

Singlish: a Controversial Yet Unique Creole of Singaporean

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to comprehend the cause of Singlish controversialism as a language. The method used in this research is library study of 23 journals, magazines, and official websites. Descriptive research is used and emphasizing the analysis strength of existed data by counting on available theories to be defined on the writings that lead to the discussion. The data analysis technique used in this study refers to the theory of Miles and Huberman, which refers to four stages: data collection, reduction, presentation, and verification. The result shows that Singlish is a creol that has been classified as a diglossia in Singapore with its unique features. Eventhough the government againts this language since the first place by establishing Speak Good English Movement. Singlish, with its dilemma, still utilized as a nonformal daily conversation and as national identity.

Keyword: *Singlish, diglossia, SSE, SGE Movement, language*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, the evolution of communication, especially the Old English as a derivation of Celtic language, spread widely after the Anglo-Saxon tragedy warfare (Essberger 2019). This language has gone far until it touched down in Malaysia when the British invade it in the 19th century after the Anglo-Dutch treaty (Information 2016), as Singapore was still a part of Malaysia at that period. The colonialism in Malaysia portrayed that modern English was mandatory as English-medium schools were established, especially in 1923 in Singapore, simultaneously as Malay, Chinese, and Tamil schools were encouraged ((Tien 2010);(Gupta 1994)).

British English and the standard accent of English in the United Kingdom had always been Singapore's English standard ahead of 1965. The declaration of Singapore in 1965 marked the new evolution of English from Singaporean, facing their own Standard Singaporean English. Standard Singaporean English took control, while Singlish emerged among the middle classes who had no official English education (Wong 2015).

English elements flitted out of classrooms and onto the grassroot, resulting in the emergence of a pidgin speech (Ong 2017) that non-native speakers utilized it as a lingua franca to communicate with speakers of the many other languages spoken in Singapore. Singlish arose mostly among the middle classes, who absorbed components of English without formal education while incorporating parts of their local languages. (Napitupulu and Simanjuntak 2015).

Following the next years, Singlish as a pidgin mixed with notable characters of Peranakan, Indian English, while Tamil, Malay, and Chinese were the citizen prior language. Creolization happened as children in Singapore absorbed Singlish as their mother tongue while Singlish became so popular to use. Singlish developed a completely formed, reinforced, and autonomous creole language as a result of this phase of creolization, with a larger lexicon and more complicated grammar, as well as fixed phonology, syntax, morphology, and syntactic embedding ((Wardaugh and Fuller 2014); (Wong 2015)).

But Singlish acceptance didn't go really well to every parties that exposed with its existence. In 1990s, Singlish popularity has been accused of being the culprit in degrading standard English mastery by the Singapore government. The launching of Speak Good English (SGE) Movement in 2000 was an effort of the ruler to keep Standard English on its track, leaving Singlish behind because its "bad" impact. At even a time when the country is working hard to integrate itself into the English-speaking world economy, Prime Minister

Lee Hsien Loong frets that such jargon is rendering quite so many young people in the city-state illiterate (Nordquist 2019).

The fact is, Singlish speakers elaborately changing standard English in their own style. Those speakers might not pay attention that their creolized language is not understandable enough by other people. Ironically, they required the school to apply “better” English while school was the first place of Singlish to grow up.

According to the background stated above, the main focus that will be discussed is what makes Singlish unique but controversial?

Based on the research question above, the researchers would like to acknowledge how does Singlish become a unique creole yet so controversial.

This research aims to give a new perspective about how well does Singlish usage in Singapore and its controversial case so people could be familiar with its existence in linguistics scope.

2. METHODS

The type that will be used in this research is library research, so that the method that might be utilized in this research is library research. It is an arrangement of some activities like library data collection, reading, and making little notes, also working on the material of research. This research applies library resources to acquire research details.

Descriptive research is used and emphasizing the analysis strength of existed data by counting on available theories to be defined on the writings that lead to the discussion. Library research is carried out by reviewing the literature and analyzing the relevant topics that are combined.

In this research, the data collection method is the researchers directly dealing with data sources or texts presented in libraries or ready-to-use data, as well as available secondary data. The library search in this study utilizes sources in the form of journals, articles, books, documents, and official blogs without conducting field research.

The data collection method used in this research is using secondary data. Secondary data is meant by collecting data indirectly by examining the object in question. The use of reliable secondary data relating to Singlish as a creole formed in Singapore. The data collection process in this research was carried out in early October 2021 to November 2021.

After collecting several journals, books, documents, and other sources obtained from online media related to the Singlish language, the researchers then analyzed the data using descriptive qualitative analysis through library research. The results of this research are in the form of descriptive data, written in narrative sentences from the results of activities or behavior observation.

The data analysis technique used in this study refers to the theory of Miles and Huberman, which refers to four stages: data collection, reduction, presentation, and verification.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With 77% ethnic Chinese, 14% ethnic Malay, 8% ethnic Indian, Singapore is counted as a country that stands for ethnic diversity. To bridge the communication between these ethnic groups, English is used. Mandarin, Chinese dialects (Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, and so forth), Malay, and Tamil are the first spoken among most Singaporeans. Singapore English can be classified into two: Singapore Standard English (SSE) and Singapore Colloquial English or Singlish (Harada 2014) similar with Dr. Danica Salazar, Oxford English Dictionary editor who distinguishes Singapore Standard English as first language by default and Singlish as a patchwork patois of Singapore’s state language ((Nordquist 2019);(Ching 2020);(Sui 2016)).

Singlish did not show up first as a pidgin, a lingua franca used in trade (Harbeck 2016). It becomes a creole language for which English is the lexifier plus words from each ethnicities mentioned before (Driffill 2017). Singlish, on the other hand, isn't always one creole: it's a mash-up of several Southeast Asian languages and pidgins (Banerji 2018).

Since its debut into Singaporean supporting the British colonial period, English began to pervade the grassroots when the Singaporean government decided to keep teaching English. Students who have a mother tongue at home subconsciously reconstruct the English they learned at school, considering they are not native

speakers, so this creole language is informal and not too rigid, a version of English that students knew wasn't 'proper'. The school became the seedbed for the growth of Singlish, which now pervades all aspects of daily life (Harbeck 2016).

Characteristics of Singlish

As a vernacular language, Singlish has grown and developed with its own characteristics. The features include the use of *be*, tense marking, the use of verb or noun morphology, also the use of pragmatic articles (Gupta 1994). Andi Napitupulu explained them in particular (Napitupulu and Simanjuntak 2015). These are the classifications:

a. In Singlish, the copula, which seems to be the verb "to be" in most forms of English, is processed uniquely. The verb "to be" is frequently removed when used with an adjective or adjective sentence. For example:

- "I am a damn naughty" becomes "I dam naughty".
- "You are pretty" clause becomes "You pretty".

A word like 'very' might appear in a sentence, that reminds us of Chinese words such as 'hao' (好) or 'hen' (很) with a similar function as an adverb. For example, "He is very good", or in Chinese written 他很好 (ta hen hao) is blatantly translated as "he very good".

"To be" is also usually not used in a complete sentence. For example:

- "I still finding"; which in this sentence, the copula "am" is vanished.
- "How come you so late still playing music, ah?" where copula "are" that is used for subject "you" is not included.
- "Dat one his wife lah" or "that lady is his wife".

b. Tense marking

Singlish grammar is also reflected by the dialects that influence this language, for instance, Malay and Chinese, with similar forms from Mandarin or Cantonese.

1) Negation

This is when you add "not" after "to be" or modals, also "don't" before every verb. In Singlish, nasalization is the symbol of negation. For example: "I do ([dō]) want" means "I do not want to."

This may apply in "can" word, that differed just by vowel. For instance: "I can do this lah." The word can sounds /ken/. While "I can't do this lah", states the sound of can't as /kan/.

2) Interrogative

Singlish have two forms beside standard yes-no interrogation. It absorbs Chinese "A-not-A" model to unidentical but similar construct, and "or not" to close a yes-no question. Here are the samples:

- She need this car **or not**? – *Does she need this car?*
- This can **or not** ah? – *Is this available / allowed?*

c. The use of verb or noun morphology

Singlish charges words from Hokkien, Malay, and Indian, which in plentiful cases, make the English words shift in their meaning. More examples are listed here:

- *Macam* (Malay) = Like; Means to resemble something.
- *Goonda* (Indian) = Stupid
- *Shiok* (Hokkien) = Delightful.
- Step (Singlish) = Acting as if (person) "Eh, Don't step Ah Beng".
- *Toot* (Singlish) = Stupid/silly [person].
- Send (Singlish) = To bring someone somewhere "I will send you to the airport".
- World (Singlish) = Nonsense, Bullshit.
- Makan (Malay) = to eat.
- 'Cher (Singlish) = Corruption of "teacher".
- Ger (Singlish) = Corruption of "girl".

Another feature that might use in Singlish morphology is reduplication. This is also the reminiscent of Chinese and Malay, where verbs are often repeated. For instance: "TV personality Phua Chu Kang's *don't play-play!*". The phrase "don't play-play" means Chu Kang is "not playing around". Verbs are usually

mentioned twice to express the delimitative component (that the activity continues for a limited time) and three times to signify greater duration and continuation. Another samples:

- Tell your *ma go ting ting* first, *den* your ma can get the point. (Tell your mother to *think* about it first, so she can comprehend the point.)
- No *take* this *take* that *ah*. (*Do not grab* any of my stuff)
- Wanna go *Or-chert walk walk see see* or not? (Let us take a *walk/ sightseeing* in *Orchard Road*.)

d. Pragmatic articles

One of the most famous discourse about Singlish feature is the use of its own article. Some of them are:

- 1) *Lah*, used at the end of a sentence; simultaneously asserts a position and entices solidarity. If used with imperatives: "Drink, *lah!*". For negative responses: "You *dun* know one, *lah!*". If used for reassurance: "It's okay *lah*".
- 2) *Mah*, is an article that is added to a sentence with patent value, which is also used to fix a fact. But this article may sound ridiculous to a stranger. For instance: But he very good at sports, *dat's* why can play soccer, *mah!*

e. Topic prominence

Topic prominent in Singlish is similar to Japanese or Chinese, which means each sentence in Singlish only start by a topic and continued with a comment. This distinguished English and Singlish because English pays attention to grammatical and semantic aspects. Some of examples:

- **Dis city** food very spicy one. – *The food is very spicy in this city.*
- **Dat joker there** no no trust *eh*. – *You are not allowed to put trust on that person.*
- **Next week** *dun* need *makan* – *You don't have to eat next week.*
- **She put make up** also very nice one *leh*. – *She is very talented on applying her make up.*

Diglossic Singaporean Languages

Due to the attitude of Singaporeans to their languages used, code-switching is tended to be applied in daily life. In a recent study, the result showed that Singaporeans are indicated to have diglossia ((Ong 2017); (Chye 2009)). This indicates that they can change over Singlish or SSE by a term or condition. According to a study narrated by Shinichi Harada that both languages have two separate purposes. as high (H) variety, SSE is always used in formal conditions, considering SSE as an acrolect of English. Contrast with Singlish, the low (L) variety and the mesolect one, that is placed for informal conditions, but each language accomplish each condition (Harada 2014).

Singaporeans believe SSE is more suited than Singlish as a language of learning and teaching, commerce, and national identity, according to the study. Nonetheless, when it comes to identification, another study found that Singaporeans are happy to declare that Singlish is their sense of identity (Harada 2014). SSE is clearly the language of school and industry, whereas Singlish is a language of identity, according to the research.

SGE Movement

However, the government failed to grasp earlier on such language is more than just a means of communication; it is also a present reality. Singapore's government notices that English is a prior element of national empowerment. That's why every Singaporean is obliged to study English, also Mandarin, Tamil, or Malay. The government assumed that each tongue in Singapore is harmonized by a single language. Considering Speak Mandarin Campaign back in 1979 which Chinese was the largest ethnicity, the government would apply SSE as the new form of its campaign by Speak Good English (SGE) Movement (Sui 2016).

The more government pushed for a strict multilingual policy, the more the languages of the territory collided and blended in Singlish. This unauthorized arrangement swiftly grew into a powerful cultural experience through fun daily talks. The books of Sylvia Toh Paik Choo were acquiring Singlish epicly in the 1980s — "Eh, *Goondu!*" ("Hey, Stupid!") and "*Lagi Goondu!*" ("Even More Stupid!") — were one-of-a-kind national hits and era-defining works. The government is serious about the phenomenon. Instead of re-examining school teaching, state authorities started criticizing Singlish for deteriorating English standards. It was also seen as isolated and hostile to foreigners by the government, and hence bad for economy.

There have been calls to ban the creole due to pragmatic concerns that it would impede the acquisition and usage of Standard English over time. As in perspective of the government, there appears to be very little space for an unlicensed variation like Singlish, and so there is no purpose to codify a linguistic variation that is inaccessible to other native English speakers and will only be used by a small number of people. The first Prime Minister, in his memorable statement on the dispute over the use of Singlish, emphasized that "Singlish is a burden we should not desire on Singaporeans." (Yew 2012). According to a media story by Au Yong, Singapore's present Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has officially said that Singlish ought not be regarded as part of the Singaporean culture (Ching 2020):

'...We have to have a sense of who we are, but it cannot be based on speaking Singlish. It would have to be built on your confidence of becoming a Singaporean, the fact that you did grow up here, and the fact and that's where you could make much difference and blend within. ...'

Lee also recommends that Singaporeans acquire standard English, which seems to be the business language, because Singlish may be complicated to understand for those who do not know the dialect.

The Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) is a long-running program initiated by the Singapore government from April 2000 to "promote Singaporeans should communicate grammatically accurate, widely understandable English." (Movement 2020). The initiative was designed in reaction to the widespread use of Singlish and is an attempt to preserve Singapore's linguistic heritage, which a researcher believes seems to have the 'concealed purpose' of erasing the creolized language (P. K. Tan 2008).

Jenkins stated how some Singaporeans are concerned that such usage of Singlish among youngsters may damage their educational standards and that they will not be able to learn a global accounting version of English (Jenkins 2015). Lots of other people, meanwhile, recently warned enthusiasts of the Singlish language not to confuse illiterate condition with identity.

But no matter how hard this movement drummed into Singaporeans to demolish Singlish, it could not reach a bright success. Singlish became bulletproof enough, spread blatantly like no border (Wong 2015).

In context, Singlish has made more progress than losses, even though it does not appear to pose any danger to Singapore's economy on a worldwide scale. It really has defined the nation's identity, defined the culture, served as a bridge for people of many ethnicities, and created a unique environment which will always embrace new members.

The Dilemma

Singlish is somewhat misunderstood by Singaporeans as a cultural gem or a national disgrace. Despite government criticism, some Singaporeans discreetly admire Singlish, seeing it as a realization of Singaporeans' desire for a distinctive cultural personality for the country. Because of the government's stated rejection of Singlish and the alienation that comes with it, many Singlish fans find joy in the language, even if they don't express it.

Nonetheless, in past few years, Singlish has become a topic of discussion well beyond Singapore's borders. The Oxford English Dictionary revealed in the spring of 2016 that it has been adding 19 Singlish terms to its entries, featuring "ang moh" (Caucasian), "shiok" (pleasing or enjoyable) and "lepak" (to chill out) (C. L.-L. Tan 2016). In May 2016, the New York Times published an editorial piece on the Singlish issue, provoking a letter from our prime minister's press secretary, Lee Hsien Loong, protecting the government's anti-Singlish stance: "Utilizing Singlish might make it difficult for Singaporeans to comprehend and also to use standard English." (C. L.-L. Tan 2016)

The author of Gwee's article says that the government's initiatives to 'quashing it have just made it continue to thrive,' that political figures are bowing down to its power to interact with the public, freely use this even during electoral campaigns, possibly actually suggesting that this creole is an alternate solution linguistic capital (albeit within the country) able of reaping votes (Sui 2016). Other writers have expressed a similar concern, claiming that whereas Singaporeans really shouldn't glorify Singlish, because there is no escape how it defines and draws Singaporeans further together (E. K. B. Tan 2016).

Some might have proposed a new equilibrium option for coexisting with this cultural phenomena, claiming that Singaporeans may typically tell the difference between formal and informal use and hence change languages while talking with others (C. L.-L. Tan 2016). The government has quickly refuted this allegation,

asserting that not every speakers have a great grasp of Standard English and might code-switch with ease, so some speakers require additional attempt to master the standardized format (Chang 2016).

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, the researcher can summarize that Singlish or Singapore Colloquial English is a language that spoken by Singaporean grassroot or in informal daily conversation. As the low variety, Singlish has various features that admitted as its own uniqueness, such as the word morphology, pragmatic articles, or its use of copula. The thing is, the attitude to this language compared to the Standard English separated by its function in society, which this dichotomy commonly stated as diglossia. Each language has its own portion, which Singaporeans could utilize in different situations, namely SSE, that used in international communication, education, and business, while Singlish is mainly used as local medium for interaction and marking its national identity. Eventhough code-switching language often used in Singapore, the Singapore government considered it annoying and inappropriate for foreigners and hopeless for business. But the SGEM does not get its point to be accepted. Singaporeans are proud to have Singlish as their grassroot language.

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