STUDIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Jock O. Wong

The Culture of Singapore English

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This book provides a fresh approach to Singapore English by focusing on its cultural connotations. The author, a native Singaporean, explores a range of aspects of this rich variety of English – including address forms, cultural categories, particles and interjections – and links particular words to particular cultural norms. By using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach, which is free from technical terminology, he explains the relationship between meaning and culture with maximal clarity, and an added strength of this study lies in its use of authentic examples and pictures, which offer a fascinating glimpse of Singaporean life. Through comparisons with Anglo English, it also explores some difficulties associated with Standard English and cultural misunderstanding. Lending a unique local perspective and written with an incisiveness that makes it ideal for both academic and non-academic readers, this book will appeal to all those interested in Singapore English and its cultural values.

JOCK O. WONG is a lecturer at the Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore (NUS).

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Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107033245

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First published 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Wong, Jock
The Culture of Singapore English / Jock O. Wong, National University of Singapore.
pages cm. – (Studies in English language)
ISBN 978-1-107-03324-5 (Hardback)
1. English language–Singapore–Grammar. 2. English language–Variation–Singapore.
3. English language–Social aspects–Singapore. 4. English language–Dialects–Singapore.
5. Language and culture–Singapore. 6. Singapore–Languages. I. Title.
PE3502.S5W66 2014
427′.95957–dc23 2013046908

ISBN 978-1-107-03324-5 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

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Acknowledgements

I would first and foremost like to thank Emeritus Professor Chris Emlyn-Jones (Arts Faculty, Open University), who read the entire manuscript and made many insightful comments for improvement. I thank him for his time, dedication and friendship.

Professor Anna Wierzbicka (Australian National University) gave me many suggestions during my earlier studies on Singapore English, which have contributed to the present book. She has always been there to give me moral support. I cannot thank her enough.

A number of people helped me by giving me comments after reading various chapters (or older versions) of the book. They include, in random order, Professor Cliff Goddard, Maliga, Jeganathan (both of whom do not have surnames), Brian Poole, John Wakefield, Lee Kit Mun (where, being a Chinese name, Lee is the surname), series editor Merja Kytö and the anonymous reviewers invited by the publisher.

Thomas Kuek has been particularly helpful with my data collection. He has also been a constant source of strength and inspiration to me. He has waited excitedly for years to read this book and I thank him for his patience and faith in me.

I am grateful to Daniel Emlyn-Jones for his long-term friendship and encouragement, without which the challenges of writing this book would have been impossible for me to meet. He has also on a number of occasions shared with me his native-speaker intuitions on Anglo English.

I would also like to thank commissioning editor Helen Barton and assistant editor Helena Dowson for their administrative support.

This book builds on a number of my previous studies and I would like to acknowledge the support I received from editors and reviewers of the following publications: *Centre for Advanced Studies Research Papers Series* (National University of Singapore), *Ethnopragmatics: Understanding Discourse in Cultural Context* (edited volume; Mouton de Gruyter), *Intercultural Pragmatics* (Walter de Gruyter), *Journal of Pragmatics* (Elsevier), *Pragmatics and Cognition* (John Benjamins), *RASK* (University Press of Southern Denmark) and *World Englishes* (formerly Blackwell, now Wiley).

Chapter 3 on Singlish forms of address is built on parts of the following papers:

- 2003. The reduplication of Chinese names in Singapore English. *RASK* (19), 47–85.
- 2006. Social hierarchy in the 'speech culture' of Singapore. In Cliff Goddard (ed.), *Ethnopragmatics: Understanding Discourse in Cultural Context*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 99–125.

Chapter 4 on cultural categories is built on parts of the following paper:

- 2006. Contextualizing *aunty* in Singapore English. *World Englishes* 25 (3/4), 451–66.

Parts of Chapter 5 on *can* are based on ideas from the following paper:

- 2004. Cultural scripts, ways of speaking and perceptions of personal autonomy: Anglo English vs Singapore English. *Intercultural Pragmatics*: *Special Issue on Cultural Scripts* 1 (2), 231–48.

Chapter 6 on expressions of certainty and overstatements is based on parts of the following papers:

- 2005. Why you so Singlish *one*? A semantic and cultural interpretation of the Singapore English particle *one*. *Language in Society* 34 (2), 239–75.
- 2004. The reduplication of nominal modifiers in Singapore English: a semantic and cultural interpretation. *World Englishes* 23 (3), 339–54.
- 2008. Anglo English and Singapore English tags: their meanings and cultural significance. *Pragmatics and Cognition* 16 (1), 92–121.

Chapter 7 on particles is based on parts of the following papers:

- The pragmatic particles of Singapore English: a semantic and cultural interpretation. *Journal of Pragmatics* 36, 739–93.
- To speak or not to speak? The 'a' particles of Singlish. *Centre for Advanced Studies Research Papers Series* no. 37. National University of Singapore.

I am indebted to my extended family for providing me with the stimulating, multilingual setting in which I grew up.

As a believer, I would like to thank God for Providence.

Lastly, I would like to thank my mother, Leong Wah Ying (1938–2009), for showing me by the way she lived what it means to be a true Southern Chinese Cantonese. The way she talked never failed to fascinate me. This book is dedicated to the memory of her.

1 English in Singapore

1.1 General remarks

Singapore has four official languages – English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. These four official languages collectively reflect the multiracial[1] make-up of Singapore society. Three of them individually represent the three dominant ethnic or racial groups living in Singapore – Chinese, Malays and Indians. This ensures that all the dominant racial groups feel represented. Among the four official languages, Malay is the national language; it is the language of the national anthem and the national pledge. This language, in particular, reflects Singapore's cultural history as an island first inhabited by Malay-speaking people. Mandarin officially represents the Chinese population in Singapore and is fairly commonly used among those Chinese Singaporeans who have limited access to English. However, the choice of Mandarin to represent the Chinese population in Singapore, which constitutes the most dominant racial group, is an interesting one. In the sixties and even the seventies, Mandarin was not the dominant Chinese language in Singapore. Not many people in those days spoke Mandarin as their native tongue. This is because most of the Chinese people in Singapore were (and still are) ethnically Southern Chinese and spoke Southern Chinese languages, including Fujian (or Hokkien, as it is known locally), Cantonese and Teochew, as their home languages, and although all Chinese languages to a large extent share the same written form, they are mostly mutually unintelligible. This means that Southern-Chinese-speaking Singaporeans have had to learn

[1] Humanities scholars more often than not think in terms of *ethnicity* rather than *race*. However, my use of the word *race* comes from the fact that Singaporeans tend to see each other in terms of *race* (i.e. Chinese, Malay, Indian, and 'others'; see, e.g., Bastion, 2007) rather than *ethnicity*. This way of categorising people is official, even if there is no universal agreement on these categories (for example, some Indians from India I have talked to insist that Indians do not constitute a race). Every Singaporean has an official identity card which states the 'race' of the bearer. The word *race* also appears in the national pledge: 'We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity, and progress for our nation.' The word *race*, whenever it is used in this book, is thus an attempt to reflect the Singaporean perspective rather than any universal, watertight category.

Mandarin (if grudgingly) to speak it well. Presumably, Mandarin was chosen because it is the national language of China and it does not privilege any particular Chinese subcultural group. The spread of Mandarin across time in Singapore may thus be seen as a product of language planning on the part of the government. Tamil, like Mandarin, also does not fully represent all members of the racial group that it is supposed to represent. There are a number of Indian Singaporeans who do not speak Tamil but Hindi and Bengali, for example. However, relative to Mandarin, Tamil has a significantly larger proportion of native speakers.

English is different from the other three official languages in the sense that, not being an Asian language, it obviously does not represent any Singaporean racial group. Rather, it reflects the country's colonial past and functions to unite Singaporeans and to connect them with the rest of the world. Because of what it does, it appears to enjoy a much higher status than the other three official languages. It is the dominant language used in Singapore and in many ways functions like a *de facto* national language. It is used in the parliament, in all public schools and in court, and is heard almost everywhere in Singapore for intraracial and interracial communications. It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that the status of English is even higher than that of Malay, the national language which, paradoxically, the majority of Singaporeans do not speak.

As one of the four official languages, English[2] has played an important role in the national development of Singapore, much greater than that of the other three official languages. Some people, including Singapore's political leaders, even think that the use of English is critical to the survival of the country. Firstly, this is because English connects Singapore with the rest of the world and so it can be part of the global community. Additionally, it allows Singapore to access modern science and technology, which is crucial to the country's development and modernisation. English also allows Singaporeans to access the global market and gives Singapore a competitive edge in doing business with and attracting investors from other parts of the world, which is crucial to the development of the economy of a country that has few or no economically viable natural resources. This indicates that the economic value of English in Singapore can hardly be overstated. Thus, English in Singapore and the country's development are seen to go hand in hand (see Rubdy, 2012). In the words of Alsagoff (2007: 35), 'in the Singapore discourse, the role of English as a global lingua franca is always discussed hand in hand with its economic capital and status as a language of science, commerce and technology'.

[2] I use the word *English* rather broadly or 'loosely' here to refer to any form of English that is, to a significant extent, mutually intelligible with the varieties of English spoken in traditionally native-English-speaking countries such as USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. However, as we shall soon see, this usage of the word is not unproblematic.

Besides its economic value in Singapore, English also has a social role to play. Among Singaporeans, English has for decades been used as the language of communication, especially interracially but increasingly intraracially. As mentioned, the three major ethnic or racial groups in Singapore are the Chinese, the Malays and the Indians, who obviously do not share a common traditional language. Since Singapore is a former British colony, it seems only natural that English has become a language Singaporeans use for interracial communications. Perhaps more importantly, this has also come about because English is seen as a language which is not perceived to give any racial group a linguistic advantage or other privileges over the rest. Within the various racial groups, however, English has not always been an important language for communication, simply because the various groups have their own languages. For the Malays, it has, perhaps until recently, always been Malay. For the Indians, it has been mainly Tamil. For the Chinese, it could be any one of the often mutually unintelligible Southern Chinese languages such as Cantonese and Fujian (Hokkien), or, in recent years, Mandarin. Increasingly, however, while many of the younger generations speak their home language to their parents or grandparents, they use English as a common language among themselves, whether interracially or intraracially. In other words, among younger people, it is not uncommon for (say) a Malay person to speak to another Malay person in English. Even if they do not use English exclusively, a significant portion of their speech is in English. For many younger Chinese people, the use of English among themselves is even more prominent. There is perhaps an explanation for this. As mentioned, Chinese languages are mutually unintelligible and this means that, before English became a socially important language, Chinese Singaporeans did not have a common home language to communicate with each other. They needed to acquire one and they had two choices, Mandarin and English, both of which had to be learned. However, the statuses of these two languages were not equal. In the eighties, English became the medium of instruction in school whereas Mandarin was merely a subject, like, for example, mathematics. This means that many of the younger Chinese Singaporeans then had more exposure and better access to English than Mandarin. Furthermore, English could be used to communicate with the non-Chinese. Above all, Mandarin was something they needed to pass in school, whereas they saw that English had lifelong implications, especially in terms of one's career. All these advantages that English enjoyed are still relevant today. As a result, many younger Chinese people have long turned to English, either exclusively or to a large extent, as a means of communication with other Singaporeans. This last point is worth highlighting – for a number of Chinese Singaporeans, English is a more important language than Mandarin. These people (e.g. the present writer) are usually fluent in English and are less fluent in Mandarin and even their traditional home language; most of them can discuss non-domestic, complex

Figure 1.1. Young Singaporeans who speak a form of English as a dominant home language. Many young Singaporeans (e.g. my nephews Adam, Bryan and Chester, as shown in the picture) speak English at home, unlike their parents, many of whom did not speak English as a dominant language at home when they were children, and grandparents, many of whom do not speak English beyond a few words.

topics (e.g. politics, economics) much more readily in English than they can in any Chinese languages. Many of them actually speak very little Chinese. Even among younger people who speak Mandarin rather fluently, English is often one of the languages they use at home (see Figure 1.1).

The growing importance of English in Singapore can be seen in the data presented in Tables 1.1 and 1.2 (source: Department of Statistics Singapore, Census of Population 2000[3] and 2010[4]). Table 1.1 shows the proportion of people who speak English as the dominant home language. As can be seen, over the ten years between 2000 and 2010, the proportion of people who speak English as the dominant home language increased for all ethnicities. Table 1.2 shows the percentage increase in the proportion of people speaking English at home over the ten-year period. As is obvious, Malay people account for the highest percentage of increase of over 100 per cent. It seems that Malay people, who at one stage represented the ethnicity most resistant

[3] www.singstat.gov.sg/Publications/publications_and_papers/cop2000/cop2000r2.html ('Language Most Frequently Spoken at Home', table 30)

[4] www.singstat.gov.sg/Publications/publications_and_papers/cop2010/census10_stat_release1.html ('Language Most Frequently Spoken at Home', table 48)

Table 1.1. *Number and proportion of people (five and above) who speak English as the dominant home language by ethnicity*

	2000			2010		
	English	Total	Proportion (%)	English	Total	Proportion (%)
Malay	32,173	405,602	7.9	78,098	459,210	17.01
Indian	75,079	211,015	35.58	125,076	300,587	41.61
Chinese	533,948	2,236,061	23.89	824,616	2,527,562	32.62
Total	665,087	2,887,552	23.03	1,097,443	3,399,054	32.29

Table 1.2. *Percentage increase in the proportion of people (five and above) who speak English as the dominant home language by ethnicity*

	2000 (%)	2010 (%)	Percentage increase
Malay	7.9	17.01	115.32
Indian	35.58	41.61	16.95
Chinese	23.89	32.62	36.54
Total	23.03	32.29	40.21

Table 1.3. *Number and proportion of people (aged 15–44) who are literate in English*

2000[a]			2010[b]		
English	Total	Proportion (%)	English	Total	Proportion (%)
1,627,867	2,494,630	65.25	2,326,025	3,105,748	74.89

[a] www.singstat.gov.sg/Publications/publications_and_papers/cop2000/cop2000r2.html ('Language Literate In' table 20)
[b] www.singstat.gov.sg/Publications/publications_and_papers/cop2010/census10_stat_release1.html ('Language Literate In' table 39)

to language shift (from a non-English home language to English), are now trying to 'catch up' with the rest.

Literacy in English has also experienced a change in the positive direction. As Table 1.3 shows, the number of Singaporeans who can be said to be literate in English now accounts for about three-quarters of the population, an increase of almost 15 per cent from ten years before.

Even without the benefit of data, the widespread use of English in this small country is readily observable. English can be heard almost everywhere in Singapore;[5] even the speech of Singaporeans who do not speak English is marked by a number of English words or expressions. In fact, Singapore

[5] Obviously, this phenomenon is not unique to Singapore; it is happening or beginning to happen in a number of countries or cultures (see Rapatahana and Bunce, 2012).

seems to be one of the few former non-English-speaking British colonies where English is given the status of an official language and used so pervasively amongst its citizens. Therefore, Pakir's (1991: 174) description of the use of English in Singapore as 'near-universal' is hardly an exaggeration.

At this point, it must be said that, like many other English-speaking societies, the English that is used in Singapore is not monolithic but comes in varieties. As evidenced in public discourse and academic literature, the common perception seems to be that there are two main varieties of English used in Singapore (Cavallaro and Ng, 2009). These are the standard variety and the non-standard, colloquial variety. The standard variety is sometimes termed *Standard English* in public discourse and usually *Standard Singapore English* in academic literature. While there do not seem to be many studies that focus on Standard Singapore English, it is thought to be a variety that is structurally similar to varieties of Standard English elsewhere (e.g. Pakir, 1991; Gupta, 1992a, b) and is usually associated with speakers who have gone through a significant amount of formal education. It has also been described as the variety of Singapore English that is most intelligible to speakers of other varieties of English. As one study suggests, the 'well-educated' variety of Singapore English 'is highly intelligible both for speakers of other varieties of English and for speakers of languages other than English, as long as their own level of English is proficient' (Kirkpatrick and Saunders, 2005: 160).

On the other hand, the colloquial variety (which is the focus of this book) is commonly referred to as *Singlish* (a blend from *Singapore* and *English*), or in academic literature *Singapore colloquial English* (SCE) or *colloquial Singapore English* (CSE), and it is the variety of English in Singapore that brings both pride and shame to their speakers. It should be noted at this juncture that the term *Singapore English* may be polysemous. It could refer collectively to the varieties of English used in Singapore (e.g. Standard Singapore English, non-Standard or colloquial Singapore English) and it could also be used to refer specifically to the non-standard variety commonly known as *Singlish*. Usually, the context makes the sense clear. In this book, unless the context indicates otherwise, *Singapore English* and *Singlish* are used interchangeably.

Interestingly, while for some time academic writers had resisted using the word *Singlish* in their writing, in recent years the word has gained acceptance in scholarly circles (e.g. Chng, 2003; Bokhorst-Heng, 2005; Wee, 2005; Farrell and Tan, 2007; Tan and Tan, 2008), which tells us that it is formally recognised as an autonomous, distinct language variety worthy of a name that is more than just a description. Singlish differs significantly from Standard English at all levels (i.e. phonological, intonational, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic) and has been the subject of study for many scholars. Since the seventies, many publications have been devoted to

the study of the various aspects of Singlish (e.g. Tongue, 1979; Pakir, 1992b; Gupta, 1994; Foley *et al.*, 1998; Brown *et al.*, 2000; Ooi, 2001; Low and Brown, 2003, 2005; Deterding *et al.*, 2003, 2005; Lim, 2004b; Deterding, 2007). A great number of these publications look at the formal and lexical aspects of Singlish, while some others discuss its sociolinguistic features and implications. Amid all these discussions on Singlish, we have come to some understanding of its phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon and even its social status. However, while attempts to describe the various aspects of Singlish may appear comprehensive, there are gaps. Relatively speaking, not much has been said about the semantics of Singlish and even less when it comes to its pragmatics and culture.

In the face of abundant evidence that language and culture are inextricably linked, as we shall soon see, it seems remarkable that while so much work has been done on the formal aspects of Singlish, so much less has been done on its cultural aspects (but see, e.g., Ho, 1992, 2001; Wierzbicka, 2003a; Wong, 2004a, b, c, 2005, 2006a, b, 2008). The modest amount of work done on the cultural components of Singlish seems to lag significantly behind the huge amount of work done on its form, leaving a rather wide gap. This book represents a modest attempt to narrow this gap. Through studying the meanings of several Singlish words and speech acts, it tries to capture the cultural components of Singlish – the values it carries, the biases it encapsulates, and the perspectives it represents. For the purposes of this book, mainly authentic data collected by the author from face-to-face conversations (recorded using pen and paper only), emails and internet chats are used and, unless otherwise stated, all data presented come from this collection. Overall, this book on the cultural components of Singlish can be seen as a pioneering attempt to examine on a large scale some of the meanings and collective ways of thinking that Singlish words and speech acts embody. It attempts to shed light on how Singaporeans use Singlish to express their cultural needs and what some of these cultural needs are. It is ultimately a book about the culture of Singlish.

1.2 Standard English in Singapore

As discussions of English in Singapore often make reference to the notion of Standard English, a variety of English that enjoys overt prestige in Singapore, it might be helpful to discuss what it refers to. It should be made clear right from the beginning of this discussion that no attempt is made to define what Standard English is, since a number of scholars have done so (e.g. Trudgill, 2011) and that is not the focus of this monograph. Rather, this section attempts to discuss what Standard English might refer to in the Singapore context, which could provide a backdrop for an understanding and appreciation of what Singlish is about.

It would appear that the conventional way to conceive Standard English is to think in terms of a few sets of rules, depending on the location (e.g. Standard American English vs Standard British English), that native speakers accept for use in formal situations or in situations where social distance is maximally observed. It might be added that, as indicated in many discussions of Standard English, the rules referred to are usually grammatical rules and, perhaps to a lesser degree, lexical rules. In other words, Standard English is usually expected to be understood in terms of a set of grammatical rules (e.g. Trudgill, 2011) and not pragmatic rules. Evidence for this comes from claims like: Standard Singapore English 'does not exhibit major differences from other versions of Standard English around the globe' (Leimgruber, 2011: 47), a claim that a number of scholars share (e.g. Gupta, 1992; Cavallaro and Ng, 2009). Obviously, similarities between Standard Singapore English and varieties of Standard English elsewhere refer to similarities in form, as there is simply no evidence that speakers from different cultures are all familiar with 'native' English norms and 'use' Standard English in similar ways.

While Standard English is often discussed with respect to the written form, a relevant question might be whether Standard English exists as a spoken variety, just as Singlish is understood to be a colloquial variety. Trudgill seems to think that a spoken variety exists, as evident in some of his statements like, 'And even in England we can note that there is a small amount of geographical variation at least in spoken Standard English. . .' (Trudgill, 2011: n.p.). In the Singapore context, Cavallaro and Ng state that it is 'widely accepted' among scholarly circles 'that [Singapore Colloquial English and Singapore Standard English] are the two main varieties of English *spoken* in Singapore' (2009: 146, my italics). An argument in support of the existence of spoken Standard English is that anything written could be spoken as, for example, in a formal speech or news broadcast. Admittedly, it may be difficult to conceive of Standard English as a spoken variety simply because English speakers often speak with contractions and in fragments. In unmarked, informal situations, people often do not speak in complete, Standard English sentences.

Fortunately, for the purposes of this book, the question of whether Standard English exists as a spoken variety is, in this author's view, unimportant. What is important is that Singaporeans believe that Standard English does exist as a spoken variety. The idea that Standard English can exist as a spoken variety is also an idea that the government of Singapore promotes and perpetuates through the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM),[6] a movement steered by a quasi-government committee comprising a number of government and professional parties (e.g. representatives

[6] See www.goodenglish.org.sg

from the Ministry of Education, the National Institute of Education, the National University of Singapore, Singapore Press Holdings). As written on one of the pages of the movement's homepage (original bold, italics mine):

> Guided by this year's tagline, '**Be Understood. Not only in Singapore, Malaysia and Batam**.' the Speak Good English Movement 2006 is urging Singaporeans to make a conscious effort to read, listen to, write and *speak* Standard English that is understood not just locally, but internationally.[7]

On another page entitled 'Asking your child questions in Standard English', Singaporean parents are encouraged to ask their children questions in Standard English; for example, a directive given on the webpage is 'You should use "*won't they*" as a question tag at the end of the sentence because it should match with "will be" in the main sentence' – a response to a given example of an ungrammatical sentence: 'Your friends will be coming this afternoon, is it?'[8] Apparently, Standard English could also be used to tell stories, which could in turn be used to teach Standard English.[9]

The most telling piece of evidence that Singapore believes in a spoken variety of Standard English comes from a page from the SGEM homepage entitled 'Using Standard English at Home', an effort made jointly with the Regional English Language Centre (RELC).[10] Even though there are undisputed differences between spoken and written varieties of English (or any language), to the SGEM any differences seem to be insignificant and the two varieties may be discussed as one. This way of thinking is evident in the statement 'children enter school speaking English, but not the type of English that is required for academic work and examinations'. By implication, in Singapore, spoken English could be of the type that is required for written academic work and examinations; the SGEM expects Singaporean children to speak academic English in all formal and informal situations.

Given that Singaporeans believe in a spoken variety of Standard English, it may be interesting to note that the term *Standard English* is not commonly used in public discourse or, at least, not as commonly as the term *Good English*. The movement mentioned above is a 'Speak Good English' movement, not a 'Speak Standard English' movement. In one of their

[7] www.goodenglish.org.sg/movement/over-the-years/2006/media-releases-2006/using-standard-english-is-the-way-to-be-understood

[8] www.goodenglish.org.sg/workshop-resources/tips-parents/asking-your-child-questions-in-standard-english

[9] www.goodenglish.org.sg/movement/over-the-years/2007/partner-prog-2007/switch-on-to-standard-english-interactive-storytelling-sessions; www.goodenglish.org.sg/movement/over-the-years/2005/partner-prog-2005/fun-with-stories

[10] www.goodenglish.org.sg/movement/over-the-years/2008/partner-prog-2008/using-standard-spoken-english-at-home

publications (2000: 1, italics added), it is stated that its aim is 'to sensitise Singaporeans to features of Singlish so that they will make the effort to speak *good* English'. In the book, the authors contrast Singlish with 'Good English' and make clear that 'Standard English' is 'good English' (p. 2). This suggests that while linguists like Trudgill (2011) consider Standard English to be an English dialect, Singaporeans tend to see it as a 'good' kind of English (SGEM Committee, 2000: 2). To the best of my knowledge, in the Singapore context, Standard English has never been described as an English dialect.[11]

Now that it may be established that, in Singaporean discourse, Standard English is conceptualised as Good English, a discussion of what constitutes Good English is in order. Without delving into the topic, evidence seems to suggest that, in the Singaporean mind, Good English has much to do with grammar and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the right choice of words, and pronunciation. For example, the SGEM website and publications feature numerous examples of the Standard English versions of Singlish in terms of grammar and lexicon. The website also features a 'Pronunciation Guide', which urges Singaporeans to 'Say it right!' All this suggests that by the term *Good English*, Singaporeans refer to sets of forms that prescribe how English is to be spoken and written.

The Singaporean emphasis on form seems to be consistent with conventional scholarly approaches to Standard English. While Trudgill, for example, does not appear to think that Standard English could be defined phonologically, as when he says that 'the differences between Standard English and other dialects cannot be phonological' (2011: n.p.), he does say that 'Standard English is a social dialect which is distinguished from other dialects of the language by its *grammatical* forms' (2011: n.p., original emphasis). It should be added that Trudgill's de-emphasis on phonological rules relates to differences among 'native' varieties of English. His attitude towards phonological idiosyncrasies of Standard Singapore English is not apparent.

Needless to say, linguists tend to take a descriptive approach to Singlish and one of the implications of this approach (in the area of language pedagogy) is nicely summarised by Wilkinson (1995: 61): 'For the purposes of teaching, teachers need to prepare pupils so that they know how and when to use Standard English and know the contexts in which non-Standard forms

[11] One of the reasons seems to be that in Singapore, the word *dialect* is not normally used in its Standard English sense. Rather, it is seen as an equivalent of the Mandarin term 方言 (*fāng yǎn* 'area language' or 'the language of an area'). In Singapore, following China, all Chinese languages are considered *fāng yǎn* or 'dialects' except Mandarin, which is upheld as the Standard Chinese language. This seems to imply that there is no such thing as, say, Standard Cantonese, which is not true. In Hong Kong, for example, the variety of Cantonese used in news broadcast and in courtrooms may be considered a Standard variety of Hong Kong Cantonese.

are more appropriate and meaningful.' By contrast, the Singaporean approach to Standard English may be considered generally evaluative, evidenced in (as mentioned) the use of the term *Good English* to describe Standard English. By implication, it seems that non-Standard varieties of English are considered bad and unsuitable for use at all, even at home or in public places, such as food courts, where many of the food providers do not have access to Standard English or any form of English beyond a few words.[12] Of course, opinions differ and there are Singaporeans who defend the use of non-Standard Singapore English but what is discussed here is at least the official stand, which is also embraced by a number of Singaporean supporters.

1.3 Singlish and Singlish culture

There was a time when linguistics was 'best known as the formal study of grammatical systems' (Gumperz, 1972: 203). At that time, the study of syntax dominated the linguistic scene. As Wierzbicka (1996: 7) once said:

> At the same time, however, I think that the Bloomfieldian and Chomskyan anti-semantic bias is still hanging over linguistics like a dark shadow. The fact that 'formal syntax' still occupies a prominent place in the curricula of many linguistic departments at the expense of the study of language as an instrument for conveying meaning, gives sufficient substance to this claim.

This longstanding formal approach to linguistics seems to assume that language is little more than a set of words and formal rules that can exist in a cultural vacuum and this was exactly how it was studied in many instances – in a cultural vacuum. In fact, even today, some scholars may still hold such a view; by the word *English*, some scholars may mean 'a certain grammar and lexicon' (Pennycook, 2012: 260), without considering its pragmatic and cultural components.

In the Singapore context, this approach is clearly seen in the ways some writers focus mainly or solely on the formal aspects of Singlish in their attempts to provide Standard English equivalents (e.g. SGEM Committee, 2000; Melcher, 2002); to them, speaking a standard variety of English is mainly about getting the form right, as if it is mainly about mutual intelligibility. Even in scholarly circles, language is usually more closely associated with form than culture; to describe a language is usually understood to be a formal description and the term 'linguistic analysis' usually refers to formal (phonological, morphological, syntactic) analysis. For example, in Deterding's (2007) *Singapore English*, two chapters are devoted to

[12] www.goodenglish.org.sg/movement/over-the-years/2010/media-release-2010/the-speak-good-english-movement-2010-calls-for-role-models-to-make-good-english-widely-spoken-and-heard

phonetics, phonology, morphology and syntax, and one chapter to discourse and lexis, with nothing on culture. This acultural orientation to language necessarily disregards aspects of language that have to do with connecting or communicating with people in the real world – pragmatics and pragmatic meanings in a cultural context.

However, the good news is that, increasingly, scholars seem to recognise that it is more fruitful to study and understand language with respect to the culture in which it is used. In fact, one of the main tenets of this book is that language is inextricably tied to culture and is evolved to meet the cultural needs of its speakers (in addition to their semantic needs), a notion that has been explored and confirmed by a number of scholars. 'To speak' means 'above all to assume a culture' (Fanon, 1968: 17) and while we sometimes talk about language and culture as though they are separate entities, I agree with Agar when he says, 'Culture is *in* language, and language is *loaded with* culture' (2007: 23; italics added). Obviously, by the word *culture*, one can refer to a host of things, like art, music, literature, and cuisine (see also Goddard, 2005). However, for the purposes of this book, it refers mainly to values, biases, world views, and generally things that people need to know to get along with each other. It refers particularly to what one can/cannot do/say in a particular situation, what one should/shouldn't do/say, and what is good/bad to do/say, etc., which can be radically different from culture to culture.

Interestingly, a traditionally held view seems to be that there must exist culturally independent ways of defining Singlish. This sentiment has to do with the view that any attempts to claim that (i) Singlish expresses Singaporean values and that (ii) Singlish is identifiable because of the values that are expressed are circular. Admittedly, there may indeed be independent ways of identifying aspects of Singlish. For example, a number of Singlish formal features are well documented and known. These include, phonologically, final consonant deletions, the avoidance of consonant clusters, a preference for monophthongs, the shortening of long vowels and, syntactically, the variable use of tense markers, agreement markers, copulas, auxiliaries, to name a few (see, e.g., Deterding and Hvitfeldt, 1994; Lim, 2004b; Deterding, 2007; Leimgruber, 2011, 2013). These features mainly reflect formal, acultural aspects of Singlish. However, as is argued here, a language is more than its form. There are pragmatic aspects of language that are closely associated with the culture in which the language is developed or evolved and it would not be helpful to discuss these features without reference to the cultural context in which they are used. I would thus argue that, as far as pragmatic features are concerned, it may be difficult to find a culturally independent way of recognising Singlish. Take, for example, the use of the imperative. This feature can be generated by Standard English grammar and seems to be syntactically unremarkable. However, from a pragmatic and cultural perspective, it is noted that, among

native varieties of English, its use in unmarked situations is restricted because its use might violate the rule that requires people not to impose their will on others (Wierzbicka, 2003a). By contrast, in Singapore culture and in many other non-Anglo cultures, the imperative is routinely used in unmarked situations and unremarkably so. This is because, in such cultures, respect for one's autonomy is not a cultural imperative and their members constantly feel obliged to do things for one another, often without even being asked. From an English perspective, it would seem that Singaporeans are constantly telling others what to do without being considered rude. It therefore seems reasonable to say that the significance of the use of the imperative in Singlish can only be understood with respect to a cultural context. This example highlights the idea that a formal Standard English feature may actually become an important pragmatic and hence cultural feature of Singlish, and the use of which in Singlish becomes much more common than in Standard English. Language and culture go hand in hand and '[a] person who is supposed to have learned a language without understanding its culture has at best mastered its lexicon and grammar' and has not mastered its 'essence' (Wong, 2010: 2932). In fact, it might be argued here that the word *Singlish* itself reflects a cultural notion, not a formal one.

The idea that it is difficult to identify a culturally significant linguistic feature without referring to culture is also implied in Wierzbicka's claim that there is no 'objective discovery procedure' for identifying cultural keywords in any language (1997: 16). According to her, one 'has to make a case for it' (1997: 16). Identification is difficult because a culturally important linguistic feature does not come in a standard form; it could be a word, a morpheme, a phrase, a proverb, a formulaic exchange, a grammatical structure or even an intonation. Some of these features are salient to all native speakers while others are as invisible as the air we breathe. Some of these features are consciously taught by parents whereas some others are acquired subconsciously. Some are acquired early in life, as a child, but there are others that are acquired much later when one starts to socialise with friends. Some of these are important in one dialect but less so in another. There is thus no single discovery procedure. Without making a case for it, it is difficult to say, objectively, whether a linguistic feature is culturally important.

The intimate relationship between language and culture cannot be overemphasised and studies on a number of languages and biographical accounts from bilingual writers have concluded that language can indeed be intimately related to culture, in the sense that the words, grammar and speech acts of a language can reflect important cultural norms and values. The languages studied for some of the values they embody include English (e.g. Wierzbicka, 2002a, 2004b, 2006a, b, 2013), Afro-American English (e.g. Kochman, 1981), Australian English (e.g. Béal, 1992; Wierzbicka, 2002b; Goddard, 2006a; Peeters, 2004a, b), Colombian Spanish

(e.g. Travis, 2004, 2005, 2006), French (e.g. Peeters, 2000), Korean (e.g. Yoon, 2004, 2005), Mandarin Chinese (e.g. Ye, 2004a, b, 2006), Malay (e.g. Goddard, 1996, 1997, 2001), Russian (e.g. Gladkova, 2007a, b, 2008), Singapore English (e.g. Ho, 1992, 2001; Wierzbicka, 2003b; Wong, 2004a, b, c, 2005, 2006a, b, 2008), West African languages (e.g. Ameka, 2006; Ameka and Breedveld, 2004) and many others (e.g. Enfield, 2002; Goddard, 1998, 2003, 2006b, 2008; Lee, 2003; Wierzbicka, 1992, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003a, 2004a, 2006a; Besemeres and Wierzbicka, 2007).

1.4 History of English in Singapore

According to Kachru's (1985: 12) model of world Englishes, Singlish may be considered an 'outer-circle' English. This is because Singlish is a product of the spread and institutionalisation of English in a former non-native context. However, although it first started as a foreign language and later became a second language to many, Singlish is now spoken natively or at least 'co-natively' with another language such as Mandarin or Malay by a number of young Singaporeans.

When Singapore gained independence in 1965, English was not spoken by the majority of Singaporeans, even though it was the language of government administration and there were English-medium schools. Partly, this was because few people attended school beyond primary level in those days. Moreover, English-medium schools also faced competition from Chinese-medium and Malay-medium schools. Because many people did not receive formal education in those days, the dominant languages used socially were the native languages of the island's multiracial people, such as Cantonese, Fujian and Malay. Therefore, while a form of English was the language of the government, it was unfamiliar to many of the common people.

However, the sociolinguistic situation soon changed. Although their parents did not speak English to them, many people born in the sixties and seventies, such as the present writer, became the first generation in the family to speak some form of English. Partly, this is because in the non-English-medium schools at the time, English was taught as a second language (Lim and Foley, 2004). Moreover, recognising the importance of a form of English for international communication and economic progress, the Singapore government mandated the use of English as the medium of instruction in all schools in the eighties (Koh, 2010) and since then it has become mandatory for all secondary school students in Singapore to sit for English Language and the General Paper in the Cambridge examinations (General Certificate of Education, 'Ordinary' and 'Advanced' levels). Making English a compulsory subject in school was immediately useful for the multiracial students. Because students in those days spoke different languages at home, the English that they learned in school conveniently became a tool for them to socialise with one other. They did not have to

learn other students' languages like many of their parents had to as they had English. As a result, more and more people started to use a form of English as their dominant social language – first among schoolmates and siblings and later among friends outside school. Eventually a form of English became the dominant language used in Singapore today. Therefore, it might be said that modern-day Singapore English, or Singlish, originated in the classroom.

The variety of English taught in the classroom is often thought or expected to be modelled on British English (see Farrell and Tan, 2007). After all, as mentioned, secondary school students had to sit for Cambridge examinations. However, although there are obviously similarities between British English and the English used in Singapore, these similarities are overshadowed by their differences. It appears that by the term British English, teachers mainly refer to form (mainly words and grammar). Therefore, students in Singapore are taught English words, spelling, morphology and grammar but not the pragmatics of English and the values embodied in its words, phrases and grammar. An example of an English form that is taught without its associated value is the question tag. When teaching the question tag, Singaporean teachers mainly instruct students how to formulate it, i.e. to reverse the polarity of the auxiliary or the modal. They do not teach students (probably because they do not understand it themselves) the cultural function of question tags, which according to one study is an acknowledgement of 'possible differences between individual points of view' (Wierzbicka, 2003a: 37). Presumably as a result, many Singaporeans do not use the question tag or, at least, not according to British English norms. Instead, they grammatically modify the English question tag to express a different, Singaporean way of thinking (see Chapter 8 on question tags).

Teaching English forms without culture therefore poses a problem. Singaporean students in the seventies and eighties might have found that many of the English forms they learned (e.g. question tags) in school did not make sense from a semantic and cultural perspective. Presumably as a result, many of these forms have become variable in use or experienced a drop in the frequency of use. A good example is the use of a variety of question forms to get people to do things (e.g. *Do this, would you?*). The variety of such question forms in Singlish is not only limited compared with British English, they are also in many instances replaced by a direct imperative (e.g. *Open the door!*), which has restricted use in British English. The fact that few people have acknowledged seems to be that Standard English may not be sufficient or efficient for expressing ideas and values that Singaporeans want to express on an everyday basis. Learning a new language to communicate with each other was not enough for Singaporeans. They needed to modify the language, significantly in some respects, to meet their communicative and cultural needs. It may thus be said that while Singapore English is formally derived from British English, it is culturally

rather far removed from its formal origin and is in this sense not a variety of British English; even if a Singaporean remains faithful to Standard English grammar and words, their Singapore English pragmatics can be very different from that of a native British English speaker. Singapore English as a whole has been and continues to be shaped by Singapore culture.

1.5 Social status of and attitudes towards Singlish

Although Singlish is commonly used by Singaporeans from all walks of life in all but the most formal situations, its use in Singapore is not uncontroversial and a number of locals actually consider it bad or ungrammatical English. Furthermore, although it has been attested in many societies that different varieties of a language can co-exist (e.g. Cockney English and Middle-Class English in the UK), the official or the government's stand in Singapore, which many Singaporeans seem to share but which some scholars question (e.g. Chng, 2003), is that Singlish inhibits the learning of Standard English and therefore has no place in society, not even at home. The controversy thus has to do with whether Singlish should be allowed to thrive or be abandoned, and this topic has been the subject of much public debate (see Bokhurst-Heng, 2005).

While supporters of Singlish convincingly argue that the language fosters social cohesion among Singaporeans and is a marker of national identity, opponents remain unconvinced. One of the strongest opponents of Singlish is, ironically, the Singapore government, which seems to be trying its best to stigmatise Singlish and eliminate it from the Singapore scene altogether through public education, public discourse, and above all the SGEM (see, e.g., Chng, 2003; Bokhorst-Heng, 2005; Wee, 2005). The SGEM in particular aims to promote and educate the public on the use of Standard English, rendering it an 'officially sanctioned' variety (Sykes, 2010), and, at the same time, discourage the use of Singlish through advertisements, booklets and activities (e.g. 'spot-the-error' photography competitions). The main argument which the Singapore government and other opponents use against Singlish is that it is 'bad English'. To meet their objectives, they have creatively employed a host of derogative adjectives to describe the language variety: ungrammatical, truncated, incomprehensible, poor, corrupted (see Bokhurst-Heng, 2005: 203). It is also thought to be in competition with Standard English, even though, as Chng (2003) points out, no evidence has been provided to support the idea that Singlish is an obstacle to learning Standard English. For all these reasons, opponents hold that Singlish is detrimental to the globalisation and economic progress of Singapore. It is thus a feature Singapore can do without. At the same time, the government has also employed a host of positive adjectives to sing the praises of its rival, Standard English: good (English), proper, excellent, elegant, witty (Bokhurst-Heng, 2005: 203; SGEM Committee, 2000: 2).

Additionally, the SGEM Committee declares that Standard English or, rather, good English 'makes speakers sound professional and highly educated' (2000: 2). Needless to say, books have been published, such as *Speak Well: Be Understood* (SGEM Committee, 2000) and *Unlearning Singlish* (Melcher, 2002), with a view to promoting the use of Standard English and eliminating Singlish from Singapore's cultural landscape.

However, it would appear that the idea that Singlish is an obstacle to the learning of Standard English is misplaced and reflects a rather myopic view. The argument for this is rather straightforward. Standard English or, rather, British English was introduced to and used in Singapore by its colonial masters long before Singlish was spoken; the British founded Singapore in 1819, almost 200 years ago, but Singlish has only been around for the last forty years or so.[13] Standard English had had many opportunities before the advent of Singlish to establish itself as the common language among Singaporeans but it has not done so. Clearly, there were practical reasons for this and Singlish was not one of them. Therefore, it seems very reasonable to conclude that if there is an obstacle to the learning of English, Singlish is not it. Parties who want to look for something to blame may have to look elsewhere but, interestingly, Singlish does give us a clue as to who the 'culprit' is. As is widely known among Singlish scholars and insiders, Singlish is marked by a number of Chinese features, phonologically, morphologically, lexically, syntactically, and pragmatically – i.e. at all levels. If the 'input' in an English-language classroom is a variety of English that is maximally grammatical with respect to Standard English and the 'output' outside the classroom (or perhaps even inside) is a variety of English that contains numerous Chinese features at all levels, with minimal semblance to Standard English, the only logical conclusion seems to be that the obstacle is in fact Chinese, not Singlish. Singlish is clearly the product of Singaporeans' perceived failure to fully master Standard English, not the cause.

Notwithstanding, Singlish is still a bane of the society that the Singapore government wants to remove and their efforts (and the SGEM Committee's) to promote the use of Standard English have met with positive responses, at least among some sectors of the population. There seems to be a general understanding that the ability to speak a Standard variety of English, presumably because of its perceived association with formal education, is a key to job opportunities and perhaps even economic success. In a recent study that explored, among other things, the attitudes of Singaporean tertiary students (19–23 years old) towards the two varieties

[13] In the view of this author, a Singaporean who lived through the seventies and the eighties in Singapore, although one of the first descriptions of the use of English in Singapore was published in the seventies (e.g. Tongue, 1979), Singlish only firmly established itself in the eighties, the decade when English became the medium of instruction in all public schools and Singaporeans who learned English in schools in the seventies had sufficient command of the language to use it fluently (if ungrammatically) and routinely.