Introduction: Questions about the Singlish Controversy

Varieties of English

One of the consequences of the global spread of English has been the identification and naming of multiple varieties of English across many societies. A quick and simple internet search, for example, will throw up references to Chinglish in China (Jing and Zuo, 2006), Manglish in Malaysia (Muniandy, Nair, Shanmugam, Ahmad and Noor, 2010), Konglish in South Korea (Hagens, 2005), Japlish in Japan (Pierce, 1971) and Spanglish in Puerto Rico (Nash, 1970), to mention just a few. These varieties all manifest different levels of influence from indigenous languages, receive different amounts of public support as to their social legitimacy and desirability, and display different degrees of empirical justification for their presumed linguistic reality.

The last point in particular has led Bruthiaux (2003: 168) to criticize what he sees as the overeager tendency among scholars to contribute to the proliferation of new Englishes, suggesting that such 'me-too' calls for additional varieties to be recognized lack validity:

> The question of what constitutes a variety of a language is a thorny one. The key issue is whether there exists in a particular location a core of speakers who not only know some English . . . but also use it to a reasonable level of proficiency for a substantial part of their daily activities, whether for international communication in a multiethnic society, for international communication with other native or non-native speakers of the language, or for academic purposes in a location where English plays a significant role as a medium of instruction despite not having a substantial presence locally. This is fundamental because for a variety to emerge, local practices must surely gain norm value through recurring, spontaneous use across a range of communicative functions as well as in emblematic domains such as the media, artistic creation, and popular culture.[1]

[1] I will continue using the term 'variety' for want of a better alternative. Other options such as 'dialect', 'code' or 'language' are just as problematic, if not more so. We already know that the traditional linguistic distinction between dialects and languages, where the former are supposedly mutually intelligible while the latter are not, does not always hold true. And the notion of a code suggests an already well-formed, independently existing autonomous linguistic system – which is essentially what is being questioned in current sociolinguistic theorizing (see the later discussion in this chapter on modernist conceptualizations of language).

Bruthiaux's criticism is well-taken since premature scholarly claims that new varieties have emerged indicate careless uses of the notion, raising the danger that it risks losing its value as an analytical concept.[2] As Park and Wee (2013: 341) point out, 'while the constitution of varieties through naming is a common phenomenon, when such names become part of our scholarly vocabulary for research, careful and critical attention must be given to the relationship between the name and the language practices that the name apparently refers to'.

The situation is different, however, when the names of varieties are being evoked in popular usage. The very fact that a specific variety's name is being bandied about in public discourse indicates that there are publicly contested ideologies regarding language at work. It is even entirely possible that such contestations can over time ultimately lead – via a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy – to a linguistic situation that does satisfy Bruthiaux's criteria for varietal status. This can happen because those speakers who view the variety favourably may calibrate their linguistic practices so as to further develop the phonological, morphosyntactic and pragmatic properties that (in their view) exemplify the variety in question. They may also try to clarify the scope of its usage in order to better distinguish this contested variety from other adjacent varieties (Pullum, 1999: 44). At the same time, other speakers who find the variety objectionable, perhaps because it runs counter to what they see as acceptable, appropriate and 'hygienic' linguistic behaviour (Cameron, 1995), may attempt to denounce and even eliminate what they consider to be deviant linguistic practices. In so doing, they may highlight examples from the stigmatized variety of linguistic practices that ought to be avoided. The consequence of this language ideological debate (Blommaert, 1999) could well be a strengthening of the ontological status of what may have at one point been little more than a name: the name now becomes associated with a (potentially growing and increasingly robust) set of linguistic practices, and to the extent that these practices are continually highlighted as exemplars that ought to be replicated or avoided depending on which side of the debate the speakers affiliate with, these then come to stereotypically exemplify and constitute the corpus of the variety.

But regardless of how well grounded in objective linguistic practice the name of a presumed variety may or may not have been initially, its use in public discourse is interesting from a socio-political perspective for a variety of reasons. One, competing assumptions about culture and identity as well as language are involved. Both supporters and detractors of the named variety are usually

[2] It is important to note, though, that Bruthiaux's (2003) own proposed criteria require that a lot of the actual conceptual work be done by notions such as a 'reasonable level of proficiency', 'a substantial part of their daily activities' and 'emblematic domains' – notions that are by no means uncontroversial themselves not least because there will be varying interpretations of what counts as 'reasonable', 'substantial' and 'emblematic'.

less concerned with linguistic issues per se than with how the variety in question might affect their ideas about the integrity of, among other factors, ethnic or national unity. Thus, it is no accident that the names of these varieties are often a blend of some ethnic or national identity prefix and the *–glish* suffix, such as Chinglish or Manglish (see the examples mentioned earlier). The name is itself intended to suggest the nativization of English in a society where it had hitherto been a foreign language. And while there will be some who welcome such nativization, there will also be others who see it as a threat to the sanctity of traditionally inherited indigenous identities or as a bastardization of proper/standard/good English, or both.

Two, in addition to competing assumptions, shared assumptions are also involved, for how else might the contesting parties be said to even be taking part in the same language ideological debate? These shared assumptions often tend to remain in the background of debates, however, since it is the points of difference that usually get foregrounded. Nevertheless, such shared assumptions can in fact go on to shape the debate in subtle yet significant ways. A simple example of such a shared assumption might be that ethnic or national identities are, indeed, at stake. Supporters of the variety might argue that it enriches or strengthens the ethnic or national identity, whereas detractors might assert that it compromises or undermines the same. In either case, the assumption that the debate carries significant implications for the future vitality of the wider community (be this ethnic or national in scope) is never in doubt, much less seriously interrogated.

Three, many of these ideological assumptions, whether competing or shared, are based on modernist precepts about the stability of both conceptual boundaries and the links between concepts. So, a traditional conceptual assemblage comprising essentialized links between language X, culture X and identity X is treated as being intrinsically distinct from equally essentialized links between language Y, culture Y and identity Y. More concretely, there is, for instance, assumed to be a Malay language, culture and identity that, taken together, constitute a naturalized package that must be kept separate from other similar packages, such as the Chinese language, culture and identity nexus. In this way, discourses about the need to maintain the integrity of specific languages, specific cultures or specific identities usually also involve attempts to sustain the links that keep an entire assemblage intact. Such essentialist views are, however, being increasingly challenged by phenomena such as commodification, migration and even reflexivity. Quite aside, then, from the issue of competing or shared assumptions is the question of how modernist orientations may or may not need to be re-evaluated in the context of life in late modernity.

Bearing in mind the foregoing, the case of Singlish becomes particularly interesting. Notionally, the label ‘Singlish’ describes the colloquial variety of English that is native to Singapore, though, as I show shortly, things are in fact

much more complicated. As a well-established and deeply entrenched cultural category, Singlish is influential in calibrating the linguistic practices of Singaporeans through which identities of various sorts are indexed, including metalinguistic identities that index the speakers as being 'for' or 'against' Singlish, often on the grounds that this variety is something that Singaporeans should be either proud or ashamed of. In other words, precisely because of its cultural salience, Singlish represents a highly contested concept that has provoked very open and public disagreements amongst Singaporeans as to its legitimacy and desirability, particularly because it is seen to have very different implications for the national identity and, indeed, the national economy as well.[3]

Some Singaporeans, as well as the Singapore government, denounce Singlish as a problem on the grounds that it supposedly compromises the ability of Singaporeans to learn proper/good English (which is usually a synonym for Standard American English or Standard British English). In contrast, other Singaporeans defend Singlish as an important marker of national identity that is worth preserving, and they reject the idea that it adversely affects the learning of Standard English. Instead, these supporters of Singlish usually offer a defence loosely based on assumptions involving diglossia and situational code-switching: Singaporeans, they claim, know when to use Singlish and when not to, restricting its use to informal situations involving fellow Singaporeans and adopting the more standard variety in formal situations, including situations where non-Singaporeans are present.

The preceding paragraph, while largely accurate as an informal description of the broad contours of the Singlish controversy, nevertheless contains developments that beg further analysis. In the rest of this introductory chapter, I therefore expand on the various issues surrounding the Singlish controversy that demand further investigation.

As I elaborate on these issues, it should become evident that an examination of the arguments surrounding Singlish can provide insights into the discourses of identity and ethnicity in a globalizing world, with implications for issues such as the possible emergence of a post-national identity, the commodification of language and the impact of 'superdiversity' (Vertovec, 2006; 2007) on language policy. Such arguments pertain not only to the Singlish controversy or Singapore specifically; they have broader ramifications for our general

[3] The notion of Standard Singapore English has also been occasionally touted in addition to Singlish, either as a variety that can coexist with Singlish or as a nationally more acceptable alternative (Wee, 2005: 61). Standard Singapore English, however, is spoken of with far greater tentativeness than Singlish. Many Singaporeans in fact appear unsure that Standard Singapore English actually exists, even considering such a notion to be chimerical. In contrast, the idea of Singlish has struck a much bigger cultural chord and enjoys a much more robust cultural reality, so much so that supporters of Singlish celebrate its existence even as its detractors consider it a clear and present national danger.

understanding of language, culture and identity, as will become clear as the discussion in the rest of the book progresses.

Singlish is therefore interesting not necessarily because of its linguistic properties per se,[4] but because it is at the center of a socio-political controversy that is symptomatic of the anxieties and concerns that revolve around language, culture and identity in the context of rapid globalization, and an analysis of the Singlish controversy helps to bring into clear relief many of the major issues that are implicated.

Ideology Pooling and Meta-Discursive Convergence

It is clear that an analysis of the Singlish controversy cannot help attending to the conflicting representations that make it controversial in the first place. But it is also useful to focus on the shared ideological assumptions that influence the positions assumed by parties involved in the controversy. This is because such ideologies may 'become socially dominant to the extent that they become a natural part of discourse production; in such cases, speakers may (consciously or unconsciously) adopt those ideologies in their discourse even though the ideologies may not necessarily be supportive of their interests' (Park, 2009: 84).

The value of focusing on the shared ideologies is nicely illustrated by Park (2009) in his discussion of the Official English debate in South Korea, where various parties argued over whether or not to accord English the status of an official language. Park (2009: 84) points out that 'the distribution of ideologies in a debate does not necessarily align with the fault lines of social positions, but instead shows what I call ideology pooling, where both sides of a debate draw upon a common set of socially shared ideologies despite differences in their political orientations'. In particular, he emphasizes that both sides of the Official English debate subscribed to the three ideologies of necessitation (where knowledge of English is constructed as a necessity), externalization (where English is presented as a language of an Other), and self-deprecation (where Koreans view themselves as being generally incapable of mastering English). The shared nature of these ideologies makes them less vulnerable to critique. Thus, even as participants in a language ideological debate, scrutinize and contest those claims that are foregrounded as points of difference between

[4] This is not to deny that there has been a fair amount of interest in the linguistic properties of Singlish. Lim (2004) provides a good overview of its various grammatical properties. Gupta (1994), and Wee (2002a) propose different theoretical perspectives on how to understand the pragmatics of the Singlish particles. There are also discussions about whether Singlish ought to be considered a pidgin, creole or creoloid (Platt, 1975), and more recently, there have been theoretically sophisticated attempts at accounting for the aspectual system of Singlish in terms of substrate influences (Bao, 2005). I discuss some of these works in Chapter 7.

them, shared ideologies constitute the backdrop against which the debate itself is made possible.

Park's observations raise questions about the influence of ideology pooling in the context of the Singlish controversy. Put differently, the question we need to ask is how the shared ideologies might lead otherwise opposing parties to come to a meta-discursive convergence so that, even as the parties remain in conflict, they make very similar assertions that are not always consistent with their various interests. In the case of the Singlish controversy, there is a tendency for both supporters and detractors of Singlish to extend the use of the label so that, in public discourses, 'Singlish' is used to describe not only colloquial uses of English but also instances of ungrammatical/broken English. This raises the question of why this extension of the label should occur on both sides of the Singlish controversy. That is, in what way does this extension serve (if at all) the opposing aims of legitimizing and stigmatizing Singlish? It also raises the related question of what effect this elision of the distinction between the colloquial and ungrammatical has, if any, on the specific arguments and assumptions being made about Singlish. We therefore need to ask what are the assumptions in the ideology pool that have led to a meta-discursive convergence between the Singapore government and supporters of Singlish, so that, despite their very different views regarding the merits of Singlish, both parties end up making rather similar assertions about its nature.

The Role of Experts and the Double Hermeneutic

A reasonable question to ask in connection with ideology pooling is under what circumstances it might be possible for parties to the debate to actually start questioning their shared assumptions. One possibility is of course to rely on the intervention of language experts, who might directly highlight and draw attention to the problematic nature of the shared assumptions. For example, from a scholarly perspective, it makes no sense to conflate the ungrammatical with the colloquial, even if the distinction is not an easy one to maintain in actual practice. Yet, scholarly contributions seem to have had little impact on the tendency to use 'Singlish' interchangeably for both broken and informal uses of English. This brings up the issue of the relevance of linguistic expertise and its role in public debates, especially in trying to change entrenched ideologies about language. There are certainly 'non-public spaces' where experts are brought in as consultants by the government, and their views regarding language and education are occasionally reported in the media. But these represent highly limited interventions that are also usually given coverage only because they do not constitute an in-depth critique, much less a direct contradiction, of extant government policy. We will therefore see that the direct influence of

language experts in the public domain – for reasons both specific to and beyond the Singlish controversy – tends to be rather limited.

The other possibility is for the parties themselves to gradually become more appreciative of the problems underlying some of their assumptions, usually as a result of contact with language experts via education or mass media, the avenues by which expert knowledge is more widely circulated (in the course of which it may get appropriated and modified by the general public). Here, the influence of language experts is less direct, and it speaks to the effect of what Giddens (1987) has described as the 'double hermeneutic' – that is, the notion that there is a two-way relationship between lay/everyday concepts and social-scientific ones. Unlike the natural sciences where scientists study objects and phenomena (e.g. chemical processes) that lack awareness, the objects and phenomena studied by social scientists (i.e. people, society) can come (via education, the mass media, socio-political debates, etc.) to not only appreciate social-scientific concepts such as 'citizen' and 'sovereignty' (Giddens, 1987: 20) and more recently, 'diaspora' or 'inflation', but even to use them themselves. As Giddens (1987: 18–19) puts it,

> the subjects of study in the social sciences and the humanities are concept-using beings, whose concepts of their actions enter in a constitutive manner into what those actions are. Social life cannot be accurately described by a sociological observer, let alone causally elucidated, if that observer does not master the array of concepts employed (discursively or non-discursively) by those involved . . .
>
> Unlike in the natural science, in the social sciences, there is no way of keeping the conceptual apparatus of the observer – whether in sociology, political science or economic – free from appropriation by lay actors.

I will say more about the double hermeneutic in my examination of the Speak Good Singlish Movement (SGSM). This is a movement that, as its name suggests, arose in response to the Singapore government's own Speak Good English Movement (SGEM). The SGEM was initiated by the government to help promote 'good English' while at the same time eradicate Singlish. The SGSM, in contrast, is notable not only for challenging the tendency to elide the distinction between the colloquial and the ungrammatical but also, more relevantly, for making this challenge on the basis of relatively sophisticated linguistic arguments. Thus, with the SGSM, we see at least some of the hitherto shared assumptions being foregrounded as problematic and then rebutted.

Voice and the Shaping of the Controversy

While it is of course unrealistic to expect all Singaporeans to each weigh in with their individual views on the Singlish controversy, it is worth noting that one important segment of the population remains largely unheard from. This is

the group of Singaporeans who have little or no competence in what is conventionally known as Standard English and who as a consequence are portrayed by active parties to the Singlish controversy as speakers of ungrammatical/broken English. Extending the label 'Singlish' to include ungrammatical/broken English immediately implicates them in the controversy. Despite this, their views are not heard in the Singlish controversy.

These speakers are instead represented by proxy via the contributions of the active participants in the Singlish controversy. The latter are generally well-educated and articulate Singaporeans, both inside and outside the government. Because the arguments both for and against Singlish have tended to come mainly from well-educated individuals who are also competent in a standard variety of English, many of whom having been educated in local, British or American tertiary institutions, this raises the issue of voice. Who gets to contribute to the Singlish controversy, who gets excluded, and why?

Attention to voice therefore allows us to identify the kinds of personas that are enabled to and indeed obligated to speak, as well as the kinds of personas that are, in contrast, disallowed from or at the very least not expected to contribute to debates over Singlish. We need to examine the implications of this situation for the Singlish controversy. This is because the possibility of voice functions to mediate the indexical relationship between named varieties and personas, reflecting conventionalized understandings of this relationship while also constituting and perpetuating it.

This way of thinking about voice recalls Spivak's (1988; 1999) critique of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, where she insists on a need to move away from treating the economically dispossessed as a homogeneous group and from relying on Western-educated academics to speak on their behalf. Spivak herself rejects as a viable project the desire to 'confer visibility and voice to the subaltern' and she suggests that it is instead necessary to understand the practices 'through which postcolonial subject-power is consolidated' (Roy, 2011: 311). The Singaporean experience with English is still very much a postcolonial one, and this includes the emergence of Singlish (Schneider, 2007: 153ff). In this regard, we need to ask about the extent to which the considerations that accompany Spivak's remarks about the subaltern might also apply to the linguistically dispossessed in the context of the Singlish controversy.

Singlish as Commodity

The overwhelming focus in the Singlish controversy has been on whether Singlish can be seen as an asset or a liability to Singaporeans. Detractors of Singlish insist that it impedes the learning of Standard English, and because of this, they assert that allowing Singlish to flourish would penalize its

speakers by limiting their social and economic mobility. This is the ghettoization argument. Relatedly, detractors also suggest that because Singlish is a low-status variety, its use, especially on the global stage, gives a bad impression of Singapore and Singaporeans. This is the symbolic capital argument, which is logically independent from the suggestion that Singlish compromises the learning of Standard English.

Nevertheless, the ideological relationship between these two arguments persists, because when two erstwhile distinct varieties of English come into contact, it is the stigmatized variety that is typically construed as infecting or contaminating the prestige variety. The possibility that the prestige variety might itself be enriched as a result of such contact is never considered. This construal is of course predicated on the assumption that the labels 'Singlish' and 'Standard English' refer to objectively bounded varieties that can be reliably distinguished and kept separate from each other.

The issue of Singlish's economic and symbolic capital (or lack thereof) leads to another reason why the Singlish controversy bears closer examination. There are signs that Singlish is becoming increasingly commodified as a cultural product that is exportable. Singlish lessons are offered to non-Singaporeans, skits prominently highlighting the use of Singlish are available on YouTube, and Singaporean-made films that feature Singlish-speaking characters are gaining international recognition. Commodification can potentially lead to the delinking of Singlish from Singaporeans. As Budach, Roy and Heller (2003: 606–607) point out, this is a possible scenario when language is commodified in the new globalized economy:

> In these conditions, the tight connection between language and identity is disturbed; language skills can have value independent of the 'identity' of the speaker, and 'identity' can be sold – in the forms of dance, music, museums, art, and so on – without the producers' having to be able to provide any of the historically related linguistic performances. Nonetheless, uncoupling does not always happen; groups understanding themselves historically as a community will use the notion of inheritance to legitimize privileged access to linguistic resources and to their new markets (see Rampton, 1995 on the notion of inheritance).

Since no single individual or group holds any proprietary claim to Singlish, even as some Singaporeans might object to Singlish becoming delinked from Singaporeans, other Singaporeans might celebrate its spread and embrace by non-Singaporeans. In this regard, it is worth noting that the Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black* has even had one of its characters, a Black American female, speaking Singlish[5] in order to promote the series to a Singaporean audience. Moreover, the Singapore government itself is not immune to the

[5] See www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO0-hvXc9kY; accessed 7 August 2016.

advantages that might accrue from the commodification of Singlish. Almost to the point of contradicting its own anti-Singlish stance, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), a government statutory board that comes under the Ministry of Trade and Industry, actually describes Singlish as Singaporeans' 'own brand of English', one that they 'fondly refer to'; it even offers light-hearted dictionary entries that are intended to help foreigners understand various Singlishisms (Wee, 2011: 82):

> Over the years, Singaporeans have developed their own brand of English fondly referred to as 'Singlish'. With our multiracial background, it's not surprising that 'Singlish' borrows from the many different languages spoken in Singapore. Here's a collection of 'Singlish' terms which you might find handy on your visit to Singapore . . .
>
> (i) Action (verb)
> Derived from the English language meaning to show off.
> Example: That fellow always like to action, walking around with his Rolex over his shirt sleeves
>
> (ii) Boh-Chup (adj)
> Derived from the Hokkien dialect meaning couldn't care less.
> Example: Ah, boh-chup, I'm not going to hand in my assignment.

Likewise, in its attempt to reach out to Singaporean communities overseas, the Singapore government has started organizing Singapore Day, a somewhat annual event that is usually held in major cities such as London or Shanghai, where Singaporeans are encouraged to gather and celebrate their Singaporeanness. On Singapore Day, then, Singlish is occasionally used, and this, too, raises questions about how this practice might undermine the government's claims that Singlish is a national liability. More recently, Koh (2016) reports that, to mark the celebration of Singapore's National Day, the budget airline Jetstar would be making announcements using Singlish on 9 August:

> These include announcements on, say, duty-free sales: 'Later we'll also be coming around for duty free. If you haven't buy from the airport yet, then you can buy from us *lah.* All same price, confirm plus chop.'
>
> Singlish lines will be provided to the crew, but they are free to add their own flair to the announcements, a Jetstar Asia spokesman told *The Straits Times* . . .
>
> 'Singlish is part of Singapore's identity and heritage so we hope the public will see this as a fun celebration of local culture on National Day', the airline said.
>
> But pre-flight safety demonstrations and announcements will still be made in standard English.

Notice that in this example, Jetstar is restricting the use of Singlish to relatively nonserious topics, such as duty-free shopping, whereas announcements regarding more serious topics such as those relating to safety issues are made using Standard English. This bears on the commodification of Singlish because commodities become indexed to different kinds of social personas (Agha, 2011: 28). As with the STB's marketing of Singlish, Jetstar, too, treats Singlish as a