

Modality in Spoken Malaysian English: A Comparison with the Supervarieties

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ABSTRACT

The interest in Malaysian English generated many studies on Malaysian English focusing on various grammatical features. However, modality in Malaysian English is still under-researched, especially in post-independence and new Englishes contexts. As a new variety of English, it raises questions on how Malaysian English has developed from the historical input variety, i.e., British English and how resistant or accepting Malaysian English is to American English which is highly influential globally. This study aimed to contribute to the development of Malaysian English studies by reporting a corpus-based research of the frequency and statistical differences of a set of modal and quasi-modal verbs in three spoken corpora representing Malaysian, British, and American English. AntConc software (Version 3.5.9) (Anthony, 2020) was used to explore and generate the relevant data in the spoken Malaysian English corpus, while the spoken British and American English corpora were accessed online using the tools on the respective websites. The findings show that the use of modal and quasi-modal verbs in spoken Malaysian English does not entirely resemble either of the Supervarieties, i.e., spoken British English and American English. Log-likelihood test carried out in the study shows significant differences in the use of certain modal and quasi-modal verbs between the varieties, suggesting that Supervarieties are not always in the lead in using quasi-modals. The results also suggest that these significant differences are mainly accounted for by the nativisation process and evolution of Malaysian English as a new English variety. The findings shed new light on the current knowledge of modal and quasi-modal verbs in post-independence spoken Malaysian English.

Keywords: corpus-based; modal verbs; quasi-modal verbs; spoken Malaysian English; Supervarieties

INTRODUCTION

The varieties of English used worldwide share a “common core” (Quirk et al., 1985, p.16), but they also possess distinctive features that make each unique. The differences between the varieties deserve research attention as they are widespread in the respective communities (Kachru & Nelson, 2006). The global development, nativisation, and institutionalisation of English in various contexts raise the need to reconsider the “Quirk grammar”, i.e. monolithic descriptions of English grammar which is not a complete representation of the English language in its entirety (Kachru, 1986). For instance, specific grammatical descriptions are crucial in recognising different English language varieties for capturing the distinctions between the native and non-native varieties (Collins, 2009a;

Schneider, 2007). Hence, researchers concerned with the development of Englishes have examined and compared the native varieties (e.g., British English and American English) with non-native varieties (e.g., Asian Englishes).

There has been substantial progress in the grammatical descriptions of English language varieties in the past three decades with the advancement in corpus-based research methodology. Early corpus-based work includes the use of the subjunctive in British, American, and Indian English (Shastri, 1988), the verb morphology in Australian English (Peters, 1994), and modal verbs in different Asian Englishes (Collins, 2009a). The increased research attention on the different varieties of English also saw the rise in the number of corpora representing the varieties of English, and the different periods, allowing for diachronic studies on the development and trajectory of the different varieties [e.g., International Corpus of English (1990s) vs. Global Web-Based English Corpus (GloWbE) (2013)]. Examining changes in grammatical aspects in native and non-native varieties provides evidence of the increase or decline in the use of the grammatical elements (e.g., Collins, 2009a; Leech et al., 2009; Loureiro-Porto, 2019). For instance, concerning modal and quasi-modal verbs, the literature shows that these grammatical aspects have received much research attention in Asian Englishes, and British and American English (e.g., Collins, 2014; Loureiro-Porto, 2019; Noël & Van der Auwera, 2015; Palmer, 2015). However, studies on modal and quasi-modal verbs in spoken forms are scarce, particularly in Malaysian English context. As a relatively new English, it raises question if Malaysian English demonstrates dynamic changes post-independence, particularly in the spoken genre. To bridge the gap in the literature on modal and quasi-modal verbs in the new Englishes context, the current study examines and compares the use of selected modal and quasi-modal verbs in the spoken forms of Malaysian English, British English, and American English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MALAYSIAN ENGLISH

In new Englishes context, Malaysian English (henceforth ME) is an Outer Circle variety due to its colonial history and its role as the country's official second language post-independence. English is widely used in Malaysia in various social settings, including educational institutions and the private sector, and is the language of international communication. English is the second most important lingua franca in Malaysia, alongside the Malay language (Newbrook, 2006). As a new variety of English, ME is viewed along the acrolect-mesolect-basilect continuum, with high to low variety (Baskaran, 2005). The acrolect is representative of standard ME and considered a prestigious form of English, appropriate for the formal context and internationally intelligible (Baskaran, 1994). Mesolectal ME allows for more variation in the areas of phonology and lexis, and due to generalisation and simplification, it lacks well-formedness (Baskaran, 1994). Basilectal ME is at the lowest end of the continuum, characterised by its deviation in lexis, phonology and syntax, and used mainly as a colloquial variety (Baskaran, 1994, 2005). ME has received much research attention, and to date, many studies have explored its phonology (e.g., Azirah & Tan, 2012; Pillai & Ong, 2018), lexis (e.g., Baskaran, 2005; Hajar Abdul Rahim 2014), and grammar (e.g., Newbrook, 2006; Tan, 2013). However, an important grammatical aspect, i.e. modality, is still largely unexplored in ME context, with only few studies conducted on Malaysian textbooks and learner language (e.g., Khojasteh & Kafipour, 2012; Umi Kalthom, 2007).

MODALITY: MODAL AND QUASI-MODAL VERBS

Modality is a semantic aspect in language that indicates necessity, possibility, obligation, ability, permission, and hypotheticality (Collins, 2009a; Depraetere & Reed, 2021; Palmer, 2015). English modal verbs (e.g., *should, can, must, will*) share a commonality, i.e., they, to a certain extent, do not represent straightforward facts, but a speaker's judgment that a proposition is possibly or necessarily true or that the actualisation of a situation is necessary or possible" (Declerck, 2011). The quasi-modal verbs of English (e.g., *have to, be able to*) form a somewhat heterogeneous set of periphrastic forms that are formally distinguishable but semantically similar to modal verbs. Modal and quasi-modal verbs in English are essential grammar and semantic aspects that express the two most semantically fundamental modalities, i.e., epistemic and deontic (Palmer, 2015). The term "epistemic" refers to two essential degrees of possibility and necessity, marked by *may* and *must*, respectively. The functions of epistemic modal verbs include making judgements about the possibility, i.e., something is or is not the case. For instance, *may* is often used to relate to propositions of various kinds, including states in the present or the future (Palmer, 2015), for example, "He *may* be in the house" Quasi-modal verbs that resemble the epistemic modal verbs include *be supposed to* and *be going to*. Deontic modals express what is obligatory, permitted, or forbidden, for instance, in giving permission with the use of *can*, as in "you *can* leave the room now." Quasi-modal verbs associated with deontic modal verbs include *have to* and *need to*. Another category of modality put forward by Palmer (2015) is dynamic modality, usually in the form of *can* or *will*. The quasi-modal verb that resembles the dynamic modality is *be able to*, often used in a neutral sense. For instance, *can* is used to indicate that an event is possible, such as "I'll see what *can* be done."

Research on modality in varieties of English includes both synchronic and diachronic studies. Collins (2009b), for instance, examined the synchronic stylistic and regional variation of several modal and quasi-modal verbs in Inner Circle (e.g., British English, Australian English) and Outer Circle varieties (e.g., Singapore English, Indian English, Hong Kong English) by focusing on the modal verbs *should, must, need, shall* and *will*, and the quasi-modals *have got to, have to, be going to, need to* and *want to* based on ICE corpora and American English corpora. Collins (2009b) reported that Inner Circle varieties, as a group, have a stronger preference for quasi-modals than the Outer Circle varieties, while Outer Circle varieties are in the lead concerning the use of modals. The study also found that American English is leading the way in popularising quasi-modal verbs while marginalising modal verbs in both written and spoken contexts. Similarly, Collins et al. (2014) discovered that modality in Philippine English, American English, and British English shows a similar trend, i.e., the British and Americans use more quasi-modal verbs, and Americans are not as keen as the Filipinos in employing modal verbs in both spoken and written contexts.

Studies on the diachronic changes in modal and quasi-modal verb use suggest that there is a decrease in the use of the modal verb *must* and an increase in the frequency of the quasi-modal verb *have to* in the 20th century in both British and American English (e.g., Leech et al., 2009; Mair, 2021; Noël & Van der Auwera, 2015). In studying Outer Circle varieties (e.g., Hong Kong English), Hansen (2017) explored the metadata in ICE for tracking diachronic changes in the use of *must, have to* and *have got to* by dividing the data based on age groups. Hansen (2017) discovered that Hong Kong English was undergoing the same developments as Inner Circle varieties. Collins et al. (2014) reported that Philippine English does not resemble either American English or British English in modal and quasi-modal verb use. Their findings also show that the British English component of ICE has the highest frequency of modal verbs, followed by

Philippine English and American English components. This finding contradicts his previous conclusion (Collins, 2009b) that Outer Circles varieties are in the lead in using modal verbs. The discrepancy in the findings of the earlier studies between Collins (2009b) and Collins et al. (2014) is not without justifiable reasons. Collins' study (2009b) involved five Outer Circles varieties, one of which was Philippine English. The latter, i.e., Collins et al. (2014), compared Philippine English with the Supervarieties, i.e., British and American English. A more recent study by Loureiro-Porto (2019) based on ICE corpora found that the modal verb *must* underwent the most significant decrease in Philippine English compared to British English, Hong Kong English, Indian English, and Singapore English, while the quasi-modal verb *want to* is the most popular quasi-modal verb, particularly in Hong Kong English, Singapore English and Philippine English.

The studies above suggest an interesting trend in the occurrences and uses of modal and quasi-modal verbs in Inner and Outer Circle Englishes. Both British and American English are recognised as Supervarieties, with British English acknowledged as the colonial parent of most Outer Circle Englishes and American English, whose significant global influence is revealed in its prominent role in contemporary English (Collins et al., 2014; Collins & Yao, 2013; Van Rooy, 2021). Concerning ME, studies on modality are limited to Malaysian textbooks and learner language (e.g., Khojasteh & Kafipour, 2012; Umi Kalthom, 2007), and the use of modal and quasi-modal verbs in the spoken context has yet to be explored. The gap in the literature is the motivation for the current study on modality in the spoken form of ME. In expanding the line of modality research in both Inner and Outer Circle Englishes, based on corpus methods, selected modal and quasi-modal verbs across acrolectal ME and the two Supervarieties, i.e., British English and American English, were examined to answer the following questions:

1. What is the distribution of modal and quasi-modal verbs in spoken Malaysian English, British English, and American English?
2. Are there significant differences in the use of modal and quasi-modal verbs between spoken Malaysian English and spoken British English, and between spoken Malaysian English and spoken American English?

METHODOLOGY

THE CORPORA

An acrolectal spoken Malaysian English corpus (henceforth SMEC) was developed, examined, and compared with the British National Corpus spoken 2014 compiled by Love et al. (2017) (henceforth BNC2014) and the spoken component in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (henceforth COCA) (Davies 2008-). BNC2014 is a compilation of samples of contemporary British English language use, gathered from a range of real-life contexts. COCA is a collection of unscripted conversation from more than 150 radio and TV programmes. SMEC comprises spoken texts on interviews and talks on Malaysia's current affairs, education, and business news podcasted by Malaysian radio station BFM 89.9. The interviews and talks in the "Morning Brief" and "Evening Edition" programmes in BFM89.9 were collected between 2018 and 2020 and involved medical doctors, academics, educators, and politicians proficient in English. The language used represents acrolectal or standard ME. The corpus size of SMEC is 556,775 words, while the BNC2014 and COCA comprise 11,422,617 words and 126,135,576 words,

respectively. Both BNC2014 and COCA are accessible on their respective websites. The time frames for SMEC, BNC2014, and COCA are similar, making them comparable and analysable using statistics and linguistic software.

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES

The *Word List* function in *AntConc* software (Version 3.5.9) (Anthony, 2020) was used to generate the relevant data in SMEC. Following Collins' (2009a) modality framework, the modal and quasi-modal verbs from three corpora were identified. Six modal verbs, *may*, *might*, *ought to*, *must*, *shall*, and *should*, and six quasi-modal verbs, *be going to*, *be able to*, *be supposed to*, *need to*, *have to*, and *want to* were selected for analysis. They were selected based on the viability of their frequencies for generating significant generalisations (Collins et al., 2014; Leech et al., 2009). The frequencies of each type of modal and quasi-modal verb were quantified and normalised to per million words for comparison purpose, and the log-likelihood test (<https://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html>) was used to determine the significant differences between SMEC and BNC2014, and between SMEC and COCA. The results of the log-likelihood test were used to determine the degree of confidence that the results of the analysis either are or are not significant (Dunning, 1993). This statistical test allows for more sophisticated analysis, moving beyond simple data descriptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

DISTRIBUTION OF MODAL AND QUASI-MODAL VERBS IN SMEC, BNC2014 AND COCA

All frequencies presented were normalised to a million words. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the modal verbs, while Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of the quasi-modal verbs in SMEC, BNC2014 and COCA. In terms of modal verb usage, despite being non-native English speakers, Malaysian speakers (SMEC=2760) advocate the use of modal verbs compared to British speakers (BNC2014=2582.24) and American speakers (COCA=2345.84). SMEC also records the highest frequency (6180.23) in quasi-modal verb usage, followed by COCA (5833.8) and BNC2014 (4445.22). As evident in Figure 1, the modal verb *should* is the most frequent, while *ought to* is least used in SMEC and BNC2014. Figure 2 shows that *have to* is most frequently used by Malaysian and American speakers, while *be supposed to* is the least popular quasi-modal in SMEC, BNC2014, and COCA, respectively.

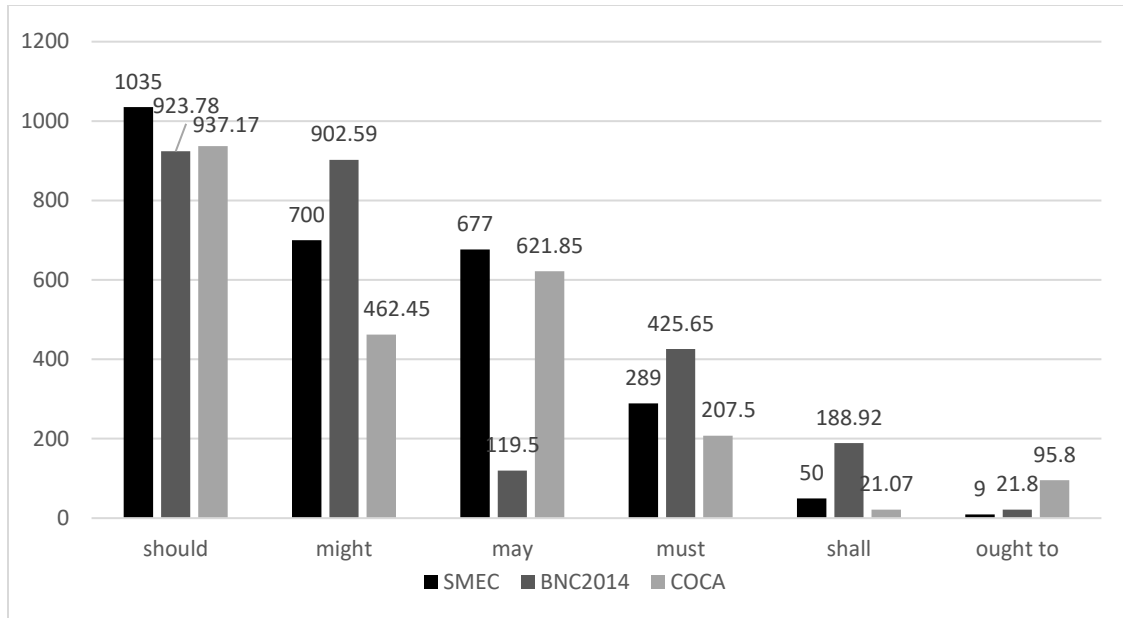


FIGURE 1. Modal verbs in SMEC, BNC2014 and COCA

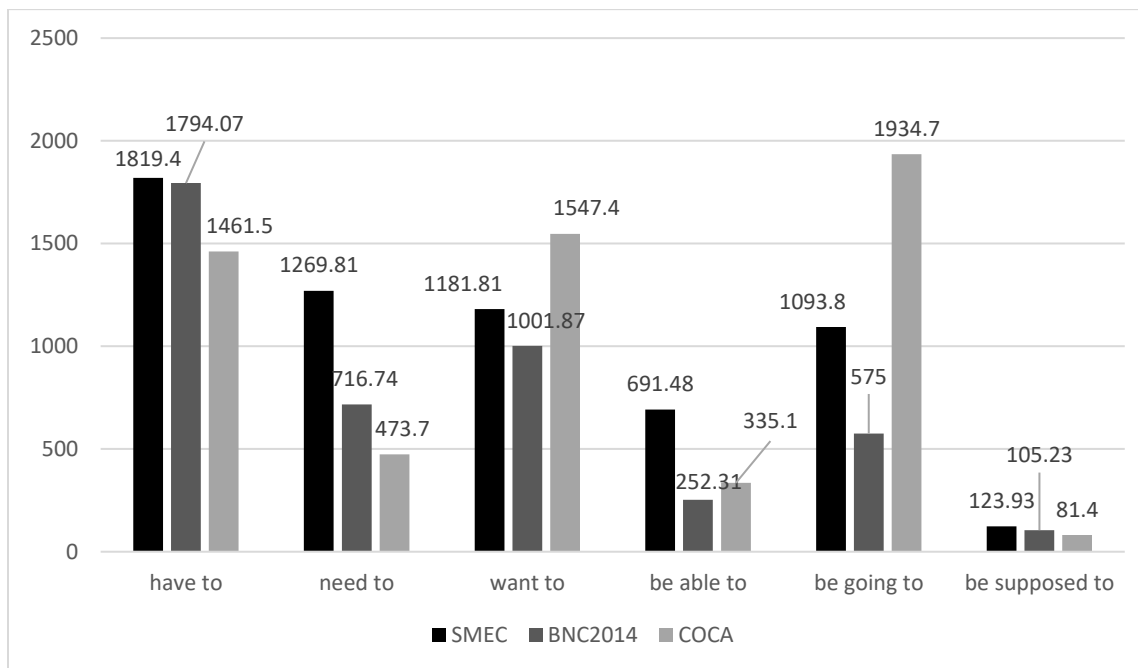


FIGURE 2. Quasi modals in SMEC, BNC2014 and COCA

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF MODAL AND QUASI-MODAL VERBS BETWEEN SMEC AND BNC2014, AND BETWEEN SMEC AND COCA

Tables 1 and 2 present the log-likelihood test results on the statistical differences in the use of modal and quasi-modal verbs between SMEC and BNC2014, and between SMEC and COCA, respectively ($p < 0.0001$; critical value = 15.13). The negative sign next to the log-likelihood value

indicates the overuse in corpus 2 (BNC2014 or COCA) relative to corpus 1 (SMEC). As shown in Table 1, *may*, *need to*, *be able to*, and *be going to* are statistically more frequently used in the Malaysian context (SMEC) than in the UK context (BNC2014). The modal verbs *shall*, *must* and *might*, and quasi-modal *want to* are significantly more prevalent in the UK context. There is no statistical difference between SMEC and BNC2014 in the use of *ought to*, *have to*, and *be supposed to*, due to their log-likelihood value below 15.13.

TABLE 1. Statistical Differences between SMEC and BNC2014

Modal and quasi-modal	Log-likelihood value
may	623.97
should	6.77
shall	77.59 (-)
Must	26.35 (-)
might	26.15 (-)
ought to	5.21 (-)
be able to	268
be going to	193.57
need to	181.9
be supposed to	1.66
have to	0.19
want to	16.17 (-)

TABLE 2. Statistical Differences between SMEC and COCA

Modal and quasi-modal	Log-likelihood value
might	58.52
shall	16.06
must	15.85
should	5.43
may	2.66
ought to	72.83 (-)
need to	504.5
be able to	160.05
have to	45.02
be supposed to	10.6
be going to	240.88 (-)
want to	52.19 (-)

Table 2 shows that *might*, *must*, *shall*, *have to*, *need to*, and *be able to* are significantly more common in SMEC than in COCA, while no significant difference is found in the use of *should*, *may*, and *be supposed to*. In the case of *ought to*, *want to*, and *be going to*, COCA statistically outstrips SMEC.

The analysis results suggest that modal verbs are more commonly used in SMEC context than in the British (BNC2014) and American (COCA) contexts. This result accords with Collins' (2009b) finding on Outer Circle varieties' preference for modal verbs compared to Inner Circle varieties such as British and American English. Malaysians also outnumber British and Americans in using quasi-modal verbs in the spoken context. Interestingly, this finding contradicts Collins' (2009b) finding that quasi-modal verbs are more common in Inner Circle than Outer Circle varieties. This difference may be due to the different data types used, i.e., spoken data in the current study and written and spoken genres in Collins' (2009b) project.

As evident in Figure 1, the modal verb *should* is the most popular modal verb in all three varieties, and there are no statistical differences in its use between SMEC and BNC and between

SMEC and COCA. The popularity of the modal verb *should* over another semantically-related modal verb *shall* is attributable to its mild subjectivity and less forceful tone (Collins, 2009b). The modal verb *shall* is one of the marginalised modal verbs in all three varieties, possibly due to its deontic meaning manifesting in specialised languages such as legal and quasi-legal registers (Collins et al., 2014). The same trend was observed in other studies (e.g., Noël & Van der Auwera, 2015). Though not popularly used, there are statistical differences between the varieties. *Shall* is found to be more common in BNC2014 than in SMEC and more common in SMEC than in COCA. In general, the modal *shall* is relatively infrequent in SMEC, BNC2014, and COCA, indicating the speakers' advancement in switching to the semantically-related quasi-modal verbs to express similar deontic necessity, such as *have to* and *need to*.

Another modal verb often used to express deontic necessity *ought to* is the least popular modal verb in SMEC and BNC2014 and the second least preferred item in COCA, as shown in Figure 1 above. While *ought to* and *should* are semantically similar, they are anything but identical in their frequency of use, with *should* occurring 115 times more frequently than *ought to* in SMEC, and 42 times and 9.8 times more often in BNC2014 and COCA, respectively. With its medium-strength deontic meaning, *ought to* is seen vulnerable to replacement by *should* (Collins et al., 2014). Harris (1986) noted that the decline of *ought to* in contemporary spoken context is primarily due to its inability to develop the syntactic properties of a lexical verb, i.e., structures such as “*he didn't ought to ...*”, as compared to its counterparts, *need to* and *have to*, where it is common and acceptable to say “*he didn't need to/he didn't have to*” in native varieties. The modal *ought to* is statistically more common in COCA than in SMEC, confirming that it is relatively more popular in the spoken American context than in the spoken Malaysian context. Besides, the modal verb *ought to* is less frequently used compared to another semantically related medium-strength quasi-modal verb, *be supposed to*. This finding confirms previous studies that found American English dispreference for modal verbs and preference for quasi-modal verbs (Collins, 2009a, 2009b; Collins et al., 2014; Mair, 2021). The current finding on *ought to* occurring ten times more often in COCA than in SMEC raises questions about the idea that modal verbs are less common in Inner Circle varieties than in Outer Circle varieties.

As a deontic and epistemic modality, the quasi-modal verb *be supposed to* is the most insignificant of the six quasi-modals in the current study, constituting 2% in SMEC, and 2.4% and 1.4% in BNC2014 and COCA, respectively. No significant difference is found between SMEC and the two Supervarieties. As *be supposed to* resembles *ought to* and *should* in strength, there is a high possibility that *should* and *ought to* have encroached the territory of *be supposed to*, suggesting that it is not preferred in Outer circle varieties (e.g., Malaysian English) and Inner Circle varieties (American English and British English) spoken contexts. This accords with Collins et al.'s (2014) finding on *be supposed to*, which they also found *be supposed to* being an insignificant quasi-modal verb in Philippine English (Collins et al., 2014).

The current study found that the quasi-modal verb *have to* is the most dominant quasi-modal verb in SMEC (Outer Circle English), and it is significantly more commonly found in SMEC than in COCA. This finding is surprising given the past findings on the preference for quasi-modal verbs in both written and spoken American contexts (Collins, 2009b; Collins et al., 2014; Mair, 2021). This suggests that Outer Circle varieties such as ME is more inclined towards popularising quasi-modal verbs such as *have to* in spoken context than American English. *Have to* is thus becoming a preferred quasi-modal verb in replacing some marginalised modal verbs such as *shall* and *ought to* in the spoken Malaysian context, given its high frequency in SMEC, i.e., 36 times more frequent than *shall* and 202 times more frequent than *ought to*.

The quasi-modal verb *need to* is the second most common quasi-modal verb in SMEC, and it is significantly more commonly found in SMEC than in BNC2014 (716.74) and COCA (473.7). Previous studies have shown that *need to* has attained a unique position in the quasi-modal verb development, which may be due to its ability to “camouflage” an imposed obligation as being in the obligatee’s best interest (Collins et al., 2014; Leech et al., 2009, p.110). While *need to* is relatively common in SMEC, BNC2014, and COCA, it is the most infrequent quasi-modal verb in Collins (2009b) and Loureiro-Porto (2019), involving both Inner Circle and Outer Circle varieties. Collins et al. (2014) observed a similar trend where *need to* occupied a medial position in Philippine English. Comparisons between SMEC and BNC2014, and between SMEC and COCA suggest that there are obvious statistical differences in the use of *need to* between the varieties. This indicates that while *need to* is prevalent in all three varieties, the speakers in each variety use it very differently.

The modal verb *must* is closest in meaning to *need to* in asserting deontic necessity in most situations (Collins, 2009a; Palmer, 2015). As presented in Figure 1 above, *must* is ranked fourth among six modal verbs, accounting for 10.5% in the SMEC modal category. This modal verb is statistically more frequently used in BNC2014 than in SMEC. Previous diachronic studies (e.g., Collins et al., 2014; Hansen, 2017; Leech et al., 2009; Noël & Van der Auwera, 2015) demonstrated that *must* has suffered a sharp decline in both Inner and Outer Circle varieties in the past three decades. *Must* is the modal verb with a noticeable dispreference for occurrence in both written and spoken contexts. The decrease in the use of *must* may be attributed to the highly authoritarian tone of its deontic meaning, making it difficult to compete with its counterpart, *have to*.

The modal verb *might* is the second most popular modal verb in SMEC and displays the same trend as *must*, as it is significantly more commonly used in BNC2014 than in SMEC and COCA. And interestingly, while *might* and *may* are essentially epistemic (Collins, 2019a), their frequencies differ significantly in BNC2014. On the other hand, their difference in frequency of occurrences is more subtle in SMEC. The different frequency patterns of *may* and *might* in SMEC and BNC2014 suggest that Outer Circle varieties, such as ME, have different preferences where these modal verbs are concerned, possibly due to pragmatic reasons. In Inner Circle Englishes contexts, Collins (2009a) discovered that although *may* and *might* express the same meanings, they have little semantic overlap in British, American, and Australian English. This previous finding is confirmed in the current study where BNC2014 is concerned. In the Outer Circle English context, Collins et al. (2014) confirmed that the modal *may* has been very popular in Philippine English, while *might* was not a preferred option, although *may* and *might* are closely semantically similar. Although both ME and Philippine English are Outer Circle varieties, they differ in treating the modal verbs *may* and *might*. It should be noted, however, that SMEC is a spoken corpus while Philippine English in ICE comprises spoken and written data. The disparity also may be because ME and Philippine English originate from different parent varieties, i.e., British English and American English, respectively.

Want to, as the third most popular quasi-modal verb in SMEC, is not conventionally seen as a quasi-modal verb (Collins, 2009a). The modalisation or grammaticalisation of *want to* is a development in the emergence of its modal senses in contemporary English, as noted by Krug (2000). Krug (2000) found that *want to* was very rare in the Early Modern English period, and its modalisation development is relatively more recent compared to other quasi-modal verbs. When comparing the three varieties, *want to* is significantly more prevalent in COCA than in SMEC and BNC2014. This quasi-modal verb has been used to express dynamic meanings, while its deontic

sense is often secondary in meaning (Collins, 2009a). It is not surprising to find *want to* as an alternative to the modal verb *will* and the quasi-modal verb *be going to*, especially in expressing milder volitional meaning. According to Collins et al. (2014), *want to* is also one of the most preferred quasi-modal verbs in Philippine English.

The quasi-modal verb, *be able to*, is relatively common in SMEC (691.48), BNC2014 (252.31), and COCA (335.1), occupying the second last position amongst all quasi-modal verbs in three corpora. This quasi-modal verb is seen as the counterpart to the modal verb *can* and is often used to express deontic possibility (Collins, 2009a). Statistical differences are found between SMEC and BNC2014, and between SMEC and COCA, and it is also one of the most popular quasi-modal verbs in Philippine English (Collins et al., 2014). Leech et al. (2009) found that the quasi-modal verb *be able to* has shown a subtle increase in both British and American English, possibly due to the intense competition from the semantically related modal verb, *can* in the two Inner Circle varieties. Collins (2009a) found that *be able to* is more frequent in speech than in writing in American English. This difference suggests a possible expansion of the current study into comparing this quasi-modal verb in spoken and written Malaysian English in future research.

The quasi-modal verb *be going to* is significantly more frequent in COCA than in SMEC and BNC2014. It is the most popular quasi-modal verb in COCA, constituting 33.16% of the quasi-modal verb population. This finding is not surprising as American English has been progressive in using this “informal” quasi-modal verb, particularly in informal writing and spoken context, where the reduced form of *be going to* such as *be gonna to* is favoured most in American English (Collins, 2009a). *Be going to* is fairly common in the spoken Malaysian context, potentially due to the competition from the briefer modal *will*. *Be going to* is markedly colloquial compared to *will*, making it an alternative in SMEC. As the modal verb *will* was not examined in the current study, the similarity and difference between *will* and *be going to* could be explored in future research.

CONCLUSION

We conclude that the selected modal and quasi-modal verbs in the contemporary spoken ME context do not always correspond with those in the spoken Supervarieties in terms of frequency and statistical comparisons. Despite having root in British English, the spoken ME does not closely follow either British English or American English, with some quasi-modal verbs being more prevalent in SMEC and certain modal verbs being more common in BNC2014 and COCA. In spoken ME context, the current study found that divergence occurs and is enough to lead to grammatical development in spoken ME which corresponds with ME’s nativisation process (Schneider, 2007) and evolution as a new English variety. The differences between spoken ME and British English do not seem to stem from “colonial lag” (Huber, 2019, p. 490) but rather the innovation as a result of the nativisation of ME. Also, the comparison between spoken ME and American English demonstrates how accepting or resistant ME is to the global influence of American English.

In relation to the evolution of postcolonial Englishes, the findings of the current study provide some justification for the need to focus on the degrees of nativisation (Schneider, 2007) and colloquialism (Collins & Yao, 2013) in future research. There is a need for a much deeper analysis of nativised language patterns to understand better the characteristics unique in other new varieties of English. As regards ME, the evolutionary processes it experienced after the country’s independence were primarily due to the elevation of the Malay language as the medium of

instruction in public schools in the 1970s and the relegation of English as a language subject (Hajar Abdul Rahim, 2014). Despite this, ME is widely used across various social domains and is a vibrant new English variety. The use of modal and quasi-modal verbs in new non-native varieties is therefore worth exploring as modality is an important grammatical element that expresses various functions and meanings in the verbal context.

The innovative potential of the study lies in the use of a new corpus, i.e., SMEC for an empirical study on grammatical aspects of the spoken ME. Using the log-likelihood test, this study offers new methodological perspectives for synchronic comparisons with British English (BNC2014) and American English (COCA). This method puts the present research on a sounder footing than conjecturing the differences using raw frequencies. More importantly, it opens the way for examining modality in spoken ME in comparison with the two Supervarieties. This study is form-based, i.e., focusing on the frequency of occurrences and statistical significance instead of the semantic features of modal and quasi-modal verbs. Moving forward, ME modality research potential is its semantics to unravel the motivations behind the different choices of modal and quasi-modal verbs in spoken ME compared to the two Supervarieties.

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