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.

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Language, Culture and Identity in a Globalizing World

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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

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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

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