

The Singlish Controversy

Singlish is the colloquial variety of English spoken in Singapore. It has sparked much public debate, but so far the complex question of what Singlish really is and what it means to its speakers has remained obscured. This important work explores some of the socio-political controversies surrounding Singlish, such as the political ideologies inherent in Singlish discourse, the implications of being restricted to Singlish for those speakers without access to Standard English, the complex relationship between Singlish and migration, and the question of whether Singlish is an asset or a liability to Singaporeans. These questions surrounding Singlish illustrate many current issues in language, culture and identity in an age of rapid change. The book will be of interest to scholars and advanced students of World Englishes and sociolinguistics. Its detailed analysis of the Singlish controversy will illuminate broader questions about language, identity and globalization.

LIONEL WEE is a professor in the National University of Singapore's Department of English Language and Literature. He has written extensively about New Englishes and language policy, particularly in relation to the Singapore context. He served for a number of years as a member of the committee of the Singapore government's Speak Good English Movement.

The Singlish Controversy

*Language, Culture and Identity in a
Globalizing World*

Lionel Wee

National University of Singapore



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-18171-7 — The Singlish Controversy
Lionel Wee
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi - 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107181717

DOI: 10.1017/9781316855331

© Lionel Wee 2018

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2018

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-18171-7 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	page vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
 Introduction: Questions about the Singlish Controversy	 1
Varieties of English	1
Ideology Pooling and Meta-Discursive Convergence	5
The Role of Experts and the Double Hermeneutic	6
Voice and the Shaping of the Controversy	7
Singlish as Commodity	8
Singlish, Migration and Mobility	11
What Is Singlish? Conceptualizations of Language	12
Organization of the Book	14
 1 Language Policy in Singapore: English, Singlish and the Mother Tongues	 21
Independence, Nation-Building and Multiracialism	21
The Positioning of English in Singapore’s Language Policy	25
Teaching English in Singapore	29
Problematizing Singlish	34
The Paradox of Linguistic Conservatism and Technological Innovation	42
Conclusion	45
 2 Ideology Pooling and Meta-Discursive Convergence in the Singlish Debate	 48
Language Ideological Debates: Conflicting and Shared Assumptions	48
The Convergence of Meta-Discursive Regimes	51
Singlish Has No Value	61
Singlish Is Non-Elitist	64
Expert Contributions to the Debate	67
Conclusion	70
 3 Language Experts, Linguistic Chutzpah and the Speak Good Singlish Movement	 71
Language Experts: Missed or Dismissed?	71
Linguistic Chutzpah	79
	v

vi	Contents	
	The Speak Good Singlish Movement (SGSM)	81
	Claims about Singlish Made by the Government	84
	Rebuttals from the SGSM	86
	The Importance of Linguistic Chutzpah	88
	Conclusion	92
4	Voice: Who Speaks about Singlish?	94
	Voice: Indexical Orders, Pretextual Gaps and the Subaltern	96
	An Inventory of Voices in the Singlish Controversy	100
	The Singlish Subaltern: Already Spoken For	104
	Shaping the Singlish Controversy	110
	Conclusion	116
5	The Commodification of Singlish	118
	Language, Commodification and Human Capital	119
	Singlish and the Culture Industries	121
	The Necessary Stage	127
	Singlish and the Non-Culture Industries	134
	Conclusion: Implications for the Authenticity and Ownership of Singlish	137
6	Singlish, Migration and Mobility	141
	Inward Migration: Foreign Workers	143
	Outward Migration and the Singaporean Diaspora	149
	Heartlanders and Cosmopolitans	154
	Rocky Roads of Reflexivity and Nationalist Imaginings	157
	Conclusion	165
7	What Is Singlish? Language, Culture and Identity in a Globalizing World	167
	Static Approaches to Defining Singlish	169
	Towards Greater Dynamism	171
	Indexicality and Assemblages	177
	Future Directions for Linguistic Work	188
	Conclusion	194
	<i>References</i>	195
	<i>Index</i>	209

Figures

1	Stickers from the Speak Good English Movement	<i>page</i> 81
2	Illustration of ‘rubbah-rubbah’ by Toh Paik Choo	112
3	Illustration of ‘xiam’ by Miel in <i>An Essential Guide to Singlish</i>	113

Tables

1	Language Most Frequently Spoken at Home (in %): 2000 Survey	<i>page</i> 26
2	Language Most Frequently Spoken at Home (in %): 2010 Survey	26
3	Ethnic Limits for Housing Development Board Flats	158

Preface

Several years ago, just before I was invited to become a committee member of the Singapore government's Speak Good English Movement in the early 2000s, I was involved in a meeting with senior civil servants who were tasked with handling the Singlish 'problem' and improving standards of English in Singapore. The meeting took place in a small office in my Department of English Language & Literature at the National University of Singapore.

After the meeting, I bumped into a colleague who had happened to walk past the office while the meeting was in progress. She told me that she had heard shouting coming from within and wondered what the fuss was about. I told her that one of the civil servants had reacted angrily when I tried to explain that (i) there is no necessary correlation between the presence of Singlish and any drop in standards of English, much less any evidence that the former is the cause of the latter; (ii) it is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain with any objective certainty that standards of English are actually dropping, since the distinction between linguistic innovations and errors is a fluid one; and (iii) the global spread of English means we have to accept that there will be changes to the language as it takes root in different societies and is both adopted and adapted by various users for multiple communicative purposes. The indignant civil servant found these points difficult to accept and, instead, accused me (and linguists in general) of being far too willing to tolerate variations in language use and therefore of irresponsibly contributing to the undesirable divergences from good/standard/proper English.

The heated discussion did not prevent the government from inviting me to join the Speak Good English Movement. A cynical interpretation (one that is perhaps not without merit) would be that the invitation was motivated by the goal of bringing into the fold and thereby co-opting potential 'troublemakers'. Nevertheless, I accepted the invitation because I thought it would provide me with a good opportunity to engage in extended discussions with government representatives about language matters and, specifically, about various assumptions concerning Singlish and Standard English.

I have to say that, in retrospect, my time as a member of the Speak Good English Movement was indeed quite rewarding. The other committee members

with whom I had the privilege of working were often open-minded about the complexities of language. In turn, I came to be more appreciative of the kinds of pressures that civil servants work under and from which, as an academic, I was relatively free. For example, running an official campaign such as the Speak Good English Movement meant being answerable to politicians and members of the public about how resources were being spent and having to show that some ‘progress’ was being made each year (such as reducing the rampant use of Singlish, raising awareness of the importance of Standard English or simply increasing appreciation and sympathy for the Movement’s goals).

Despite this, my concern about the ways in which Singlish is being understood and debated in the public sphere has continued to grow. This is because there has been no significant change in the premises and parameters of the debate. Each time Singlish is discussed in public, the same arguments tend to be thrown up and the same responses made. The result is that previously established views and attitudes (simplistically, either ‘for’ or ‘against’ Singlish because it is a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ thing) are further entrenched; there is no evidence of a closer meeting of minds, a better appreciation of different positions or a more nuanced understanding of the ideological assumptions involved.

This book is born out of my concern with the ways in which the Singlish controversy has unfolded in public debates. Though the impetus for the book is personal in nature, I have tried to provide an objective analysis of the controversy, looking at both sides of the debate. I should make clear, however, that the points I tried to convey to that senior civil servant all those years ago remain valid, and because of this, I am largely unsympathetic to those who would argue that Singlish is a problem, a linguistic menace that needs to be eliminated. This does not mean, however, that the arguments that have been proffered in favour of Singlish are unproblematic. The arguments put forward by the supporters as well as by the detractors of Singlish tend to be based on questionable assumptions.

In what follows, I show that viewing Singlish as a liability or an asset in fact sidesteps many of the important and complicated issues involved. And because the issues involving the Singlish controversy are by no means unique to Singlish but are in fact relevant to broader concerns about language and identity in the context of rapid globalization, I am hopeful that the discussion in this book will be of interest to a fairly wide audience and not just those concerned with promoting or retarding the use of Singlish.

Acknowledgements

Parts of this book are based on previously published materials. Chapter 2 is based on ‘Metadiscursive convergence in the Singlish debate’ (*Language & Communication* 31: 75–85, 2011). Chapter 3 is based on ‘Linguistic chutzpah and the Speak Good Singlish Movement’ (*World Englishes* 33/1: 85–99, 2014). Chapters 5, 6 and 7 draw on ‘Evolution of Singlish in late modernity’ (in S. Bushfeld, T. Hoffman, M. Huber and A. Kautzsch, eds., *The Evolution of Englishes*, 126–141. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2014) and my review of Leimgruber’s *Singapore English: Structure, Variation and Usage* (*English World-Wide* 36/2: 259–263). Parts of Chapter 6 also draw on ‘The party’s over? Singapore politics and the “new normal”’ (*Journal of Language and Politics* 14/3: 455–478, 2015). These materials have been revised and reorganized so as to better fit in with newer ideas and discussions. I am grateful to Elsevier, John Benjamins, and Wiley-Blackwell for permission to include these materials in the book. I also thank Gartbooks for permission to reproduce the illustration from *Essential Guide to Singlish*, and Marshall Cavendish for permission to reproduce the illustration from *The Complete Eh, Goondu!* My thanks also to Simone Khoo, Gerald Tan and Alan Tea for their comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript.