

Evolving Identities

**The English Language in
Singapore and Malaysia**

Vincent B. Y. Ooi (ed.)

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Upholding Standards or Passively Observing Language?: Corpus Evidence and the Concentric Circles Model

Vincent B Y Ooi

12.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I would like to address the question of maintaining standards in the making of an inclusive English dictionary that balances both internal and external norms (i.e. endonormative and exonormative standards respectively). Such a balance is achieved by considering and adopting two important criteria. First, there is a primary reliance on modern-day computer corpora or language databases which (owing to their size and computability) allows the tracking of a language variety or the comparison between language varieties. Second, the evidence of usage gathered by corpora needs to be complemented by a model of English that recognises the unequal nature of words; such a model recognises that there are High and Low varieties, and degrees of transparency in local words vis-à-vis internationally recognised ones. Such a model seems especially necessary in situations where there are local educational and political concerns that the wholesale adoption of the endonormative variety through its codification in the dictionary will inevitably lead to a decline in language standards.

The dictionary in which these two criteria have been adopted is the second edition of the *Times-Chambers Essential English Dictionary* (henceforth TCEED2), which represents the first-ever inclusive dictionary that places newly codified Singaporean-Malaysian English lexical entries

alongside those from the Chambers-Harraps language database (containing Standard British and American English).

12.1 A Brief Overview of English in Malaysia and Singapore

Both Malaysia and Singapore share a common history regarding English. Inherited from the British, the English language took root and flourished in these two countries. English became a widespread language in the local community, being the language of business, technology, and diplomacy and the language of everyday life for many people. Given its many functions in the community, it is not surprising to find that the English transplanted in both Singapore and Malaysia (henceforth SME) has, over time, formed (as it were) its own distinctive roots and branches.

What this means is that English is nowadays used for both international communication and intranational communication in both Malaysia and Singapore. For international communication, the most acceptable variety of English is the print standard, otherwise known (approximately) as Standard English, or 'core' English. While the notion of Standard English might be a nebulous one for some people, for our purposes, it is usually taken to mean Standard British English, Standard American English, or both. In Singapore and Malaysia, Standard British is still currently the official frame of reference, although the American standard is competing with it unofficially in many television, educational and radio programmes. For intranational communication, there are at least two sub-varieties: the English used in formal situations (the High variety) and that used in informal situations (the Low variety).

The categories I have just sketched regarding the types and functions of English, i.e. for international communication, intranational communication, formal and informal English, are not always distinguished by SME adult speakers, much less learners. Indeed, as English becomes more indigenised, it is not unreasonable to expect a conflation between the inter- and intranational functions of English, leading to the concern by educators and purists that the inability to access and distinguish between these two varieties will lead to a 'decline' in the standard of English. A significant drop in the standard of English could mean that local speakers will not be able to communicate well with the outside world, and so 'international intelligibility' will then be lost. For this group of educators and purists, whom for convenience sake I shall call the 'prescriptivists', the most important agenda is therefore to discourage the use of local English, often seen as an 'error'-ridden variety, in favour of the standard form. Following this to its conclusion, the codification of local English by

means of a dictionary (since it is the role of a dictionary to codify new linguistic items) would be viewed as disfavour to the efforts of teachers of English to promote the standard form. On the other hand, there is another group of people, (whom for convenience I shall call) the 'descriptivists', who think that it is important to codify the local variety through such a dictionary, simply because it is there, because there are local conceptual and cultural items which are not easily translatable to standard English, and because the local variety is rule-governed and systematic. In addition, there might be members from this latter group who are concerned that it would be unrealistic to expect local teachers of English to have an adequate access to an exonormative standard variety, given the local milieu that they are in.

12.2 Types of SME Dictionaries

In recent years, there have been calls for a dictionary which would capture the distinctive use(s) of English in this part of the world (see Pakir, 1992). But, while descriptive concerns regarding the need for such documentation exist, prescriptive concerns that such a dictionary could license the corruption of standard English prevail. From this prescriptive point of view, the compilation of such a dictionary might unwittingly detract the local language learner from the task of achieving 'international intelligibility' which is so necessary for the country's economic survival. So, whether fortunately or unfortunately, there is yet no motivation among publishers in both Singapore and Malaysia for the making of a dictionary that merely documents definitions of lexical items. In addition, items perceived especially as 'Singlish' (colloquial Singaporean English) or 'Manglish' (colloquial Malaysian English) represent terms of endearment to some and derision to others. For instance, the Hokkien borrowing *kiasu* (= afraid to lose out) in Singapore evokes both descriptive approval and prescriptive proscription. In Malaysia, the colloquial Malay borrowing *lepak* (= laid-back) invites similar concerns.

If an SME dictionary is to be compiled, there seem to be three main (but by no means exclusive) ways in which this can be done:

- (1) Compiling a dictionary that contains the SME variety only;
- (2) Compiling a dictionary that contains core English and a description of the SME variety;
- (3) Compiling a dictionary that contains core English and the SME variety, including both descriptive and pedagogical content.

Let us consider each of these possibilities in turn.

Dictionary of SME items only

The advantage of this 'exclusive' approach is that there is a sense of transparency, i.e. only items claimed to be distinctively different (i.e. culturally and conceptually) from core English are listed. However, the main disadvantage is that it can misrepresent the local sociolinguistic scenario as one where people do not use core English. People do obviously use core English, otherwise there would not be any understanding between native speakers and non-native ones. In terms of the target audience, such a dictionary is likely to attract, besides local interest, a foreign and expatriate audience. However, it is less likely to be useful to the local learner in their attempt to master Standard English, since learners need to relate their own usage to the standard variety as much as possible.

Also, to elaborate on the danger of misrepresentation, it serves us well not to forget Gortlach's (1991: 27) injunction that a word or a regionalism listed as such may be due to an unawareness of 'colloquial, spoken or regional uses in Britain or America. Such wrong claims for the lexicon of X-ean English are at least as frequent as unawareness of occurrences in other ex-colonial Englishes — where they may well be survivals of 19th-century British usages which have become obsolete or archaic in the mother-country itself.'

Dictionary descriptively incorporating SME and core English

The advantage of this approach is that it more adequately represents the local sociolinguistic scenario as one where people not only use core English but also local items for intranational communication. The possible disadvantage of this approach is that, because of the inherent nature of a reference dictionary in focusing on a larger number of lexical items (and less on usage notes), a learner could easily misrepresent the intention of such a dictionary and interpret local terms (which are sparsely labelled) as being on the same footing as core English ones in usage. A possible concern here is that the learner could treat such a dictionary as authoritative in prescribing usage and so use these SME items in formal writing (e.g. when writing to prospective employers, in the classroom, for examinations etc.). Also, from both commercial and educational perspectives, there is as yet no motivation to publish such a dictionary. It is possible that publishers are not sure that such a dictionary will sell well, and educationists (as well as government) might regard any attempt to detract from 'international intelligibility' as being unhelpful to the country's economic survival (especially in business dealings with Western

countries). However, this situation is rapidly changing because standard English dictionaries compiled outside Singapore and Malaysia (such as Pearsall, 1998 and Rooney, 1999) have themselves started the trend of incorporating both formal and informal aspects of various varieties of English (including Singaporean and Malaysian English).

Dictionary that compares SME to core English, but detailing contexts of use

A balance between such prescription and description can be struck by focusing on 'controlling' the vocabulary of Singaporean and Malaysian English, one that would 'achieve a balance between the national pride of linguistic ownership and the need for international intelligibility' (Khoo, 1993: 67). Such a constraint can be made in the dictionary, especially a learner's dictionary that signals the appropriate contexts of usage. The advantage of this approach is that it not only indicates the contexts of usage but also proscribes inappropriate usage for the learner. Given that learning is a process of creating a relationship between what one already knows with what one should know, the learner would do well in being more aware of what constitutes 'core' (standard) English vis-à-vis his/her own language variety, what is acceptable in the local context, and whether a particular linguistic item is used more in speech than writing. At the same time, from the descriptive point of view, such a dictionary would accord well with Kachru's (1980: 72) call for lexical research that recognises 'these (non-native) varieties as contextually and linguistically definable distinct world varieties of English'. Although this is a learner's dictionary, it should also appeal to both adult speakers and expatriates interested in the way local English is used vis-à-vis standard English.

12.3 The Computer and More Adequate Linguistic Evidence

TCEED2 takes the third approach to the making of SME dictionaries. Following the aims of the first edition, TCEED2 is an intermediate to advanced learner's dictionary that captures a range of language patterns most commonly found in Singapore and Malaysia; it uses a stylesheet containing full sentence definitions (pioneered by COBUILD — see Sinclair, 1987) and includes the specification of all inflectional forms for the verb. It retains the method, established in the first edition (and by major dictionary makers nowadays) of using large quantities of language data stored in electronic form. Indeed, one of the reasons

for the non-actualisation of an SME dictionary is that, until only very recently, researchers of English in Singapore and Malaysia did not have access to such large quantities of linguistic evidence, or corpora. Simply put, a corpus is a collection of texts systematically gathered and often stored in computer form for language research: it is sampled to be (maximally) representative of the variety of language under study. Corpus evidence is nowadays necessary for the study of the lexicon and dictionary-making (see Ooi, 1998a). For example, the Collins COBUILD 'Bank of English' (cf. Sinclair, 1987), currently has an evidence base of 415 million words, which typify contemporary English usage in the United Kingdom, the United States and to a lesser extent, Australia.

At the Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore, we have for some years been gathering a Bank of Singaporean-Malaysian English of sorts, evidenced by data from the International Corpus of English (ICE) project (cf. Greenbaum & Nelson, 1996; Ooi, 1997), electronic data from local newspapers, and other spoken and written material. While this is a modest beginning, in the longer term, larger regional corpora of X-ean Englishes (comprising Singaporean-Malaysian and other 'Banks of English') should be constructed to assist in comparative research into the study of world Englishes (see *retrench*, Section 12.4, as an example of what this entails). One of the potential applications of such corpora is the compilation of dictionaries comprising core English, 'with special attention given to [local] lexical meanings and usage labels' as well as exclusive dictionaries 'listing the local *-isms* and interpreting them "on historical principles"' (Gorlach, 1991: 27).

12.4 Computer Corpus Analysis

What can corpus evidence offer? Since the concordance listing remains the lexicographer's basic tool, I demonstrate the use of the concordancer (see Ooi, 1998a) on various electronic texts for the study of some specimen SME lexical items typifying stable and systematic usage.

Our first specimen lexical item is the distinctive use of *gazette* (both noun and verb) not only to refer to a notification by government and organisation regarding a particular publication or event but also in the SME context to detail the government's restriction on the publication or event. Although the following edited concordance shows the use of the word in the December 1994 edition of Malaysia's English daily broadsheet *The New Straits Times*, it does not (owing to constraints of space) show the full context of use. Nevertheless, the reader can appreciate the active

role of government in the gazetting that goes beyond mere notification, as Figure 12.1 (using Mike Scott's WordSmith Tools version 3) shows:¹

N	Concordance
96	RU, Tues. - The Johor Government plans to gazette more forests as national parks,
97	reject while they (the State) decide when to gazette the area under the council's juri
98	without the Minister's endorsement and the gazette, traffic police cannot use the eq
99	resources, remains the only State yet to gazette those amendments; with the unfort
100	nal assembly and the edition of the national gazette in which they were published.
101	rts tht the State Government expects to gazette the by-laws next year as the local
102	U, Sun. - The Fisheries Department will not gazette any more marine parks besides
103	Sun. - The Attorney-General's chambers will gazette in a month's time the National F
104	he State until it (the State) decided when to gazette the area under MPK jurisdiction
105	U, Sun. - The Fisheries Department will not gazette any more marine parks besides
106	RU, Tues. - The Johor Government plans to gazette more forests as national parks,
107	g the Selangor Government's approval to gazette the area as a public park. A s
108	will advise the State Government whether to gazette the 32-hectare hilly area as a p
109	by the State until the State decide when to gazette the area under the council's juri
110	Sun. - The Attorney-General's chambers will gazette in a month's time the National F
111	, it was up to them when they wanted to gazette the bylaw. Ting was speaking
112	d a proposal to the State Government to gazette the area into a public park. He
113	why some States took longer than others to gazette the by-laws Ting said that as St

Figure 12.1: Edited concordance listing for 'gazette' (from *The New Straits Times*, December 1994).

The second specimen lexical item concerns the verb *retrench*, which interestingly has the meaning of not just cutting down on expenses (as in both American and British English) but also of laying off workers or making employees redundant as part of the process of cutting costs. Consider Figure 12.2 (see page 175).

In this figure, the sources of linguistic evidence in the COBUILD database are shown on the extreme left side. Thus, 'indy' stands for the British Independent broadsheet newspaper, 'oznews' for Australian newspapers, 'brspok' for British informal transcribed talk, 'bbc' for the British Broadcasting Corporation's World Service radio, 'guard' for the British Guardian broadsheet newspaper, 'npr' for the US National Public Radio, and 'brbooks' for British miscellaneous books. Most of the British and U.S. examples indicate that the term is an intransitive verb to mean 'downsizing.' By contrast, all the Australian examples indicate that *retrench* is a transitive verb and refers to laying off staff or workers. This sense is similar to the one for *retrench* in Figure 12.3 (see page 175).

Figure 12.3 therefore suggests that SME shares with Australian English in the use of *retrench* as a transitive verb for laying off someone or making someone redundant.

The third specimen lexical item concerns the somewhat systematic conflation of *molest* and *molestation* into only one form (i.e. *molest*) to express both verb and noun meanings. This usage is overwhelmingly found in *The New Paper*, Singapore's daily tabloid newspaper, as Figure 12.4 shows (see page 176).

Concordance
indy/03 the US and UK economies retrench. But what if a negotiated
indy/03 industry, which started to retrench in 1991 during the recession and
oznews/16 while BT did not expect to retrench staff, staffing levels would fall
oznews/16 will not be renewed than to retrench someone who has been with the firm
oznews/16 plant in Melbourne and retrench at least 34 workers. <p> It also
oznews/16 of councils having to retrench staff if large contractors free of
oznews/16 practices Tribunal it would retrench more than 500 employees if it
oznews/16 n QIW." <p> JOHN Patten # retrench 500'. <p> RICKETTS S
oznews/16 you felt when you had to retrench 1500 aircraft workers in the
brspok/07 than <ZF1> to <ZF0> to retrench and <ZGY> defend themselves <ZGY>
brspok/07 are <ZGY> it might <ZG1> retrench <ZG0> more people # <M01> <000>
bbc/01 s to go forward, rather than retrench. <h> PRESS REVIEW SIX </h> The
guard/13 the Republican drive to retrench government and wrest the White
guard/13 it enabled the Serbs to retrench. <p> Lieutenant-General Rupert
guard/13 incumbent upon Stewart to retrench. Instead, in Matthews's very next
npr/05 government, the state will retrench. Voters will likely get their wish
npr/05 , are--are going to have to retrench themselves and try to hang onto
npr/05 its control--and it has to retrench on programs to which it has made a
npr/05 in Torquay. We thought we'd retrench what the Pilgrims did. <p>
brbooks/04 seconds before they could retrench, mentally and physically, it was
brbooks/04 resident in 1969, did not retrench seriously on welfare. Positive

Figure 12.2: Edited concordance listing for 'retrench' (from the 415-million word Collins COBUILD Database).

Concordance
(MAF) is worried about the Government's call to retrench all medical staff, including doctors and
emphasised that Malaysia Airlines had no plans to retrench employees. "We need the 's
de union movement is strong and it is difficult to retrench staff. The Government is now trying to
as only a matter of time before the bank decided to retrench in Hong Kong. "I thought about
repercussions. "Employers would be driven to retrench workers found with HIV positive. If
LD: EMPLOYERS, when deciding whether to retrench an employee, must ask themselves
a, alleged that the company had used the fire to retrench senior workers. "It had drawn up
observation, overstaffed, MHS is not expected to retrench anyone. However, industry obser
ness, focus on niche markets or specific segments, retrench from a particular line of business
the Wembley Rubber Products when we have to retrench skilled workers when we install new t
He, however, denied rumours here that Shell would retrench a significant number of its staff du
ons of independence that the Government does not retrench the whites. It is only when they re
a long, long time. Unlike other businesses that retrench or go bust during hard times, the

Figure 12.3: Edited concordance listing for 'retrench' (*New Straits Times*, 1994).

ssman "The advertisement is not sexist. The molest cases that have occurred are isolated
 / "Don't cane all molesters" Graph showing molest cases are on the rise in Singapore fro
 a swim a day after he appeared in court on a molest charge. Coroner Tan Jen Tse said th
 assified the case as gang robbery and forcible molest. The penalty for gang robbery is betw
 ery part of my body. Molesting me. It's really molest." While such attention was flattering
 ts image tarnished by reports over fights, and molest cases that have taken place at the di
 2 strokes of the cane. The penalty for forcible molest is between two and 10 years' jail with
 antly, the figures for two types of aggravated molest - where the victims were threatened w
 or her brother, who has been accused of child molest, at concerts in Cincinnati and Toronto.
 ific, said so far, there have been two cases of molest reported. She blamed it on men who r
 he cases have been classified as aggravated molest. The suspect is said to be an outside
 this was the first time he had come across a molest in the course of his work. Police spo
 good reports... I haven't heard anything about molest or rape." Agreeing, Miss Katun, also
 s Munawaroh, 19, said "I've never heard of any molest cases in Singapore. I'm not afraid."
 The biggest increase in crime was for simple molest cases, in which the victims are not se

Figure 12.4: Edited concordance listing for 'molest' (from *The New Paper*, 1993).

In many instances, it is not always clear that most educated English speakers of the local speech community do treat a term such as *molest* as both noun and verb in such a fairly regular way that a new norm is being created (either consciously or subconsciously). Even in the *New Paper*, there are instances of the noun *molestation*, but the frequency of occurrence of *molest* as a noun is higher. While the *New Paper* is a popular tabloid paper, the linguistic evidence it offers should be checked against other sources in order to verify that the majority of local educated speakers are in agreement about the usage (in the case of *molest* vs *molestation*) before the term is marked with the 'SME' label. A term should occur with such regularity and systematicity that it merits the SME label (as in the case of *gazette* and *retrench*) without any further usage notes. In the meantime, one should err on the side of caution and indicate to the learner that careful educated speakers of English would be less forgiving about such an occurrence in more formal speech and writing.

In Figure 12.5, we see another instance (*She paid RM20 a month for her son who is schooling at a primary school*) in which the form *schooling* is used as a verb (in informal SME), in addition to being a noun (in standard English). In this case, it is clearer that the conflation of noun and verb is less forgivable in formal situations: the usage is well-documented in grammar books, and the proscription is unwavering. For these reasons, the word merits the label 'SME: informal' which indicates that the form should be restricted only to informal situations, as in canteen talk and casual conversations among friends.

o have just embarked on a new experience of a schooling environment. One teach
 here none existed. A result is the methodical schooling in emotional competence tha
 untries. Accumulation of physical capital and schooling (human capital) contribute
 six-year-olds with as much as two years of pre-schooling to non-literate eight-year-olds
 ts of civil society, that is at the lowest levels of schooling. Education Minister Datuk Se
 dren cannot be integrated into the mainstream schooling. To begin with, schools
 je would only be enjoyed once throughout their schooling years. Najib said the sel
 opportunities as able-bodied people in terms of schooling and job-training," he pointed
 an learned more than they could in a lifetime of schooling. In short, 1995 was the
 nent. What do economists know so far about schooling? Although the results of
 ing to non-literate eight-year-olds. As universal schooling did its job of educating the m
 oughout France, citizens are entitled by law to free schooling through a university educ
 Thursday. But even during those all-important schooling period, she still managed
 said she paid RM20 a month for her son who is schooling at a primary school about fou
 CYCOON should be greeting the judges after three schooling runs. Well up last start bu

Figure 12.5: Edited concordance listing for 'schooling' (from the *New Straits Times*, December 1995).

Finally, the concordance listing for a word such as *kiasu* (see Figure 12.6) confirms the existence of terms that occur largely in informal, spoken contexts. As evidenced in the Singapore component of the ICE corpus, *kiasu* hardly occurs in formal writing, except in reported speech and as an effect marker (e.g. the naming of McDonald's *Kiasu Burger*). Such words, which the language learner already knows, tend to be mainly borrowings from local dialects or other languages which should probably not be placed in the main section of a learner's dictionary; instead they can be relegated to an appendix. This is because there is the concern that codifying such words (including the Malay borrowing *lepas*) in the main section might unduly influence the learner into thinking, despite being signalled otherwise, that these words can be used in formal situations. Also, as mentioned in Section 12.3, such terms do not always conform to the rules of standard English grammar (as in the case of the verbal use of *kaypoh*) and so merit a separate treatment. On the other hand, interestingly in the case of *kiasu*, there is the morphological process of forming the noun *kiasuism* from the adjective *kiasu*. This morphological process does not, however, occur in the case of *suaku* (also an adjective), unlike a more productive word such as *kiasu*. *Kiasu* is used nowadays in increasing frequency to characterise the negative Singaporean trait of being overly competitive or being afraid of losing out in situations such that they ride roughshod over any and everyone in their way. McDonald's, in celebrating this trait, at one time introduced the *kiasu burger*; the comic character *Mr Kiasu* was also created to personify this trait.

Why this some people are saying look why so kiasu you know why the suddenness of this people who are hardworking by calling them kiasu? A: Oh yes I would think so because at there could be ten different definitions for kiasu according to what the person wants we are number one breast beating er to we are kiasu brow beating? Come on lets give capitalisation by commercial firms of using Mr Kiasu to promote their goods I think it ca m the people in other countries Lets not be so kiasu Thank you for calling in and reme of this part of the discussion and it's clear that kiasu promotions are meant to allow us ve the ?? ?? don't?? ?? Forget about being kiasu Go for the try What's what's the prob 're probably er more effective in getting the anti-kiasu message across than promoting k we make a special effort to show whenever Mr Kiasu does something er bad he pays fc ok and I must say that em a comic book a kiasu comic book is not a promotion of kias hink that em when we first coin the word being kiasu is always very negative in terms of onalds in Singapore their introduction of the Kiasu Burger Now is that entrepreneurship? pose to make Singaporeans more aware of the kiasu behaviours and that was what sort ou see you are trying to tell them not to be kiasu but you have no control over how they

Figure 12.6: Concordance listing for 'kiasu' (from the spoken Singapore component of the ICE corpus).

The lexical items illustrated in this section point to the rich blend of Asian and Western realities of English use found in this part of the world. Although I have focused only on single-word items, there are obviously many multiword units which merit a separate treatment on their own (see Ooi, 2000).

12.5 English Use in Singapore/Malaysia: Types of Words

Whether it is single or multiword units, the preceding section has yielded at least five main groups of words typifying the range of language use in so-called 'second language' or 'nativised' contexts where English is used in a stable, native-like manner by the local speech community. These groups of words/expressions can be represented using concentric circles, beginning with *Group A: Core English* words in the centre. (The notations used for the groups of words below include the following: Singapore/Malaysian English — SME; Linguistic Processes: abbreviation — ab; blending — bl; borrowing — bo; calque — cq; compound — cp; hybrid — hy; idiom — id; reduplication — rdup. Other notations: proscription for the language learner — ngr; particle — part; interjection — interj.)

Group A: Core English. This group includes English of most general utility worldwide, and is associated with the notion of 'Standard English.' Traditionally, the notion of Standard English can be equated with either standard British English or American English. 'Core English' has traditionally included Germanic/Latin/French words, but there are many

foreign words that are now known on a global scale, and so can be deemed to enter the core. In comparing four recent learner dictionaries — the CIDE (Procter, 1995), COBUILD (Sinclair, 1995), LDOCE (Summers, 1995), OALD (Crowther, 1995), and TCEED (Higgleton & Seaton, 1995) — the picture that emerges is that non-English words such as (*run*) *amuck/amok*, *kowtow*, *typhoon*, and *yin-yang* are now incorporated into a number of them; *kungfu*, *longan*, *lychee*, and *sari* are found in others.

Group B: SME/words of English origin/formal. This group includes words or expressions of English origin that are accepted and understood by SME speakers in both formal and informal situations. Some of these words, like *amok/amuck*, get incorporated into Group A over time. Examples include *airflown* [cp] [=airfreighted/airtransported, freshly imported and exclusive goods/produce: e.g. *airflown New Zealand apples*, *airflown Australian beef*]; *cooling* [cq] [=too much 'yin', see Group A], *heaty* [cq] [=too much 'yang', see Group A], *love letters* [cp] [=a type of triangle-shaped wafer], *MRT* [ab] [=Mass Rapid Transit system], *neighbourhood school* [cp] [=a school not only in the vicinity of where one lives but also one which is average in standing], *red packet* [cp,cq] [=money put in an envelope which is red/pink], *Singapore Girl* [cp] [=Singapore Airlines' stewardess], *steamboat* (dinner) [cp] [=a meal where pieces of uncooked food are put into a pot of boiling water or stock], *tuition teacher* [cp] [=private tutor].

Group C: SME/words or hybrids of non-English origin/formal. Words of non-English origin accepted and understood by SME speakers in both formal and informal situations. There are no English equivalents (without missing local associations). Examples include *ice kacang* [hy] [cp] [=a dessert of shaved ice with various flavours and toppings], *rambutan* [bo] [=a succulent fruit with a hairy skin] and *songkok* [bo] [=Malay hat].

Group D: SME/words of English origin/informal. Words of English origin acceptable in local informal situations (usually speech) only. Many of the items found in this group are regarded by highly educated SME speakers as 'Singlish', 'Manglish', or 'errors'. Examples include: *cut* (verb) [ngr] [=overtake: e.g. *His car cut mine*], *keep* (verb) [ngr] [=put away: e.g. *Don't keep your pencil box ... you'll need your pencils*], *half-past-six idea* [id, cq,ngr] [=a half-baked idea], *no head no tail* [id, cq,ngr] [=incomplete], (*to be a*) *lamp post* [id, cq, ngr] [=to play gooseberry/ two's company, three's a crowd], *playplay* [rdup, cq, ngr] [=joke/tease], *send* (verb) [ngr] [=take: e.g. *I have a car. Let me send you to the airport*], *take* (verb) [ngr] [=eat, e.g.: *What food do we take to keep our teeth healthy?*], *zap* (verb) [=photocopy].

Group E: SME/words or hybrids of non-English origin/informal. Borrowings from the substrate languages and dialects such as Hokkien

and Bazaar Malay found mainly in informal speech. Many items are regarded as 'Singlish', 'Manglish', or 'errors'. Examples include *ah* [part] [= 'query' marker], *chim* [cq] [= profound], *kiasu* [cq] [= overly competitive], *lah* [part] [= 'solidarity/familiarity/emphasis' marker], *leh* [part] [= 'protest/wonder' marker], *Mat Salleh* [bo] [= Caucasian], *malu* [bo] [= shameful], *meh* [part] [= 'questioning/protest' marker], *shiok* [cq, interj] [= marvellous], and *siong* [cq] [= hurts].

This model for the introduction of lexico-grammatical items in inclusive dictionaries of nativised Englishes (as in the case of the SME variety), representing their respective degrees of transparency, may be diagrammatically represented as follows:

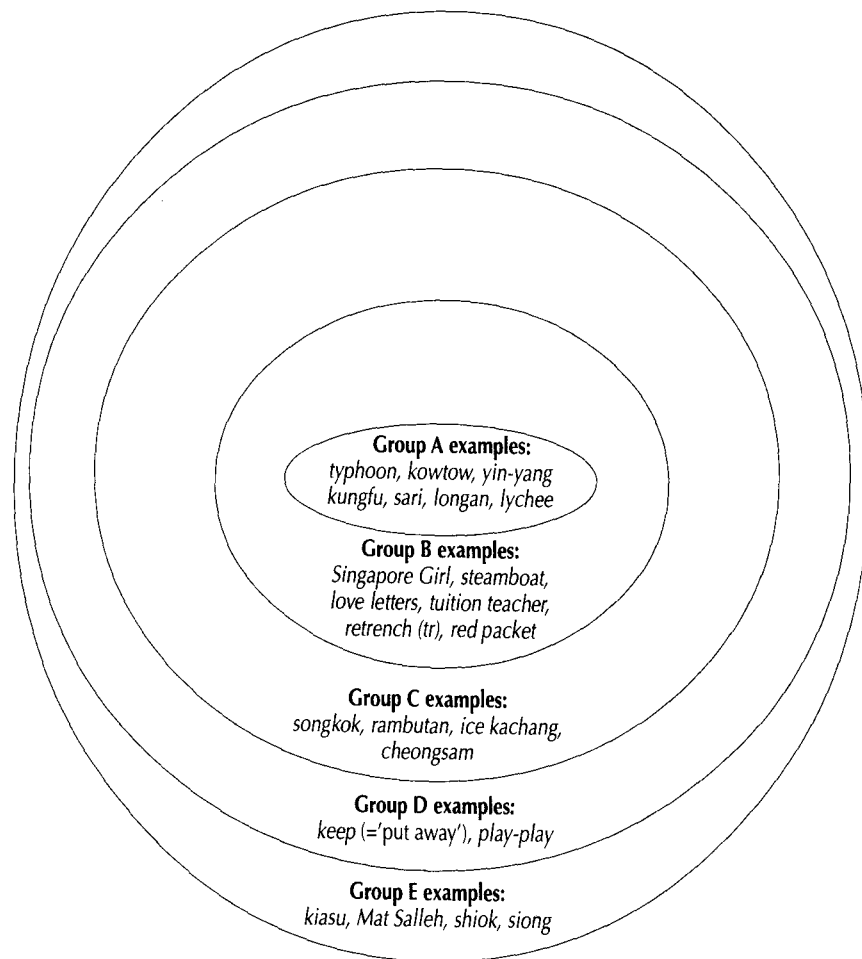


Figure 12.7: *Concentric Circles for nativised Englishes, including the SME variety (cf. Ooi, 1998b; Ooi, 1999).*

In postulating this model, I am aware of the inadequacy of mere labelling in determining whether a certain lexical or grammatical item is an exclusive feature of a particular group of words or variety. For instance, it is not unexpected that the term for the Chinese national costume, *cheongsam*, currently occurs much less frequently than *sari*, its Indian equivalent in any database of British English: this can be attributed to both Anglo-Indian influence (stretching to British colonial days in India) and the fact that the Chinese community is smaller than its Indian counterpart in the United Kingdom. Therefore, should *cheongsam* be given an 'SME' label (*sari* being indisputably a more well-known item among British users of English)? It would seem that the current defining criterion for whether an item necessitates the 'SME' label (or otherwise remain unlabelled as a core English item) is how widespread its usage is perceived to be in the British or American context. For instance, since *durian* (the thorny fruit) is beginning to be widely perceived in these contexts, it does not seem to continue to need any label at all; on the other hand, a local Malaysian-Singaporean fruit such as *rambutan* does seem to necessitate the label. Also, a term labelled as 'SME' does not mean that it is necessarily a unique characteristic of Singaporean-Malaysian English: the term *red packet*, for example, seems to be a widely used term in Hong Kong as well.

12.6 Upholding Standards or Passively Observing Language?

In the preceding sections, I have suggested that corpus evidence need not be subjected to the charge of being snapshots of the language that 'passively' observe language; on the contrary, they are active indicators of the prevailing grammatical norms and lexical preferences in a language variety. Of course, since lexicography is also a hermeneutic or interpretive enterprise, the onus of responsibility is on the lexicographer (normally one sensitive than most to language trends) not only to determine 'stable' usage but also whether an item should be labelled 'SME' (acceptable to local educated users of English) or 'SME: informal' (a proscriptive marker to signal its informal use).

However, merely providing the markers 'SME' (for Groups B and C) and 'SME: informal' (for Groups D and E) is not likely to prove adequate in signalling the appropriate contexts of usage, or what the respective standard British or American English equivalent is. For this reason, a dictionary stylesheet, exemplified by the one established for the TCEED2 should also provide extra notes and guidance on the appropriateness of

an item for a given context. For instance, in the case of *follow* to mean 'accompany' in the SME context, the entry in the TCEED2 is as follows:

(SME: informal) You **follow** someone somewhere you accompany them there: *She often follows* (or, in BrE, *accompanies*) *her mother to the market.*

The advantage of this approach is the indication of, firstly, the proscriptive marker 'SME: informal' and secondly, the standard British equivalent in parenthesis. Also, in a number of cases, we have been unwavering when it is common knowledge that a certain feature is universally proscribed as a linguistic 'error'. For instance, although the term *equipments* occurs a number of times in our database, we have chosen to treat it as an error; this is also borne out by a (more representative) corpus as the Singapore component of the ICE corpus, which indicates that the term tends to be used loosely in informal speech only. Thus, the relevant usage note states that *equipment* is an uncountable noun, and that an individual appliance or device is referred to as a 'piece of equipment'.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the TCEED2 is the current relegation of Group E words (colloquial borrowings from the substrate languages) into a three-page appendix at the end of the dictionary, rather than their incorporation into the main section. It was felt that, notwithstanding a proscriptive treatment (given in the case of invectives and four-letter taboo words), words such as *kiasu* and *shiok* (although quite popular terms in local usage), if put into the main section, would relegate the dictionary enterprise to the misguided perception of a 'Singlish'/'Manglish' effort. Also, linguistically, many of the terms in this group do not yet fully behave like English words and represent cultural perceptions that are not easily paraphrased into English. For example, a core English learner's dictionary should include verb inflections, e.g. learners should know that the verb *run* takes the inflected forms *runs*, *running*, *ran*. However, very local informal items (in Group E) such as *kaypoh* (verb) [= 'being a busybody'] and *gostan* (verb) [= 'reverse the car'] do not seem to have the forms *kaypohs*, *kaypohing*, *kaypohed* and *gostans*, *gostanning*, *gostaned* respectively. Thus, a way to treat these very informal items is to put them in a separate listing with a modified stylesheet. Also, such an approach (i.e. by relegating these items to the appendix) will signal to the learner that these very informal items are less established than the core English ones.

Beyond the issue of proscription, the TCEED2 represents a rich blend between Asian and Western realities. For instance, in British English,

high tea tends to occur between 5 pm and 6 pm and consists of 'a cooked main course followed by bread and cakes, with tea to drink' (Higgleton & Ooi, 1997: 465); in SME, it is usually held between 2.30 pm and 5.30 pm and is often served as a buffet. Islamic terms such as *azan*, *ummah* and *fatwa* are common among Muslims; terms such as *Hokkien*, *Khek* and *Hainanese* are among those which detail the various Chinese groups; and terms such as *Thaipusam* and *roti prata* characterise Indian customs and food respectively.

12.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the issue of maintaining standards in the compilation of the second edition of *The Times-Chambers Essential English Dictionary* (Higgleton and Ooi, 1997), an inclusive dictionary which I hope proves judicious in its incorporation of the endonormative variety of English found in Singapore and Malaysia. This judicious incorporation, by means of the model I have postulated, is necessary for the codification of not only non-offensive, local cultural items (in order to satisfy descriptive concerns) but also appropriately treating possibly 'offensive', local items (in order to satisfy prescriptive concerns). Of course, the notion of 'standards' is not a static one, and the acceptability (or otherwise) of a lexico-grammatical item changes with the speech community (e.g. witness the loss in the distinction between *who* vs *whom* nowadays). No dictionary is ever final in being the ultimate authority of standards, and the issue continues to be a popular linguistic and social one.

¹ The data used for this study are created by the New Straits Times Press (M) Pte Ltd (for Figures 12.1, 12.3, 12.5), Singapore Press Holdings (S) Pte Ltd (for Figure 12.4), COBUILD for the Bank of English corpus at the University of Birmingham (for Figure 12.2), and the Department of English Language & Literature, National University of Singapore (for Figure 12.6). The New Straits Times Press data are obtained for a National University of Singapore research project, RP3960003, in 1996 and the Singapore Press Holdings data are obtained for two National University of Singapore research projects, RP3960002 and RP3960003.

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