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## **Singlish as defined by young educated Chinese Singaporeans\***

Abstract. Colloquial Singapore English, or Singlish, exists in an environment characterised by strong language planning aimed at demoting it in favour of Standard English, as well as in a linguistic ecology featuring a number of languages that have had an impact on its current form. An actual definition of Singlish, beyond scholarly linguistic analyses, is less than straightforward, and this paper sets out to address this. Chinese Singaporeans were asked to define Singlish, and elements of Hokkien (one of the major substrate languages involved in the emergence of the contact variety) in conjunction with Singlish were subjected to attitudinal ratings. The results call for a redefinition Singlish not in terms of a clear set of features that set it apart from other varieties, but rather as a combination of linguistic resources that combine to create a stylistic repertoire appropriate for the expression of, among other stances, local identity.

Keywords: Singapore English, Singlish, Hokkien, language attitudes, Chinese Singaporeans

### **Introduction**

‘Singlish’, the vernacular form of Singapore English, is widely spoken in Singapore, widely described in the literature on World Englishes, and widely criticised by policy makers as ‘bad English’ that threatens proficiency in Standard English. This latter point is echoed somewhat in speaker attitudes towards their variety, though the extent to which attitudes towards Singlish are positive or negative has not been satisfactorily queried (though see Cavallaro and Ng 2009). Similarly, the question of what Singlish actually is and what makes it different from Standard English and instances of code-switching between English, Singlish, and other languages, is not as straightforward as

the extensive body of research on Singapore English might suggest (Leimgruber 2012, 2013a). From the language planners' perspective, Singlish is anything that is not Standard English. This paper seeks to probe speakers' definitions of Singlish. Given the linguistic and ethnic composition of the Singlish speaker base, interethnic differences are bound to appear. In order to minimise these differences, the study focussed on Chinese Singaporeans, a choice justified by their majority status in the country (74% of the resident population, Wong 2011) and by the amount of Chinese loanwords and constructions found in prototypical Singlish.

### **Language planning in Singapore**

In order to understand the status of Singlish within the city-state, it is necessary to say a few words about language planning and policy in Singapore. This has been described in quite some detail (Bokhorst-Heng 1998, Shepherd 2005, Tan 2005, Wee 2006, Rappa and Wee 2006, Chua 2011, Leimgruber 2013b). The basic legal instruments at the disposal of policy-makers are actually comparatively slim: unlike in neighbouring Malaysia, there is no language act, and the only legal statements about languages are three sentences found in the constitution: 'Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English shall be the four official languages of Singapore.' (§153A(1)), 'The national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in the Roman script.' (§153A(2)), and '[A]ll debates and discussions in Parliament shall be conducted in Malay, English, Mandarin or Tamil.' (§53). However, the absence of a more elaborate legal framework articulating the state's language policy does not mean that these provisions are the only ones influencing actual policy. Nothing explicit in the constitution, for instance, gives English a special place in the Republic. English, however, is the language in which the constitution as well as all other legal texts are written, it is the language of the courts, of government administration, of the armed forces, of the education system, so in short, the

country is essentially run in English. Though not enshrined in law, the status of English as Singapore's 'working language' is constantly highlighted as having been the prime reason for Singapore's economic success, giving the country an advantage over regional competitors. Illustrating this stance is a quote by Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister and founding father of independent Singapore, from a speech given at the launch of the English Language Institute of Singapore in 2011:

Had we not chosen English, we would have been left behind. We are the only country in the region that uses English as our working language [...] This has given our young a strong advantage of growing up in a multi-cultural multi-lingual society, all speaking the international language of commerce and trade, English, and their mother tongues, Chinese, Malay, Tamil and others as their second languages. (Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in Ramesh 2011)

The importance accorded to English needs to be viewed within the larger frame of language policies in Singapore, which bestow, on the one hand, economic and commercial values to English, and, on the other hand, cultural and traditional values to Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, the other three official languages. These three languages are termed 'mother tongues' and are assigned to the three major ethnic groups of the country, the Chinese, the Malays, and the Indians – groups which are, actually, quite heterogeneous in actual language use. This distinction between a practical and economic role for English and a cultural and emotional role for the mother tongues has been discussed at length elsewhere (Bokhorst-Heng 1998, 1999, Wee 2003, Tan 2006, Alsagoff 2010, Wee 2011b,a, Leimgruber 2013b); its gist can be seen in this quote by Lee Kuan Yew, given at a speech in 1984 to a Chinese audience:

English will not be emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue [...] Mandarin is emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue. It also unites the different dialect<sup>1</sup>

groups. It reminds us that we are part of an ancient civilisation with an unbroken history of over 5,000 years. This is a deep and strong psychic force, one that gives confidence to a people to face up to and overcome great changes and challenges.

Therefore I can state that its psychological value cannot be overemphasised. Parents [...] want their children to retain traditional Chinese values in filial piety, loyalty, benevolence, and love. Through Mandarin their children can emotionally identify themselves as part of an ancient civilisation whose continuity was because it was founded on a tried and tested value system. (Lee Kuan Yew, cited in Bokhorst-Heng 1998: 252, cited in Wee 2003: 214)

Given the importance of language skills to a service-based economy, and also in light of the absence of natural resources in the city-state, proficiency in English is of paramount importance, whereas, on the other hand, lack of proficiency in English is a threat to the country's economic survival. The existence, in Singapore, of a local form of English generally known as 'Singlish' or 'Colloquial Singapore English' (a variety that has been extensively described, see e.g. Ho and Platt 1993, Gupta 1994, Foley et al 1998, Lim 2004, Low and Brown 2005, Deterding 2007, Wee 2008a,b, Leimgruber 2011) has long been seen, by policy-makers, as an impediment to proficiency in Standard English. Based on this assumption, Singlish is seen as a direct threat to the nation's wealth and economic development, which is itself seen to be based on the country's decision to promote English as the working language (being, as it is, the language of international trade and business). This reasoning entails that Singlish needs to be actively discouraged in order to maintain and improve proficiency in Standard English, which will, in turn, result in a better future for the country as a whole. The government stance is that 'co-existence [of Singlish and Standard English] is not an option' (Rappa and Wee 2006: 95), and that 'whatever merits [Singlish] may have as a

marker of a Singaporean identity must be jettisoned in favour of the global economic value associated with the standard variety' (Wee 2011a: 79).

One way in which this is attempted is through an annual Speak Good English Movement (SGEM, see e.g. (SGEM, see e.g. Rubdy 2001, Bruthiaux 2010, Leimgruber 2013b), which promotes the use of 'good English' (as opposed to 'Singlish', which is equated with 'bad English'). The SGEM has a visible side, with posters and banners adorning public spaces, reports and small quizzes in newspapers and on television, and less visible sides, such as themed activities in schools, writing competitions, adult language learning classes, and a Movement website (SGEM 2011) with exercises and lists of 'commonly mispronounced words'. While it is hard to measure the exact success of the SGEM in terms of achieving its goal of eradicating Singlish and promoting Standard English (partly because of difficulties in assessing what exactly constitutes these two sub-varieties, see Leimgruber 2013a), it is clear that 'English' (presumably encompassing both) has, over the past few decades, seen a sizeable increase in speakers. Figure 1 shows census data for self-reported language use, with English clearly having benefited from language shift.

@@ Figure 1 about here @@

### **Defining Singlish**

Singlish is often straightforwardly defined as the colloquial version of English spoken in Singapore. As such, it is a contact variety, featuring the usual elements common to Englishes having emerged in high-contact situations: in the grammar, there is transfer from substrate languages, patterns of regularisation, null subjects and objects, copula-deletion, differences in the article system, and a local count/non-count distinction in nouns. In the phonology, there is a reduced vowel inventory, monophthongisation, and

variation in the realisation of interdental fricatives. In the lexicon, there is admixture of lexical items from contact languages. Descriptions abound (inter alia Ho and Platt 1993, Gupta 1994, Low and Brown 2005, Deterding 2007), but by way of examples, the following in (1) from Leimgruber (2011: passim) illustrate the main features of the variety:

- (1) a. That boat  $\emptyset$  very short one. (copula-deletion, emphatic *one* (see also Bao 2009))
- b. How much it will be? (lack of inversion)
- c. Because she wants to sing mah. So she want to use, she want to join to sing, so we just groom her lor. (discourse particles, see e.g. Lim 2007)
- d. Because he want to see how we all talk, normally. (non-inflected 3SG)
- e. (That car) very expensive, you know. (null subject)
- f. Christmas, we don't celebrate, because we are not Christians. (topic-prominence)

Borrowed lexical items are particularly interesting in any description of a contact variety, as they give clues to the languages most closely associated with the emergence of the new variety. Common Singlish words of Malay origin include *makan* 'n., food' or 'v., to eat', *roti* 'n., bread', *kopi* 'n., coffee', *lobang* 'n., opportunity, opening', and *agak-agak* 'n., guess/estimate' or 'v., to guess/estimate'. Hokkien is the other important contributor with words such as *kiasu* 'adj., afraid of losing out', *ah pek* 'n., elderly man', *ang moh* 'n., Caucasian person' or 'adj., having the attributes associated with a Caucasian person', and *cheem* 'adj., profound/complicated'. Other languages have left their traces too, such as Cantonese (*kancheong* 'adj., nervous/tense', *ta pau* 'take-away') or Teochew (*kakinang* 'n., friends/allies'), but it is Hokkien and Malay that account for the bulk of non-English words in Singlish.

A complicating factor in describing Singlish is the presence of code-switching. Singlish, together with its words of Hokkien and Malay origin, exists in a linguistic ecology where it is in daily contact with Standard English, Malay, Mandarin, Hokkien, and a host of other languages and varieties, all of which are widely spoken in the community. Most common are Mandarin (spoken by 36% of the resident population as their dominant home language, Wong 2011), Malay (12%), and Hokkien (7%), with English itself at 32% (no distinction made between Singlish and Standard English). Therefore, it may be difficult, at times, to decide whether a particular non-English element in Singlish is due to a code-switch or a historical borrowing. This is further complicated if speakers' views of their speech is taken into account: while several Singlish speakers are aware of their variety's complex grammar, many others may have taken to the official policy of considering non-English elements (particularly in the lexicon) alone as evidence of Singlish. Previous research (Leimgruber 2012) has shown the difficulties of teasing apart elements of Singlish and elements of Standard English in the same utterance. It would appear that a similar problem arises with respect to Singlish and other languages, particularly Hokkien.

### **Speaker evaluations**

This study seeks to shed light on speakers' attitudes toward the language policies that have shaped the linguistic ecology of Singapore, as well as on speakers' own definitions and perceptions of Singlish.

### ***Methods***

A brief online survey was carried out in September–October 2011 among 134 students at a Singapore university. The focus here is on respondents with a Chinese ethnic background, which numbered 114. The questionnaire was in English, as were all the

responses. Respondents were between 19 and 30 years of age and 82% female. All were university students at the time of data collection.

The questionnaire was divided into four parts: (i) a section on language attitudes employing Likert-type scales, (ii) a section on the contrasts between Singlish and English, (iii) a series of open-ended prompts for attitudinal responses to examples of Singlish, and (iv) an inventory of the respondents' languages. I shall consider parts (i) to (iii) here. The attitudinal ratings in part (i) were given on a five-point Likert-scale (1=completely disagree, 2=disagree somewhat, 3=neutral, 4=agree somewhat, 5=completely agree), to the following statements:

- (2) a. The Speak Good English Movement has changed the way in which I use English.
- b. I think the Speak Mandarin Campaign has changed the way Singaporeans use Chinese.
- c. I am happy about the existence of the Speak Mandarin Campaign.
- d. It is a good thing that English is the main language for education in Singapore.
- e. Singlish is just bad English.
- f. Singlish is the only thing that really makes us Singaporeans.
- g. Singlish unites the different races of Singapore.
- h. English unites the different races of Singapore.
- i. It would be better for Singapore if Singlish did not exist.
- j. I find it sad that many Chinese dialects are no longer spoken.
- k. It is important that pupils learn their mother tongue.

There are more questions about the English–Singlish than about the Mandarin–dialects interaction, due to primary focus of the study; the latter will not be considered in this paper. The questions themselves occasionally paraphrase official government stances (2d, 2e, 2i, 2k); others take up general grievances sometimes heard in public (2f, 2g, j), yet others are more exploratory (2a, 2b, 2c).

Part (ii) asked the three questions in (3). Here the focus was on the actual definition of Singlish, which was directly queried from informants (3a), and to be illustrated with usage examples (3b). Question 3c focused on the sociolinguistic status of the variety. In hindsight, the phrasing of question 3b (specifically, the exhortation to ‘explain’ the meaning of the examples) skewed responses towards a particular type of Singlish expressions: loanwords abounded, as well as grammatical constructions radically different from Standard English.

- (3) a. What is Singlish? Give a definition.  
b. Give some examples of Singlish, and explain what they mean.  
c. When or where, in your opinion, is it acceptable to use Singlish?

When/where not?

Part (iii) presented informants with examples of Singlish sentences found on the Facebook group ‘Speak Good Singlish Movement’ (SGSM 2011). For each, they were asked if it was Singlish, whether or not they would use it and why, and what would be an alternative.

## ***Results***

The level of agreement with the statements in (2) is given in Figure 2. A few things can be said about these results. A first observation would be that, generally speaking, respondents agree with government policies (Figure 2-d, English as the language of

education, and Figure 2-k, mother tongue policy). Their effectiveness, however, is not rated very highly (Figure 2-a for the Speak Good English Movement, Figure 2-b for the Speak Mandarin Campaign)

@@ Figure 2 about here @@

As far as concerns Singlish, there is strong disagreement with the official stance that equates Singlish with ‘bad English’ (Figure 2-e), as well as with the statement that ‘it would be better for Singapore if Singlish did not exist’ (Figure 2-i). On the other hand, Singlish is seen as something of a marker of Singapore identity (Figure 2-f), with 56% of respondents agreeing that ‘Singlish is the only thing that makes [them] Singaporeans’, while 30% disagree and 18% are neutral. Interestingly, ‘Singlish’ is seen to have a higher potential in aiding interethnic cohesion than just ‘English’ (compare Figures 2-g and 2-h).

These attitudinal stances considered, let us turn to definitions of Singlish. The responses to the questions in (3) differ in interesting ways from the professional linguist’s take on the variety. A selection of the ‘definitions’ of Singlish is presented in (4). Here some common themes appear: the idea of Singlish as a ‘mixture’ of other languages (primarily Malay and Hokkien, but also other varieties of Chinese and ‘Indian languages’), giving rise to a ‘hybrid’ variety (4b, 4d, 4e, 4f). Actual linguistic features that were given are intonation (4e) and discourse particles (4d). Other comments make reference to the role of Singlish as a marker of national identity (4a, 4c). Of the 114 respondents who answered this question, 55 mentioned the ‘mixture’, and 14 the ‘uniqueness’ of the variety. Singlish was called ‘local’ English by 22

informants. The identity factor was mentioned by just 5, whereas 13 highlighted the ‘non-standard’, ‘colloquial’ or ‘vernacular’ status of the variety.

- (4)
- a. Something uniquely spoken among Singaporeans.
  - b. A mixture between the languages of Singapore and English.
  - c. Singlish is a culture, a language that has developed naturally through the interaction between Singaporeans of different races. It is unique to the country and gives provides a sense of solidarity.
  - d. 1. the use of ‘la, ‘lor’, ‘leh’, ‘meh’ 2. incorporation of common terms from dialects and Bahasa Malayu [sic]
  - e. A hybrid of English, Malay, Hokkien and spoken in the intonation of Chinese.
  - f. colloquial english with improper grammar and littered with terms borrowed from other languages, especially malay and mandarin

These definitions fall into two – sometimes co-articulated – broad types: structural and functional. Structural approaches address the (perceived and real) features of the variety and what sets it apart from other varieties of English. This includes the often-mentioned particles, references to grammar, prosody, and lexical admixture. Functional definitions are more concerned with the uses of the variety for sociolinguistic purposes: its potential for cultural and local indexing, as well as value judgments as to its suitability and uniqueness. That the two types are not mutually exclusive is shown in (4f), where ‘improper’ co-occurs with ‘terms borrowed’.

The examples of Singlish given in response to question (3b) provide an insight into the perceptions of what Singlish is to its speakers. The 112 responses focused primarily on borrowings (in 64 cases) and discourse particles (52 examples). For the

latter, the particle *lah* was mentioned most often (36 times), *leh* came next with 22 mentions, followed by *lor* (17) and *meh* (13). In the category ‘borrowings’ most came from Hokkien (52 items), with Malay a distant second at 11 items. Only 4 Cantonese items were mentioned and just one from Mandarin. The most common loanwords were *kiasu* (Hokkien, 15 times) and *kena* (passive marker, Malay, 9 times). Others include *sian* (‘bored/boring’, Hokkien, 7 times), *makan* (Malay, 6 times), *(buay) tahan* (‘(not) to stand/endure’, Malay, 4 times), *wa lau* (interjection of dismay, mild annoyance, etc., Hokkien, 4 times). Table 1 shows the ten most frequently mentioned loanwords, with interesting results: while both Hokkien and Malay feature 26 token counts each, Malay has twice as many types as Hokkien (6 vs 3). Cantonese is less well-represented, with a single type *kancheong* ‘nervous’ mentioned three times.

@@ Table 1 about here @@

As far as the results for part (iii) are concerned, I shall limit myself here to the first example of Singlish presented to informants. It consisted of the single sentence *Kua si mi?*, a common orthographic rendering of the Hokkien *Khoá<sup>n</sup> sím-mih?* ‘What are you looking at?’. It is the stereotypical opening to youth gang fights. Below the sentence the questions in (5) were displayed.

- (5)
- a. Is this in Singlish?
  - b. Would you use this?
  - c. If not, why?
  - d. If not, what would you say instead?
  - e. If yes, why?

Attention briefly needs to be drawn here to the distinction between spoken and written language.<sup>2</sup> The examples in part (iii) of the questionnaire come from written language use on the Internet; there is the possibility that this might bias their classification towards Singlish and that responses to the same examples in audio form might be different. Much of Singlish is spoken rather than written, notwithstanding a significant presence of the variety online (see e.g. Gupta 2006, Deuber & Sand 2013). The fact that a large number of respondents (two thirds) thought of it as not belonging to Singlish, combined with the stereotypical status of this utterance, alleviates these concerns somewhat.

For the purposes of this paper, the focus shall remain on the first two questions (5a and 5b). A good third (36) of the 92 informants who responded unambiguously to this question said that the sentence was Singlish. Fewer (30 out of 99) responded that they would actually use it. More interesting than simple yes/no answers to this open-ended question, were the 37 comments received about the nature of the sentence. Of these, 29 mentioned Hokkien, although to different extents: nine answers were ‘no, it is Hokkien’ or similar, whereas two were ‘yes, it is Hokkien’ and ‘yes (it’s actually fully Hokkien)’. Thus, there is awareness that the sentence is Hokkien at least in origin, though its status as part of Singlish is somewhat debated. Among the more cautious responses were ‘kind of’, ‘yes, somewhat’, ‘possibly’, ‘not really’, ‘somewhat, it is more Hokkien’, ‘partly, but it is more of dialect’, and ‘this is Hokkien, mainly’. The fact that one can be unsure about whether a sentence entirely in Hokkien is part of another language is telling, and I shall return to this below. There were also responses directly assessing when and under what conditions the sentence can be thought of as part of Singlish, as shown in (6). Answer (6a) puts the sentence into its discourse context, arguing that it might just be Hokkien if preceded by more Hokkien. (6b) and (6c) use

the ethnic category ‘Chinese’, and ascribe to its speakers a sub-variety of Singlish that is likely to feature Hokkien elements. Like (6a), (6d) puts the sentence into context, although now the argument is that it might be Singlish if preceded and followed by Singlish, since, after all, Hokkien is one of the sources of Singlish. (6e) says that although it is Singlish it is of Hokkien origin and therefore can be used in Hokkien, and (6f) points to the fact that most Singaporeans would recognise it, thereby granting it the status of Singlish. (6g) simply states that it is in fact Hokkien, ‘which can be said to be part of Singlish’ – leaving open the question of which variety it actually belongs to.

- (6)
- a. Depends on what language you were using beforehand. It may be Hokkien if you speaking Hokkien throughout.
  - b. yes - to a Chinese, Singlish speaker.
  - c. Not really. Most users tend to be chinese for it is taken from Hokkien.
  - d. It is actually hokkien, but may be viewed as Singlish if used in part of a sentence in Singlish, since Singlish borrows from languages like hokkien and Malay as well.
  - e. Yes, but it originates from Hokkien so it is also usable in Hokkien.
  - f. Yes. The words and entire phrase is borrowed from Hokkien and almost everyone would recognise it.
  - g. Hokkien, which can be said to be a part of Singlish.

## **Discussion**

The results presented above give new insights into what ‘Singlish’ as a variety means to young Chinese Singaporeans. As far as the description of Singlish by its speakers is concerned, the recurring theme of ‘mixture’ is actually in line with scholarly accounts that describe Singlish as a ‘contact variety’ (Lim 2004: 130), a ‘high-contact variety’

(Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi 2011: 277), or as a ‘variety of Singapore whose lexicon and grammar in part derive from English, Chinese and Malay’ (Ansaldo 2009: 1). Obviously, all these scholars give more nuanced accounts as to the nature of this admixture and as to the effects of this contact. In fact, the recurrent mention of respondents of all three ‘mother tongues’ (Chinese, Malay, and Tamil) as contributors to the linguistic shape of Singlish is probably a reflection of the current language policies which, firstly, present the mother tongues (as well as the ethnic groups they are associated with) as on a legally equal footing and as having contributed similarly to Singapore’s general development, and secondly, discursively frame the mother tongues and English as being in some sort of symbiotic relationship. In actual fact, Tamil has had virtually no influence on the grammar of Singlish, and an extremely limited one in terms of vocabulary; Min Nan varieties of Chinese (Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese) and Malay having had a much more lasting effect. Nonetheless, the ‘mixed’ nature of Singlish is central to perceptions of the variety. This view is echoed in the responses to the Hokkien string *Kua si mi?*, which was variably identified as Hokkien or Singlish. The mere fact that a wholly Hokkien sentence (and even more so in isolation) can be seen as Singlish raises the question of what actually counts as ‘Singlish’: English with substrate-influenced grammar, any amount of Hokkien or Malay, or is code-switching required? One respondent (6a above) notes that if the entire exchange surrounding the sentence was in Hokkien, then it follows that it must be Hokkien. It also follows that if the sentence was preceded by English/Singlish elements, it would become Singlish and not Hokkien. This is, of course, problematic, since the string itself is the same (grammatically, and, when spoken, phonologically). To participants in the conversation, however, it may well make all the difference: non-code-switching discourse is, in the Singaporean context, the marked form of interaction. As a result, informal exchanges

are characterised by the very ‘mixing’ that was so often given in definitions of Singlish in this study. That this mixing is under-defined and quintessentially lay here is beyond doubt: Singlish is not just any kind of code-mixing, but one that follows rules as to the etymological provenance of its features and, of course, well-researched grammatical patterns (e.g. the clause-final placement of discourse particles).

The extent to which these new definitions of ‘Singlish’ allow for it to be classified as a variety of English is, of course, debatable. One avenue would be to distance oneself from traditional notions of ‘language’ and ‘variety’ which, given the highly heterogeneous nature of everyday speech in Singapore, is less suited for analyses than ‘post-varietal’ (Seargeant & Tagg 2011) approaches, such as the often-commented shift from *language* to *resources* (Blommaert 2010: 180). It certainly is the case that more often than not, the use of a particular feature (from Singlish, Standard English, Hokkien, Malay, etc.) in discourse can function to index a particular social meaning (see e.g. Alsagoff 2010, Leimgruber 2012). If, then, speakers can draw on any number of resources (with etymologies in various languages) and consider the resultant utterance Singlish, the definition of Singlish as essentially ‘mixed’ and is as accurate as the classification of *Kua si mi?* as Hokkien.

### ***Multilingual repertoires***

The concept of ‘truncated repertoires’, introduced by Blommaert (2010: 103–106) and intimately intertwined with the idea of *resources* as used in such settings, can serve as a useful point of departure for a reflexion on the Hokkien–English interaction. The basic premise of ‘truncated repertoires’ is the idea that the different languages available to ‘multilingual’ speakers are never entirely comprehensive in the range of possible uses: ‘no one knows *all* of a language’ (Blommaert 2010: 103), including ‘native speakers’. Blommaert goes on to give an example of his own repertoire (2010:

104–105), which includes (in order of age of acquisition) Dutch, French, German, and English. Particularly when considering different genres and styles (oral/written, vernacular/standard, formal/informal, etc.), he makes clear not only that none of these four languages achieve a 100% competence score in any single domain, but also that these languages vary in competence according to domain, genre, and style. English scores high for lecturing and academic writing, whereas Dutch scores high for spoken vernacular and informal styles; unsurprisingly, the school language German gets low scores in all categories.

This concept, then, is particularly well suited for a multilingual setting like Singapore. Research by Siemund et al (forthcoming) shows that the average Singaporean youth, being multilingual, typically falls into broadly four ‘language profiles’, i.e. combinations of languages spoken: (i) English and Mandarin, (ii) English, Hokkien, and Mandarin, (iii) Cantonese, English, and Mandarin, and (iv) English and Malay. These combinations account for 70% of their informants, with further combinations always including English, usually Mandarin, and often Hokkien/Teochew. Furthermore, the truncated nature of these repertoires is evidenced in informants’ self-assessment of each language: no language is given full scores. While Siemund et al’s study does not give as detailed a breakdown of language domains as in the example in Blommaert (2010: 104), it did measure differences in oral and written proficiency, and there are obviously differences there, with written proficiencies self-assessed as being consistently lower than oral proficiencies, particularly so for the informant’s third and fourth languages.

The interesting question is, therefore, whether the Hokkien of our informants is sufficiently ‘truncated’ to be integrated wholesale into their Singlish code or whether, on the other hand, it is still an active part of their repertoire and a viable option for

multi-word code-switching. This distinction has already been brought up in (6a) by one respondent's definition of the status of the sentence *Kua si mi?*: 'Depends on what language you were using beforehand. It may be Hokkien if you speaking Hokkien throughout'. A quantitative measure on Hokkien proficiency would therefore be necessary for each speaker, which goes beyond the scope of this study, but the qualitative judgements given in part (iv) of the questionnaire shed some light on the issue. Of the 37 informants who mentioned Hokkien in their repertoires, most (23) mentioned it as fourth in their list of languages (typically after English, Mandarin, and Singlish). Furthermore, when asked how well they spoke it, only nine said they spoke it well, whereas 12 said they spoke it poorly and 16 reported passive knowledge only. In other words, for the majority of 'Hokkien speakers', Hokkien is actually a severely truncated language, in that they can only use it in specific domains, sometimes just receptively. Note that while 28 out of the 37 'Hokkien-speaking' informants reported these poor or passive skills, other respondents, who did not list Hokkien in their repertoire, understood the Hokkien examples given and were able to comment on them, as well as to provide their own loanwords. Therefore, it would seem that for most younger Singaporean Chinese, Hokkien, rather than an active – if truncated – constituent of their linguistic repertoire, has become a set of linguistic resources integrated into their Singlish register, which in turn benefits from this and is given a wider range of uses. The active ability to use multi-word code-switches is restricted to a few speakers who maintain a certain level of proficiency and use Hokkien-only turns with some addressees in their entourage for whom it is an equally active code.

## **Conclusion**

The language policy environment in Singapore places a strong emphasis not just on (Standard) English and the role it plays in keeping Singapore competitive in the global

economy but also on the ethnic ‘mother tongues’ (Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil), held up as the vector to access and pass down traditional values. In this bilingual policy, English is grammatically standard, devoid of substrate influences, and globally intelligible, whereas the mother tongues are also standard, famously devoid of ‘dialect’ terms and structures, and crucial for cultural grounding. Especially for the Chinese majority, this cultural grounding is, however, allochthonous, since the ‘mother tongue’ Mandarin is in fact *not* the ancestral language – the officially-decried ‘dialects’ are. This disconnect between language policy discourse and actual cultural experience highlight the perceived need for genuine, local vectors through which Singaporean identities can be expressed.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the rootedness of Singlish in the local culture is mentioned by a considerable number of respondents, coupled with some awareness of expressing identity. The description of it being ‘uniquely Singapore(an)’ (a phrase often used, partly also because it is the Tourism Board’s slogan) nicely encapsulates its role within an otherwise very diverse society: Singlish is the glue that keeps Singaporeans of all races together (the ‘sense of solidarity’ in 4c), an expression of the local Singaporean culture. The variety is thus endowed with the possibility to index genuine local culture and identity, as opposed to the exonormative (and therefore foreign) cultures of China, Malaysia, and India.

Furthermore, the lay view often expressed that Singlish is an amalgamation of various ‘local’ languages, while problematic, is true to some extent. The existence of Hokkien as a completely separate code is challenged by the self-assessment ratings given, raising the likelihood of it being, for many Singaporean Hokkiens, and certainly for most other Singaporeans, simply a part of their Singlish repertoire. Whether the same is true for Singaporeans of other ethnic groups remains open for future research;

given the strong ethnic mixing happening among young adults (for instance in the conscription-based armed forces), it would not be surprising if Indians and Malays similarly had a certain degree of Hokkien resources in their Singlish repertoire, in addition to elements from their respective ethnic varieties.

As a concluding thought, the concept of ‘ethnolinguistic repertoires’ (Benor 2008, 2010) might yield an interesting insight into the Singaporean situation: while there are similarities with other situations where several ethnic groups mingle and produce a multiethnolect of English (as in, e.g., London, see Cheshire et al 2008), Singapore and Singlish are different because these ways of speaking are not specific to a sub-community such as ‘British Asian’ (see e.g. Sharma 2012) or ‘Jewish American’ (Benor 2010), but are a genuinely *local* multi-ethnic repertoire. This is because Standard English, although an official language and the neutral interethnic lingua franca, is not entirely localised in the same way as Singlish, a repertoire precisely drawing on these local resources.

## Notes

- \* I thank Christian Mair as well as two anonymous reviewers for thought-provoking and useful feedback on earlier versions of this article. All errors remain mine.
- 1. Non-Mandarin varieties of Chinese are usually called *dialects* in a Singaporean context, although they are often mutually unintelligible (Cheng 1996). On the question about the dialect/language status of the various Chinese varieties, see DeFrancis (1986: 53–67), Ramsey (1987: 16–17, 28–29), and Mair (1991), among others.
- 2. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

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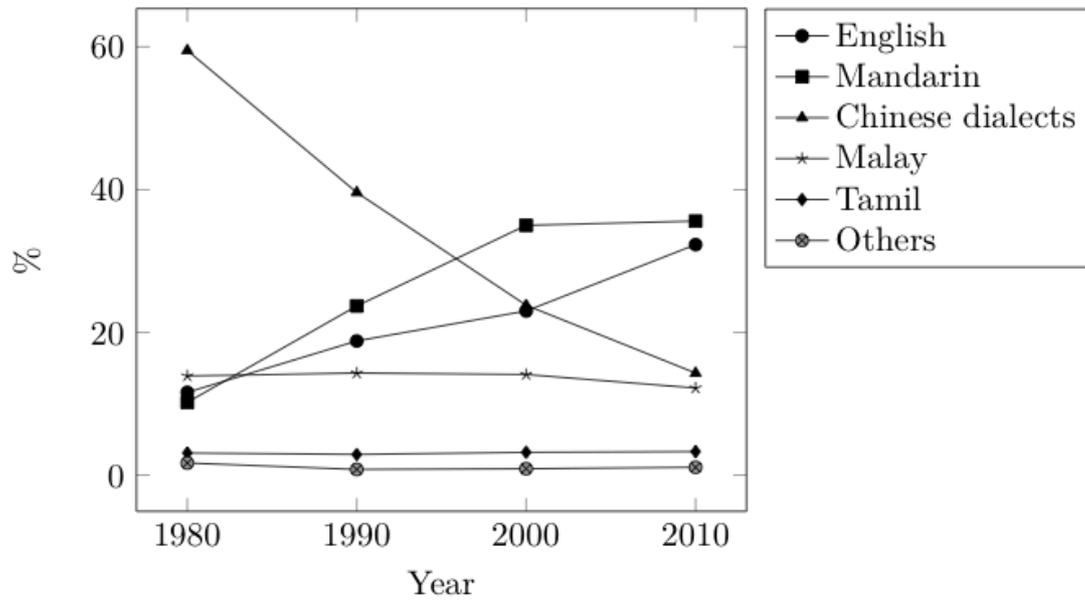
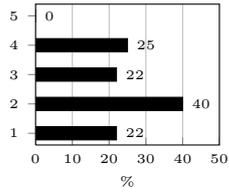
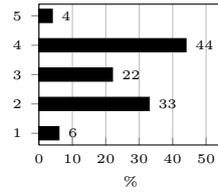


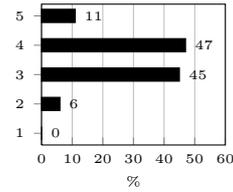
Figure 1: Language most frequently spoken at home, as a percentage of the resident population. Data for 1980 from Foley (1998: 221) citing Lau (1993: 6), for 1990 and 2000 from Leow (2001), and for 2010 from Wong (2011).



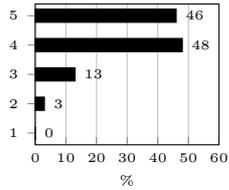
(a) The Speak Good English Movement has changed the way in which I use English.



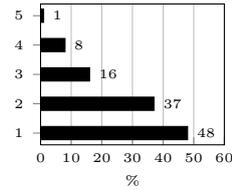
(b) I think the Speak Mandarin Campaign has changed the way Singaporeans use Chinese.



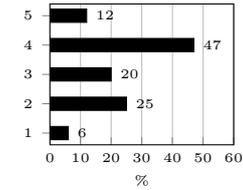
(c) I am happy about the existence of the Speak Mandarin Campaign.



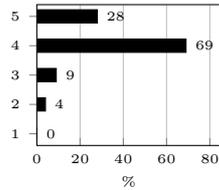
(d) It is a good thing that English is the main language for education in Singapore.



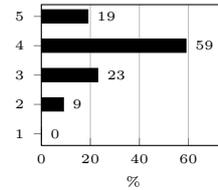
(e) Singlish is just bad English.



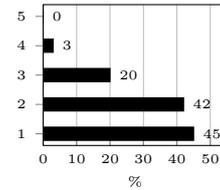
(f) Singlish is the only thing that really makes us Singaporeans.



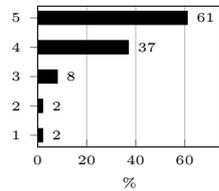
(g) Singlish unites the different races of Singapore.



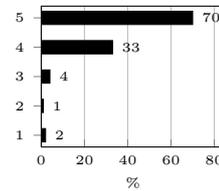
(h) English unites the different races of Singapore.



(i) It would be better for Singapore if Singlish did not exist.



(j) I find it sad that many Chinese dialects are no longer spoken.



(k) It is important that pupils learn their mother tongue.

Figure 2: Responses to the attitudinal statements in (2). 1=completely disagree, 2=disagree somewhat, 3=neutral, 4=agree somewhat, 5=completely agree.

Table 1. Top ten loanwords given in response to the question ‘Give some examples of Singlish’, with counts, origin, and definition. Definitions are primarily from Lee (2004)

<b>Loanword</b>	<b>Tokens</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<i>kiasu</i>	15	Hokkien	Adj., afraid of losing out
<i>kena</i>	9	Malay	Part., passive marker
<i>sian</i>	7	Hokkien	Adj., bored; adj., boring
<i>makan</i>	6	Malay	N., food; v., to eat
<i>tahan</i>	4	Malay	V., to endure, to stand
<i>walao</i>	4	Hokkien	Interj., oh dear
<i>lepak</i>	3	Malay	V., to relax;, adj., relaxed
<i>kancheong</i>	3	Cantonese	Adj., nervous, tense
<i>kayu</i>	2	Malay	Adj., stupid, dull
<i>hantam</i>	2	Malay	V., to beat up