

Singapore English

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Abstract

Singapore English is a nativised variety of English, which comes in essentially two forms: Standard Singapore English and Colloquial Singapore English. This article describes the sound system and the grammar of this variety, including an overview of the local vocabulary. A concluding section explains the various models that have been proposed to explain that variation in Singapore English, including the post-creole continuum (Platt 1975) and diglossia (Gupta 1994, 2001), before settling on more recent research using a cultural orientation model (Alsagoff 2007) and indexicality (Eckert 2008).

1 Introduction

Among the ‘New Englishes’ (McArthur 1987), ‘Outer Circle Englishes’ (Kachru 1982), or ‘post-colonial Englishes’ (Schneider 2007), Singapore English is probably one of the better-studied varieties. From the early treatises of Tongue (1974) and Platt and Weber (1980) to the recent textbooks of Low and Brown (2005) and Deterding (2007), descriptions of this ‘nativised’ (Gupta 1994) variety abound, interspersed with scholarly articles on various aspects of its phonetics, phonology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics. There are books on child language acquisition (Kwan-Terry 1991, Gupta 1994), edited collections on aspects of the grammar (Lim 2004, Deterding et al. 2003) and phonetics (Deterding et al. 2005), and countless articles on various elements of Singapore English grammar (Bao 1995, Bao and Wee 1998, Wee 2004, Kim and Wee 2009, Wee 2010) as well as its sociolinguistic characteristics (Platt 1975, 1977, Gupta 1989, Pakir 1991, Poedjosoedarmo 1995, Gupta 2001, 2006, Bao and Hong 2007).

Before embarking on an analysis of Singapore English, we need to define what exactly is meant by the term. English is one of Singapore’s four official languages (alongside Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil), and is the main language used in government and administration. It is also the only medium of instruction in schools.¹ As such, it enjoys a privileged position among the

¹Except in the elite Special Assistance Plan schools, where some subjects are taught in the mother tongue. They currently only exist for Mandarin.

four official languages: in fact, government publications (legal texts, online services, etc.) are often in English only.

The variety used in this context is Standard (Singapore) English.² This is a localised version of Standard English, which does not exhibit major differences from other versions of Standard English around the globe. It comprises a few lexical items that are locally restricted, such as the initialisms *HDB* ‘public housing flat/bureau’ < *Housing Development Board* and *PIE* ‘Pan-Island Expressway’, and some words whose semantics reflect the local climate (e.g. *slippers* meaning ‘flip-flops’ rather than the warm footwear used in colder climes).

In addition to Standard Singapore English (SSE), we have the vernacular, Colloquial Singapore English (CSE), often called ‘Singlish’ by speakers, government language planners, and, indeed, linguists. This is a variety of English that is very different from the standard, and the following sections set out to describe its pronunciation and grammar. Singlish co-exists with SSE in a relationship that has been termed ‘diglossia’ (Ferguson 1959, Richards 1983, Gupta 1989, 1994), which essentially means that SSE is restricted in use to situations that are characterised by a high level of formality, whereas Singlish is used in all other instances. This aspect of the CSE–SSE co-habitation, or, in other words, the linguistic ecology of the speech community, will be dealt with in more detail in section 5.

Much of the description in this article, as well as the illustrative examples, are from previous research, complemented with findings from Leimgruber (2009). In the latter case, examples are referenced using a coding system designed in the course of fieldwork in 2007–2008, and indicating, from left to right, the school the informant was attending (i=junior college, ii=polytechnic, iii=vocational school),³ their race/ethnicity (C=Chinese, M=Malay, I=Indian), their sequential number within an ethnically homogeneous group of four (1–4), their sex (m=male, f=female), or, where the recording is not of a single individual, a note on the nature of the recording (dia=dialogue, gr=group, rm=radio-microphone).⁴

²Preferences among authors vary as to the correct appellation of this variety; Ho and Platt (1993) prefer *Singaporean English* as this is in line with other varieties, and Gupta (1994) prefers *Standard English* without a geographical specifier, highlighting the similarities rather than the few differences between versions of Standard English.

³Informants were in their second year (average age 17.5 years) at these post-secondary schools, which have entrance requirements of decreasing stringency. Junior College is the prime choice for those wanting to pursue university studies, polytechnics cater to more practice-oriented students (e.g. through problem-based learning), and vocational training schools give their students practical training in more blue-collar professions.

⁴Informants were interviewed first individually, then paired up for a debate-style dialogue on a given topic, followed by a task-based group recording in fours, as well as by a radio-microphone recording of free speech in an informal location.

2 Phonology

2.1 Vowels

The variety of Singapore English described herein, then, is CSE (Singlish), the one which differs most from its standard counterpart. With regards to pronunciation, the (monophthongal) vowel system of Singlish is, according to Deterding (2007: 26), nicely balanced, as shown in Figure 1. This presupposes a number of mergers.

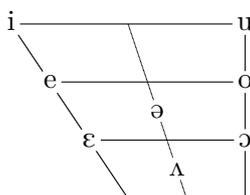


Figure 1: Vowel system of CSE (based on Deterding 2007: 26).

2.1.1 Mergers

Firstly, vowel length tends not to be contrastive. In RP,⁵ to take a convenient accent for comparison, there is a distinction between the vowels in *bit* and *beat*: the first is a short /ɪ/, while the second is a long /i:/. In CSE, they are merged into a single phoneme, which may vary phonetically in length and quality, but not in a way consistent enough to effect a distinction between minimal pairs (i.e. in the phonology). The same is true for the vowels in *loose* and *put*, respectively /u:/ and /ʊ/ in RP, and for those in *caught* (/ɔ:/) and *cot* (/ɒ/).

Secondly, there are mergers in the short vowel system, notably the DRESS–TRAP merger. Deterding (2007: 23–24) is careful to point out that there is variation here, with formality resulting in a distinction in educated speakers (Suzanna and Brown 2000). Nonetheless, his analysis shows the two vowels [ɛ] and [æ] to be close enough to warrant collapsing them into a single phoneme /ɛ/ in CSE.

2.1.2 Monophthongisation

Perhaps less remarkable is the absence of a diphthong in the FACE and GOAT set. These are, in RP, /eɪ/ and /əʊ/ respectively, but monophthongal /e:/ and /o:/ in many parts of the British Isles (northern England, Scotland, Ireland), the USA, India, and several Southeast Asian varieties (Deterding

⁵Received Pronunciation (see Roach 2004).

and Kirkpatrick (2006), Deterding (2007), see also Kortmann and Schneider (2008) for a typological overview of World Englishes). In CSE, the absence of the diphthong, coupled with the absence of vowel length, has the potential of bringing /e/ into the proximity of /ɛ/, resulting, potentially, in a merger, and thus in a further reduction of the system in Figure 1 — the same being true for /o/ and /ɔ/. This has led Bao (1998: 154–155) to propose a vowel system of CSE consisting of just six vowels (/i ɛ a ə ɔ u/).

2.1.3 Diphthongs

The diphthongs listed by Bao (1998: 158) include /ɔi ai au iə uə/. Deterding (2007: 26) agrees, and clarifies the /uə/ diphthong, which occurs in words such as *poor*, *tour*, and *sure*, but not in *pure* and *cure*, which have /jɔ/. The resulting distribution is the inverse of that found in modern British accents, he notes, where *poor* now normally has [ɔː] and *cure* [jʊə].

2.2 Consonants

The consonant inventory of CSE is practically identical to that of RP, as shown in Table 1. It is only the (inter-)dental fricatives /θ/, as in *thing*, and /ð/, as in *these*, that may or may not be part of the repertoire. Deterding (2007), among many, reports high variability, which does not always follow the expected pattern. The usual substitutions, word-initially, are /t/ and /d/ respectively. Sometimes, however, ‘a sound intermediate between [θ] and [t] may be used [and] even trained phoneticians cannot agree on what sound has occurred’ (Deterding 2007: 13).

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Nasal	m			n			ŋ	
Plosive	p b			t d			k g	
Fricative		f v	(θ ð)	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
Approximant				ɹ		j		
Lateral				l			w	

Table 1: CSE consonant inventory.

There is one predictable behaviour of /θ/ in CSE, however. While it may be [t] or [θ] word-initially and medially, in word-final position it is often [f], although here too, [θ] can occur. Thus, *healthy* may be [hɛlti] or [hɛlθi]

but *health* is realised as [hɛlf] or [hɛlθ] (example from Bao 1998: 154). This cannot occur in other positions: Deterding (2005) reports that CSE speakers have considerable difficulty understanding southern British English speakers who have a tendency to pronounce /θ/ as [f] regardless of position (so-called ‘th-fronting’, as in *thought* [fɔ:t], *something* [sʌmfɪŋ], and *youth* [ju:f]).

3 Grammar

The grammar of SSE is not different from that of other versions of Standard English around the world; in particular, constructions considered grammatical in British English are as widely accepted as those used in American English. Thus (1) is grammatical, as is (2).

- (1) John is not going to the party, but Mary might **do**.
- (2) John **dreamed** about Mary every night.

It is of course the grammar of CSE that is of more central concern here, as it differs from its standard quite markedly. It is also relatively localised, in that this combination of features is restricted to CSE. Many of these features, of course, are not unusual in other varieties of English. Topic-prominence, for instance, is found in Ghanaian English (Huber and Dako 2008), and non-marking of the third person singular is common to many non-standard Englishes around the world (Kortmann and Schneider 2008), but in their combination, these and other features form the unique grammar of CSE.

3.1 Topic-prominence

Topic-prominent languages feature the topic of the sentence at the beginning of the sentence. This is the case with Chinese and Malay (Tan 2003), as well as with CSE (Alsagoff and Ho 1998), so much so that Tan (2003: 6) considers this word-order to be ‘basic’. He gives (3) as an example of Chinese topic-prominence, and (4) as an example from CSE:

- (3) Zhè běn shū wǒ qù nián dú-guo.
this CLF book 1SG last year read-EXP
‘I read this book last year.’
(Tan 2003: 6)
- (4) Christmas — we don’t celebrate because we are not Christians.
(adapted from Tan 2003: 8)

Example (4) is an outright calque on the Chinese structure. The topic is established first, and subsequent elements refer to this initial topic. The emphasis on the topic can also be further exploited since, in a subsequent turn, the topic can be elided: thus, an afterthought to (4) could well be ‘But I

like’, with no object (see also 3.4 below). Thus topic-prominence can be seen as operating at both utterance and discourse levels: it comes first, and once it is established, it remains the default topic referred to. Example (5) shows that the topic need not always be a noun phrase: here it is the slowness of the printer that is topicalised.

(5) Too slow lah, I find that printer. (Bao and Lye 2005: 279)

The prominence of the topic can be further highlighted by the insertion of a break or a discourse particle between the topic and the SV clause. This sets the topic apart from the sentence, and puts it into a truly prominent position. Often, the topic ends with a rising intonation.

3.2 Agreement

Tense agreement is highly variable and not compulsory. Ho and Platt (1993: 74–141) report various levels of past tense marking, conditioned by phonetics and semantics (actually aspect), with punctual verbs (such as *paint*, *write*, *hit*, *say*) and irregular verbs⁶ seeing higher rates of past tense marking. However, I shall follow Deterding (2007: 46) in not analysing this in more detail, especially because of the near-impossibility of deciding whether this feature is grammatical or phonological. It is the high degree of variability that is of interest: sometimes verbs agree for tense, sometimes not, as evidenced in (6). Perhaps the avoidance of unnecessarily repeating information by marking all verbs in an utterance or a discourse with the past tense is reminiscent of the topic deletion mentioned above.

(6) 1.f: Er, after secondary school, I do dance with my cousins, we go out as a group performance, outside, and all that.
JL: Any competitions?
1.f: No, we haven’t taken part. We just go for dance, like weddings and... yeah, performances.
(iii.I.1.f)

Similarly to past tense marking, third-person singular present tense *-s* is not required in CSE, much like in other non-standard varieties of English (see e.g. Hughes et al. 2005, Kortmann and Schneider 2008). Here too, the pronoun or other contextual clues are sufficient, as evidenced in (7). Additionally, however, it is also possible for the inflexion to appear on non-3SG verbs, as in (8). The data seem to confirm Deterding’s (2007: 44–45) analysis that showed low rates of the hypercorrect variant; however, evidence that this is restricted to 3PL was not found in the data (see e.g. (8)). Also, the rate at which *-s* marking occurs in environments where the standard demands it

⁶Actually ‘verbs whose stems undergo a vowel change [...] in order to form the past form e.g. *fall–fell*, *eat–ate*, *go–went*’ (Ho and Platt 1993: xv).

is given by Deterding (2007: 45) as 8 %, whereas the data here suggests a number closer to 25 %.

- (7) a. Because he want to see how we all talk, normally. (ii.M.gr)
b. So it end up around eighty. (i.C.gr)
c. If he have like a rubber plantation or something, you know. (i.C.gr)
d. Let's say he wear everything Louis Vuitton bag, ah. (ii.M.gr)
e. It look very cheap. (ii.I.gr)
- (8) We need to plans first, that's the main thing. (ii.C.gr)

3.3 Copula-deletion

The copular verb BE may be omitted in several cases, such as those in (9). Here the copula links the subject with an adjective (9a), with an *-ing* inflected verb (9b), with noun phrases (9c), and with passives (9d). This process has been described at length in Ho and Platt (1993), who give detailed figures for each environment and the rates of deletion for each case (under the more inclusive heading 'variation in BE occurrence').

- (9) a. That boat \emptyset very short one. (iii.C.2.f)
b. My uncle \emptyset staying there. (ii.M.1.m)
c. What \emptyset your dialect? Panjabi? (ii.I.1.m)
d. The place \emptyset called Sungei Buloh. (iii.M.gr)

Notwithstanding the detailed variationist analysis in Ho and Platt (1993), the fact remains that copula-deletion is a marginal phenomenon: their corpus showed a rate of 86.3 % of BE realisation. In the subset of data from Leimgruber (2009) analysed for this article, the proportion of BE-deletion does not even exceed 6 %. Therefore, copula-deletion, while clearly possible in CSE, is by no means general. In fact, it is one of several diagnostic features (see e.g. Gupta 1994) of Singlish as opposed to Standard English. This means that the feature itself is CSE, but not that CSE requires the feature. This non-compulsory nature of CSE features was observed above in the case of aspect markers, and presents some interesting challenges for an adequate definition of what CSE actually is, which I shall turn to in section 5.

3.4 NP deletion

Noun phrases that can be deleted may be in the position of the subject, as in (10), or of the object, as in (11). Deterding (2007: 58–61), based on his data supplied by an educated speaker recorded in a rather formal setting, draws attention to its wide occurrence: the deletion is not, as suggested by Gupta (1994: 10–13), simply diagnostic of CSE, but is very frequent even in formal discourse.

- (10) (That car) very expensive, you know.
(11) I don't know why, but I like (it/swimming).

Examples from Deterding's data include those in (12) and (13), and focus on subject deletion, or null subjects. His review of the literature comes to the conclusion that this phenomenon in Singapore English, which cannot be explained in the same way as in other pro-drop languages such as Italian or Spanish (where the subject can be recovered by the inflexion on the verb), is to be analysed in the framework of topic-prominence. Once the subject is established, e.g. through the use of a personal pronoun, it is unnecessary to repeat it later in discourse. Furthermore, as in the examples below, if the context is unambiguous, no mention of the subject needs to be made at all.

- (12) Yeah, \emptyset can cycle, not very well, but \emptyset can cycle, ah, \emptyset knocked myself against a pillar ... but ((laughs)) then \emptyset managed to pick up ((laughs)) cycling.
(Deterding 2007: 59)
(13) so \emptyset only tried one or two dishes, \emptyset didn't really do much cooking
(Deterding 2007: 59)

3.5 Inversion

Inversion in interrogatives is regarded by Gupta (1994: 8) as being diagnostic of SSE. In *wh*-questions, CSE leaves the subject and the verb in the same order as in statements, as shown in (14).

- (14) a. How much it will be? (ii.M.gr)
b. What the cruise is like? (iii.I.gr)

In polar interrogatives (yes/no questions), CSE has the invariant tags *is it* and *or not*, as exemplified in (15). The latter frequently co-occurs with *can*, leading to the emergence of *can or not*, which can be used as a tag or as a complete utterance (Wee 2008: 599).

- (15) a. The tea very hot, is it?
 b. Can go home or not?

(Wee 2008: 595, 599)

3.6 Discourse particles

CSE uses a number of clause-final discourse particles, whose origins seem to lie in Hokkien and Cantonese (Lim 2007). Scholars (Gupta 1992, Wee 2004, Wong 2004, Ler 2006, Lim 2007, Wee 2010) do not always agree on their number and exact meaning, but the list in Table 2 attempts an overview.

Particle	Meaning
<i>ah</i>	tentative marker, continuation marker
<i>hah</i>	question marker
<i>hor</i>	attempts to garner support for a proposition
<i>lah</i>	mood marker, appeals for accommodation
<i>leh</i>	marks a tentative suggestion/request
<i>lor</i>	indicates obviousness or resignation
<i>mah</i>	marks information as obvious
<i>what/wot</i>	marks obviousness and contradiction
<i>meh</i>	indicates scepticism
<i>ya</i>	conveys (weak) emphasis and uncontroversiality

Table 2: Selected particles of CSE.

The examples in (16) illustrate how these particles are used. *Ah* seems to be used most frequently, but *lah* has the highest profile, as a stereotype of Singlish, among its speakers. Its use is shown in (17).

- (16) a. Because she wants to sing **mah**. So she want to use, she want to join to sing, so we just groom her **lor**.
 (ii.C.rm)
- b. Then there's another issue, if you marry later, woman tend to have more complicated pregnancies **hor**.
 (iii.I.dia.23)
- c. 4.f: Wait wait wait. No money, wanna go everywhere.
 3.f: No, thousand two convert to Thai Baht is quite a lot **what**, in a way, really...
 1.m: Yeah, is about millions.
 (ii.I.gr)

- (17) a. 3.f: Do you realise that he’s actually quite nervous?
 4.m: I know!
 2.f: Yeah. He will edit it **lah**, I think.
 (ii.M.gr)
- b. Ok **lah**, confirm **ah**, Bangkok. Let’s have a try **ah**... It’s more like a survival things **ah**, with three hundred.
 (ii.M.gr)

4 Vocabulary

As far as the vocabulary of Singapore’s Standard English is concerned, there are two main areas of interest: semantics and lexical borrowing. At the level of semantics, we can distinguish between words common to most standard Englishes, but used with a different semantics in Singapore, and words that have been recombined to form lexical items with special local relevance. Borrowings from non-English languages occur, too, with some even making it into the *Oxford English Dictionary* — at which point it is questionable, of course, whether such words are still solely Standard *Singapore* English. Colloquial Singapore English, on the other hand, has a vocabulary that draws much more heavily on borrowings.

4.1 Semantics

A list of words whose semantics is different in SSE and in, e.g., British English, is given in Table 3. These differences are analogous to those between, say, British English and American English, such as *pavement* (BrE: pedestrian path along a street [AmE *sidewalk*], AmE: any paved surface, e.g. of a road) and *pants* (BrE: inner garment [AmE: *underpants*], AmE: outer garment [BrE *trousers*]). While both sets are part of Standard English, each tends to occur more in one location rather than the other.

SgE item	Definition
<i>slippers</i>	open sandals (BrE/AmE <i>flip-flops</i>)
<i>to bathe</i>	to have a shower
<i>to take</i>	to (like to) eat/drink
<i>to send sb.</i>	to drive/accompany sb.
<i>to renovate</i>	to (re)decorate (esp. a newly-bought flat)

Table 3: Some Singapore English lexical items and their definitions.

Not included in this list are locally-coined names of e.g. governmental bodies, such as *HDB*, which stands for ‘Housing Development Board’, the statutory board that builds and rents the flats in which well over 80 % of

the population resides. The initialism has been extended to stand for both the organisation and an HDB block or an HDB flat. In fact, as highlighted by Deterding (2007: 77–79), there is a high occurrence rate for initialisms in Singapore, most of which having only local currency: thus, in addition to the world-wide *CBD* ‘Central Business District’ and *ASEAN* ‘Association of Southeast Asian Nations’, there is *MRT* ‘Mass Rapid Transit’ (the underground metro system), *NUS* ‘National University of Singapore’, *NS* ‘National Service’, *PIE* ‘Pan-Island Expressway’, *(NR)IC (Card)* ‘(National Registration) Identity Card’, *ICA* ‘Immigration and Checkpoints Authority’ (who also manage the NRIC database and issue passports), *MICA* ‘Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Arts’, and many more.

4.2 Borrowing

Words of non-English origin include *kiasu* ‘characterised by a grasping or selfish attitude arising from a fear of missing out on something’ (usu. adj., definition from *OED* (Simpson and Weiner 2000); Hokkien *kiaⁿsu*), *ta pau* ‘take-away’ (adj. or v.; Cantonese *daa²baau¹*), *roti* ‘bread’ (Malay), *makan* ‘food, to eat’ (Malay), *paiseh* ‘embarrassing’ (?Hokkien *phàsiu*), *kopitiam* ‘café’ (Malay *kopi* ‘coffee’ + Hokkien *tiàm*), and many more.

The extent to which these are restricted to SSE or CSE is unclear: *kiasu* is found so often in print media as well as at least once in a parliamentary debate that it is hard to argue it is not part of the standard (if inclusion in the *OED* wasn’t already good enough). Certainly some, such as *paiseh*, have more of a CSE ring to them, but since usage alone dictates which word belongs to which sub-variety (a problematic distinction, as the next section will reveal), this status may well change in the future.

5 Variation

The question of how SSE and CSE (or Standard English and Singlish) co-exist from a sociolinguistic point of view has been approached from different sides. Language planners have taken the view that Singlish is a hindrance to Singaporeans’ acquisition of Standard English, and have therefore discouraged its use in several contexts. Research on language policy in Singapore includes Bokhorst-Heng (1998) and Wee (2005), among others. Since 2000, an annual ‘Speak Good English Movement’ encourages the population to learn more of the standard and leave Singlish at home.

Linguists, on the other hand, have taken a more descriptive approach. An early attempt was by Platt (1975), who considered Singlish and Standard English to be varieties at the extremes of a post-creole continuum (much like the one proposed for Jamaica by DeCamp (1971)). In this model, the continuum consists of sub-varieties of English that are increasingly more like Singlish the closer they are to the ‘lower’ (or ‘basilectal’) end of the

scale, and increasingly more like Standard English the closer they are to the ‘upper’ (or ‘acrolectal’) end of the continuum. This linguistic continuum is then presented next to a social continuum (see Figure 2) that takes education as its measure of social ranking. Each speaker, then, is seen to have at his disposal an acrolect that is commensurate with his position on the social scale, as well as the basilect Singlish, and all varieties existing between the two. Therefore, speakers have at their disposal a certain ‘range’ of the continuum, the breadth of which depends on their location on the educational continuum, which they can choose from for the purposes of stylistic variation.

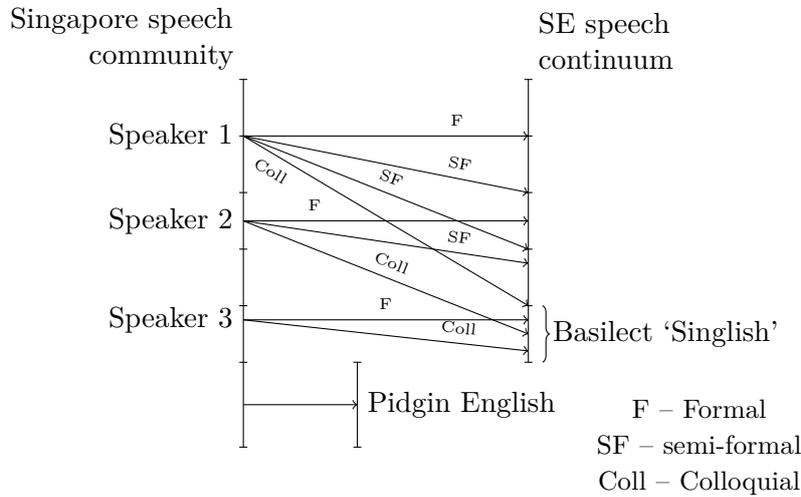


Figure 2: ‘Relation between socio-economic factors and the usage of sub-varieties of [Singapore English] available to a speaker’ (Platt 1975: 369).

Platt’s continuum approach has been criticised (Gupta 1994, Alsagoff 2007) for its reliance on education as the sole medium, leaving aside important considerations of proficiency (see e.g. Pakir (1991), Poedjosoedarmo (1995)), and, crucially, treating CSE as an essentially non-native variety. This is what prompted Gupta’s (1994) analysis of the Singapore speech community as being organised along the lines of diglossia, as defined in Ferguson (1959). In diglossic societies, there are two varieties (usually, but not necessarily, related) that are used for different purposes. One is the vernacular, the native language of the community, which is spoken in all unmarked settings, and is typically not used in writing except in folk literature and perhaps political satire. This variety is called the ‘low’ or ‘L’ variety, and in Singapore, would be CSE, or Singlish. Its ‘high’ or ‘H’ counterpart is Standard English, which is used in a restricted set of situations that require its use, such as university lectures, parliamentary debates, virtually all writing, the media, and religious services, for instance.

Such an idealised approach does not, by definition, allow for intermediate varieties, and is, therefore, quite distinct from the continuum model used by Platt. However, Gupta (1994: 8) concedes that there is not a ‘hard division between H and L’ but rather ‘degrees of aim at H and L. She nonetheless feels that it is possible, using a set of features seen to be diagnostic of one or the other variety, to draw a line between the two, since ‘in practice [the features] tend to constellate’ and result in identifiable varieties (1994: 8). To members of the speech community, it is always clear whether H or L is being used.

The problem of elements of L occurring in otherwise H utterances was explained by Gupta (2006: 22) as typical of a ‘leaky’ diglossia, a term introduced by Fasold to qualify diglossic situations where ‘one variety “leaks” into the functions formerly reserved for the other’ (Fasold 1984: 41). Unhappy with this solution, Alsagoff (2007) proposes a rethink of the seemingly unstructured variation between Singlish and Standard English as being much less an example of diglossia proper, but more of a reflection of varying degrees of orientation towards local, Singaporean, identity. Her model, the ‘cultural orientation model’ (or COM), proposes that Singlish and Standard English are extremes at the end of a continuum of cultural orientation, where Singlish (renamed ‘Local Singapore English’) indexes a localist orientation, whereas Standard English (renamed ‘International Singapore English’) indexes a globalist orientation. With these orientations are associated a number of cultural orientations, summarised in Table 4, which are expressed in dyadic terms, one having a localist, the other a globalist element.

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

Table 4: ‘Features of the two orientations in the cultural orientation model’ (Alsagoff 2007: 39, Table 1).

The COM is interesting for its inclusion of the several social meanings English can have in a place like Singapore, namely those associated with localist and with globalist orientations, as well as those situated on the continuum in between. The model does a lot to explain examples such as those in (18), where a discourse, otherwise entirely in Standard English, features single occurrences of Singlish elements, *kiasu* and *lah*, in these cases. Whereas a diglossic approach would have to regard these as instances of

one-word switches into the L variety, COM views it as a result of speaker agency, i.e. as a resource the speaker consciously draws on in order to take a particular stance. In other words, the ‘switch’ itself carries meaning. In (18a), the speaker uses a word typically associated with Singlish (notwithstanding its inclusion in the *OED*, see 4.2 above), in order to point to a mindset or behaviour often stereotypically self-assigned by Singaporeans. The use of the term *kiasu* ‘afraid of losing out’, rather than a clumsy, non-Singlish paraphrase, expresses criticism while at the same time emphasising a local trait, or ‘socio-cultural capital’ in Alsagoff’s terms.

- (18) a. I wish that the Government Ministers do not become infected with the same **kiasu** syndrome that they themselves have advised other people against.
(Parliamentary debate, see Lee 1990: vol. 55, col. 181)
- b. SG is NOT Beijing or Shanghai or Fujian or Canton, or UK or USA we’re uniquely Singapore **lah**!! And as a born and bred Singaporean I really think locals should be proud of their unique regional quirks, including Singlish. So what if we can’t enunciate [sic] perfect Queen’s English, so be it. Ditto Beijing-perfect Mandarin.
(Online forum post by user ‘SG Chinese’)

Similarly, in (18b), the writer uses exclusively Standard English, except for the discourse particle *lah*, which comes after an exclamation about local/national identity, based on the Singapore Tourism Board’s slogan (‘Uniquely Singapore’). Here too, the use of what is stereotypically regarded as a marker of Singlish is consciously used in order to underline the localist orientation of the utterance, and, indeed, of the whole discourse. That the rest of the post is in Standard English is due to its appearing on a discussion board used mostly by western expatriates in Singapore, i.e. ‘true’ ambassadors of globalism, thence warranting the orientation towards the ‘International Singapore English’ side of the COM continuum in order for the localist message to be broadcast globally.

A step beyond the cultural orientation model is a model based on the concept of indexicality (Silverstein 2003, Eckert 2008). This approach considers every linguistic variable to index (to point to, to mark) one or more social meanings, understood by the speaker and addressee consciously or unconsciously. The range of a particular variable’s social meanings can be captured by an ‘indexical field’ (Eckert 2008), which, in Eckert’s example of /t/ release in American English, includes stances such as ‘angry’, ‘formal’, ‘careful’, ‘emphatic’, and so on.

- (19) Kotikirtuku need three days ah. (ii.I.gr)

This kind of indexical analysis takes into account several layers of reference — ‘orders of indexicality’ in Silverstein’s (2003) terms. By way of example, the sentence in (19) has a layer of ‘pure’ semantic meaning, a first-order indexical (pragmatic) meaning, a second-order indexical (metapragmatic or sociolinguistic) meaning, and, possibly, a ‘higher-order’ (conventionally recognised) indexicality. The referential, semantic meaning is a question whether one would need three days to eat the amount of food discussed (colloquial Tamil *koṭikirtuku* ‘to eat a lot’); at the first indexical level, it is a rebuke to the preceding turn suggesting of a three-day trip to Thailand in order to sample to local fare. A second level of indexicality operates at the level of the discourse particle *ah*, which is commonly ascribed to Singlish, and, as a result, places the utterance within that sub-variety, and, therefore, in an informal style. Finally, the Tamil word at the beginning of the utterance may be an instance of a higher-order indexicality, firstly, in that a shared background is needed in order to simply understand the switch, but also because of the effect the switch has on the conversation: the topic of food (particularly the concept of eating large quantities thereof) may be removed from the relatively formal atmosphere of the setting in which this recording was made. A switch away from the school language English (in particular into the L variety of an official language) may therefore be recognised by the participants as indexing a particularly anti-prescriptive stance.

In the Singaporean context that concerns us, it is useful to reconsider the Singlish–Standard variation as not consisting of two uniform codes (or varieties), but rather as the selection of variables typically associated with one or the other of a set of variables, commonly termed ‘Singlish’ in the former and ‘Standard English’ in the latter case. This is important considering the quasi-non-existence of uniform use of variables from one of these sets. Figure 3 illustrates this, by showing the use of the H and L variants of five variables in the course of a group recording. The horizontal axis abstractly represents time, and the unit is a speaker turn. Each colour-coded tick represents a variant of its variable, such that the red ticks in the upper half (labelled ‘L’) are instances of copula-deletion, whereas the red ticks in the lower half (labelled ‘H’) are instances where the copula was realised. The discourse particles, in green, only have L variants.

There are a few things to be said about Figure 3, but the most striking is the absence of a clear constellation, at any one point in the recording, towards a fully ‘Singlish’ or a fully ‘Standard’ code. There is very frequent simultaneous use of variants associated with H and variants associated with L. This co-occurrence is present in all variables, and often also within the same turn. This underlines the idea of features of H and L combining not to form clear-cut codes that would be uniformly Singlish and uniformly Standard, as would have been predicted by the traditional models, but rather as combining to give rise, overall, to a kind of mixed code that employs features from both sets.

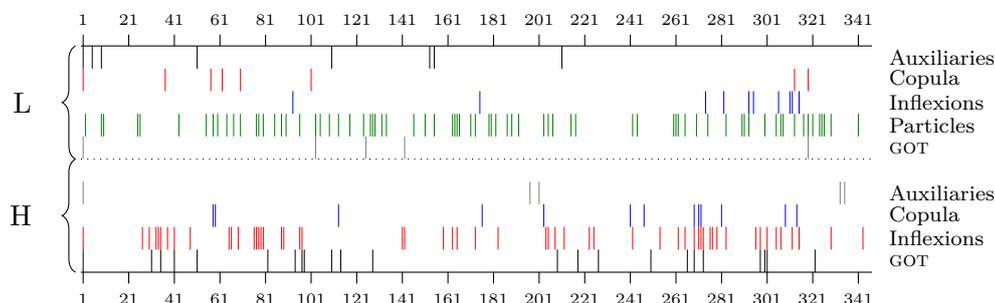


Figure 3: Occurrences of H and L variants of five selected variables in the course of one recording. The horizontal axis shows the number of the turn in which the variant is used. (Leimgruber 2009: 210)

At a deeper level of analysis, it is enlightening to consider examples such as those in (20). Here the alternation between variants of H (with wavy underlines) and variants of L (with straight underlines) are shown to be in less than random distribution. In (20a), it is the addressee, i.e. the ‘outsider’ researcher, that triggers a move away from the use of L variants (copula-deletion, perhaps also the borrowing *hor fun*⁷) towards features of H (an inflected verb). Example (20b) shows the co-occurrence of an H and L feature within the same clause: a realised copula, which is in line with the predominant use of H features in the preceding turns, but an absence of DO-support and of inversion, which may well index a stance ‘impatient’ or ‘annoyed’.

- (20) a. We can eat *hor fun* there, I heard that the *hor fun* Ø quite famous. [to microphone] er *hor fun* means rice noodles.
(i.C.gr)
- b. How long we are supposed to talk?
(iii.M.gr)

To sum up, it appears that the indexical model offers a powerful way of explaining the variation in Singapore English. It overcomes the problems of the continuum and of diglossia, while incorporating elements of the cultural orientation model, taking it beyond ‘simple’ cultural orientation to include social meaning and indexicality in general. As English becomes increasingly nativised in Singapore, the indexicality model may become increasingly appropriate.

⁷ Term of Cantonese origin, *ho⁴fan²* (Mandarin *hé fěn*). A Chinese dish consisting of broad, flat rice noodles, fried with prawns, fishcakes, vegetables, etc., and served in gravy (Lee 2004). The anglicised spelling with non-rhotic ⟨r⟩ and ⟨u⟩ for /a/ is the usual one in Singapore and is the one reported in Lee (2004).

6 Conclusion

As a country, Singapore is certainly in a unique situation: it is one of a tiny number of city-states, and probably the one that has the highest degree of political independence. It has, within its surface area of just over 700 km², not only around 5 million people, but also an ‘indigenous’ population that is so diverse that this diversity was made official policy. In this system, the English language is not just one of its four official languages, but undeniably also the most important one, be it simply for its role in the education system. As a result, knowledge of English has increased over the years, with 28.1 % of the population now indicating it as their most frequent household language (Leow 2006).

The shape of the English language in Singapore is influenced by many factors, not least by the multitude of languages with which it co-exists. Singlish, English in its most localised Singaporean form, has, at several points in its history, been criticised for a number of ills — including impairing speakers’ learning of the standard, reducing employability, and threatening the nation’s competitive edge in a global economy where English is very much the lingua franca. Some speakers, however, have come to treasure Singlish for its potential in expressing a Singaporean identity. If none of them would deny the importance of knowing English in addition to Singlish, the fact that it is increasingly becoming a native variety of many Singaporeans is starting to cast it as a powerful tool for expression of national identity. After all, if the official languages Mandarin, Tamil, Malay, and English all also ‘belong’ to other countries, Singlish is indeed uniquely Singaporean.

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