# The Unspeakable Singaporean Identity

Emily Ding

Singapore's policy of having English as its official working language has enabled it to compete commercially with Western countries in the global arena. At home, however, its multi-ethnic population has developed and united under a unique tongue of its own – Singlish – a creole of English that has become an integral aspect of Singaporeans' national identity. Nevertheless, Singlish is regarded by many as an improper way of speaking English and has been explicitly discouraged by policy makers. Code-switching is therefore proposed as a viable means by which both Singlish and Standard English can co-exist without jeopardizing the objectives of maintaining Standard English as the official working language.

As the hegemonic forces of globalization take the world by storm, cultures are blending and different ethnicities are coming together to exchange information and learn about each other at an unprecedented rate. However, a broad definition of globalization could easily argue that the process is much older than we think. Historically, cultural exchanges have been an integral aspect of interactions between different ethnic groups that can be traced back to the era of colonization. These crucial years in which British officers ventured into the 'unmapped' regions of the globe were responsible for the development of English as the global language we recognize it to be today. Singapore, a member of the Commonwealth, has since created its own local creole that reflects the ethnic diversity of its people: an amalgamation of English, Chinese dialects, Malay, and Tamil, commonly referred to as Singlish. This home-grown icon of Singaporean culture has made its way into the hearts of Singaporeans, and onto the hit-list of their government, a staunch proponent of Standard English. Despite the Singaporean government's efforts to stymie the use of Singlish in everyday contexts, this unique variety of colloquial English has become so ingrained into Singaporeans' national identity that it ought to be nationally accepted as a common native tongue while co-existing, not conflicting, with the objectives of using Standard English as an official working language.

With the arrival of British officers in 1819 came the introduction of English to Singapore's shores (Leimgruber 1). Colonization saw the transformation of Singapore from a small, nondescript fishing village into a rapidly growing regional entrepôt of importance, given its strategic geographic location and free trade policy. The influx of international trade brought in merchants and migrants from China, India and European countries (Chua 185), who needed to use English in order to facilitate trading activities. In addition, several English-medium schools were set up and children were taught British English by Christian missionaries (Leimgruber 3). Essentially, English became the colonizer-enforced *lingua franca* of the community; a gatekeeper for daily interactions and transactions. In a society steeped with the ideology of Eurocentrism, Queen's English became the hallmark of the upper echelons of society with greater power and prestige, consisting of British officers and the select few Asians privileged enough to associate with them.

The status of English as having a "privileged place in Singapore" (Leimgruber 9) has been evident since the Singaporean government's implementation of English as its official working language, upon achieving independence from the British in 1965. This policy was enacted in recognition of English's "importance… for international

communication and economic progress" (Wong 14). In addition, English was mandated as the medium of instruction for all schools, with the introduction of a Bilingualism Policy requiring students to study English as a first language, as well as their own mother tongue in school. The model for the teaching of English in schools "[sought] to reflect an International Standard English close to British English" (Thumboo 271). Since English was not commonly spoken at home, Colloquial Singaporean English, or Singlish as it is commonly termed, essentially "originated in the classroom" (Wong 15) as students of different ethnicities conversed with one another in their newly-learned common language, while interspersing their speech with words from their own native tongues.

Singlish is a creole of English: a "product of 'influence' from languages spoken in Singapore" (Wong 33), mainly Chinese dialects, and Malay. It is "marked by a number of Southern Chinese features" (34) such as pronunciation of words, grammatical structure and some aspects of its lexicon (34). The native Singlish speaker's sing-song inflexions are reminiscent of the tonality in Mandarin and other Chinese dialects like Hokkien and Cantonese. Suffixes and particles such as "one", "*lah*", and "*lor*" are commonly used to add or change the meaning of a sentence, while honorifics and a specialized lexicon reflect cultural nuances and stereotypes commonly found in Singaporean society, such as the innate desire to grasp at every opportunity so as not to lose out, described as "*kiasu*", a recent inductee to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED Online).

The rise of Singlish as the default vernacular has put it at odds with Standard English as taught in schools. English has long enjoyed a place of privilege in postcolonial Singapore, and today, continues to be highly valued officially for its benefits in a globalized world. As an official language, English is prioritized above Chinese, Malay and Tamil, being the link that "connects Singapore with the rest of the world" (Wong 2), allowing Singaporeans to gain "access [to] modern science and technology…and the global market, and [giving them] a competitive edge" (2) for foreign investments and other business-related transactions. It is therefore a commonly-held belief that "non-proficient speakers are significantly disadvantaged" (Leimgruber 9) for their inability to access positions of prestige, being linguistically impaired, and therefore ill-equipped for the international arena.

This social stratification is further complicated by another popular attitude, especially among those in the heartlands, that Singlish is the language of the people. In the similar way in which English once was the common denominator between schoolchildren in the 1980s, Singlish is the *lingua franca* that places all Singaporeans on common ground today. By contrast, "English is the language of the elites" (Stroud and Wee 37). Given the unequal value attributed to both dialects, the way a person speaks English has become an indicator of his or her upbringing and social status. It is common for students in public neighborhood schools to hear and speak only Singlish. In a study of the teaching of English in Singapore, it was found that even English teachers, when instructing their students, often used Singlish to explain concepts to their class (42). While this seems to help students to understand lectures with greater ease, it does appear to be a counterproductive endeavor. On the other hand, students in elite schools, especially those founded by Europeans during colonial times, are exposed daily to Standard English, and taught to speak in a manner that tends toward Received Pronunciation.

Just as locals who spoke fluent English once were regarded with disdain as those who willingly subjugated themselves to Eurocentric ideology, in the present context, speakers of fluent Standard English can often be regarded as elitists who are out of touch with the rest of their fellow countrymen and would rather place themselves on a pedestal. Research has shown that among Singaporean teenagers, speaking Standard English is associated with "the fear of being labelled an attention-seeker or snob" (Stroud and Wee 39). In this light, fluency in Singlish is a symbol of safety, authenticity, and solidarity with the rest of Singapore. An informal survey of 750 undergraduates at the National University of Singapore found that 75.3% of respondents considered Singlish to be the feature that is most uniquely Singaporean (38). This demonstrates the commonly-held belief on the ground that Singlish is an intrinsic part of Singaporean culture and identity.

The formation of a national Singaporean identity is an issue of particular interest to policy makers. Given the ancestral heritage of Singaporeans that spans South and East Asia, the government has faced the mammoth task of developing an identity that unites its people under their new "Singaporean-ness", in what comparative politics professor Dr. Stephan Ortmann considers "a prime example of the attempt to construct an authoritarian civic national identity" (24). This policy aiming to create a Singaporean identity impacts the populace at the most foundational level, as the compulsory national primary school syllabus requires all students to study Social Studies, and other subjects often include anecdotes of Singaporean history or present-day achievements for purposes of "National Education". On a larger, national scale, the government and quasi-governmental organizations promulgate "the use of national symbols (like the flag, the national anthem, or the national pledge) and the annual National Day celebrations" (28) that

all students in Primary Five also attend as part of their 'National Education' requirements. Singapore's official "Shared Values" were introduced in 1991 (Lim) with the intention of creating a society that emphasizes harmony, respect, family and the value of a group identity above the individual. Such policies exemplify Ortmann's observation that "the definition of what constitutes Singapore's national identity is playing an increasingly important role in politics" (24).

In response to the proliferation of Singlish, however, the government has dedicated years of time and resources to the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM). Launched in 2000 (Sim), the SGEM aims to convince the public of the degeneracy of their colloquial default and the importance of Standard English by comparison. This movement that has endured for over a decade comprises annual themed campaigns addressing specific areas such as grammar, pronunciation, syntax, and commonly confused pairs of words. Posters are replaced each year with new slogans targeting specific age demographics, and occasionally involve the distribution of free informational booklets explaining basic grammar, complete with colorful entertaining graphics (Sim). The plentiful mass media is thus used in a "systematic attempt to influence the English language as used locally by steering it away from indigenized adaptations and closer to something internationally recognizable as standard English" (Bruthiaux 92).

Why would Singaporean authorities go to such great lengths to clamp down on the *lingua franca* of its citizens? The impetus for campaigning toward the eradication of Singlish is apparently to minimize the potential for miscommunication with foreigners. English was implemented as a national language with the intention of supporting international relations. As such, foreigners' inability to understand Singlish causes the ruling party to consider Singlish to essentially be "English corrupted by Singaporeans… broken, ungrammatical English… [that] English speakers outside Singapore have difficulties in understanding" (Goh). As Singapore's founding father and globally respected politician Lee Kuan Yew described, "Singlish is a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans" (Lee). The government's pragmatism demonstrated by the SGEM is a tried-and-tested way to develop a rising generation of fluent English speakers; this much is evident from the success of their similar "Speak Mandarin" campaign twenty-five years prior, in which Chinese dialects were dissolved in favor of the more commonly understood Mandarin, for similar reasons (Lee), since "dialects do not fit in with [the government's] developmental plans very well, as they contradict the globalization of Singapore's economy" (Ortmann 36).

In light of the important role that Singlish plays in rallying the different ethnic groups together under a common tongue, it is ironic that the government desires to be so closely involved in the formation of Singaporeans' national identity that it has taken such pains to discredit Singlish, the one aspect of Singaporean culture that it seems to have no control over. The organic development of Singlish over the years, in fact, is what makes it such an authentic part of national identity. If the government is truly committed to the unity of its people, then Singlish can prove to be significantly more effective in achieving societal cohesiveness. Singlish is a much richer cultural artifact of the fusion of ethnic diversity found in Singapore.

The contributions each race brings to the development of this creole can be regarded as a national project of sorts, one which each member of the community can feel proud to be a part of, and be able to speak to be understood by his fellow countrymen. As a "multiethnic mixture of various cultures and languages" (Ortmann 36), Singlish encompasses all aspects of Singapore's cultural diversity, and hence should be embraced as an integral part of being a true Singaporean. Associate Professor of sociolinguistics at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, Rani Rubdy, regards "Singlish as a nascent symbol of identity" (345), observing that "in recent years, an increasing number of… Singaporeans have begun to accept and even expect the use of [Singlish] in the in-group" (345). This indicates an understanding of the local ubiquity of Singlish as it becomes what Ortmann considers "perhaps the most visible national characteristic" (36) of Singaporeans. The creole's "symbolic function as a language of solidarity, identity and pride" (Rubdy 348) is able to unite Singaporeans regardless of socio-economic background, race, or religion, using a unique code in which they can comfortably understand and be understood in their native environment.

The very fact that Singlish continues to be the widespread default language for most Singaporeans even after nearly twenty years of efforts by the SGEM suggests that it is highly likely here to stay. Given its current prevalence, it would be practical to simply embrace it as a functional day-to-day language for the masses. Contrary to the government's belief, this need not interfere with the use of Standard English as the official working language. Instead of seeing both as mutually exclusive in that the use of one will negatively affect the other, a more productive approach would be to consider the merits of code-switching. This skill has become increasingly common among young people in today's Singaporean society, who grew up speaking Singlish at home and learning Standard English in school. A study of undergraduate students

in 2013 showed that codeswitching is a common trait amongst those who have been educated under Singapore's bilingual policy (Ong and Zhang 167). In fact, they prefer its "linguistic economy" (164), believing it to be "the easy or 'lazy' option in formulating thought and speech" (163), given their tendency to lapse into English words mixed with Mandarin, which is a "semantic-syntactically simpler language" (163).

Therefore, instead of denigrating the colloquial manner of speech, perhaps a more constructive institutional response to Singlish would be to capitalize on its new generation of fluent 'code-switchers', and educate Singaporeans on when and where particular varieties of English are acceptable and useful for communication. In his study of the current politically-involved linguistic landscape, sociolinguist Paul Bruthiaux observed that "the very existence of SGEM…[betrays] a mindset of condescension on the part of the Singapore leadership. Singaporeans, it seems, cannot be trusted to decide for themselves what is appropriate in language use… without benefit of governmental guidance" (102). On the other hand, by explaining the contexts in which Standard English should be used, such as classroom lessons, workplace presentations, and formal occasions, while Singlish is perfectly acceptable in informal circumstances, we no longer undermine Singaporeans' ability to think for themselves and judge their environments to make an appropriate linguistic choice.

Furthermore, the ubiquity of English on a global scale has given rise to many different varieties of English, such that some countries even have multiple colloquial English lexicons. The ability to "shift across varieties… [is] a defining characteristic of every socially well-adjusted human, which no amount of intervention by language planners will suppress or even modify substantially" (102). Singapore's linguistic situation is not completely unique unto itself, and therefore Singlish should not be singled out as an errant strain of English.

In a society whose ancestors hail from the four corners of Asia, Singlish has made its mark as an important unifier and symbol of Singaporeans' common identity. They should therefore be encouraged, or at least not feel pressured, to change their familiar vernacular, and instead ought to be granted this basic freedom of expression. Simultaneously, by encouraging mindful codeswitching, the government's objectives of using Standard English to connect to the rest of the world can still be sufficiently met. This is not just making a case for Singlish. This is defending one's cultural artifact and identity from the ideology of unrelenting pragmatism upon which Singapore was built in its founding years. In this new era, however, Singapore has attained the status of a first-world country, with a society that is educated and sophisticated enough to understand that there is a time and place for everything, *lah*.

Works Cited

Bruthiaux, Paul. "The Speak Good English Movement: A Web-User's Perspective." *English in Singapore*, Jan. 2010, pp. 90–108.

Chua, Catherine Siew Kheng. "Singlish Strikes Back in Singapore." *Unequal Englishes*, 2015. 185–200.

"kiasu, n. and adj." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018. Accessed 3 Oct. 2017.

Lee, Kuan Yew. "Speech by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew at the Tanjong Pagar 34th National Day Celebration on Saturday, 14 August 1999, at the Tanjong Pagar Community Club". *National Archives of Singapore*.

Leimgruber, Jakob R. E. *Singapore English: structure, variation and usage*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Lim, Tin Seng. "Shared Values." *Singapore Infopedia*, National Library Board, Singapore, 13 July 2015. Accessed 3 Oct. 2017.

Ong, Kenneth Keng Wee, and Lawrence Jun Zhang. "Codeswitching in Universities in Singapore and the Philippines." Codeswitching in University English-Medium Classes: Asian Perspectives, 11 Dec. 2013, pp. 163–185.

Rubdy, Rani. "Creative destruction: Singapore's Speak Good English movement." *World Englishes*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 10 Jan. 2003.

Stroud, Christopher, and Lionel Wee. "A Pedagogical Application of Liminalities in Social Positioning: Identity and Literacy in Singapore." *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2007, pp. 33–54.

Thumboo, Edwin. "Literary Dimension Spread of English." *The Other Tongue: English Across Cultures*, 1992.

Wong, Jock. *The Culture of Singapore English*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014.