

Singapore English: An indexical approach

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Abstract

Existing models of variation for Singapore English, with the possible exception of Alsagoff's cultural orientation model, are largely unsatisfactory in accounting for the high degree of Singlish–Standard alternation found in everyday speech. The occurrence, for instance, of Singlish elements in otherwise Standard speech is a challenge. An approach based on indexicality enables a less code-based, more inclusive analysis, allowing for a multitude of codes from various languages to be taken into account. Thus, the clear separation of 'varieties' such as Singlish, Standard English, Mandarin, Hokkien, etc., is deconstructed, and their interplay highlighted. The data presented herein shows the strength of such a model, and raises questions as to the appropriateness of independent, distinct 'varieties' in the speech community at hand.

1 Variation in Singapore English

1.1 The problem

When describing the situation of English in Singapore, authors usually take one of two approaches. Many (Pakir 1991; Ho and Platt 1993; Poedjosoedarmo 1995) have found analyses based on the continuum hypothesis put forward by Platt (1975) most useful, whereas others (Gupta 1994, 2001) have preferred a traditional diglossic approach (Ferguson 1959). Each of these models has, of course, been adapted to suit local specificities, such as Gupta's Fergusonian diglossia taking on a 'leaky' (Gupta 2006a: 22) nature to explain features of H in otherwise L utterances (and vice-versa). Nonetheless, there remain problems with all these, stemming largely from their usage of ill-defined concepts such as 'code' or 'variety': it is unclear, for instance, to which diglossic sub-variety an utterance such as (1) should be ascribed.

- (1) My brother one went there and he took the budget airline and then he come back with the normal airline. (ii.M.3.f)

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The utterance in example (1) contains two features that are usually ascribed to ‘Singlish’: emphatic *one* (Bao 2009) and the verb *come* in the present, marking a current relevant state (Deterding 2003). However, it also contains two past tense verbs (*went* and *took*), features described by Gupta (1994) as being diagnostic of Standard English. A diglossic approach could, for instance, consider (1) to be in H (e.g. as the matrix language, in Myers-Scotton’s (1997) terminology), with switches to L in the first NP and in the VP *come back*. This is, however, unsatisfactory from a Fergusonian point of view, which all but precludes the possibility of intrasentential switches, whereas ‘leaky’ diglossia is only a partly helpful notion, particularly in the absence of a clear motivation for a switch from one sub-variety into the other, and, also, because of the problems identifying individual varieties: while the past tense of *go* is always *went* in H, it can be *go* or *went* in L, which renders a clear assignment to one or the other variety difficult. Similarly, a continuum approach would fail at explaining the co-occurrence, in (1), of forms associated with sociolects positioned at quite different levels on the continuum. Furthermore, there is little by way of a shift in formality that would warrant moving from one lect to another, a problem similar to that faced by the diglossia model.

The data used in this article is from fieldwork in Singapore in 2006–2007. The coding in each example identifies several social variables: digits i–iii stand for the informants’ school (junior college/polytechnic/vocational school), C/M/I for their ethnic group (Chinese/Malay/Indian), and m/f for their sex (male/female). The digit in third position (1–4) is a running identifier.

1.2 A heterogeneous community

An additional problem with models of ‘Singapore English’ (henceforth SgE), which, however, is usually recognised by authors, is the complexity of the community where it is spoken. The different Englishes spoken in Singapore also interact with other languages, notably the so-called ‘mother tongues’, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, but also other varieties of Chinese (Hokkien, Cantonese, etc.), colloquial Malay, the L form of Tamil, and a host of other minority languages from Indo-European (Panjabi, Hindi), Dravidian (Malayalam, Telugu), Austronesian (Tagalog, Javanese), and Sino-Tibetan (Hakka, Wu) families (Lewis 2009).

While any attempt to generalise would be at odds with the rest of this article, it is fair to say that very few Singaporeans are monolingual, not least because of the bilingual policy adhered to during education (where ‘mother tongue’ classes are given on a daily basis — although they are closer to L2 classes). The demographics of multilingualism are hard to quantify, but the 2010 census does show that 67.5% of residents are literate in two or more languages (as opposed to 28.3% who are literate in a single language and

4.1% illiterates) (Wong 2011). It is likely that adding spoken proficiency to literacy would increase the number of multilinguals to well over the current two-thirds, particularly since the non-official non-Mandarin varieties of Chinese are rarely taught in their written form, and consequently absent from the census data. A not uncommon situation is that of a Singaporean Chinese, who speaks Hokkien with his grandparents, Mandarin with his parents, and English with everyone else. In such a situation, of course, code-switching is the norm rather than the exception, particularly intra-ethnically, where a common ‘mother tongue’ is (more often than not) shared: Mandarin in the case of the Chinese, Malay for the Malays, and Tamil (to a lesser extent) for the Indians.

The concept of ‘mother tongue’ may need a little explanation. Of Singapore’s four official languages (English, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil), three (Mandarin, Malay, Tamil) are called ‘mother tongues’, and are closely associated to the three major ethnic groups (Chinese, Malay, and Indian, respectively). Their supposed role is to be repositories of local (or rather ancestral) culture, a role that cannot be fulfilled by English, which, from an official perspective, is solely meant to strengthen international competitiveness and needs to be culturally voided in order to prevent ‘corrupted Western values’ such as e.g. individualism (Alsagoff 2007: 36; (2010), see also Bokhorst-Heng 1998) being appropriated by Singaporeans. The mother tongue is taught at school to pupils that are members of the ethnic group associated with it, regardless of their actual native language (a situation that has slightly changed recently, with a wider choice of L2 available for pupils, see e.g. Dixon (2005); see also Pakir (2001) for a discussion of the implications of the bilingual policy). This mother tongue policy has had an effect on a whole generation, in all three major ethnic groups. For Chinese Singaporeans, it meant a shift from Hokkien, Cantonese, and other non-Mandarin varieties of Chinese to Mandarin, further aided by the more wide-ranging Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC 2009), a nationwide campaign started in 1979 aimed at uniting the diverse Chinese-speaking population under the single variety Mandarin.

	1980	1990	2000	2010
English	12 %	20 %	23 %	32 %
Mandarin	10 %	26 %	35 %	36 %
Other Chinese	60 %	37 %	24 %	14 %
Malay	14 %	13 %	14 %	12 %
Tamil	3 %	3 %	3 %	3 %

Table 1: ‘Predominant household language’. The 1980 and 1990 census data are from Kwan-Terry (1993). The 2000 census data (Leow 2001) and 2010 (Wong 2011) censuses call it the ‘language most frequently spoken at home’.

The mother tongue, then, is taught as an L2 and as a school subject like any other. Success in the subject may be important for educational attainment, but it is the mastery of English, the medium of education, that is of paramount importance in the process. It is no surprise, therefore, that English has become, over the years, increasingly popular as a home language, as apparent from the numbers in Table 1 — its importance in the linguistic ecology of Singapore is further illustrated by the recent introduction of English language tests for ‘foreign workers in the hotel, food and beverage, and retail sectors’ (Abdul Khamid 2010). The census numbers in Table 1 do need to be taken with a pinch of salt, as highlighted elsewhere (Gupta 1994; Leimgruber 2009), as they are self-evaluations by the census population, and the modifiers ‘predominant’ and ‘frequently’ are relatively vague and gloss over the complex multilingual situation in most homes; nonetheless, these are the most easily available numbers. In addition, one can cite MOE (2006: 4), who gives the breakdown of the 2006 Primary 1 cohort’s predominant home language as 8 % English only, 42 % mostly English and some mother tongue, 37 % mother tongue and some English, and 12 % hardly or no English. Therefore, around 50 % of primary school entrants have English as a main home language. By 2009, this number was reported to have increased to 54 % (Tan 2009).

Linguistically speaking, then, we are in presence of a highly heterogeneous community, much more so than transpires from a superficial look at census data. The problem with these, hinted at above, are manifold, but the widespread multilingualism is the one that makes the census’ methodology so questionable. Even the numbers in MOE (2006), more useful than those in Table 1, use the category ‘some mother tongue’, which presumably (given that the percentages add to 100) covers other varieties not defined as ‘mother tongues’ by the Ministry of Education. This would include, for instance, non-Mandarin Chinese dialects, which are, despite strong government effort,¹ still alive and well. And what about combinations of ‘mother tongues’ — although less common these days, it is conceivable for a Singaporean Hokkien to know (at least some of each of) English, Mandarin, Hokkien, and perhaps Malay. Hokkien, of course, being the majority Chinese variety in Singapore, is known to greater or lesser extents by Chinese of non-Hokkien background — even if this knowledge is limited to a few words, which are sometimes considered part of Singlish (*kiasu* ‘afraid to lose out’, *paish* ‘embarrassed’, see e.g. Lee 2004). Malay, due to its constitutional status as a national language, enjoys ‘knowledge’ by all Singaporeans, at least as far as the lyrics of the national anthem are concerned (although their actual meaning is obscure to most non-Malays). Many Malay words have also made it into descriptions of Singlish (e.g. *roti* ‘bread’, *bodoh* ‘stupid’).

This raises another issue, succinctly summarised by Chiang (2009) when he explains that when meeting non-Singaporean Chinese, he speaks ‘in Mandarin and switch[es] to English when needed to better communicate’.

The ever-present multilingualism makes non-switching discourse in ‘mother tongue’ rare and very much the marked choice, even, as in Chiang’s case, in intra-ethnic communication. This may be seen as a problem of the education system, but is, much more likely, the inevitable consequence of Singapore’s multilingualism, where several languages (two for each individual, officially) are given near-equal importance in terms of proficiency. In fact, code-switching is common not just between two languages, but between any of the codes available to the speaker. Consider example (2), overheard in a restaurant, where the speaker suggests to the addressee to use the tea in front of her in order to wash off the oil on her spoon.

(2) Yong tea wash it off lah.

Yòng (用) ‘to use’ is Mandarin, and *lah* is prototypical Singlish. There is little in the intervening lexical items that would warrant classifying it anything other than English. Are we therefore in presence of two switches, first from Mandarin into English and then from English into Singlish? If so, what about the missing dummy *to* before *wash* — is that a case of Singlish within an otherwise Standard English verb phrase?

These are important questions for theories of code-switching, and have been dealt with elsewhere (Romaine 1995; Myers-Scotton 1997, 2000; Chua 2001; Gardner-Chloros 2009). They also highlight the difficulties faced when formulating theories of code-switching that have to take into account switches not just from one language to another (and back, e.g. Mandarin–English), but also from one variety of a language to another variety of that same language (e.g. Singlish–English). The linguistic distance between these ‘varieties’ might not be large enough to easily identify a switch, rendering the theoretical framework of code-switching (or at least the matrix language frame model (Myers-Scotton 1997)) ill-suited, and, by extension, questioning the very concept of the variety. In the Singaporean context, these questions are particularly interesting with respect to the various models that have been proposed in order to explain the variation in Singapore English, in particular.

1.3 Modelling variation

Of the existing variationist models put forward for Singapore English, I shall briefly outline three. The first is that of Platt (1975), who proposes an analysis based on DeCamp’s (1971) post-creole continuum. In Platt’s adaption of the continuum (see Figure 1), the speech community is ordered in a vertical hierarchy based on levels of educational achievement. The model’s ‘speech continuum’ is, as expected, a seamless succession of sociolects, with Standard English as its acrolect and ‘Singlish’ as its basilect. Departures from DeCamp’s model exist, chiefly in the absence of a clear implicational hierarchy of the lects, and in the fuzzy definition of the basilect as a ‘bunching’ of several lower mesolects (Platt 1975: 366).

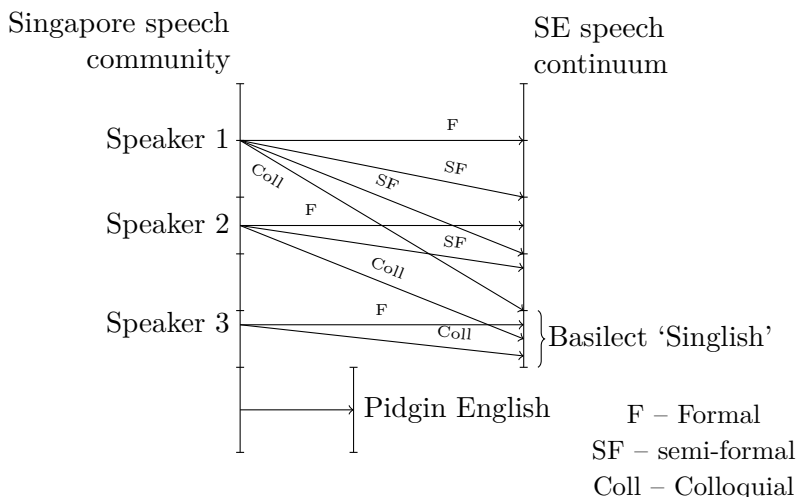


Figure 1: ‘Relation between socio-economic factors and the usage of sub-varieties of [SgE] available to a speaker’ (Platt 1975: 369).

An important feature of Platt’s continuum is the connection between the social and the linguistic axes. Each speaker is seen as having at his disposal a given range of the linguistic continuum, based on his position on the social continuum. In Figure 1, speaker 1, being at a high social level (measured in terms of level of education), has access to a reasonably acrolectal variety as his most formal style. In addition, in common with all other members of the speech community, he also commands the basilect, as well as all the intervening mesolects between it and his formal lect. The same system is at work for speakers 2 and 3, who have access to the basilect and all the lects between it and the highest lect they command, based on their level on the social continuum. The consequence is that the higher one’s educational attainment, the wider one’s range of available lects, and, therefore, the more refined one’s possibilities of stylistic choice.

The problems with this model have been investigated elsewhere (Gupta 1994, 1998; Ansaldo 2004; Alsagoff 2007, 2010, see also Patrick 1999), but can be broken down into two concerns. Firstly, there is the absence of a reliable way to distinguish individual lects on the lectal scale, which was a major component of DeCamp’s (1971) continuum. Its implicational hierarchy, linking Jamaican Creole proper and Standard Jamaican English, made it relatively easy to identify the lect that a speaker was using at any one time. Platt does not give such a hierarchy, admittedly because the Singaporean situation does not easily lend itself to it. While there is a decrease in instances of, for instance, copula-deletion (Ho and Platt 1993), that correlates with increasing educational attainment, these measures do not easily enable an

identification of the spoken lect as being situated on a given point of the continuum. As a result, the sub-varieties represented in Figure 1 by arrows labelled with F(ormal), Coll(ouial), etc., are unhelpful in that they are not linguistically defined.

Secondly, it is by no means certain that all members of the speech community do indeed make use of the basilect for the colloquial register Platt assigned it to. Hussain (2006: 1), for instance, reports on an ‘upper middle-class, English-speaking’ Singaporean (Lee 2004) who was first exposed to CSE during his National Service, and ‘often [...] could not understand his platoon mates’. While this may be the exception, with most intelligibility issues restricted to the lexicon, it is plausible that there are members of the speech community that do not *actively* use the basilect, even for the informal exchanges Platt had in mind (e.g. ordering from a waitress). These speakers would be found in homes where English is the first language — sometimes a result of parental concern for their children’s academic advantage — and where features of the basilect are frowned upon and, as a result, not transmitted. Children of such homes also often attend schools where they interact with peers from comparable backgrounds, thus reinforcing the sociolect to the exclusion of Singlish.

A second important model used to describe variation in Singapore is the diglossia model (Gupta 1989, 1994, 1998, 2001). Here Standard (Singapore) English (SSE) is called the H(igh) variety, and Colloquial Singapore English (CSE) the L(ow) variety. SSE is indistinguishable from other Standard Englishes around the globe, with the exception of some localised vocabulary (e.g. *HDB* ‘(flat in a) public housing block built by the Housing and Development Board’, and compounds of Standard English words restricted to Singapore, e.g. *NS-man* ‘national service conscript’). CSE is ‘Singlish’, called thus by its speakers, by language planners opposed to its use, and, indeed, by linguists describing it (Tan 2005; Wee 2005; Gupta 2006b; Alsagoff 2007, 2010). Gupta (1994: 10–13) gives a list of features that can be used to distinguish H from L, such as inversion, inflexions, and modals for H, and particles, PRO-drop, and copula-deletion for L. The choice of when to use one or the other of these two varieties is, according to Gupta (1994: 7), based on considerations of domains of use, as it is in Ferguson’s (1959) diglossia.

The linguistic reality, as always, is more complex than the classic Fergusonian diglossic view. The problem lies in the non-homogeneous character of H and L, which, in a ‘pure’ diglossic situation, would be taken for granted. Gupta (1998: 8) concedes that there is no ‘hard division between H and L’, but ‘degrees of aim at H and L’. She later calls this situation one of ‘leaky’ diglossia (2006b: 22; see also Fasold 1984: 41), where elements of one sub-variety can appear in the other, in a phenomenon akin to code-switching. Notwithstanding this ‘leaking’, individual strings of SgE are seen ‘to constellate’ (Gupta 1994: 8) towards H or L, in an argument not unlike that of Willemyns (1987). This analysis can, however, be problematic, not least

because it too, like Platt’s, does not account for code-switching into languages other than Singlish (L) and the standard (H). Furthermore, it is hard to imagine how an examples such as (3) can be adequately broken into strings of H and L (highlighted with wayy and straight underlines respectively): what we have would be a L–H–L–H–H–L sequence, and no clear ‘constellation’ towards one or the other.

- (3) No ah, that one is only for accommodation. But actually, if you go there, right, my brother say for just going there is² actually five hundred bucks ah. (ii.M.3.f)

This point was also made by Alsagoff (2007, 2010), who goes a long way to review the research on this topic, with, in conclusion, a new model entitled ‘cultural orientation model’, or COM. This model attempts to overcome the shortcomings in the continuum and in diglossia by proposing two sub-varieties of SgE, International Singapore English (ISE, broadly equivalent to Standard English) and Local Singapore English (LSE, Singlish), which are at the extremes of a continuum of cultural orientation. According to this model, speakers are able to express a number of orientations, non-exhaustively listed in Table 2, which can be broadly summarised under the headings ‘global’ (for ISE, or Standard English) and ‘local’ (for LSE, or Singlish). Thus, the ‘cultural orientation’ in the model’s name refers not just to endogenous vs. exogenous, but also to levels of formality, authority, and closeness. Additionally, speakers may wish, in a given situation, to stress either educational attainment or community membership, or economic or socio-cultural capital, and do so by choosing the adequate variety.

	ISE <i>Globalism</i>	LSE <i>Localism</i>
(a)	Economic capital	Socio-cultural capital
(b)	Authority	Camaraderie
(c)	Formality	Informality
(d)	Distance	Closeness
(e)	Educational attainment	Community membership

Table 2: ‘Features of the two orientations in the cultural orientation model’ (Alsagoff 2007: 39, Table 1).

The power of the model lies in its ability to combine these orientations, such that a speaker can stress closeness while at the same time, for instance, emphasising economic capital. This leads to its main advantage over the diglossia model (with which it shares the dyadic nature of the features in Table 2), namely the ability to satisfactorily explain the presence of L features in otherwise H speech, which can be reanalysed as the insertion of ‘local’

features into a ‘global’ utterance. Think, for instance, of a politician, wanting to convey, in his speech, not just formality and the importance of economic capital, but also a degree of community membership in order to build rapport with his audience. This is done by a decision ‘to orientate towards ISE to indicate authority’ while at the same time ‘exhibit[ing] some degree of Singlish features to indicate a local perspective in order to stress membership in the community’ (Alsagoff 2007: 40). The inclusion of Singlish features is called by Alsagoff ‘style-switching’, which she prefers to *code-switching* as the latter suggests ‘a binary movement between two varieties’ (2007: 40).

Alsagoff’s COM goes in the direction, initiated by Gupta’s diglossia, of viewing speakers of SgE not simply as being of various levels of educational achievement (and, therefore, of English proficiency), as in Platt’s continuum (among others), but as having at their disposal a complex binary system, which they successfully exploit for stylistic purposes. It is true that the recognition that English has become a major first language in Singapore, and continues to do so, needs to be taken into account in modern models: Gupta (1994), for instance, devotes a whole chapter to the native speakers of English in Singapore, whereas in Platt’s (1975) time, it was much less widespread, e.g. as a dominant home language.

Like the other models, COM does not explicitly mention code-switching (into Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, etc.) and is largely concerned with variation within English. The inclusion of non-English varieties in a comprehensive model of language use is something that has only really been addressed by Platt (1977), who, however, casts it all into a multi-layered diglossic system (‘polyglossia’), with all the shortcomings this implies. In conclusion, however, COM offers the best of the existing ways of looking at how Singlish and English interact in their daily use. The stylistic component certainly works well, but perhaps its limitations lie within its very name. Limiting variation to cultural orientation alone may not be enough, as the following section sets out to show.

2 Indexicality

2.1 Background

An alternative model, which takes into account not only the variation addressed by Alsagoff, but, potentially, also the code-switching that is central to language use in such a multilingual community, can be found in work based on indexicality (Silverstein 2003; Eckert 2008). Especially Eckert’s (2008) concept of the ‘indexical field’ is useful in determining a particular variable’s range of social meanings.

An indexical approach to variation in SgE has to be situated beyond first-order indexicality. To briefly explain what this means, a sentence such as that in (4) has, at its referential level, a given semantic value, and, at its

indexical level, both a first-order (pragmatic) indexicality, as well as a second-order (metapragmatic, social) indexicality, and, possibly, a ‘higher-order’ (conventionally recognised) indexicality.

(4) And we mustn’t forget Mr. Maṅmatan. (iii.I.2.f)

In this example, the referential meaning is that of an addition to the informants’ discussion of a guest list for a weekend getaway, and *Mr. Maṅmatan* ‘good-looking man’ (Tamil) refers to the researcher conducting the experiment. At the first indexical level, (4) indexes a suggestion, made in jest, to include the researcher in the informants’ party. The relatively formal nature of the verb phrase *mustn’t forget* — which is, according to Gupta (1994: 10–13), in a form diagnostic of Standard English, as opposed to Singlish — is at a second level, indexing, precisely, a certain level of formality (triggered, presumably, by the presence of a microphone, or the mention of the interviewer). Lastly, a higher-order indexical process is involved in the switch to Tamil for the actual reference to the researcher. There is, firstly, the need for a shared background in order to simply understand the switch (taken for granted given the ethnicity and mother tongue of the informants), but also in order to appreciate the effect the switch has on the whole utterance: intra-sentential switches are recognised as quintessentially Singlish;³ this has, in the present case, the effect of lifting the utterance from a formal register (as indexed at the second level) into an informal one. This re-evaluation at the level of formality is, however, ambiguous, precisely because of the lexical item responsible for the indexing being preceded by a construction that indexes its opposite.

Examples of this kind are not difficult to come by, as the exchange in (5) makes clear. Here four informants (two male and two female) partake in an unsupervised discussion, having been given the task to organise a joint holiday trip on a given budget.

- (5) 3f: Fifteen minute ah, is it? Aiyoh, don’t know what to say ah. 1
 4m: Eh after this ∅ finish ah? 2
 2f: No. One of you have to go walk around the school, meet your 3
friends and talk. 4
 4m: Are you sure ah? 5
 2f: Because he want to see how we all talk, normally... 6
 3f: (***) stupidity. 7
 2f: That’s what him say to us just now. 8
 4m: Serious? So dumb. 9
 3f: Do you realise that he’s actually quite nervous? 10
 4m: I know! 11
 2f: Yeah. He will edit it lah, I think. 12
 1m: So confirmation right, we will be Bangkok. 13
 4m: (***) 14

2f: Yeah.	15
3f: [laugh]	16
2f: Ok <u>lah</u> , confirm <u>ah</u> , Bangkok. Let's have a try <u>ah</u> . . . It's more like a survival things* <u>ah</u> , with three hundred.	17 18
4m: (***), eat like rice?	19
3f: No <u>ah</u> , that one is only for accommodation. But actually, if you go there right, my brother <u>say</u> for just going there is actually five hundred <u>bucks ah</u> .	20 21 22
4m: No <u>lah</u> .	23
2f: Minimum!	24
3f: Ng-ng. My brother, my brother <u>one went</u> there and he <u>took</u> the-	25
2f: Budget one?	26
3f: Budget airline and then he <u>come</u> back with normal, the normal airline, then the total is <u>hundred</u> . But never mind, we can always. . .	27 28 29
4m: But if you take, yeah, my friend <u>say ah</u> , because he <u>∅</u> going back Thailand, (***) don't know right, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai?	30 31
1m: Chiang Mai, Chiang Mai.	32
4m: He <u>say</u> if he <u>takes</u> Silk Air, it's five hundred, to go.	33
2f: To go only.	34
3f: <u>Hah?</u>	35
2f: <u>Wah lau eh!</u>	36
4m: But if you take Jet Star, can <u>∅</u> eight <u>dollars</u> . FROM† <u>ah</u> , from eight <u>dollars</u> onwards. But then <u>got</u> the airport tax.	37 38
2f: That one the eight <u>dollar</u> is a plus plus thing, you know.	39
4m: Yeah <u>lah</u> .	40

(ii.M.gr)

* Hypercorrection.

† Emphasis.

Several elements of interest are present here: firstly, there is a total absence of constellation towards 'Singlish' or 'Standard English', with H and L features, highlighted with wavy underlines and straight underlines respectively, co-occurring frequently, in a seemingly haphazard fashion. Certainly there is no easily identifiable 'matrix language', or even a hint at which of Singlish or Standard is the default code. Bearing that in mind, it is more enlightening to think of the exchange not as consisting of strings *in* Singlish and *in* Standard English, but rather as elements (features) drawn *from* these codes and combined to form the exchange in (5). Secondly, there are ways in which the occurrence of features of either Singlish or the standard is less than random. Quite apart from cases such as (4), where a borrowing from/switch to Tamil is used in order to index certain social meanings (informality, light-heartedness, group membership, anti-authoritarianism, etc.),

here the features underlined in (5) are a result of the complex interplay of discourse-level influences (lines 2–3), topic (lines 10 and 12), and stance-taking (lines 17 and 36). In line 1, for instance, the non-inflected noun and the particles, but in particular the interjection *aiyoh*, are triggered in part by preceding ‘Singlish’ elements of discourse and by the stance that they index, namely one of impatience and boredom. In contrast, the exchange in lines 10 to 12, a criticism of the researcher, is phrased using features commonly ascribed to the H variety, with a single L element, the particle *lah*, at the end of a clause expressing the hope that the comment will be deleted from the final transcript.

2.2 Discussion

It should be clear by now that the selection of features associated with Singlish or Standard English, is, in the present data, less than straightforwardly explained by existing models such as diglossia. The potential of Alsagoff’s cultural orientation model for discourse of this kind has been analysed above, and found partially suitable: certainly as far as globalist/localist orientations are concerned, the model can be applied to examples such as (5). Examples (4) and (5), however, also show that the variation between features of Singlish and of Standard English can be taken beyond a mere local–global dimension. The interplay of elements belonging not only to Singlish and to Standard English, but also to the realm of the mother tongues (Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil) and to non-official ‘dialects’ allows for a creative use of this mix in order to index particular social meanings.

Here an element of the indexical framework, proposed by Eckert (2008), can be useful. She conceives of sociolinguistic variables as covering an ‘indexical field’ of social meanings; i.e. a range of possible sociolinguistic meanings. Her example was that of /t/-release in American English, where the use of the unreleased variant is taken to index several meanings, including ‘stances’ and ‘permanent qualities’ such as ‘angry’, ‘careful’, ‘formal’, ‘educated’, etc., and ‘social types’ such as ‘British’ or ‘school teacher’. The boundaries between these social meanings are fluid, such that stances can, if indexed repeatedly by the same speaker, become permanent qualities (‘stance accretion’ (Eckert 2008: 469), see Rauniomaa (2003) and Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 596)), whereas social types are ‘enregistered voices’ (Eckert 2008: 470) against which stances can be referenced.

Variables such as Eckert’s word-final /t/ can be of many kinds: phonological, phonetic, grammatical, or lexical. In the Singaporean case at hand, they may ‘belong to’, or be associated with, a particular variety (or language), such that the famous discourse particles of Singlish (Gupta 1992; Wee 2004; Ler 2006), while generally accepted to be Cantonese in origin (Lim 2007), are now seen as being of the realm of Singlish. Multi-word strings in (e.g.) Hokkien, on the other hand, would be evidence of a switch to that vari-

ety/language (as opposed to the many Hokkien loanwords that are part of ‘regular’ Singlish). Non-reduced final consonant clusters would be seen to belong to school-type Standard English, and so forth.

Considering, now, that each variable has an indexical field, and that these (phonological, grammatical, etc.) variables, ‘belonging’ to several, sometimes highly different varieties, may be co-occurring at the discourse level, their interplay becomes complex and a potentially prolific resource for all sorts of indexical behaviour. The following occurrence might serve as an example of this multi-layered system: during a light-hearted post-dinner conversation with a group of similarly-aged Singaporeans, in which I was the only ‘western’ foreigner, a question arose from one of the group regarding the culinary preferences of, precisely, *ang mohs*. *Ang moh* is a staple Singlish term of Hokkien origin (红毛, *âng mó*, lit. ‘red hair’), and is either a noun for ‘a Caucasian, a white person’, or an adjective meaning ‘having the nature or attributes of a Caucasian or white person’ (Lee 2004). It is always pronounced [aŋ mo] in regular Singlish. In this particular instance, however, the speaker pronounced it [ɛŋ mo], which resulted in laughter by all present, including the linguist addressed, much to the speaker’s embarrassment. What happened was that the speaker, aware that the TRAP vowel is pronounced differently in the outsider’s variety of English (a less open [æ]), and assuming that *ang moh* contained the ‘short *a* sound’, perhaps due to its usual spelling, moved the item *ang moh* from its original phonological system into another English one, reassigning it to the TRAP set, which is, of course, pronounced [ɛ] in most varieties of Singapore English. The resulting laughter can be interpreted, too, at several levels, firstly by being directed at the misplaced pronunciation, more likely, however, as a reaction to the pretentious stance such a pronunciation would index, but also, crucially, as a recognition of the irony inherent in that pretension being indexed through an ‘ang moh’ pronunciation of that very same item, and therefore backfiring.

The multitude of layers at which the indexing works, together with the wide range of variables available, make for a rather complex picture. Code-switching (where strings of several words from different languages combine, rather than instances of single-word borrowings) is another such example, where the indexical framework not only of English/Singlish has to be taken into account, but also that of the language(s) switched into — for instance, the choice of variety in diglossic Tamil, or that between the local vernacular Mandarin and a Mainland-accented one.⁴ This multilingual indexical framework is much more complex than the polyglossic model of Platt (1977), where ways of speaking were equated with individual sub-codes of varieties, such as ‘Formal Singapore English’ and ‘Colloquial Singapore English’, ‘Mandarin’ and ‘Hokkien/Cantonese’ and ‘other Chinese dialects’, etc., which were in turn given diglossic labels such as H_1 , H_2 , or L_n , depending on their location in a bi-dimensional reference frame based on the level of prestige they carry within the speech community. In an indexical framework,

the independence and mutual exclusiveness of these varieties is relegated to a lesser level of importance, if not discarded fully: the amount of switching, or intermingling, as shown in the preceding examples, is just too important to talk of different varieties. This linguistic lack of difference, argued for here, is of course absent sociolinguistically, where the individual, prescriptively ‘pure’ (i.e. non-code-switching) official languages are very much given a higher attitudinal rating by various stakeholders.

The focus, therefore, needs to be on variables and on the social meanings they index. One could argue that the difference between the alternation of variables associated with Standard English and with Singlish and the alternation of variables associated with Singlish and, say, Mandarin or Tamil, is equivalent. The fact that it is not is due to the social interpretations behind each of these variables. The important thing is that these interpretations are not limited (or indeed extended) to the variety they ‘belong to’ as whole, but are much more specialised. Thus, Mandarin switches will not automatically be more positively valued because of the overall (and official) stance on Mandarin as the official, useful, and valuable variety to be proficient in, than, say, a Singlish discourse particle in the right position, when deemed appropriate by all involved in the conversation.

Considerations such as those in the Alsagoff’s cultural orientation model — degrees of formality, of closeness, of localism, of educational or social capital — all combine to be collectively indexed, by means of variables taken from Standard English, Singlish, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, and any other linguistic resource available to speakers (Britishisms among Singaporean alumni of a British university, for instance). With this in mind, an exhaustive list of variables and the social meanings they index would be a futile exercise, since such a list would be highly dependent on many factors unique to the individual speaker. In the case of Singapore, these include the home language or ‘dialect’, the educational ‘mother tongue’, the type of English used at home, and more generally on the speaker’s repertoire of linguistic codes.

3 Conclusion

What transpires from this discussion is, firstly, that existing models trying to explain variation in Singapore as a result of a unidimensional Singlish–Standard continuum or of a bipolar diglossic situation are unsatisfactory at best with regards to a full modelling of the linguistic variation present in the city-state. An indexical model, which relegates the question of which variety is being used at any one time to a secondary level, has the potential to take into account the vastly different origins of the variables used in everyday discourse, as well as to adequately explain the social meanings and uses indexed by these variables. The work done by Alsagoff (2007, 2010) goes a long way in this direction, but can be furthered by the use of a more inclusive

indexical approach.

A wider implication of such an approach is to question the relevance of clearly defined geographical labels such as ‘Singapore English’ in studies of World Englishes. While it is arguably clear that such a label stands for a variety (whatever that might mean) spoken within the confines of the nation-state of Singapore (assuming such a geopolitical reference frame is an appropriate one for linguistics), it is much less clear what it stands for linguistically. As I have tried to show, the use of Singlish, or indeed English, alone and without switches between them and between other languages, is restricted to highly specific settings, where such switches might still occur when appropriate, e.g. for stylistic reasons. As a result, while the ‘Singapore’ element in the label is still quintessentially important, that of ‘English’ takes on a much more fuzzy meaning. That this reflection holds true to other, if not most World Englishes, shows the relevance and the explanatory power of an indexical model. It is hoped that further research will show this to be true for other, non-Singaporean ‘varieties’.

Notes

¹Among these efforts are the Speak Mandarin Campaign mentioned earlier, the elimination of ‘dialects’ from public broadcasting, and the repeated injunctions from ministers and others, sprinkled with pseudo-scientific claims, that proficiency in ‘dialect’ hinders the learning of Mandarin. See, for instance, the arguments put forward in Chee (2009) (calling the learning of dialects ‘foolish’ and ‘stupid’) as a response to Abu Baker (2009), which drew attention to the endangered status of these varieties. That Singaporeans still have an attachment to them, however, is shown in a further response to the debate by Chiang (2009).

²Presence of the copula has been marked as a feature of H here. Additionally, one could postulate PRO-drop for the absence of the /t/, however, it could equally well be that all of *for just going there* is the subject of *is*.

³Or *rojak* ‘jumbled up, mixed up’ < Malay < Javanese *rudjak* ‘sliced fruits in a peppery sauce’ (Lee 2004: sense B).

⁴Mostly through the application of *érhuà* (儿化), a form of rhotacisation particular to Mandarin in its northern form, where e.g. *gōngyuán* [kɔŋ¹ɿɥən¹] ‘park’ > *gōngyuánr* [kɔŋ¹ɿɥər¹]. See e.g. Liu (2003).

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