

The Roles of Singapore Standard English and Singlish

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要 旨

多民族で構成されるシンガポール人の母語の多くは、華語または中国語方言(福建語、潮州語、広東語等)、マレー語、タミール語であるため、英語は、民族間同士のコミュニケーションを司るリンガフランカとしての機能を担っている。シンガポールの英語は標準英語とシングリッシュの二種類に分類され、シンガポール人は状況によってこの二つの英語を使い分ける。本稿では、筆者による調査結果と、シングリッシュや言語政策(Speak Good English Movement)に関する調査結果を基に、二つの英語に関して社会言語学の観点から考察した。その結果、標準英語は公式な状況で使用される高変種で、シングリッシュは非公式な状況で用いられる低変種という二つの変種が異なる役割を持ち併存するダイグロシアの関係にあり、状況に応じて使い分けられることが明らかになった。近年、シンガポール政府はシングリッシュの排斥を試みているが、多くのシンガポール人がシングリッシュに対してアイデンティティーや愛着を感じており、このダイグロシアの関係は今度も続いていくと思われる。

Abstract

In Singapore, where three main ethnic groups exist, English serves as an inter-ethnic lingua franca to communicate with the other ethnic groups because the first languages of most Singaporeans are Mandarin, Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew, and Cantonese, Malay, and Tamil. Singapore English can be classified into two: Singapore Standard English (SSE) and Singlish. This paper examined the roles of the two varieties of English from a sociolinguistic point of view, based on a questionnaire survey conducted by the author and recent surveys on the use of Singlish and the Speak Good English Movement. It follows from the findings on language use and language attitudes that SSE and Singlish are used for two different functions. In other words, the relationship between SSE and Singlish is diglossic. SSE is used in formal situations as the H variety, whereas Singlish is used in informal situations as the L variety. Although the government has been trying to eradicate Singlish from Singaporeans, a number of Singaporeans still keep using it and many of the younger generation regard it as a language of their identity. Therefore, the diglossic relationship between SSE and Singlish will continue.

Key Words: Singapore Standard English, Singlish, diglossia, Speak Good English Movement

1. Introduction

1.1 Singapore Standard English and Singlish

Singapore is a multi-ethnic country which is composed of Chinese (77%), Malays (14%), and Indians (8%). For the three main ethnic groups, English serves as an inter-ethnic lingua franca. The first languages of most Singaporeans are Mandarin, Chinese dialects (Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese and so on), Malay, and Tamil. Since Singaporeans are educated in English, they can speak fluent English. However, Singapore English can be classified into two: Singapore Standard English (SSE) and Singlish. In fact, Singapore English is said to consist of three sociolects: acrolect¹, mesolect², and basilect³. Both acrolect and mesolect are regarded as SSE while basilect is regarded as Singlish (Platt, 1975, pp. 363-374; Platt & Weber, 1980, pp. 107-116). We will briefly consider the difference between SSE and Singlish in grammar and vocabulary. We are not concerned with the difference in pronunciation because of lack of space.

According to Tay, the difference in grammar between the two is as follows:

SSE (Acrolect and Mesolect)

Acrolect

There are no significant or consistent differences between the grammatical features of the acrolectal variety of Singaporean English and those of Standard British English.

Mesolect

- Word order in indirect questions
“May I ask where is the stamp counter?”
- Indefinite article deletion
“May I apply for car licence?”
- Lack of marking in verb forms
“He always go there every Saturday.”

Singlish (Basilect)

- Generalized “is it” question tag
“You’re teaching us today, is it?”
- Copula deletion
“My handwriting not clear.”
- Use of particles like ah, la
“Wait ah.” “Hurry up la.”

(Tay, 1993, pp. 27-35)

Another feature in which Singlish differs from SSE is vocabulary. Generally speaking, Singlish contains numerous loanwords borrowed from Chinese dialects and Malay. Foreigners who are fluent English speakers but not familiar with Singlish would find it difficult to understand Singlish embedded with these loanwords. Here are some examples:

Chin chai: Hokkien term meaning “unconcerned about details.”

Singlish: Chin chai lah ... anything also can lah!

[I am not fussy. Anything's fine by me.]

(VJ Times, 2000, p. 10; Talkingcock.com, 2002, p. 30)

Makan: Malay term referring to “meal” or “to eat.”

Singlish: Wah, damn hungry, anything to makan a not? I dying already.

[I am so hungry. Is there anything to eat? I'm starving here.]

(VJ Times, 2000, p. 13; Talkingcock.com, 2002, p. 71)

To summarize, Singlish differs considerably in grammar and vocabulary from SSE, which resembles British English. In fact, the distinct difference between the two varieties of English has been recognized by not only sociolinguists of Singaporean English but also ordinary Singaporeans, and Singaporeans frequently use two terms: English [SSE] and Singlish.

1.2 The Speak Good English Movement

Although most Singaporeans usually use Singlish, the Singapore government sees the use of Singlish as a serious problem to deal with. The government's view on SSE and Singlish is clearly reflected in the speech of then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at the Launch of the Speak Good English Movement 2000:

The ability to speak good English is a distinct advantage in terms of doing business and communicating with the world. This is especially important for a hub city and an open economy like ours. If we speak a corrupted form of English that is not understood by others, we will lose a key competitive advantage. My concern is that if we continue to speak Singlish, it will over time become Singapore's common language. Poor English reflects badly on us and makes us seem less intelligent or competent. Investors will hesitate to come over if their managers or supervisors can only guess what our workers are saying. We will find it difficult to be an education and financial centre. Our TV programmes and films will find it hard to succeed in overseas markets because viewers overseas do not understand Singlish. All this will affect our aim to be a first-world economy.

(Speak Good English Movement, 2000)

In 2000, the government launched the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) to eradicate Singlish from Singaporeans. The SGEM is a nationwide movement to encourage Singaporeans to speak grammatically correct English that is universally understood (Speak Good English Movement, 2008). According to the SGEM, one of its main aims is “to get Singaporeans to speak in Standard English so as to be understood by all English speakers in this globalised and highly-interconnected world.”

The SGEM annually sets up each year's goal. For example, the 2008 goal is to focus on improving the English of service and retail staff. Some companies hold workshops to make their employees speak better English. Needless to say, in shops, restaurants, and hospitals, which the 2008 SGEM targets, it is crucial for service and retail staff to speak intelligible English. However, Singaporeans do not necessarily respond

favorably to this movement. A recent survey conducted by the SGEM indicated that 41 percent of the respondents thought they do not need to speak good English (*The Straits Times*, 2008). Unlike the success of the Speak Mandarin Campaign⁴⁾, launched in 1979 in order to encourage Chinese Singaporeans to speak Mandarin instead of Chinese dialects, the SGEM does not seem to be going well so far.

2. Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the roles of SSE and Singlish from a sociolinguistic point of view: language use and language attitude. This paper addresses the following three research questions.

Q1: What is the Singaporeans' language choice between SSE and Singlish?

Q2: What are the Singaporeans' language attitudes toward SSE and Singlish?

Q3: What are the roles of SSE and Singlish?

In order to answer these three research questions, we will examine the results of a questionnaire survey conducted by the author and other recent surveys on the use of SSE and Singlish and the Speak Good English Movement.

3. Use of SSE and Singlish in Schools

Let us look at the use of SSE and Singlish in schools. According to the Ministry of Education (MOE), from observations, anecdotal feedback and media reports, Singlish seems to be becoming a language of identity, particularly among the younger generation (1999, pp. 1-5).

Observations from parents and teachers point to the use of Singlish in the schools today as being more widespread than it was five years ago [1994]....In many schools, Singlish is the preferred language of interaction among students....While Singlish might be the preferred mode when they interact with their peers informally, they are able to use Standard English in formal situations and when speaking with their teachers.

(Ministry of Education, 1999, pp. 1-3)

Although many Primary 1 students are unable to distinguish between SSE and Singlish, most students make improvements by the time they reach Primary 6 and acquire a fluent command of SSE. A majority of secondary students can appropriately switch between SSE and Singlish, depending on situations.

However, MOE accusingly pointed out the inappropriate use of Singlish by lower level students. Students who are weak in English and who have little exposure to the language outside the school tend to use ungrammatical structures and mix Standard English with Singlish expressions, or, in the case of very weak students, they might use only Singlish. (1999, p. 2)

As the assessment of the situation of the time, MOE stated:

Of some concern is that some of our students are unable to distinguish between standard English and Singlish and are hence unable to switch between the two codes according to the situation. In an atmosphere where Singlish is the pervasive and preferred medium of communication, these students are left with only one code, Singlish. This is not desirable....At the same time, those Singaporeans who are most likely to need to plug into the global economy must speak and write standard English. We must thus arrest the rising trend to use Singlish as the lingua franca among our young people.

(1999, pp. 5-7)

For this reason, MOE concluded that it would have to revise the English Language syllabus with substantial strengthening in the teaching of grammar and presentation skills and conduct a 60-hour grammar course from 2000-2001 for about 8,000 primary and secondary teachers in order to bring them up to date on both grammar and on current approaches to the teaching of grammar. Additionally, it has been conducting the SGEM since 2000.

4. Language Choice between SSE and Singlish

In order to clarify the language choice between SSE and Singlish and language attitudes toward them, the author conducted a questionnaire survey in 2002 (Harada, 2003, pp. 37-59). Thirty educated Chinese Singaporeans aged 20-38, who can speak both SSE and Singlish, were asked the following questions:

- (1) When you talk with the following persons*, which do you use more frequently, English [SSE] or Singlish?

*The persons are friends, family members, salesclerks, Malaysians, bosses, teachers, government officials, Americans, British, Japanese, and Koreans.

- (2) To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Strongly Agree, Slightly Agree, Neutral, Slightly Disagree, Strongly Disagree

(2-1) I like Singlish better than English [SSE].

(2-2) I hope that my child will speak Singlish more than English [SSE].

(2-3) Singlish is more suitable than English [SSE] to express national identity.

(2-4) Teachers should speak Singlish rather than English [SSE] as a medium of instruction.

(2-5) Singlish is similar to English [SSE] in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

4.1 Language Use

Table 1 shows the respondents' language choice between SSE and Singlish. When talking with family members and friends, they spoke Singlish more frequently, whereas they spoke SSE when talking with bosses, teachers, and government officials. When conversing with foreigners except for Malaysians, who could speak Singlish-like Malaysian English, they used SSE.

Table 1. Language Choice between SSE and Singlish

Interlocutor	SSE	Singlish
Friends	32%	68%
Family members	47%	53%
Salesclerks	77%	23%
Malaysians	79%	21%
Bosses	93%	7%
Teachers	100%	0%
Government officials	100%	0%
Americans or British	100%	0%
Japanese or Koreans	100%	0%

(Harada, 2003, p. 38)

All in all, there is a dichotomy in the language use. Singlish is used when talking with intimate persons while SSE is used with superiors and most foreigners. The result that the respondents often speak Singlish when conversing with friends is compatible with the MOE report. When the author asked a Singaporean friend why Singaporeans use Singlish with friends, she replied, “If I talk to my friends in Standard English rather than Singlish, they will think I am being snobbish. Of course, during class discussions, I speak Standard English.” Similarly, some researchers refer to this.

Proficient adult speakers of English in Singapore use two sharply different kinds of English depending on the circumstances.

(Gupta, 1989, p. 34)

Many Singaporeans know well when Singlish is or is not appropriate.

(Chng, 2003, p. 56)

This means that Singaporeans switch between SSE and Singlish according to situations. It follows from the findings of their language use that SSE and Singlish are used for two different functions. In other words, the relationship between SSE and Singlish is diglossic⁵⁾. SSE is used for formal interactions as the H variety⁶⁾, whereas Singlish is used for informal interactions as the L variety⁷⁾ and both varieties of English complement each function.

4.2 Language Attitudes

Table 2 indicates the respondents’ language attitudes toward SSE and Singlish. Most respondents had a positive attitude toward SSE rather than toward Singlish in all the respects. The results reveal that Singaporeans think SSE is more suitable as a language of communication, education, and identity than Singlish. However, as for identity, the result is inconsistent with the results of other research. This is probably due to the difference in educational level of the respondents. All of the respondents, who graduated from university, are acrolect speakers. In contrast, most Singaporeans, who have not graduated from university, are mesolect or basilect

speakers. Both mesolect speakers and basilect speakers use Singlish more frequently than acrolect speakers. It is likely that the difference in the use of Singlish has a great influence on their language attitudes toward Singlish.

Table 2. Language Attitudes toward SSE and Singlish

I like Singlish better than SSE.	Agree*	Neutral	Disagree**
	13%	40%	47%
I hope that my child will speak Singlish more than SSE.	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
	7%	10%	83%
Singlish is more suitable than SSE to express national identity.	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
	13%	13%	73%
Teachers should speak Singlish rather than SSE as a medium of instruction.	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
	3%	7%	90%
Singlish is similar to SSE in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary.	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
	0%	10%	90%

*Agree includes “Strongly Agree” and “Slightly Agree.”

**Disagree includes “Strongly Disagree” and “Slightly Disagree.”

(Harada, 2003, p. 58)

The result of market research by the SGEM between 2002 and 2004 indicated a similar tendency. For example, 98 percent of 1,205 respondents rejected the notion of teaching Singlish in school and 96 percent also indicated that if they were faced with the absolute choice of speaking either SSE or Singlish, they would choose SSE. The results of the market research have shown that pragmatic reasons tend to override cultural ones in the choice of language (Chew, 2007, pp. 85-87). However, unlike the main objective of the SGEM, Singaporeans do not have to choose one of the two varieties of English and eliminate the other. Both varieties can co-exist because Singaporeans possess the ability to switch freely between SSE and Singlish. Some researchers take a similar view.

No one in Singapore, including the present author, is recommending that we use Singlish in the Singaporean classroom. Supporters of Singlish however, are of the view that Singlish is a crucial part of Singaporean identity, and ...a trade-off is perhaps not necessary, at least not for speakers who have access to multiple discourse resources [SSE and Singlish].

(Chng, 2003, pp. 54-55)

Besides, it is noted that 53 percent of the respondents did not like SSE better than Singlish. In fact, in informal settings, many students seem to feel more comfortable conversing with each other in Singlish (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 5). Thus, there are a lot of people who like Singlish as much as SSE and like to speak Singlish though they realize the higher importance of SSE.

As for the use of the two varieties of English and beliefs about the use of Singlish, Rubdy also conducted a questionnaire survey (2007, pp. 308-324). The respondents were 690 primary students (523 Chinese, 121 Malays and 56 Indians). Table 3 shows students' language use and language attitudes. On the whole, the result is quite similar to those of other research. The students code-switch between SSE and Singlish according to interlocutors and situations.

Table 3. Students' language use and language attitudes

I use Singlish with my classmates during class discussions.	Agree*	Disagree**
	55%	45%
I use Singlish when I speak to my classmates during recess.	Agree	Disagree
	83%	17%
I use Singlish to get my ideas across clearly.	Agree	Disagree
	31%	69%
I feel comfortable when I speak to my friends in Singlish.	Agree	Disagree
	65%	35%
It is easier to communicate with my friends in Singlish.	Agree	Disagree
	71%	29%
I use Standard English with my classmates during class discussions.	Agree	Disagree
	75%	25%
I use Standard English when speaking to my classmates during class.	Agree	Disagree
	37%	63%
I use Standard English when speaking to other Singaporeans outside my home and school.	Agree	Disagree
	65%	35%

*Agree includes "Strongly Agree" and "Agree."

**Disagree includes "Strongly Disagree" and "Disagree."

(Rubdy, 2007, p. 312, partly modified by the author)

As with the MOE report, the result also reveals that a lot of students feel comfortable when they use Singlish. Additionally, most students think that it is easier to communicate with their friends in Singlish. It is said that young Singaporeans, who have been watching and imitating *Phua Chu Kang*⁸⁾, the most popular Singlish sitcom, identify themselves with Singlish.

We can conclude, from the findings of the respondents' language attitudes, that SSE is a language of education and business, whereas Singlish is a language of identity. This conclusion corresponds to the concept of diglossia that the H variety is used in literacy, education, and government, while the L variety maintains value as a marker of membership of a peer or ethnic group (Spolsky, 1998, pp. 63-65).

5. Singaporeans' Views on SSE and Singlish

In terms of Singaporeans' views on SSE and Singlish, we will also look at their opinions posted in *The Straits Times*, the most popular local newspaper. First of all, let us introduce an excerpt expressing approval of speaking good English.

Singapore wants to become a hip world-class city, but can this be achieved if expressions like “lah”, “lor” and “leh” continue to be the pride and joy of our identity? ...it's a lot clearer to say “Is this okay with you?” than the lazier “Can or not?” Singlish gives a negative image of foreigners, who are often left perplexed by it. But choosing not to speak Singlish doesn't make me less Singaporean...I can think of better reasons to be proud of being Singaporean. It's high time we took pride in our use of English.

(Chan, 2005)

Although this view coincides with the concept of the SGEM or the speech of former Prime Minister Goh, there are a number of contrary opinions. In fact, most of the contributors supported the use of Singlish for various reasons.

What is good English? And who defines what it is? The British, the Americans, the Indians? I believe none can make that claim. Language is something on which no one has a monopoly. I don't think anyone cares whether you mouth a “lah” or a “lor”...Let's not obsess over the English our youngsters speak. And let's not have an inferiority complex—our English is not that bad.

(Ho, 2005)

This opinion is backed by a recent SGEM survey. Nearly half of those aged 25 to 29 said they felt their English was already up to scratch, and that there was no need for improvement (*The Straits Times*, 2008).

In addition, some people have strong emotional attachment to Singlish.

Language gives identity. A people's common language is their pedigree—their line of ancestry. That is perhaps why Singlish is so important to Singaporeans....The beauty of Singlish lies in it being so succinct. Its ability to convey meaning so economically makes it too practical a tool to

eradicate....Speaking Singlish is a proclamation of who we are and where we feel we belong. Should the day come when the “lehs” and “mehs” finally disappear from our speech, I wonder if Singapore can be said to exist.

(Chang, 2005)

I LOVE Singlish so much, I speak it at every opportunity... It is the language that defines our identity and connects us to our community. Speaking Singlish is a means of survival here, a way of communicating effectively with the people around you. It is even more important at home. Many young people of my generation cannot speak dialect. So, the next best alternative is to use Singlish with our parents and grandparents...It is almost impossible to eradicate Singlish from our lives. And since we can't live without it, we should learn to use it in the proper context. That means we need to be able to code-switch effectively between English and Singlish. Singaporeans are pretty adaptable. At McDonald's we say “Takeaway, please”, but at the hawker centre a simple “Tah pau, hor!” does the trick.

(Ee, 2005)

As you can see, since Singlish is a language of identity for Singaporeans, they will continue to use Singlish as well as SSE despite the SGEM. Others feel the need to code-switch appropriately between SSE and Singlish. As has already been mentioned, they code-switch according to situations and know which variety of English to use in a certain situation.

6. Conclusion

The answers to the three research questions are as follows:

Q1: What is the Singaporeans' language choice between SSE and Singlish?

A1: SSE is spoken with superior persons such as bosses and teachers, whereas Singlish is spoken with intimate persons such as family members and friends in limited places such as homes and schools.

Q2: What are the Singaporeans' language attitudes toward SSE and Singlish?

A2: English is regarded as the language suitable for formal purposes, whereas Singlish is the language for informal purposes. Singaporeans think that SSE is appropriate for education and work. By contrast, they see Singlish as a language of identity.

Q3: What are the roles of SSE and Singlish?

A3: There is a diglossic relationship between SSE and Singlish. The role of SSE is the H variety, used in formal situations; the role of Singlish is the L variety, used in informal situations. Code-switching between the two varieties of English takes place, depending on situations.

Although the Singapore government has been trying to eradicate Singlish from Singaporeans, a number of

Singaporeans still keep using it and regard it as a language of identity. Therefore, the diglossic relationship between SSE as the H variety and Singlish as the L variety will continue.

Currently, many different English varieties, which are called World Englishes, are spoken all over the world. Singapore English, one of the World Englishes, has an important role as an inter-ethnic lingua franca in the Singapore community. Since language is closely related to identity, even if the Singapore government carries on the language policy which ignores the relationship between language and identity, the policy will have little effect on Singaporean language use and attitudes. In that sense, Singapore's language environment, which gives us the answer to a sociolinguistic problem, is of great interest. In order to confirm the language maintenance of both SSE and Singlish, further research is necessary after the 2010 census, which will include information on Singaporean language use, is published.

Notes

- 1) Acrolect refers to the prestige sub-variety of a speech continuum, spoken by the educated speakers of the community and often serving as the official (or unofficial) standard for that particular language (Platt, 1980, p. 271).
- 2) Mesolect refers to the sub-variety of a speech continuum, spoken by speakers with some education or, in new varieties such as Singaporean English, by educated people for semi-formal purposes (Platt, 1980, p. 274).
- 3) Basilect refers to the lowest sub-variety of a speech continuum, spoken by speakers of little or no formal education. In some new speech varieties such as Singaporean English it can also be used by educated people for their colloquial speech (Platt, 1980, p. 271).
- 4) The Speak Mandarin Campaign was launched by then Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew in 1979. The task was to transform a deeply entrenched social-linguistic habit of Chinese Singaporeans who were long used to the speaking of dialects. The objectives were: (1) to simplify the language environment for Chinese Singaporeans, (2) to improve communication and understanding amongst Chinese Singaporeans, and (3) to create a Mandarin-speaking environment conducive to the successful implementation of our bilingual education programme (Speak Mandarin Campaign, 2007).
- 5) "Diglossic" is an adjective form of "diglossia." Diglossia denotes the situation where two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the community, with each having a definite role to play (Ferguson, 1959, pp. 325-340).
- 6) The H variety refers to a language or a language variety within a particular speech community and used in formal spheres of activity such as religious services, government debates and court proceedings (Platt, 1980, p. 272).
- 7) The L variety refers to a language or a language variety which is considered as a colloquial, low status variety within a particular speech community. It is often used in the home or with friends, and is the variety learned by children before they attend school (Platt, 1980, p. 273).
- 8) *Phua Chu Kang* is a popular sitcom with a witty script and a good mix of characters. Singapore's favorite funnyman, Gurmit Singh plays the 38-year-old, ear-digging, money-driven *Ah Beng* [unpolished Chinese

man] contractor, *Phua Chu Kang*. *Phua Chu Kang* strikes a chord with viewers of all ages (MediaCorp, 2002).

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