An In-depth Study of the Role and Development of English in Singapore

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1. Introduction

English has become the language of choice for international communication in the world today, especially among people who do not share a common native language. According to Jenkins (2009), ‘English remains the world’s first international language into the twenty-first century’ (p.39), and ‘it is now spoken in almost every country of the world, with its majority speakers being those for whom it is not a first language’ (p.2).

However, the extent of English used and the role of English differs in every region and country, even in countries where English is a native language, and English, as a language, shapes the politics and culture of every country in its own way. In this paper, I will do an in—depth study on the spread of English in Singapore, my country of birth, which, according to Kachru (1992: 356), belongs to the Outer Circle of the three concentric circles of the ‘sociolinguistic profile of English’.

In attempting to discuss the complex nature of English in Singapore, I will first give a brief history, then analyse the identity and role of English in Singapore, the effects on her nation-building process, and the impact of English on local languages, cultures and language policies of the government. I will base this paper on critical readings of published books and papers on these topics as well as on my personal experiences as a born and bred Singaporean.

2. A brief history

The founding of modern Singapore dated back to 1819, when Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, a British statesman, discovered the island and thought that it had a very strategic location for a trading port. Together with Malacca and Penang, the Straits Settlement was formed in 1826, which was a colony under the British (Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) 2012, Singapore Tourism Board (STB) 2013). In time, Singapore attracted immigrants from all over the world, but the bulk came from China, India and the Malay archipelago.

‘Because of the multi-ethnic situation, a complex network of language use developed’ (Platt, Weber & Ho 1983 : 8). The Chinese used a variety of Chinese dialects, with Hokkien being the most predominant. The Indians mostly spoke Tamil and the Malays Bahasa Melayu. (Platt et al. 1983) Even under colonial rule, it was a polyglot community. The British let the people decide how they wanted to educate their children. ‘The government provided a limited number

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of English-language schools to train people to be clerks, storekeepers, draughtsmen and such subordinate workers.’ (Lee 2000: 170) There were Malay-language schools for the Malays, and the Indians and Chinese funded their own Tamil and Chinese language schools respectively. (Lee 2000)

‘At first, the use of English was very restricted. It was the language of the British administration and British employees in private business. It was also the language for legal matters in the Straits Settlements …’ (Platt et al 1983: 8)

It was via the education system that standard British English was introduced during the British colonial rule. A few schools that used English as the medium to teach were opened in the Straits Settlement, and privileged children of the locals attended these schools.

After WWII, during which Singapore was occupied by the Japanese from 1942 to 1945, the British regained governance over Singapore. The locals quickly began to realise the economic value of learning English, and as a result there was a rapid increase of students in English-medium schools. English enabled different groups of the multiracial society to communicate with each other, and at the same time was the key to the world outside, such as in the fields of Western science and technology, politics, law, medicine and so on. (Platt et al 1983: 9)

Early forms of Singapore English (McArthur 1998) started around this time. Although the locals learned Standard British English, they developed ‘a type of English … which was strongly influenced by the background languages, particularly the Chinese dialects and Malay’. (Platt et al 1983: 9) Singapore English went on to develop into its own unique variety, and I will explore this further in a later section of this paper.

In 1958, Singapore fought and won their independence from the British, and went on to merge with Malaya. The merger lasted only two years for there were political differences between the ruling parties of the states, especially with Malaya’s laws that showed preferential treatment for the Muslim race. In 1965, the ruling party of Malaya decided to expel Singapore from the federation, and Singapore, ‘led by the leader of the ruling People’s Action Party and Singapore’s first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew’ (MCI 2012), was forced to become independent.

3. Development of English in Singapore

Lee, who stepped down from Singapore politics in 2011, set the stage for English to become the main language in Singapore. Against a backdrop of racial riots and tension among the Muslims and Chinese in Singapore in 1964 and a newly independent and tiny Republic left to fend for herself, he strongly believed that English as the working language was necessary both for Singapore’s survival as a country and as a lingua franca among the multiracial society. In the own words of Singaporeans’ beloved former Minister Mentor (from 2004–2011):

‘We realised English had to be the language of the workplace and the common language. As an international trading community, we would not make a living if we used Malay, Chinese or Tamil. With English, no race would have an advantage.’
With the population consisting of three main ethnic groups, Chinese, Malays and Indians, the Singapore government in 1959 made official four languages: Chinese (Mandarin) for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays, Tamil for the Indians and English as the first language. Malay was decided to be the national language 'to prepare the way for merger with Malay' (Lee 2000: 170). Some linguists have problems with the term 'first language' (Kachru 1998: 95), but it is simply as the name suggests, a term the Singapore government coined to convey its language policy that although English might not be the mother tongue or national language of Singaporeans, it would be the main language of use especially in the government, education and business sectors.

After independence in 1965, this policy of four official languages remained because 'it was too sensitive... to make immediate changes' (Lee 2000: 170). Slowly, the government started introducing the teaching of English in Chinese, Malay and Tamil schools. 'Malay and Indian parents welcomed this but increasing numbers preferred to send their children to English schools' (Lee 2000: 171). There was strong opposition from Chinese unions and societies of the Chinese majority group, leading them to start their own Chinese university, Nanyang University (now Nanyang Technological University (NTU)). However, the Chinese eventually realised the difficulties of managing this university because its graduates had very poor job opportunities compared to graduates from the English-medium university, University of Singapore (now National University of Singapore (NUS)). At the same time, English-medium schools became increasingly popular as students aimed to go to the University of Singapore. Nanyang University had to turn to the government for help, and allowed itself to change into an English-medium university. After the two national universities were merged by the government, Lee 'made all Chinese schools switch to English as their main language of instruction, with Chinese as their second language' (Lee 2000: 177–8). It was a cultural struggle and dilemma but finally English was accepted to be the working language by both the politicians themselves and the people alike. (Lee 2000)

With this, the Singapore government adopted a bilingual policy for the nation. Singaporeans were expected to learn their own mother tongue in schools in order to embrace their roots and heritage and retain their cultural self, but at the same time Singaporeans also needed to embrace English to build Singapore's global self. Lee mentioned in his memoirs that 'becoming monolingual in English would have been a setback (because) ... we would have lost our cultural identity, that quiet confidence about ourselves and our place in the world' (Lee 2000: 181). Gupta (1994) observes that, today, very few people in Singapore are monolingual, partly because of the bilingual policy and also because of interaction between the different races. Because of the 'English as a first language' policy, the development of English progressed rapidly.

‘Virtually everyone in Singapore speaks some English, and it can perhaps claim to be the only country in Asia where this is true.’

(Deterding 2007)

The situation above came about via various social and policy developments. One is the continuous growth in the number of Singaporeans, especially the elite and the privileged, who
view the acquiring of English as an attainment of social status and the gateway to a better future. Another is the ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign the government launched in 1979, due to studies which showed that a large number of students were doing poorly in their mother tongue subject in school. It was believed that this was due to the fact that students were still using Chinese dialects at home. With the ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign, the government discouraged the use of Chinese dialects, saying that it would be extremely difficult for an individual to master many languages. The government intensively promoted the bilingual policy urging Singaporeans to use only English and the mother tongue, which is Mandarin for the Chinese people, rather than different Chinese dialects. Lee even advised the first Chinese governor of Hong Kong in the post British colonial era, Tung Chee-hwa, to retain only two languages for Hong Kong rather than three, which includes Cantonese: ‘If I were you, I would concentrate on Mandarin and English; English because you need to connect with the world.’ (Plate 2010: 132)

The ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign was difficult to implement, but it was successful.

‘Without this active promotion of Mandarin, our bilingual policy would have failed for Chinese students. Mandarin-speaking families increased from 26 per cent in 1980 to over 60 per cent in 1990, and are still increasing.’ (Lee 2000: 180)

As a result of the ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign, the number of languages in society decreased, though the situation went in the opposite direction. Progressively the people came to favour an almost monolingual English society as parents chose to focus on improving English abilities and in the process neglected the mother tongue. (Stroud & Wee 2012) Rubdy (2001) offered an explanation from T’sou (1988) that ‘the promotion and acceptance of Mandarin may have represented an added linguistic burden to dialect speakers which hastened language shift in younger members towards English’. (Rubdy 2001: 352)

4. **Singapore English and Singlish**

In this section, I will explore Singapore English and the localized variety, Singlish, by doing a critical review of the paper ‘English in Singapore: culture, capital and identity in linguistic variation’ by Alsagoff (2010).

Alsagoff (2010: 336) sees that there are ‘two functions English plays in Singapore: as a global language, and as a local language’. The tension between these two functions has been discussed in a lot of literature, and given rise to many names for Singapore English. Some of these include Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), Singapore Standard English (SSE) (Alsagoff 2010), Colloquial Singapore English (CSE), Standard Singapore English (SSE) (Jenkins 2009) and of course the name that most agree on, Singlish, since it is a short word and a simple combination of the words ‘Singapore’ and ‘English’. According to Alsagoff, Singlish is the product of the tension between the global and local functions of English in Singapore.

Alsagoff summarises the three models that have been suggested by linguists in attempting to analyse Singapore English before suggesting that the models do not work and a new one is in need. The first model, developed by Platt et al (1980, 1993) in the late 1970s, acknowledged that
Singapore English is a variety in its own right with three proficiency levels along a spectrum. The highest proficiency level is the acrolectal variety, closely resembling standardized varieties of English, and mostly spoken by the most educated people in Singapore and belonging to the highest social class. The middle proficiency level is the mesolectal variety and the lowest proficiency level is the basilectal variety. The basilectal variety is associated with Singlish, deemed as the ‘uneducated variety of Singapore English’ (Alsagoff 2010:337) spoken by people from the lowest social class with the lowest levels of education. However, the model fails to explain why people using the acrolectal variety would switch to the basilectal variety and vice versa if they so desire.

The second model is the diglossia model developed by Gupta (1994) (in Alsagoff 2010) which says that SCE and SSE are two different varieties. SCE is the L-form and is used in a friendly, informal context when Singaporeans want to express kinship and show a common identity with each other. SSE is the H-form used in formal and serious situations. Gupta differentiates between the two varieties using four grammatical features, but this model is also deemed to be problematic because the classification method using the four grammatical features are too limiting and do not properly classify some SCE data as SCE. To make up for these data, Gupta uses ‘a percentage count of a series of features of SCE and SSE to determine degrees of focus on either of these varieties’, but this is in fact an admission that the distinction between SCE and SSE are blurred, and as such there cannot ‘exist two gramatically distinct varieties of English in Singapore’. (Alsagoff 2010: 339) SCE and SSE now appear to exist in ‘continuum’, which is a better characterization than ‘complementary distribution’ according to Alsagoff.

The third model proposed as an analysis to Singapore English is the expanding triangles model developed by Pakir (1991) (in Alsagoff 2010). This model ascertains that ‘English-knowing bilingualism’ affects the way Singapore English is spoken, in that ‘the range and depth of speaker’s repertoires’ is correlated to their English proficiency. Because this model uses the same classification method like the diglossal model, it has the same weakness. (Alsagoff 2010: 340)

Alsagoff’s new model, the cultural orientation model (COM), provides an interesting take on the analysis of Singapore English that does not look at grammatical structures. The COM uses the ‘cultural tension between “being/doing global” and “being/doing local”’. Culture here is referred to as ‘macro-culture’ and defined in a more general sense, i.e. the Singaporean national culture rather than the various ethnic cultures in Singapore. Glocalisation, a term borrowed from Japanese economics, is used to describe Singlish, a language structured around opposing forces of the global and the local, or ‘two opposing perspectives: “internationalism” versus “national identity”. The result is a fluid interaction in the middle that is Singlish,

‘a multidimensional variational space where speakers negotiate between the global and the local in relation to constructs such as capital, identity and culture where fluidity and flux of movement rather than constancy of clear boundaries is the norm.’

(Alsagoff 2010: 340)

As such, the COM easily addresses the flaws in Gupta’s (1994) and Pakir’s (1991) models, when it
is sometimes difficult to categorise data accurately into SCE or SSE, since SCE, or Singlish, need not be consistent with ‘clear boundaries’.

The COM first defines the concepts of ‘the globalist orientation’ and ‘the localist orientation’, and argues how the variation of Singapore English is a negotiation of both these ‘macro-cultural orientations’ (Alsagoff 2010:343). The globalist orientation is the perspective that Singaporeans have to be global citizens, helping the country become economically successful and globally recognized. The government pushes for this perspective that in order to build a great future with a high standard of living, and continue to remain competitive in the global economy, Singaporeans have to embrace internationalism using English as a tool. Most Singaporeans agree with this, and are mostly aware and grateful of the good governance that has brought them this far. The role of English in Singapore is thus very clearly brought out by the globalist orientation concept:

‘The role of English is always discussed hand in hand with its economic capital and status as a language of science, commerce and technology… English is clearly seen as an instrument and means of global participation in financial and economic markets (Wee 2003 : 211).’ (Alsagoff 2010 : 341)

The localist orientation is the perspective that sees oneself as a member of the community and holding a strong national identity, a camaraderie with other fellow Singaporeans. It appears then, that standard English is not adequate in fulfilling this localist orientation. Alsagoff opines that the political discourse in Singapore makes out English to be the global language rather than the language of the west for two reasons, to alleviate concerns that western values are infiltrating society and are ‘poisonous’, and to make English ‘ethnically neutral’ (Alsagoff 2010 : 342). With regard to the first reason, I believe that English is viewed to be a global language because it really is. Singapore is using English as a tool not just to reach out to the west—she is more ambitious than that. Besides, Singaporeans themselves voluntarily adopt western values, seeing them as modern and open-minded. I agree with the second reason because nation-building and racial harmony in Singapore has always been of extreme importance to the well-being of the nation due to the historic occurrence of racial riots.

English, or language in general, cannot be used in a country as a ‘cultureless’ lingua franca without being linked to culture of some sort. This is where Singlish comes in. ‘In performing its social function as a common language among the ethnic groups’ (Alsagoff 2010 : 342), English has developed into the SCE, or Singlish. Singlish is the rightful lingua franca of multiracial Singapore, rather than standard English.

‘A badge of identity for many Singaporeans, it (Singlish) represents a hybrid form of the language that includes words from Malay, as well as Chinese and Indian languages.’ (STB 2013)

Indeed, Singlish has become a language of choice among Singaporeans as a way of signifying national identity. It is deemed to be important and a cultural icon in its own right, regardless of
The COM explains the constant switching between SSE and Singlish as a negotiation of the two 'macro-cultural orientations'. This is termed the 'sociolinguistic variation of English use in Singapore' (Alsagoff 2010: 343). For example, a Singaporean with globalist intentions would assume uniformity with the rest of the world, thus utilizing standard forms of English that would make him be understood by foreigners and enable him to create the formal business tone as he wishes. When the intentions change to that of the localist, the Singaporean switches to Singlish in his desire to connect with other Singaporeans to show solidarity and camaraderie and/or reconnect himself with his cultural roots. Alsagoff describes the two 'macro-cultural orientations' as being at two opposite ends of a spectrum, and that 'speakers of Singapore English vary their style of speaking by negotiating and exploiting the multidimensional space defined by the contrast between these two contrapuntal cultural perspectives' (Alsagoff 2010: 343). This means that, for example, if the Singaporean is speaking at a formal event to an audience of Singaporeans, his language repertoire used would probably be closer to the localist end of the spectrum as compared to if he is speaking to an audience of foreigners at another similar event.

The globalist orientation stresses 'economic capital', and the use of standard English at the individual level to represent 'formality, authority and distance', and that at the collective level to represent 'institutionalism and economic power'. The localist orientation stresses 'sociocultural capital', and the use of Singlish at the individual level to represent 'rapport, familiarity and intimacy', and that at the collective level to represent 'group membership' and 'community identity'. (Alsagoff 2010: 343–4)

How do I, as a Singaporean, view all these discourses? I definitely identify with Alsagoff’s COM best. It is a very sophisticated model since it implies that Singaporeans are capable of switching between two forms of English to their advantage, SSE for ‘globalist orientation’, to reach out to the world, and SCE, or Singlish, for ‘localist orientation’, a way to form a Singaporean identity and a sense of belonging to the country, and to keep out foreigners, unfriendly as it may sound. In fact, more than being a code switch, the model aptly describes the fluidity of the use of Singapore English as that of moving across a spectrum, one end being SSE and the other being Singlish. The model at the same time reflects ‘the hybridity and complexity of speaker and hearer identities’. (Alsagoff 2010: 344), and flatters Singapore English by saying that Singaporeans are sophisticated users of English. As Kachru puts it, ‘Once a language establishes its autonomy, it is actually liberated’ (Kachru 1998: 103). Singapore can thus be said to have benefited from and yet been liberated from the linguistic imperialism of English.

The COM effectively illustrates the role of English on Singapore’s nation-building process, and the impact of English on local cultures. The role of English is that of a neutral unifying force, a lingua franca that is not related to the three mother tongue languages. At the same time, English paved the way for Singlish, which developed into a ‘cultural resource’ (Alsagoff 2010: 344) for Singaporeans who have Asian heritage and global mindsets, a curious blend and one that is difficult to understand for those who do not have a good knowledge and experience of what Singapore is like. The COM shows how English influences Singapore’s culture and identity: by giving it a voice, a language that is Singlish, a means of representation. Besides the fact that English has helped pilot Singapore to her first-world status, English has also done
Singapore good in this way.

5. Arguments for and against Singlish

Before Singlish was seen by Alsagoff as a uniquely Singaporean language liberated from English, it has in fact been criticized and argued about. Some in the local Singapore community, as well as the government, had felt that Singlish was getting out of hand. According to Rubdy (2001), ‘there is a fear of failing standards because Singapore wants to maintain international intelligibility in English.’ (Rubdy 2001 : 345) Jenkins (2009) also wrote that there was the fear that young people might eventually not be able to speak ‘an internationally acceptable or understandable form of English’. (Jenkins 2009 : 125)

Interference from the government to promote the use of standard English and the disuse of Singlish started in 2000. Singapore’s National Day Rally that year gave a good summary of the situation regarding the views of Singlish at that time. Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong outlined the issues reported by the Ministry of Education (MOE), namely that students across ages were getting worse in their standards of English. Many spoke Singlish with their peers and had difficulty with grammar when speaking English with their teachers. Students of below-average English abilities could not differentiate between English and Singlish, and even tertiary students had difficulties with grammar and used Singlish too much. Many attributed the preference of use to Singlish being promoted in the media.

Goh opined that Singlish was ‘not only ungrammatical and truncated but often incomprehensible, especially to foreigners.’ (Goh 2000) He went on to list out the disadvantages of Singlish:

‘If we speak a corrupted form of English that is not understood by others, we will lose a key competitive advantage. . . . 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. . . . All this will affect our aim to be a first-world economy.’

(Goh 2000)

Then Senior Minister Lee also had criticisms against Singlish. He called ‘Singlish a ‘handicap’ that was stifling the country’s economic development. He lambasted TV comedies for popularizing Singlish.’ (Rubdy 2001 : 345–6) The use of a specific Singaporean TV comedy series, ‘Phua Chu Kang’, to blame the media for popularizing Singlish, was, according to Rubdy, a smart move to engage the public in their reactions towards the usage of Singlish. Immediately the topic sparked off public debate in the forum and editorial pages of the country’s major newspapers. There were arguments both for and against the use of Singlish. Members of the public who agreed with the government believed that ‘Phua Chu Kang’ made people think that it was all right to speak Singlish as it was an official television broadcast programme. Some felt that those fluent in English found it fashionable to speak Singlish to show solidarity with those less fluent, and others feared that Singlish may cause ‘a slide in English proficiency among the young.’ (Rubdy 2001 : 346)
On the other side of the argument, there were people who thought that ‘Phua Chu Kang’ was a ‘national icon and his popularity attests to (Singaporeans’) cultural maturity’. (Rubdy 2001: 347) One argued articulately that the English language was always changing anyways, so Singaporeans can laugh at themselves and the way they speak. (Rubdy 2001: 347) Most of the people supporting the usage of Singlish agreed that Singlish was an icon of national identity, ‘a mark of how (Singaporeans) have evolved as a nation’ (Rubdy 2001: 347) and thus deserved a place in Singapore culture and society. Some believed that Singlish gelled Singaporeans together and had an important role in national cohesion. Pakir (1994b) wrote that even The Financial Times London reported that ‘Singlish is an important unifying force’, that Singaporeans were now proud and confident in using Singlish, and that Singlish has become so big that ‘academics have studied it’ and ‘books have been written about it.’ (in Rubdy 2001: 345) Local playwright Alfian Sa’at went so far to say, in the words of Rubdy, that ‘the anti-Singlish crusade “smacked of a colonial mentality” which deigned to appropriate the American slang of Hollywood movies but frowned upon homegrown expressions.’ (in Rubdy 2001: 347–8) In my opinion, this was also because local artistes and playwrights like Alfian Sa’at used and are still using Singlish as their tool to create humorous and uniquely Singaporean artistic works which become hits with the local people.

6. The ‘Speak Good English Movement’

At the National Day Rally 2000 mentioned above, Goh officially launched the ‘Speak Good English Movement’ (SGEM), a campaign that would from then on be held annually until today to promote the usage of standard English and discourage the usage of Singlish. In 2000, the SGEM had ‘a week-long festival packed with more than 100 events including plays, storytelling competitions, seminars, debates, skits, and a speech marathon.’ (Rubdy 2001: 348) There was even a book launch in which the book being promoted was about advice on switching from Singlish to English. Following the week-long festival, the public sector organized a year-long programme in schools, libraries, community clubs and other public places to drive home the SGEM slogan, ‘Speak Well. Be Understood’. At the same time, the MOE revised English syllabuses in schools and held seminars on teaching methodology for English teachers. (Rubdy 2001: 348)

Goh was quoted in The Straits Times that year as saying that Singaporeans speaking Singlish when they can speak good English ‘are doing a disservice to Singapore’. The activities held under the SGEM all aim to ‘show Singlish in a less prestigious, less attractive light than standard English.’ (Rubdy 2001: 348) It is ironic that while Singlish should be celebrated as an independent language that broke free from its colonialist master, English, in Singapore the government and people alike have been trying hard not to let it happen, insisting that Singlish is English corrupted by Singaporeans (Rubdy 2001: 348, Jenkins 2009: 129). Rubdy also pointed out that although Singlish is the ‘glue’ that binds Singaporeans together, the government preferred ‘a different “brand” of glue—one that is closer to either British or American Standard English.’ (Rubdy 2001: 352, Jenkins 2009: 129)

It is not difficult to understand, though, why this is so. According to Jenkins (2009), ‘the
prime motivation behind the SGEM is an economic imperative’. (Jenkins 2009: 129) Rubdy puts it aptly when she said that in the case of Singapore, it is especially true that ‘a language needs to have an economic basis if it is to survive; if a language has no market value it will in time decline.’ (Rubdy 2001: 353) English in Singapore has this extremely important role as has been reiterated in the sections above, that as a tool firstly for survival, then for globalization, and then competition to be among the best in the world in every way possible.

Rubdy (2001) introduced the term ‘creative destruction’ to apply to the SGEM that aimed to phase out Singlish. ‘Creative destruction’ refers to the ways of phasing out current obsolete practices, ideas, products, etc. that would give way to newer versions which would lead to economic advancement. Rubdy opined that the SGEM is ‘creative destruction’ ‘deliberate(ly) and consciously planned’ (Rubdy 2001: 350) to root out Singlish, and done by introducing the ‘better’ version that is standard English. Singlish was viewed to have no place in the society of Singapore as Singapore participates in the race to become a first-class economy.

Many linguists, however, did not think so. (Jenkins 2009: 129–130) Schneider (2007) observed that for many post-colonial Englishes, the fear of falling standards of English was a common characteristic, and Mugglestone (2003) observed that differences in pronunciation of English has always been a problem in Britain (in Jenkins 2009: 129). Singlish should not be seen as an exception and thus a language that needed to be weeded out. Wee (2002) (in Jenkins 2009: 129–130) even saw the motives behind the SGEM as linguistic discrimination and a breach of human rights as the campaign propaganda persuaded Singaporeans to see that Singlish was a corrupted language that Singapore can do without. In fact, in recent years, Wee (2010) (in Seargeant 2012: 110) pointed out that government boards like the STB used Singlish in its advertisement messages to promote tourism for the country, another evidence of the advantages of Singlish in that it brings out the uniqueness of Singapore.

Several linguists have discussed English as an identity crisis for countries previously colonized. Kachru (1998) wrote that colonization leaves imprints on the country and a large part of those imprints have been assimilated to become part of the country’s ‘multicultural and multilingual legacies’. These legacies are then transmitted on to future generations and they should take place without ‘guilt’. He believes that ‘linguistic and cultural hybridity is our identity’ (Kachru 1998: 105). Rubdy also talked about the ‘complex issue’ of ‘the choice of English as a symbol of identity’. English is both a neutral tool for betterment of the country as well as ‘a carrier of Western decadent values and undesirable influences’ (Rubdy 2001: 351–2).

Having lived in Japan for more than the past seven years, I am able to look in from an outsider’s point of view and can understand the government’s stand with regard to the SGEM. I agree that Singlish is the lesser form of standard English in terms of grammatical correctness, but then, ‘wrong’ grammatical structures are sometimes used on purpose for comic effect, just like some communities in America use ‘bad’ English for purposes of humour. ‘Singlish and standard English are not mutually exclusive but are a part of the multilingual and multidialectical repertoires that Singaporeans daily employ’ (Seargeant 2012: 110). Alsagoff also illustrated how Singaporeans choose whether to speak Singlish or English, or a mixture somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. However, I have come across instances where teenage Singaporean students came on exchange programmes to Japan and used Singlish on
their unsuspecting counterparts, who of course had trouble understanding as their knowledge of English was limited only to simple stock phrases to begin with.

I believe that speaking standard English is definitely important and if more and more Singaporeans are starting to be confused about where to draw the line between Singlish and standard English, then something has to be done. The SGEM might have been, and may still be an effective plan. Perhaps the focus can be on educating how to manage the usage of Singlish and English rather than an elimination of Singlish altogether. And like what Kachru said, multicultural and multilingual Singapore is the unique identity of the country and Singlish reinforces this.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced the development of English in Singapore and its role in her nation-building process. I outlined the historic circumstances that made English a strong choice as a common and the main language among the people in Singapore, and explained how the government painstakingly but successfully built up the bilingual policy in Singapore, with English being a half of that bilingualism. I illustrated how English has enabled Singaporeans to create a new language, Singlish, that we can call our own, and in the words of Kachru, that has ‘acquired functional nativeness’ (Kachru 2010: 102). Finally I presented arguments for and against Singlish and the government’s intervention of preventing Singlish from bringing down standards of English.

English will always continue to play an important role in Singapore, but in the twenty-first century, innovations will win the day, so hopefully Singlish will very soon find itself the ‘market value’ (Rubdy 2001: 353) it deserves.

References


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