet available, I demonstrate that variation in usage of a particular construction exists across varieties as well, especially in informal speech, which reflects variant usage patterns in distinct linguistic ecologies (Mufwene 2001, 2008). Here, I focus on Singapore English (SE), a contact variety of English. The results show that while speech verb causatives, especially *ask*, are found in all dialects, it appears significantly more frequently in SE than in the other dialects, which are all “ancestral” or settlement varieties. Examples of the *ask* periphrastic construction used causatively are the following:

2. (a) Ya lah<sup>1</sup> *ask* him to *ask* her go and fry an egg and all that (ICE-SIN:S1A- 007#263:1:B)  
(b) I have therefore *asked* two colleagues to be your source of advice and points of contact for processing new drafts through the system. (ICE-GB:W1B-029#70)

Apart from *ask*, the periphrastic construction with *call* as the cause verb is also found. It is an innovation within SE and is not found in the other dialects. An example is the following:

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<sup>1</sup> In SE, it is common to omit elements that can be recovered from the discourse. In this case, the Subject is omitted. Tense agreement is also somewhat optional. *lah* is a discourse particle. See Lim 2004 for grammatical points of SE.

3. All I see is more problems for Singapore as the prices rise beyond control, even the rich is starting to feel the pinch and the govt still doesn't have a single solution except to *call* poor Singaporeans to eat frozen food and to work harder and accept lower pay.

I suggest that the difference between the use of *ask* and *call* is register-based or socially determined, i.e., *ask* is more frequently used when the relationship between the Causer and the Causee is neutral, while *call* is used when the Causee is perceived to be socially superior whether in real world or in the interaction.

Finally, it is proposed that the conventionalizations of *ask* and other speech verbs such as *call* as cause verbs is attributable to Singapore English's evolution in a contact environment in which surrounding languages, importantly Sinitic and Malay, frequently use periphrastic causatives with a speech verb as the cause verb. This study also demonstrates that contact effects can be subtle, since frequency of occurrence (frequency effects) is more seldom noticed.

#### REFERENCES

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Singapore English (SE) is found on the island state of Singapore, in Southeast Asia. Because of the multilingual environment of Singapore both past and present, linguistic features of SE include some that are considered to have been influenced by contact with one of the surrounding languages, most importantly Sinitic (especially Hokkien) and Baba Malay. Inter- and intra-speaker variation is significant, reflecting both the intense contact situation and the heterogeneous sociolinguistic backgrounds of individual speakers.

