Singaporean Expressions

Branding Singapore Through Singapore(an) English?

By ***Vincent B Y Ooi***

Not long ago, Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong urged new citizens to integrate into Singapore society by joining in the country's community life:

> *"Pick up Singapore customs, lifestyles, norms, (and) social rules. And if you can understand Singlish, so much the better."* [1]

This is not only an excellent observation that the use of *Singlish* is very real in the local community but also that the discourse can be so localised that those new to the country would find it hard to understand.

I am reminded of an anecdote regarding a Caucasian male who approached a group of local students making Changi Airport as their study place during the examination period. When he listened to their *Singlish* for the first time, he asked them, "Excuse me, what language are you using?"

While we might find this a joking matter, PM Lee would probably not do so. When asked by a student from China regarding how *Singlish* as a unique language would help to bond Singaporeans, he said,

> *"I think many Singaporeans will not agree with me but I don't think we should start a new language in Singapore called Singlish. There are too few of us…we have to have a sense of who we are, but it cannot be based on speaking Singlish. It has to be based on your pride in being a Singaporean, you grew up here...this is where you can make a difference and you fit in."*[2]

According to PM Lee, [proper] English should be the working language here and *Singlish* should not be a part of the Singapore identity.

At the same time, we might also be reminded of Ambassador Tommy Koh's popular 1974 musing:

> *"When one is abroad in a bus or train or aeroplane and when one meets a fellow Singaporean, one can immediately identify that that person is Singaporean or Malaysian….and I should hope that when I speak English, no one will have a problem identifying that I'm Singaporean."*

Of course, the type of English that Ambassador Tommy Koh advocates need not necessarily be construed as *Singlish* just because it is Singaporean in nature. In his own speech, Ambassor Koh is characterised as someone

[1] Channel NewsAsia (7 July 2012), retrieved from http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1212148/1/.html.
[2] AsiaOne (22 September 2012), retrieved from http://www.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20070922-26463.html.

who speaks 'flawless English' with a Singaporean accent.[3]

What 'types' of English are used in Singapore? Is it always *Singlish* versus 'proper (standard) English'? What do we mean by the term *Singlish*? The discourse of English use in Singapore is usually characterised dichotomously, resulting in the 'Speak Good English Movement'[4] pitted against the 'Speak Good *Singlish* Movement'.[5]

In this article, I hope to offer a middle ground by sketching a model of English that relates the range of domestic English use to its international usage. The type of English for domestic use is often described by linguists as 'Singapore(an) English', one that goes beyond the somewhat derogatory and loaded term *Singlish*. It is Singapore(an) English that 'brands' Singapore and offers a common cultural discourse for the various ethnic groups/races that make up the country's composition.

Singapore(an) English as a 'variety' of English

It may be strange to non-linguists that the word 'English' can be pluralised nowadays, or that there are 'varieties of English'. Singapore(an) English (or 'SgE', Lim et al, 2010) may be characterised as a new variety of English such as Philippine English, Indian English and Malaysian English.

In Singapore, English is the language that links its main ethnicities which include 74 percent Chinese, 13 percent Malay and 9.2 percent Indians. According to the latest Census of Population 2010[6], English is the most frequently spoken language at home among 32.6 percent of the Chinese (while others use mostly Mandarin and Chinese dialects as home languages), 17.0 percent of the Malays (while most use the Malay language as the home language) and 41.6 percent Indians (while others mostly use Tamil, other Indian languages or Malay). 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. Many Singaporeans are bilingual or trilingual, and the linguistic repertoire of a local Chinese resident can include knowledge of English, Mandarin Chinese and one of the Chinese dialects (typically Hokkien).

[3] Chua Mui Hoong, posted on http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bmalaysia/message/4008.
[4] Retrieved from http://www.facebook.com/MySGSM#!/speakgoodenglishmovement?fref=ts.
[5] *Speak Good Singlish Movement*, retrieved from http://www.facebook.com/MySGSM.
[6] *Census of Population 2010*, retrieved from http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/c2010sr1/cop2010sr1.pdf and http://www.singstat.gov.sg/news/news/press31082010.pdf.

English Use in Singapore is a Range or Continuum

The range of English use in Singapore may be characterised as follows: standard English (which usually means standard British/US English), SgE-H (educated, 'standard' Singaporean English) and SgE-L (Colloquial Singapore English, also popularly known as *Singlish*). Standard English is the benchmark set in grammar books, dictionaries, classroom texts, official media and print materials. SgE-H may be considered the local H(igh)-variety used and comprises 'invisible norms' that have to be distinguished from those of native English speakers.

SgE-L, as the L(ow) variety, is used in more domestic situations and is the popular colloquial variety found in (among others) casual conversations, television humour programmes, online personal blogs, chat rooms and discussion forums. I would prefer the term SgE-L to *Singlish* which has become a loaded term that is either hated or loved among Singaporeans. Unlike 'broken English' (which has no rules), the word order in SgE-L tends to be rule-governed. For example, the well-known SgE-L expression *Why you so liddat?* ('liddat' = 'like that', meaning 'Why do you behave in this manner?) is not recognisable by native SgE-L speakers if it was rephrased in one of the following ways:

**Why you liddat so?*

**Why so you liddat?*

While SgE-L expressions[7] may be said to derive mainly from Chinese or Malay, native SgE-L speakers would probably also tend to agree that the expression *everyone is good* (to mean 'Hello, everyone') is not so much *Singlish* (if at all) as it is *Chinglish*. This expression is literally translated from the Chinese expression 大家好 into English.[8]

Ooi's Concentric Circles Model

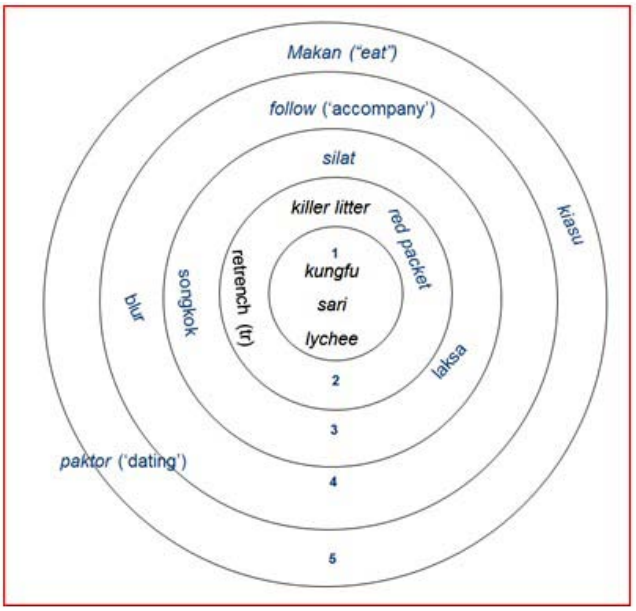
The three aspects of English just outlined may be diagrammatically represented and 'graded' in terms of a 'Concentric Circles Model' (Ooi, 2001) as follows:

Circle 1 represents the inner circle that comprises 'core or standard English' linguistic expressions that may or may not be traditionally Germanic/French/Latin in origin. Non-Anglo expressions that are codified and standardised in dictionaries nowadays include *kungfu*, *sari* and *lychee*. Circle 1 items are unmarked and deemed acceptable internationally.

[7] Retrieved from http://freepages.family.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~jacklee/Files/19950503-ST-PleaseUseSinglishSparingly.pdf.

[8] The difference is that this is an expression recognised by mainland Chinese speakers, rather than native *Singlish* speakers. Search 'everybody is good' in Baidu.com for a list of instances.

Circle 2 (SgE-H) is the next outer circle containing linguistic expressions from



English acceptable in more formal local situations, but go beyond their conventional meaning in Western discourse. For instance, *killer litter* is a hybrid of two intriguing and yet unlikely juxtapositions in Western discourse, ie the seriousness of 'killers' and the social irresponsibility of throwing harmless garbage on the ground. In Singaporean discourse though, this productive neologism is needed in a densely populated society of high-storey buildings. For many expressions, the influence from a local language or dialect is obvious. An example is *sleep late.* In US English, a song title such as *I like to sleep late in the morning* makes it clear that one gets up late in the morning; in SgE-H, it would be much more common to refer to staying up late at night. Thus, a sentence such as *I like to sleep late at 3am* would have its corresponding meaning in either Malay ('*tidur lewat'*) or Chinese ('*wan shuì'*). Pakir (2009: 85) reminds us that 'Singapore offers an example of a (tropical) [v]country where spontaneous daily interaction among speakers of several languages over a long period of time has led to (various linguistic) innovation processes' and semantic shifts which differ from the conventional Western discourses that we tend to associate standard English with. Thus, "while Australians might find the description of 'windy' for homes as a negative feature in the (real estate) 'for sale' advertisements, Singaporeans consider 'windy' as 'breezy' and therefore a positive feature" (Pakir, 2009: 96). Another noteworthy point is that the sense of 'breeziness' would not tend to invite the charge of *Singlish* among Singaporeans.

Circle 3 (SgE-H) is the next outer circle containing linguistic expressions that are also acceptable in formal local situations and go beyond their conventional understanding in Western discourse. However, unlike those in Circle 2, the items in this circle contain loanwords and expressions from other local languages (principally Chinese and Malay). There are no English equivalents without missing local associations. Examples

include *silat* ('Malay kungfu'), *songkok* ('Malay hat'), *laksa* ('a popular curry dish') and *ice kachang* ('a dessert of shaved ice with various flavours and toppings' that can include *kachang*, a Malay word for 'peanuts'). Conceivably, Malay words such as *durian* (whose first use is attested by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as early as 1588) and *rambutan* (coined in 1707) would be in this circle instead of Circle 1. However, these words have stood the test of time and are now accepted by the world's English-speaking community. Hence, the words *durian* and *rambutan* rightfully belong to Circle 1.

Circle 4 (SgE-L or *Singlish* expressions taken from English) is the next outer circle of English-derived expressions that are deemed suitable for local colloquial or informal situations only. In this circle, structures from colloquial Chinese or Malay are 'filled by' English words. Thus, the expression 'I follow Mother to the market' does not mean that the interlocutor walks behind but instead accompanies the mother. In casual conversations, blur is also used as an adjective, to mean 'confused or dazed'. Former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew used this example of 'blur' as a prototypical *Singlish* feature. [9]

Circle 5 (SgE-L or Singlish expressions taken from other languages or dialects) represents the outermost circle of least transparency (in relation to 'core English') in having terms of non-English origin that are primed for local colloquial situations only. *Makan* is the Malay word for 'to eat', *paktor* is the Cantonese Chinese word for 'dating', and *kiasu* is a word borrowed from Hokkien that means 'afraid to lose out'. Proponents of the 'Speak Good English Movement' in Singapore would probably be appalled to learn that the publishers of Oxford Dictionaries ("the world's most trusted dictionaries") have included both *kiasu* and the Malay word *lepak* ('loafing') – labelling them as 'South East Asian' usage.[10]

Both Circles 2 and 3 would be acceptable in more formal situations, for example classroom reports, newspaper editorials and broadcast news (see Ooi, 2007 and Low, 2010, for a range of other expressions in Circles 2 and 3). However, both Circles 4 and 5 would be acceptable in colloquial or highly informal situations only (usually speech) and contain terms that are popularly known as 'Singapore Colloquial English' or *Singlish*.

This way of thinking about English in Singapore, ranging from Circles 1 to 5, would remove a lot of the linguistic anxiety surrounding the use of a linguistic expression as either *Singlish* or 'standard

[9] *The Business Times* (16 Aug 1999), reproduced in http://groups.yahoo.com/group/beritamalaysia/message/12662.

[10] Retrieved from http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/kiasu?q=kiasu and http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/lepak?q=lepak.

English'. We can use the model to relate domestic English to international English usage; at the same time, it would help foreigners to avoid cross-cultural miscommunication (as in the case of 'windy') when they first arrive in the country.

Singapore(an) English: Generational Changes, Technological Affordances

We should note that Singaporean English is not a static entity; it noticeably changes over time as younger and older Singaporeans prefer different expressions respectively. At the same time, the rise of Short Message Service (SMS), instant messaging, blogs, twitter and Facebook also means that Singaporean English is shaped by such technological affordances in an increasingly 24/7 online world.

For instance, the expression 'see me no up' (literally from Chinese 看不起我) was used no fewer than five times in the course of a conversation by a middle-aged Chinese lady in a popular local shopping mall recently. The Coxford Singlish Dictionary[11] lists it as follows:

> ***SEE ME NO UP***
> *To be looked down upon by someone. Can also be used to accuse someone of being condescending. "You know me for so long and still treat me like that? You damn see me no up, is it?"*

I suspect that younger (Chinese) Singaporeans would not use this expression much, if at all, and would prefer the corresponding Mandarin Chinese form instead.

In terms of the newer phenomenon of computer-mediated communication (CMC), the following excerpt is taken from a personal blog by a 15-year old female teen:

> LoNG tiMe NO Blog lE..FinalLy..aFteR THe prElIms..Nw LeFt WiTh ScIencE pRActIcAl

Writing in a blend of SgE-L and Computer-mediated communicaton (CMC), this teen prefers a mix of upper and lower case in order to identify with a younger female group. CMC represents the newer literacy nowadays, in which expressions online are mediated by the keyboard that at once signifies a blend of both speech and writing.

Now, consider the following excerpt from a Twitter post:

> ABC
> @xyz how come sia omg its killing me.

The one who posts, 'ABC' (whose real name is anonymised here), is writing to another Twitter account holder, 'xyz' (anonymised for privacy too). ABC, a Malay speaker, uses the particle *sia* (presumably a shortening from the Malay swear word *sial*) to relate with

[11] Retrieved from http://www.talkingcock.com/html/lexec.php?op=LexLink&lexicon=lexicon&keyword=SEE%20ME%20NO%20UP.

his friend xyz. *Omg* ('Oh my God') is increasingly a well-known common computer-mediated abbreviation marker.

Conclusion

Beyond thinking about English use in Singapore as either 'standard English' or *Singlish*, the Concentric Circles Model shows the scaffolding that is needed for learners to move towards the acquisition of (international) standard English or for those new to Singapore to better understand the English used within the country. Through its unique blend of Western and Asian discourses and cultures, Singapore(an) English continues to showcase the country to the world.

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