

citation information.

Ooi, Vincent. 2010. Entry on 'Singaporean English',
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United Kingdom: Collins Language/HarperCollins, p. 221.

Singaporean English

Singaporean English is a new variety of English (NVE), alongside other established NVEs such as Indian English, Filipino English, and Nigerian English. Unlike older varieties of English (OVEs) such as British English, Australian English, or US English, NVEs historically emerged primarily through the classroom rather than the home, incorporating the attendant cultures of a multiracial population, and complementing the other languages of the country.

Singaporean English very much displays NVE characteristics. According to the latest Singapore General Household Survey (2005), English is the predominant language of the home for only 28.7% Chinese, 13.0% Malay, and 39% Indian residents respectively. It complements the predominant use of Mandarin Chinese (47.2%) and Chinese dialects (23.9%) for Chinese residents, Malay (86.8%) for Malay residents, and Tamil (36.8%) and Malay (10.6%) for Indian residents in the home respectively. Despite this, English is the predominant language of instruction in learning institutions and can be considered the *de facto* national language (which constitutionally, and *so de jure*, is Malay). English is the leading language of administration, education, public signage, and everyday interaction, and the link language for the 3.73 million residents which comprise 74.2% Chinese, 13.4% Malay, and 9.2% Indians respectively. Many Singaporeans are bilingual or trilingual.

English as a linguistic entity in the country may be divided into three parts: standard English (which usually means standard British/US English), High Singaporean English (educated, 'standard' Singaporean English), and Low Singaporean English (colloquial Singaporean English, also popularly known as 'Singlish'). Standard English is the benchmark set in grammar books, dictionaries, classroom texts, official media, and print materials. The local high variety comprises linguistic expressions that are acceptable in various situations. The norms represented in these expressions are not often immediately noticeable; they tend to be an 'invisible' cross between standard English and a local language or cultural notion. The low variety is acceptable only in informal situations and is the

popular colloquial variety found in casual conversations, some TV comedy programmes, many online personal blogs, and informal online discussion forums.

The high variety includes such terms as *handphone* (for mobile phone), *killer litter* (heavy objects thrown from high rise buildings that can injure passers-by below), and *Singapore Girl* (advertising depiction of Singapore Airline's flight stewardesses). Another example is *red packet* (Chinese *hong bao*) which is a red/pink envelope containing money given during auspicious occasions; it is a term shared with other NVEs such as Hong Kong English and Malaysian English. The expression *sleep late*, as in 'I like to sleep late at 3am', corresponds to the idea of staying up late at night in both Malay (*tidur lewat*) and Chinese (*wǎn shuì*). However, an OVE which has the song title 'I like to sleep late in the morning' makes it clear that one gets up late in the morning.

Low variety terms include *kiasu* (from Hokkien Chinese, to mean 'afraid to lose out'), *cut* ('to overtake': 'His car cut mine') and *blur* ('dazed'). The low variety is mainly influenced by Chinese (especially Mandarin or Hokkien) and/or Malay grammar structures and words. It is popularly characterized by particles such as *lah*, *leh*, *lor*, and *meh* whose various intonations express different attitudinal meanings at the end of a sentence. In the expression *Referee kayu meh?*, the Malay term *kayu* ('wood') metaphorically means 'block-headed/dim-witted' and the Chinese dialect particle *meh* (depending on the tone) can indicate surprise, scepticism, sarcasm, or disbelief. Thus the sentence loosely translates as follows: 'I can't believe that the referee is as stupid/dim-witted as you say he is.'

Proficient Singaporean English speakers should have the ability to shift between standard English, the high variety, and the low variety to suit the occasion. On the other hand, less educated speakers can access only the low variety. There are both advocates and opponents of the low variety: advocates refer to its indispensable cultural identity, but opponents (including educationists and some prominent politicians) warn that it could be a 'handicap' for the local populace to master standard English for international communication.