The polemics of Singlish

LEE-WONG SONG MEI

An examination of the culture, identity and function of English in Singapore

There is much discussion and debate on the growth of regional varieties and the role of English as an International Language (EIL). This is not surprising given the fact that the use of English is growing faster than any other language in the world.

> English is now spoken by more people (as a first, second, or foreign language) than any other language and is recognized by more countries as a desirable lingua franca than […] any other language… [T]he unprecedented scale […] of the growth in usage (approaching a quarter of the world's population) has resulted in an unprecedented growth in regional varieties.
>
> (Crystal, 1999:13)

In China, the estimate for the number of people learning and using English is 200 to 300 million (Dzau, 1990). In Singapore, the Ministry of Education figures for the 1990 intake show 25% of parents claiming English as the most frequently spoken home language, and 44% claiming it as the second most frequently spoken home language (cf. Gupta 1994). The widespread use of English in Singapore has placed Singapore in the Outer Circle, along with India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Ghana, Nigeria, the Philippines and others, in contrast with Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and others who belong to the Inner Circle (Kachru,1991).

Placing countries in different circles – inner vs outer or expanding, based on the concept of nativization – has generated questions of democracy in linguistic ideology and related issues of norms and standards:

> ● The norms of one national variety (or some national varieties) [are] afforded a higher status, internally and externally, than those of others … So Canadian French, Belgian French and Singapore English are all in an inferior position vis-a -vis French French, Dutch Dutch and British or American English though not all in the same way.
>
> (Clyne, 1997:454)

> ● [B]ecause the learning and usage of a major variety (in most cases AmE or BrE) effectively marginalizes speakers of local varieties, an insistence on the superiority of established educational models is not in keeping with a democratic ideology of linguistic diversity.
>
> (Modiano, 1999:22)

> ● In China, as well as in other regions in the Expanding Circle, should the norm be only American or British English even if the learners will never have a chance to communicate with a native speaker of that variety?
>
> (Zhao & Campbell, 1995: 388)

> ● What are the problems, on a theoretical and practical level, of considering English in Singapore as a new variety? What standards and norms are accepted, practised and followed? What attitudes hold in the community regarding the English varieties..? Whose English norms are to be used? Who sets the standards?
>
> (Pakir,1998:67)

These are pressing issues facing Singapore today. Singapore English as a regional variety has been discussed and debated since the

LEE-WONG SONG MEI lectures on English and Management Communication at Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University of Singapore. She received her MA and Ph.D in linguistics from Monash University, Australia, and has conducted research in China, Australia and Singapore. The author of 'Politeness and face in Chinese culture' (2000), she is a member of the board of consulting editors of the journal 'Multilingua'. She has published internationally in the journals 'Linguistics', 'Multilingua' and 'Pragmatics'.

1970s. (cf. Platt, Crewe, and Richards & Tay, all in 1977). In the seventies, the nativization of English was not regarded as desirable and its existence was denied:

> Despite claims by those who have looked at so-called Singapore English we do not have one … These departures from standard forms are consequences of poor grammar et cetera.
>
> (Thumboo, 1976:26)

There has been a shift in attitudes since then. Language varieties and language shift are discussed with a greater degree of openness. Beardsmore (1998) considers cultural implications of language shift; Gupta (1994) analyses Singapore English (SE) and Talib (1998) examines responses and attitudes to the language of Singaporean literature in English. The existence of Singapore English and its basilectal variety *Singlish* is more openly acknowledged. Edwin Thumboo (above), a well-known Singapore writer and poet, now says it performs the role of bazaar Malay (colloquial Malay): "You do not teach it, you cannot banish it. You cannot resist the reality" (1997). The Senior Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, highlighted the issue of Singlish as follows:

> Singaporeans add Chinese and Malay words into Singlish, and give different meanings to English words like "blur" to mean "blank". Worse, Singlish uses Chinese sentence structure. In fact, we are creating a different new language. Each family can create its own coded language; nothing wrong with that except that no one outside the family can understand you.
>
> (August 15, 1999)

Graddol claims that the growth of an increasingly large number of local varieties worldwide, SE being a case in point, has led to an increasing "pressure towards global uniformity":

> English has two main functions in the world; it provides a vehicular language for international communication and it forms the basis for constructing cultural identities. The former function requires mutual intelligibility and common standards. The latter encourages the development of local forms and hybrid varieties. (1997:56)

Although such 'contradictory tensions' have particular significance for Singapore from the perspective of education and public attitude, they have not been given their due attention in the current debate about norms and varieties.

In this paper, my primary objective is to examine Singlish as a basis for the construction of a Singapore identity, a symbol of solidarity. Specifically, it is claimed that Singlish has significance as a subcultural variety for the youth of Singapore. This is the pull factor of SE. The push factor is the anxiety about the declining standard of local English and its intelligibility to the world outside.

First, I will discuss the relationship between the cultural orientations of language and the use of SE. Next, I will sketch the background and the factors which contribute towards the growth of an indigenized variety of English in Singapore.

Language, culture and identity

The interdependence between language and culture has long been acknowledged by anthropologists and linguists. Sapir (1974), one of the earliest champions, considers language as a tool for the expression of culture:

> *The content of every culture is expressible in its language* and there are no linguistic materials whether as to content or form which are not felt to symbolize actual meanings, whatever may be the attitude of those who belong to other cultures. New cultural experiences frequently make it necessary to enlarge the resources of a language. (1974: 48–9) [Italics mine]

It is my contention that Singapore English (SE) arises out of attempts by speakers to enlarge the resources of English through creation and/or adaptation: coining new words to express cultural constructs and adapting existing words to express new meanings. This process of indigenization is evident in Baba Malay (BM), a variety of Malay which has loanwords from the local Chinese dialect, Hokkien, such as the food terms *mihun* (rice vermicelli), *tauge* (bean sprouts) and *cincai* (jelly) (Pakir, 1988). Comparably, a well-known and popular word in SE, is *kiasuism,* derived from *kiasu,* a Hokkien term meaning 'fear of losing out to others'. There is no substitute or near equivalent for this term in English at large.

Further, social meaning has great relevance in the consideration of SE. As Sapir pointed out:

> Language is a great force of socialization, probably the greatest that exists. … (It) is a peculiarly potent symbol of the social

solidity of those who speak the language. (1974:53)

There is certainly evidence that Singaporeans identify with SE. Professor T. T. B. (Tommy) Koh, a well-known ex-representative to the United Nations, was quoted by Tongue (1979) as having taken pride in his Singapore accent:

> When one is abroad, in a bus or train or airplane and when one overhears someone speaking, one can immediately say this is someone from Malaysia or Singapore. And I should hope that when I'm speaking abroad, my countrymen will have no problem recognizing that I am a Singaporean.

A more recent example is the view of an undergraduate who spoke in defence of the TV sitcom 'Phu Chu Kang', named for an amusing character who has been singled out for his excessive use of Singlish:

> Singlish as used in TV programmes … should not be blamed for making Singlish popular. It is just our relaxed way of communicating without pretence… Singlish is the true cultural artifact of Singaporeans. And I am proud of it.
> (September, 1999)

That Singlish is a matter of pride for *all* Singaporeans is not, however, necessarily true. It is nevertheless well received by a cross-section of the community, possibly those who are more relaxed about language use. In a questionnaire survey (Chin, Ler & Wang 1993/94:36) on the acceptability of Singlish to Singaporeans, more than 50% of working adults and students from high school and university aged 16–50 considered that Singaporeans should not be ashamed of Singlish.

The indigenization of English

To understand Singapore English (SE) one needs to understand the social fabric of this multilingual and multiracial ex-British colony.

Background

Singapore has three major ethnic groups (Chinese, Malay and Indian), at least five major languages, and three minor languages. The former are Malay, English, Mandarin, Tamil and Hokkien; the latter are Teochew, Cantonese and Hainanese (Kuo, 1977:10). In 1965, when Singapore became an independent republic, the government decided on a policy of using four official languages: Mandarin Chinese, Malay

and Tamil to represent the three major ethnic groups, and English because of its importance as an international language and because of the territory's history. The national language was Malay, used primarily for ceremonial functions, and English became the language of administration.

The economic value of English was clearly shown in a survey in 1975 when it was found that three-quarters of those with a monthly income exceeding $1,000 could understand English in contrast with two-fifths of those whose household incomes were less than $300. The English-educated also tended to have higher education and to enjoy better career opportunities.

The introduction of the Government's bilingual policy in the 1960s where a second official language was taught at school led to further expansion of English. The years that followed witnessed an increase in enrolments in English-medium schools and falling enrolments in Chinese-, Malay-, and Tamil-medium schools. The result was that English became more widely spoken both in school and at home. The expansion of English, from a language of formal instruction at school to a language in the home, has had significant repercussions on the way it was acquired. Gupta comments that this would probably increase the number of speakers proficient in English but *not necessarily in Standard English*: "The whole concept of level of proficiency in English will change as the varietal pattern of English in Singapore becomes much more like that in the traditional English-speaking world, or in the English-speaking Caribbean where most citizens are fluent in a variety of English which may be very different from StdE" (Gupta, 1997:138).

Singapore English

SE is not a single variety but is best defined along a cline of proficiency. Platt (1977) defined it as "a speech continuum, comparable to the post-creole continuum in Jamaica … or in Guyana… There is a whole range from the 'lowest' variety, the *basilect*, through the medium range, the *mesolects*, to the 'highest' variety, the *acrolect*." (1977:84). This acrolect would be 'a very distinct non-British English acrolect'.

Crewe (1977) illustrated the 'foreignness' of SE with examples which show deviations in grammar, structure, vocabulary and pronunci-

ation from the British standard norms. There would be:

- Chinese influence, e.g. *give me a coffee – a no-milk one.*
- Malay influence, e.g. *you wait here, I will go and come.*
- Dialect words, e.g. *chop* (= stamp)
- Particles, e.g *la(h)*, from local Chinese Hokkien dialect: *Yes, la. Cannot lah.*
- Differences in vowels, e.g. *quiet* sounding like *quite.*
- Differences in consonants, e.g. *youth* sounding like *use* (n).

Today, with Mandarin as the dominant second language for the Chinese community, structures showing its influence constitute one of the characteristic features of SE, as in the following illustrations.

A Chinese lady receptionist (in her early forties) asked another receptionist whether the lab technician had collected specimens from the surgery for laboratory tests:

1. Q: Afternoon lab collect already?
   A: This morning.

A mother explained to her young son why he was not allowed to go into the recreation room to play computer games.

	Mandarin
2. Afterwards cannot find you.	[= *Deng yixia bu neng zao dao ni*]
Inside nobody already.	[= *Limian yijin meiyou ren le*]

Strong code-mixing is another characteristic of Singlish. In the following example, the speaker switched rapidly between Chinese Mandarin and English in his reply to a question as to why he was away from class. He explained that he attended a relation's wedding:

3. *Wode* grandmother *de* brother *de haizi jiehun.*
   My grandmother's brother's child got married.

A subcultural variety

Graddol (1997) in his discussion of youth culture mentions the influence of the global teenager on the future of English, its style and varieties:

> English, of course, is not a single, unitary language and it is *unlikely that young people accept or reject English on the basis of its standard form. Young people within native-speaking English countries* experiment with particular varieties of English in order to present or experience particular social identities: in schools in both England and Australia, for example, children may adopt words and characteristics from black American speech.
>
> *Non-native forms of English also may acquire identity functions for young people.* In Europe, for example, MTV has promoted the use of foreign-language varieties of English as identity markers – a behaviour more usually associated with second-language usage – by employing young presenters with distinctive French, German and Italian English accents, alongside British presenters with regional accents. Such cultural exploitation may indicate that standard, native varieties will be the least influential for the global teenage culture.
>
> (1997:49) [Italics mine]

Young Singaporeans, just like young people in England and Australia, are comparatively relaxed about the use of StdE. Their use of SE and attitudes towards it suggest a degree of value attached to this L(ow) variety. This perception is supported by the results of an informal survey on a group of 60 university undergraduates which I conducted in April 1999. They were asked to jot down: (1) whether they object to the use of Singlish; (2) what kinds of Singlish they use (if any), and (3) why they use them. Although some viewed Singlish as a barrier to comprehension for non-Singaporeans and some considered it rather crude, the majority (68%) were rather positive towards it. Two typical positive comments (Apr 99) were:

- Gives us a unique sense of *identity* as Singaporeans. Should be encouraged.
- Speaking Singlish doesn't mean we don't know the 'actual' (standard) English. Those 'la', 'leh' allow us to *express ourselves better.*

The key words associated with the use of Singlish are 'fun', 'spontaneous', 'typical Singaporean attitude', 'suitable', 'express better', 'faster', and 'closer communication'. They reveal a spirit of experimentation with new linguistic forms in order to communicate better.

Undeniably, Singlish is a great symbol for solidarity amongst the youth, and a process of adaptation and creation is apparent in its use. New words are coined by incorporating local dialect (Hokkien) and language (Malay). New, often playful, meanings are injected into existing English words. In an informal exchange between a male and some female students during a tutorial, a male student who considered himself an introvert challenged the extroverts

with a question (1) followed by his own comment (2).

(1) Do the extroverts think they're very *happening*? [= game, active, where the action is] (2) Introverts are also *happening*. [= love to participate in exciting things]

A female student who considered herself an extrovert responded:

(3) If it's after the exam, of course you feel like *happening*. [= joining in the fun]

When questioned as to why they used such a term, these speakers reported that the word 'happening' comes naturally to them, a very informal term, similar to *kiasu* ('afraid of losing out to others'). To them 'happening' means you 'happen' to be around when exciting things are there; it also means you want to participate. They also cited the following examples as part of 'Singapore slang':

space out (= to blank out)
Why are you *spacing out*? [= not in your right senses [today]?]

blur (= 'confused')
'Some students act *blur*' [= pretend to be confused].

In discourse, SE is characterized by final particles which are used across ethnic and socio-economic boundaries. The most common are *la*, *lo* and *ma*. Richards and Tay report that *la* is also used in Hokkien, Mandarin and Malay: "something of a joke, it adds a colorful and unique quality to the low variety of Singapore English" (1977:143). In their study, they show support for *la* as a marker of rapport, solidarity, familiarity and informality. These functions are clearly evident in the following exchange between two university students on a bus. Some parts of the conversation were not audible.

A: How's the project going?
B: ... Like this *la*.
[Asked how A was getting on with his project]
A: Ok *la*.
[Asked about B's work]
B: Stressed *la*.

As one student put it in 1999:

In spite of the mixture of *lahs* and *lors* and other seemingly unforgivable grammatical errors, we can still understand each other. So what if we are creating a new language? Are not all languages created the same way? Are we not moving toward creativity?

Singapore English: functionality *vs* identity

The status and significance of English in Singapore's economy is the strongest part of the push factor. In a strongly-worded speech, the Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew has said:

Let me state clearly the disadvantages of Singlish. There are as many varieties of English as there are communities that speak English. In spite of differences in accent and pronunciation, people in Britain, America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand understand each other easily because they are speaking the same language, using the same words with the same grammar and sentence structures. ... We are learning English so that we can understand the world and the world can understand us. It is therefore important to speak and write standard English.

This will be a disadvantage to the less-educated half of the population. The better educated can learn two or three varieties of English and can speak English English to native Englishmen or Americans, standard English to foreigners who speak standard English, and Singlish to less-educated Singaporeans.

Unfortunately, if the less-educated half of our people end up learning to speak only Singlish, they will suffer economically and socially.
(August 15, 1999)

This diglossic situation (cf. Richards & Tay, 1977) serves as a renewed reminder to Singaporeans of the economic consequences if SE were allowed to perpetuate and flourish. In terms of diglossia (Ferguson, 1954), StdE enjoys the status of H(igh) variety and SE is perceived as a L(ow) variety. In socio-economic terms, this informal L variety is perceived to be detrimental to Singapore's growth.

We cannot be a first-world economy or go global with Singlish. (Prime Minister Goh, 23 August, 1999)

We should ensure that the next generation does not speak Singlish. ...It may take us 10 to 15 years to raise the level of English in Singapore, but we must succeed. Then, truly, we will be a *first-world class economy* and a world-class home. (PM Goh, August 30, 1999) [Italics mine]

Singaporeans by and large are aware of the limits of Singlish. A sociolinguistic survey by Chin, Ler and Wang (1993/94) shows that 61% of respondents in the age group of 30–50 were of the opinion that Singlish should *not* be

promoted. Interestingly, however, only 45% of University students were against the idea of promoting Singlish.

On the other hand, StdE is not able to fill the cultural and thus the identity gap for Singaporeans. Unlike such native-speaking countries as Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and New Zealand, where the first language is associated with their culture, Standard English in Singapore is not associated with the bilingual speaker's culture. Singlish, however, has become that symbolic cultural construct, a tool of expression for what is uniquely Singaporean.

Kachru refers to this process as *acculturation*. As English undergoes thorough acculturation in such contexts, it shows various degrees of culture-boundness. The more culture-bound it becomes, the more distance is created between it and the native varieties. (1981:35).

To deny the functionality of Singlish in the speech community is to be at odds with a situation where users are adapting a foreign language to a local communal culture. No doubt, steps can be taken to improve the standard of English, particularly at elementary schools, but, beyond the walls of formal learning, it is up to the individual to decide how s/he wishes to speak and in what manner.

In considering language as part of a larger sociocultural organization, it becomes plain that just as there are multiple layers in an organization, there are multiple ways of speaking.

> *Any consciously constructed international language has to deal with the great difficulty of not being felt to represent a distinctive people or culture. …*The future will tell whether the logical advantages and theoretical necessity of an international language can overcome the *largely symbolic opposition which it has to meet.*
> (Sapir,1974:66) [Italics mine]

There is more than symbolic opposition in the case of StdE. The use of SE is reflective of a strong motivating force for forging what is one's own within the constraints of a system. Speaker, language and identity cannot be dissociated in the negotiation of meaningful speech. Today's Singapore youth – tomorrow's leaders – have demonstrated in no uncertain terms their need for a language they can identify with.

Conclusion

The view that Singlish is a handicap is comprehensible from the perspective of national planning. "Singapore's tertiary institutions are linked with the likes of the Massachussetts Institute of Technology and John Hopkins University. But it will not be able to do business with the rest of the world with Phu Chu Kang's Singlish. The Government is right to recognize the problem and deal with it now, because ultimately Singlish will be a handicap" (*Straits Times,* August 24, 1999).

However, it is undeniable that Singlish represents a strong unifying force across ethnic boundaries and socio-economic groups, among both the well- and less-educated. It is a language to signal cultural identity, although its use is limited to specific domains (for example, the market place) and for specific purposes (to joke, to bond and to speak unpretentiously). Even the Prime Minister could not resist a switch to a local term to drive home his point *against* code-switching in Mandarin, when he counseled, "Don't slip into 'chap chye' Mandarin", that is, Mandarin mixed with Chinese dialects and English. *Chap chye* is a Chinese dialect term referring to a mixed dish of all kinds of vegetables.

One should also ask to what extent English is used internationally and intranationally. Is it true that Singlish is encroaching on Standard English? The question of an international norm in relation to a local or regional norm is an important one. The notion of 'standard' needs to be considered "when such hybrids (trends and varieties) are used confidently and fluently by groups of people who have education and influence in their own regional setting" (Crystal, 1999:16). "(There) are executives who speak sub-varieties of Malaysian English. Do we tell them that what they speak does not meet with the standard…?" (Gill, 1999). How 'standard' and how varied is Singapore's English in terms of the regional norm as opposed to the norms of British English, American English, Australian English and so on? Linguists are not able to come to terms with defining the norms of 'standard' English – or World Standard Spoken English. According to Crystal, English as a spoken lingua franca will be a multidialectal one. In view of this, perhaps Singaporeans can take heart that Singapore English may yet earn a place in World Englishes. Should creative Singaporeans not take pride in their linguistic contribution – "that the Manglish and Singlish 'blur'" reported by a *Straits Times* reader, Gan (August 17, 1999) is now found in the *Encarta World English Dictionary*? ■

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