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Repositioning Singlish in Singapore's language-in-education policies

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Author Bio

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Repositioning Singlish in Singapore's language-in-education policies

Singapore's language-in-education policies have always prescribed that only a standard variety of English be allowed in teaching and learning. This view of upholding a standard has been pervasive not only in education but also throughout Singapore's society. In this article, we review Singapore's language policy, emphasising the functional polarisation of languages ideology that serves as its basis, and discuss the resultant natural emergence of the key linguistic marker of Singaporean national identity– Singlish. Charting the journey and growth of Singlish's role and status from both official and socio-cultural perspectives, we highlight that changes can be observed. It is, thus, imperative that Singlish's place in language classrooms and the affordances that Singlish has for language learning be reconsidered. Following a discussion of salient Singlish features, highlighting their appropriacy in social situations where standard English features are not and the fact that many Singapore English features are recognisably shared by both Singlish and Singapore Standard English, we propose a linguistic feature-based contrastive analysis approach for Singapore's English language classrooms. At the core, we call for a review of Singapore's language-in-education policies and the support of various stakeholders in the bid to nurture confident and effective English language users of the future.

Keywords: language policy; Singlish; Singapore English; language education

Wee (2011) highlights two instances in which Lee Kwan Yew, Singapore's founding father who continued to have enormous influence on language policy long after stepping down as prime minister, admitted to having made language-in-education policy mistakes. The first of these admissions occurred in 2004, when Lee acknowledged that the government's expectation that all Singaporeans acquire two languages with equal advanced levels of proficiency was unrealistic. The second came in 2009, with Lee acknowledging that the Chinese teaching methods employed for years in Singapore schools involved too much rote learning and insufficient interactivity to adequately engage learners. In response to these

admissions from Lee, policies regarding Chinese language education were tweaked, with the introduction of a less rigorous Chinese B syllabus and a call for Mandarin teachers to employ more interactive methods, such as drama, and use of some English in their instruction, to engage learners.

These 'mistakes' regarding previous expectations and practices were not readily apparent until Lee Kwan Yew recognised a connection between low examination results and dramatic societal change – specifically a sharp increase in the percentage of Singapore households in which English was predominantly spoken (rather than Chinese languages, Malay, or Tamil). In this article, we highlight another area in which language policy needs to change in order to keep pace with changes in Singapore society. But unlike the minor policy tweaks that resulted from the previously mentioned recognition of past mistakes, implementation of our proposed changes would require acknowledgement that the ideological foundation on which Singapore's language policy is based has become outdated. We're referring here to the ideological notion that for Singaporeans, English is merely a 'working language' appropriate for only utilitarian purposes, and can, hence, serve no identity or cultural functions.

One need not spend more than a few minutes in Singapore to realise that Singaporeans routinely use Singapore English (SgE), particularly features of its informal colloquial variety, Singlish, to project Singaporean cultural identity, and we contend that Singapore's language policy needs to align itself with this reality. In this article, we outline what we feel are Singlish's most salient linguistic features, some of which are instantly identifiable by all Singaporeans as 'Singlish'. But this is not necessarily the case for all Singlish features, for as Schaetzel, Lim, and Low (2010) point out, even students training to be English

teachers in Singapore schools often have difficulty distinguishing between Singlish and the formal variety of English that we will henceforth call Singapore Standard English (SSE)[i].

In this article, we call for government acknowledgement that Singapore's societal realities have changed, necessitating modification to the ideological stance that English (in any form) has no legitimate identity functions. Such modifications open up the ideological space for the salient and systematic regularities of Singlish, which are very much engrained in the linguistic, social, and cultural practices of learners, to be leveraged in Singapore classrooms to facilitate the acquisition of the more formal SSE. But first, we will provide some background on the historical context that informed Singapore's language policy, the ideological basis of this policy, and the emergence of Singlish as a marker of national identity.

Functional polarisation of languages: the basis of Singapore's language policy

Chua (1995) identifies national survival and vulnerability as the twin themes that have motivated and justified a pragmatic approach by Singapore policymakers throughout the country's short history. In the early days of Singapore's independence, its survival was considered quite tenuous, with perceived threats not only from other nations, but also from inter-ethnic tensions internally. Its status as a tiny, predominantly Chinese nation with no natural resources in a region dominated by Islamic Malays made vulnerability a valid concern, especially with Indonesian hostility from Sukarno's *Konfrontasi* fresh in the minds of Singaporeans[ii]. And on the domestic front, the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Singapore's Chinese, Malay, and Indian population was seen as a potentially explosive threat to national survival. At the time of independence, Singapore

was still reeling from race riots the year before that left 22 dead (see oral history accounts documented by Low, 2001). It was in this context in which Singapore's leaders felt an acute sense of vulnerability and urgency that the new nation's language policies were formulated.

In choosing official languages, language planners must consider two broad categories of language functions – identification and utility. But Singapore's linguistic and cultural diversity meant that no single language would be able to accomplish both functions. At the time of independence, the notion of a cohesive national identity seemed elusive. Singapore's approximate ethnic make-up in 1965 was 78% Chinese, 15% Malays, and 7% of South Asian ethnicity (Chua, 2005), and identity was generally thought to be intrinsically connected to one's ethnic group (Willmott, 1989). Further dividing Chinese Singaporeans were their strong allegiances to communities that spoke Cantonese, Hokkien, and other Chinese languages regarded as 'dialects'. Lamenting the lack of cohesion and the challenges it posed for nation-building, Lee Kuan Yew (1998) writes, "How were we to create a nation out of a polyglot collection of migrants from China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia and several other parts of Asia?" (p. 22).

Pendley (1983) argues that "the need for increased integration and co-ordination at all levels in society implies the replacement or supplantation of sub-national levels of identification with that of a national identity" (p. 48). But even as the government attempted to forge a national identity for Singaporeans through events such as national day festivities and having school children sing the national anthem (Mutalib, 1992), it persisted at highlighting the "sub-national levels of identification" – particularly ethnic identities, with paternal ethnicity determining whether one is designated 'Chinese', 'Malay', 'Indian', or 'Other' on government-issued ID cards (with hyphenated ethnic designations allowed only in recent years). Such efforts at maintaining the distinction of

each of Singapore's three main ethnic groups came out of Lee Kuan Yew's adamant belief that the lack of anything resembling a Singapore national identity in the early years of the nation made this absolutely necessary. As he explained in a 1984 interview:

> Over the centuries something distinctive may emerge, something separate from China, India or Indonesia or Britain. However, if in the interim you deculturise a person, erase his own culture when you have not got something as relevant to put in its place, then you have enervated him. (Vasil, 1984, p. 175)

Designating English (or any other language) as the sole official language and expecting it to fulfil both symbolic identity and utilitarian communication functions would clearly have been unacceptable to both Lee and the Singapore public at the time.

But as Wright (2004) points out, "In bi- or multilingual settings the different functions of symbol and communication may be fulfilled by different languages" (p. 46). In language planning, Singapore embraced this notion of a functional division of labour for different official languages, designating English as the language to be used as a utilitarian tool for inter-cultural communication, trade, and accessing technology. It was not only the status of English as the language of the global economy that made this a very pragmatic choice. The fact that English was not associated with any of the country's three main ethnic groups (Chinese, Malays, and Indians) also allowed it to be promoted as a neutral choice. As Wee (2010) reminds us, no language can, in reality, be truly neutral. Regardless of what language is chosen by language planners for use in particular domains, there will always be some who are advantaged and others who are disadvantaged. So in spite of the fact that the choice of English did, in fact, advantage Singapore's elite minority already proficient in the language, framing the neutrality argument in terms of ethnicity rather than socioeconomic class enabled the government to promote English as having inter-group neutrality – (dis)advantaging all Singaporeans equally insofar as there were no essentialised linkages between English and any of the

three main ethnic groups (Wee, 2010). The Singapore public, focused as it was on ethnicity in the wake of the recent race riots, accepted the ethnically-framed neutrality of English rationale, facilitating both political stability and economic success (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999).

Underlying the Singapore government's promotion of English as an official language, however, was the insistence that its use by Singaporeans be strictly as a utilitarian tool and *not* as a conveyor of culture or identity. It was Singapore's other three official languages, Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil (dubbed 'mother tongue' languages[iii]), that were assigned the functions of conveying culture/identity and serving as a means of intra-ethnic communication. Describing this strict division of labour between English and the other three official languages as 'functional polarization', Pendley (1983) explains:

> Functional polarization here refers to the functional division between English and the various mother tongues or Asian languages currently in use in Singapore. It is expressed as "English for practical use and mother tongue for cultural identity." This can be seen as a means to both conceal and legitimate the socio-economic dominance of English over the various Asian languages by relegating the Asian mother tongues, with the possible exception of Mandarin…, to the domain of culture and family life. (pp. 51-52)

When this functional polarization of languages was first conceptualised, it would indeed have been quite unusual for English to be used in the Singaporean home domain. The language policy broadly regarded the 'mother tongue' languages to be the home languages of Singaporeans, but even then, that was an abstraction. Malay was spoken in the vast majority of Malay Singaporean homes, but only around 40% of Indian Singaporeans were of Tamil-speaking family backgrounds, and although Chinese Singaporeans learned Mandarin at school, the Chinese 'dialects' were prevalent in the

home domain, with Mandarin actually spoken by less than 1% of the population (Tham, 1990).

Although the Singapore government has relentlessly promoted the functional polarisation of languages for years, its rhetoric for the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) muddled this ideological conceptualisation. First launched in 1979, the SMC is a yearly campaign that originally aimed to persuade Chinese Singaporeans to embrace Mandarin Chinese and abandon the 'dialects'. In urging Chinese Singaporeans to do away with the 'dialects' in favour of Mandarin, the SMC not only employed the argument that Mandarin would unify the heterogeneous Chinese community, but also used the pragmatic tactic that had proven so successful for the promotion of English – arguing that the use of Mandarin would facilitate trade with China, and thus, have immeasurable economic benefits. While this argument undoubtedly facilitated the campaign's success, it also effectively shattered the dichotomous division of labour between English and the mother tongue languages – the ideology upon which the entire language policy was based (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999; Wee, 2003).

Emergence of a linguistic marker of Singaporean national identity

Today's Singapore is far removed from the circumstances that necessitated the policy based on the functional polarisation of languages. Although politicians like Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat repeatedly remind the public that "maintaining racial and religious harmony is always a work in progress" (Yap, 2019, para. 1), the ethnic strife of the 1960s seems a very distant memory, with Singapore now regularly lauded for its harmonious relations between ethnic groups[iv]. And while tensions do still occasionally flare up between Singapore and its regional neighbours, also gone are the days when these countries seemed to pose an imminent threat. Impending crisis can no longer serve as an impetus for Singaporeans to radically change their language

practices. Not only are most Singaporeans now confident ‘English-knowing bilinguals’ (Pakir, 1991, 1992), proficient in English as well as their assigned ‘mother tongues’, but “Singapore has clearly moved from ‘English-knowing’ to ‘English-dominant’” (Cavallaro & Ng, 2014, p. 44).

The Singapore government, however, has continued to officially insist that English is not suitable for conveying culture or identity – wrestling with the paradox of “wanting English and yet denying it its full scope/range of functions, and its full recognition in Singapore as more than just ‘a working language’” (Pakir, 1992, p. 257). Through the routine use of English as ‘a working language’ and medium-of-instruction for almost all school subjects, Singaporeans came to be increasingly confident in their use of the language, and “a sociolinguistically natural consequence of widespread confident adoption of English is the development of a nativized variety” (Wee, 2013, p. 204).

The nativised variety that developed was Singlish, commonly referred to by linguists as Singapore Colloquial English (SCE). The emergence of Singlish as a marker of Singaporean identity became clear in the late 1990s with the immense popularity of a TV show called *Phua Chu Kang Pte. Ltd.*, a situation comedy in which the main characters (except for the one depicted as a snob) spoke Singlish. The show’s popularity triggered some public condemnation of Singlish, with editorials and letters published in *The Straits Times* blaming Singlish for declining English education standards (Kramer-Dahl, 2003), and the government responded with a campaign to eradicate Singlish. At the April 2000 launch of this campaign, dubbed the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), the then prime minister Goh Chok Tong positioned Singlish as posing a threat to Singapore’s global competitiveness, arguing “Investors will hesitate to come over if

their superiors and managers can only guess what our workers are saying” (Goh, 2000, para. 4).

This emphasis on international intelligibility had featured heavily in government rhetoric leading up to the launch of the SGEM, with regular reminders of the official utilitarian purposes for learning and using English, such as Lee Kuan Yew’s (1999) declaration that “we are learning English so that we can understand the world and the world can understand us. It is therefore important to speak and understand Standard English” (para. 8-9). Goh Chok Tong (1999), in his National Day Rally speech, put forth the same message, arguing, “We learn English in order to communicate with the world…we should speak a form of English that is understood by the British, Americans, Australians, and people around the world” (para. 97-98).

This depiction of any deviation from a standardised internationally-intelligible variety of English as unacceptable is perfectly aligned with the functional confines that had been officially sanctioned for English. If the intention is for the language to function purely as a ‘tool’ to accomplish communication tasks without any consideration for identity functions, anything that blunts the utilitarian effectiveness of the ‘tool’ would, of course, be unwelcome. That official functional polarisation of languages ideology, however, is far removed from the reality of present-day Singapore society. The ‘mother tongue’ languages would be perfectly adequate for handling all identity functions for Singaporeans if ethnicity were the sole relevant aspect of their identities. This, of course, is not the case. Singaporeans do, in fact, now have a national identity separate from their ethnic identities. Lee Kuan Yew’s speculation that “something distinctive may emerge, something separate from China, India or Indonesia or Britain” did indeed come to pass. In a matter of decades rather than centuries, Singlish emerged as the preferred means to index Singaporean identity.

Numerous language attitude studies (e.g., Cavallaro, Ng, & Seilhamer, 2014; Tan & Tan, 2008) have highlighted the national identity role that Singlish now plays in Singapore. As part of Tan and Tan's (2008) examination of attitudes to Singlish among Singaporean secondary school students, 79.2% of their study's 260 participants identified Singlish as the trait they most associated with Singapore.

With many Singaporeans cherishing Singlish as an identity marker, there has been fierce opposition to the Singlish eradication efforts of the government and SGEM. This has resulted in an ongoing ideological debate that has played out over the course of the last two decades in political speeches, on the Internet, and in newspapers. In her analysis of this ideological debate over Singlish, Bokhorst-Heng (2005) highlights the fact that there is denial and erasure on both sides, with government and other anti-Singlish voices denying that Singlish and Standard English can ever co-exist harmoniously, completely ignoring the issue of identity, and pro-Singlish voices reiterating Singaporeans' ability to easily switch between the two as circumstances demand, disregarding the reality that many Singaporeans cannot, in fact, do this. After discussing the discursive strategies of both sides and the ways in which they frame their arguments, Bokhorst-Heng (2005) identifies the root of government opposition to Singlish as the simple fact that it "challenges the polarisation of language, threatening to apply some of the meanings of language reserved for the 'mother tongue' languages to English" (p. 205).

A 2016 exchange in *The New York Times* revealed that the Singapore government was still holding on to the official stance that use of Singlish necessarily means a decline in Standard English. This was revealed in the response, by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's press secretary, to an opinion piece in which Singapore academic and literary critic Gwee Li Sui commented on the endurance of Singlish in

spite of the government's best efforts. The press secretary's response began with a characterisation of the government's efforts as simply promoting SSE mastery, but the focus soon turned to a zero-sum orientation and the Singaporeans that Singlish advocates tend to disregard – those without the ability to switch between Singlish and SSE, with the press secretary arguing "For them, mastering the language requires extra effort. Using Singlish will make it harder for Singaporeans to learn and use standard English" (Li, 2016, para. 2).

Baby steps toward official acceptance of Singlish

Despite the indication by the prime minister's press secretary that, in 2016, the official stance was still "to stifle one language to boost another" (Goh & Woo, 2009, p. xi), the Singapore government has, over the course of the last decade, become less adamant in its denial of legitimate co-existence, grudgingly acknowledging Singlish's role as an identity marker, occasionally appearing to embrace its cultural soft power potential. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) website, for example, introduces Singlish to potential international visitors, characterising it as "an integral part of everyday conversation among Singaporeans" (para. 7). The website goes on to provide potential visitors with a brief Singlish lesson, presenting a glossary of Singlish lexical items. And in a clear acknowledgement that the ability to at least understand some Singlish is a key aspect of new citizens' assimilation into Singapore society, the People's Association (a statutory board tasked with promoting social cohesion) chose to feature a Singlish Challenge in a 2018 ceremony for new citizens, quizzing the newly-minted Singaporeans assembled (one of whom was the 1st author of this article) on the meaning of lexical items (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Even the SGEM has, in recent years, stepped back from its previous stated aim of eradicating Singlish, acknowledging on its website that it “recognises the existence of Singlish as a cultural marker for many Singaporeans” (SGEM, n.d., para. 3). Whereas the SGEM previously made no distinction between Singlish and ‘broken English’, it now proclaims “It is important to understand the differences in standard English, broken English and Singlish” (SGEM, n.d., para. 2).

In the school domain, the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE), in 2016, issued a statement informing teachers that, in students’ compositions, “Singlish words should be used only appropriately, usually in direct speech” (Yang, 2016, para. 4). Allowing Singlish to be used for direct quotations is presumably for the sake of authenticity and “appropriately” does allow a lot of space for teachers’ discretion, but the MOE made it clear in its response to journalists’ inquiries that this advisory referred only to particular sorts of usage in compositions – that “for formal communication in general, students should not use Singlish in its written or spoken forms” (Yang, 2016, para. 3).

Although just a baby step, the MOE 2016 statement can be viewed as a step toward official recognition of the reality of Singlish use in Singapore schools, providing teachers with a limited sanction to accept what many of them have always allowed or even encouraged. Teachers’ stances on Singlish do, of course, vary wildly depending on their individual ideologies, but some have long encouraged use of Singlish in direct quotations in narrative compositions, praising students for the ‘local flavour’ achieved with Singlish[v]. Indeed, Singlish was highly prevalent in Singapore classrooms even when the government and SGEM were explicitly pushing for its eradication. Tan and Tan (2008) point out that although “the position of Standard English in the school context is not in question, pupils also seem to want to carve out a space for Singlish in

some finely calibrated contexts" (p. 477). Rubdy (2007) discusses teachers' reports of using Singlish strategically in the classroom for particular purposes, such as "To explain difficult content, especially to students at low English proficiency levels", "To build rapport with students, especially when interacting with younger children", and "As a springboard or stepping stone to speaking the standard" (pp. 313-314). While all of the reasons provided by Rubdy's respondents represent very valid reasons for classroom use of a non-standard variety, it is the 'springboard to the standard' reason – apparently expressed by just one teacher and characterised by Rubdy as a "rather unusual response" (p. 314) – that we contend is the way forward for facilitating learning of SSE in Singapore. We believe that this is the sort of bold practice that needs to be officially sanctioned in our language-in-education policy for alignment with Singapore's present-day sociolinguistic realities.

In this discussion though, we have thus far managed to sidestep the issue of what exactly Singlish *is* – and in what ways it does, in fact, differ from SSE. This is then where we will now turn our attention.

A consideration of Singlish features

It would make for a simple discussion if the differences between what constitutes Singlish and what features characteristically determine its standard counterpart, SSE, could be clearly delineated. However, the challenges in doing so are undeniable, leading to today's unresolved stand and constant debates that advocates of both camps face. In this section, then, we identify some of the most salient Singlish features that can be established as systemic regularities based on the fact that they are arguably produced intentionally, differentiating from a more formal/standard variety of SgE (i.e. SSE). We acknowledge, however, that this too may undergo processes of change over time. Underlyingly, we also aim to highlight, through features that are commonly discussed to

be Singlish but are contentious, that it is not always feasible to clearly demarcate differences between Singlish and SSE forms. Many such features are, in fact, shared by the two varieties, strengthening our conviction that Singlish be used to leverage the learning of SSE. We present this section, advocating the perspective of Singapore English comprising varieties that exist on a cline, with a focus on the three linguistic categories of phonology, syntax, and semantics/lexicon. It should be noted that the list of features presented here is by no means exhaustive but serve as examples of features that are saliently Singlish.

Phonology

Analyses of the sound system of Singlish often take the backseat in conversations surrounding Singlish, possibly due to the innate intricacies of speaker variation. To give a complete picture, however, we discuss four salient phonological features.

Non-aspiration of initial plosives

This is perhaps the most salient of phonological features in Singlish. While one would expect that burst of air in the realisations of English voiceless plosives like /p, t, k/ in syllable-initial positions, these exist characteristically without aspiration in Singlish. However, it should be noted that, contrary to the common generalisation that these voiceless plosives and their voiced counterparts (i.e. /b, d, g/) get conflated in Singlish, they remain identifiably distinct. There is no lack of differentiation between words like *pin* and *bin* in Singlish, arguably mainly through the retention of voicing in the latter.

Deletion of final plosives

Here, we focus on the process of deletion that takes place with plosives in final positions. This refers more specifically to the simplification of final consonant clusters /-sk, -st, -kt, -mpt/ in Singlish (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 here]

We note here that this should be distinguished from the alleged absence of plosives in final consonant clusters like /-mp, -nt, -nd / in words like *camp, want, and tend*. Given that both consonants in the cluster are produced with the same place of articulation (e.g. bilabial, alveolar), one cannot be certain if the final plosives in these clusters are indeed deleted or are in fact present but have simply been articulated as a non-released plosive.

L-vocalisation/-deletion

Another salient phonological feature of Singlish we wish to highlight is one that features quite prominently in discussions on SgE. Commonly termed as L-vocalisation, where the dark /l/ in final position is replaced by a vowel, this phenomenon is more fully represented with the inclusion of a potential complete deletion of the /l/. We thus describe final /l/ in Singlish to be either vocalised or deleted completely. Table 2 presents some illustrated examples.

[Insert Table 2 here]

TH-replacements

In Singlish, interdental fricatives in content words are often replaced by /t, d, f/ in specified phonological positions. /θ, ð/ undergo TH-stopping and are replaced by dental/alveolar stops /t, d/ respectively in initial positions, for example *three* /θriː/ and *thermometer* /θəˈmɒmɪə/ are /triː/ and /təˈmɒmɪə/ while *thy* /ðaɪ/ and *thee* /ðiː/ are

/daɪ/ and /diː/. This TH-stopping also occurs for these interdental fricatives in medial position, such that words like *marathon* /ˈmærəθɒn/ and *anything* /ˈænɪθɪŋ/ are realised as /ˈmærətɒn/ and /ˈænɪtɪŋ/, and *brother* /ˈbrʌðə/ and *weather* /ˈwɛðə/ as /ˈbrʌdə/ and /ˈwɛdə/ respectively. This differs from, for example, Estuary English, which sees the phenomenon of TH-fronting in medial position, involving the replacements with labiodental fricatives /f, v/ instead, resulting in *anything* realised as /ˈænɪfɪŋ/ and *brother* as /ˈbrʌvə/. TH-fronting in Singlish occurs only in final position with both interdental fricatives /θ, ð/ replaced by /f/ regardless of voicing. This is exemplified in the following examples – *birthday* /ˈbɜːθdeɪ/ as /ˈbɜːfdeɪ/, *tooth* /tuːθ/ as /tuːf/, *breathe* /briːð/ as /briːf/, and *bathe* /beɪð/ as /beɪf/. We contest TH-stopping for function words (e.g. *this*, *there*) being treated as restrictively Singlish as it commonly appears and is arguably gaining acceptance in SSE. A noteworthy point here is that while we describe this difference in analysis between content and function words, we also hypothesize TH-replacements to be undergoing a gradual change led by the more frequently used function words – one that sees it, regardless of word form, eventually occurring also in formal contexts and being completely socially-accepted.

Besides these highlighted phonological features, we acknowledge that there are other phonological features that are commonly described as existing in Singlish, but we propose that they be reconsidered as general SgE features instead. One such example is syllable-final obstruent devoicing. As discussed in Bao (2003), voiced obstruents (i.e. /b, d, g/) that occur syllable-finally usually go through the process of devoicing in SgE. This he terms an autonomous feature in SgE as it "can be analysed on language-internal evidence" (p. 28). He further describes this feature as being "widely accepted within the speech community in both formal and informal speech", and also carrying "little or no

social stigma" (p. 28). For similar reasons, other such contentious features include neutralisation of front vowels /e ɛ æ/, minimalising of vowel length contrast, and lexical stress placement.

Syntax

Discussions of Singlish features over the years have revolved around mainly syntactical features and structures. Here we forefront two features that we consider to be characteristically Singlish.

Subject/Pronoun dropping and/or Copula deletion

Dropping of subjects/pronouns and copula/modal verbs occuring widely in Singlish have been discussed by numerous scholars (e.g. Bao, 2009; Gupta, 1992; Leimgruber, 2011) . These features can exist as a single feature and even combined in a single utterance as shown in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Optionality of tense marking

Tense marking/agreement has long been purported to be variable in Singlish (e.g. Deterding, 2007; Ho & Platt, 1993; Leimgruber, 2011). The various levels of this have been reported to be conditioned by semantics, phonetics, grammar, and phonology (Leimgruber, 2011). We will not endeavour to delve into the analytics of this and will just present examples illustrating how this feature takes form in Singlish. It should also be noted here that Singlish is a highly context-based variety. Thus the intended tense is generally understood from context and often unnecessary. The question-answer examples in Table 4 show permissible forms in Singlish. The second example features

the aspect marking *Already,* which is a characteristically Singlish feature to signal the perfective, said to be adopted from Mandarin.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Semantics/Lexicon

Descriptions of Singlish features would be incomplete without considering its unique vocabulary inventory, both in terms of semantics and lexicon, as these play a big role in the Singlish identity.

Semantics

There are various English words that take on different meanings in general SgE, many of which have gained widespread use and acceptance (e.g. *steamboat, coffee shop*). We regard these as features of SgE and not Singlish. Here we focus on others that are more restricted to Singlish. The use of *One* is such a feature (Bao, 2009; Leimgruber, 2014). It is neither used to represent the numeral '1' nor to make direct reference to the singular as it would in SSE. In Singlish, *One* is reported to have two major functions, as a pronominal (e.g. *my one* to mean that something is mine) and as a marker of emphasis (e.g. *He always like that one!* to emphasize that one always exhibits a behaviour). Another common example of a word used semantically different in Singlish is *basket* (e.g. *Wah you mean I got cheated again? Basket!* to mean *Oh damn, I can't believe I got cheated again!*). Some other words like *power* (*Your Chinese damn power!*), *extra* (*Eh, don't extra lah you!*), and *steady* (*Wah she's so steady man!*) also feature strongly in Singlish. However, while these are used in slightly different contexts and grammatical forms in Singlish, we note that their fundamental meanings remain close to the original definitions.

Reduplication has been touted as a prominent feature in Singlish (e.g. Ho, 1998). However, we contend that, in recent times, reduplication has waned in popularity. Of the three grammatical classes and sub-levels of functions that Ho (1998) discusses as representing reduplication in Singlish (i.e. finite verbs and verb groups, nouns, and modifiers), we propose that reduplication remains in Singlish today only for finite verbs in specific forms and for a restricted function. According to Ho's (1998) categories of function types, the following examples would be analysed as reduplication of finite verbs in Singlish to suggest informality and casualness. We concur but propose an additional and more specific function of lessening the formality and seriousness of the situation. The following examples also differ slightly from those provided by Ho (1998), reflecting more likely forms of reduplication that exist in Singlish today.

[Insert Table 5 here]

From a casual preliminary poll done by the second author amongst Singaporean family members, friends, and students, some Singlish features appear to be going through change while others show a more stable occurrence across age, speaker-sex, linguistic-profile, and social/ethnic groups. The addition of discourse particles, typically at the end of clauses, is one such consistent feature across communities and is arguably the most identifiable and recognised feature of Singlish – a view that is said to be held by both Singlish and non-Singlish speakers alike. This characteristically Singlish feature has also been studied widely, with a large focus on the kinds of discourse particles, their origins, usage, and user-profiles (e.g. Gupta, 1992, 2006; Ler, 2006; Lim, 2007, Schaetzel et al, 2010, Smakman & Wagenaar, 2013; Wee, 2003) although, as mentioned by Leimgruber (2011), there is not always agreement on the total number of discourse particles and their meanings and/or functions. We concur with Lim's (2007) suggestion that eight discourse particles play prominent roles in Singlish as a whole. In addition,

we propose an addition of the discourse particle *siah,* which appears to have emerged as a noteworthy member of the list. What is clear in this discussion, however, is that there seems to be a paucity of research on the role of assigned tones conveying meaning. We therefore present here our full list of the nine Singlish discourse particles and their permissible tones, together with illustrative example utterances, the meanings they convey, and the functions they perform.

[Insert Table 6 here]

Lexical borrowings

A large part of describing Singlish centres on word borrowings from Singapore's other languages. Borrowing words of non-English origins is not uncommon in English, which has adopted words from languages like French, Japanese, and Arabic. In the case of Singlish, words are commonly borrowed from Malay, Hokkien, and Cantonese. There are also words that are taken from Standard English and modified to an identifiably Singlish version. Regardless of origin, the meanings of these borrowed words are either solely kept or kept alongside other meanings specific to their usage in Singlish. Table 7 presents some of these Singlish lexical items, their languages of origin, the possible meanings they carry, and example sentences in which they are used.

[Insert Table 7 here]

Linguistic feature-based contrastive analysis in Singapore English classes

We have presented here a few of the linguistic features of Singlish that we feel are most salient, illustrating their undeniable richness. These Singlish features accomplish societal functions that SSE cannot and the value that Singlish can bring, both to our language-in-education policies and our society as a whole, needs to be acknowledged. We thus propose that Singlish be granted a legitimate place in Singapore's English

language classrooms, for as Tan and Tan (2008) point out, “To persist in officially maintaining schools as Singlish-free zones flies in the face of what actually happens” (p. 477). The ideological basis for stifling Singlish in the promotion of Standard English – the notion that any variety of English is unsuitable for conveying cultural identity – is completely out of step with the reality of today’s Singapore, where some variety of English (be it Singlish or SSE) is indeed the mother tongue (in its usual sense of ‘first language learned from infancy’) for a large portion of Singaporean children and even those students that do not learn some variety of English from infancy are exposed to a great deal of Singlish before setting foot in a Primary 1 classroom. Singlish is now Singapore’s most salient identity marker and language-in-education policy should not only acknowledge this reality, but actually make use of it, harnessing the Singlish proficiency that students are bringing with them to Singapore classrooms to aid in the teaching and learning of SSE. We firmly believe that this is an approach that will not only further the government’s goal of strengthening Singaporeans’ proficiency in SSE, but also help achieve the non-linguistic aims of enhancing national cohesion and pride.

We are certainly not the first to call for the utilisation of Singlish in the classroom as a scaffold for Standard English. Another call for Singlish to be used as a classroom resource came from Tan and Tan (2008), who argue:

> …that a child with some home background in a non-standard English copes better in English in school than a child with no background in any kind of English at all. Moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar is a standard learning, teaching, and rhetorical strategy. A curriculum that recognises the familiar starting point and uses that as a launch-pad seems likely to succeed. (p. 477)

The first proposal to utilize Singlish as a classroom resource to facilitate learning of SSE came from Fong, Lim, & Wee (2002), who specifically call for the use of contrastive analysis, as does a more recent call from Tupas (2018), who argues that this

approach promotes additive bidialectalism[vi]. Like these earlier calls for a radical change of tact regarding the place of Singlish in the classroom, we also advocate contrastive analysis of Singlish and SSE, with teachers raising students' awareness of the differences between the two varieties' linguistic features, as well as their many shared features. This focus on the individual linguistic features is in-line not only with current theoretical conceptualisations of SgE, but also with current trends in applied linguistics more generally.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, SgE was viewed as varying according to level of education and/or as code-switching between formal (SSE) and colloquial (Singlish/SCE) varieties according to contextual situation (e.g., Gupta, 1994; Pakir, 1991; Platt & Weber, 1980). Alsagoff (2010), recognising that earlier conceptualisations did not satisfactorily account for "blurred boundaries, where it is not always possible to demarcate clearly the presence of either SCE or SSE" (p. 339), proposes her Cultural Orientation Model (COM), in which speakers make use of SSE linguistic features in their utterances to index global cosmopolitan identities/orientations and Singlish linguistic features to index local identities/orientations. In some formal contexts, Singaporeans may attempt to index 100% global cosmopolitan identities, and thus refrain from including any Singlish features in their utterances, but in other ostensibly formal contexts, they may want to temper their global cosmopolitan identity with a bit of local identity projection, including one or more Singlish features in an otherwise Standard English utterance. These Singlish features might be phonological (e.g., consonant cluster reduction), lexical (including discourse particles – e.g., *She's provided the correct answer, lah.*), or syntactic (e.g., no tense marking).

Alsagoff's (2010) COM sits comfortably with current trends in applied linguistics, where the notion of code-switching has, in recent years, fallen out of favour.

Instead of conceptualising languages/language varieties as distinct bounded entities, as one must do when speaking of *switching* from one code to another, presently preferred conceptualisations, such as translanguaging (Garcia, 2009) and polylanguaging (*Jørgensen*, Karrebæk, Madsen, & Møller, 2011), conceptualise each speaker as possessing one linguistic repertoire, from which the most appropriate resources are selected for making meaning in given situations, regardless of what named languages/language varieties these resources might be commonly associated with. These resources are particular linguistic features, and as *Jørgensen* et al. (2011) suggest, "the level of linguistic features, and not the level of 'language', is better suited for the analysis of languaging in super-diverse societies (if not everywhere)" (p. 28).

In the super-diverse society of Singapore, speakers continuously calibrate the extent to which they wish to project local identities versus global cosmopolitan identities in their speech, and select particular linguistic features accordingly from their linguistic repertoires. The aim of the linguistic feature-based contrastive analysis approach we are proposing is to expand students' linguistic repertoires to include an inventory of SSE features as resources for their strategic use in particular situations, while positioning the Singlish resources they bring to the classroom as valued, fully legitimate, and far more appropriate in some situations than SSE resources. But while it may seem like an utterance consisting of 90% SSE-associated features and only 10% Singlish-associated features would project a predominantly global cosmopolitan identity, this is not necessarily the case. Employment of a single Singlish-associated feature in an utterance that is otherwise composed of only SSE-associated features (e.g., *She's provided the correct answer, lah.*) might result in the whole utterance being labelled 'Singlish'. Learners should explicitly be made aware of this.

To the best of our knowledge, contrastive analysis that is specifically linguistic feature-based has not previously been proposed for teaching children in Singapore schools, but such an approach has already been employed with trainee teachers in the National Institute of Education's undergraduate teacher education programme. Acknowledging that the trainee teachers will indeed find it necessary to deal with what differentiates the two varieties in their future classrooms, Schaetzel et al. (2010) describe the main aim of a course entitled 'Features of SgE' as helping trainee teachers "distinguish between standard and non-standard features of SgE and to identify those features which may need to be addressed in the classroom" (p. 422). While this 12-week course proved insufficient for making much of a difference in the trainee teachers' ability to differentiate between the two varieties (as gauged by pre and post-tests), Schaetzel et al. do report encouraging results insofar as the trainee teachers, after the course, viewed Singlish as a legitimate variety of English (rather than 'Bad English') and better appreciated the fact that "the two varieties have vastly different roles in societal communication" (p. 429).

Comparing and contrasting the linguistic features of Singlish and SSE will highlight to students the fact that Singlish is indeed systematic and not deficient – just different. Focusing on the two varieties' linguistic features will also allow teachers to highlight features that Singlish and SSE share, boosting students' confidence when they realise how much positive transfer Singlish actually provides for SSE acquisition. This can be the case even when the shared features are sometimes realised differently. Invariant tags, for example, are indeed an SSE feature, but instead of being realised with the lexical item *isn't it?*, the SSE invariant tag is *right?*

Certain Singlish features would require more focused attention in class than others. Some, such as the discourse particles *lah*, *lor*, and *leh*, are, after all, highly

salient ones that are strongly associated with Singlish in the minds of virtually all Singaporeans. Such features would, thus, require less in-class attention. Class time would be better spent raising students' awareness of syntactic features and phonological features, which, as Tupas (2018) points out, potentially impact students' spelling. Special emphasis should be given to lexical features associated with both Singlish and SSE, but used differently in each. The lexical feature *last time* in Singlish, for example, simply means 'previously' or 'in the past', while the same feature in SSE has the much more specific meaning of 'the most recent instance of a given phenomenon'.

We do, of course, recognise that although this use of the non-standard as a "launch-pad" for the standard is a pedagogically sound and proven strategy (see, for example, Labov, 1995), it is exceedingly likely to be met with resistance from those who see any appearance of the non-standard in the curriculum as an endorsement of 'deficient' varieties that will only serve to further disadvantage disadvantaged students. This is exactly what happened in Oakland, California, where efforts by the Oakland school board in the 1990s to use students' existing knowledge of African American Vernacular English as a stringboard for the teaching of Standard English was met with vehement opposition (see Baron, 2000). To avoid a repeat of this sort of resistance, efforts would need to be made to emphasise to the public (starting with teachers) that viewing Singlish as 'bad English' is ill-informed (Fong, Lim & Wee, 2002) and that the intention is not to 'teach' Singlish, but instead to utilise students' existing knowledge of Singlish as a means to achieve precisely what the SGEM aims to accomplish – helping Singaporeans "understand the differences in standard English, broken English and Singlish" (SGEM, n.d., para. 2). The Singapore government, with its vast experience with public campaigns, would no doubt be able to launch a highly persuasive 'movement' to educate the public on the research-backed efficacy of using non-standard

language varieties as a scaffold for learning the standard. This sort of campaign would also serve significant nation-building functions, encouraging Singaporeans to take pride in *all* of our linguistic resources.

In order to avoid further ideological contradictions of the sort that the Singapore government created in its promotion of Mandarin as having pragmatic economic value, all the pedagogical and public education measures discussed above would, however, need to be preceded by an explicit government acknowledgement that in recognition of Singapore's societal changes, identity and culture conveyance will no longer be officially relegated *exclusively* to the 'mother tongue' languages. We are well aware of the fact that the functional polarisation of languages is "a deeply entrenched ideological position" (Wee, 2011, p. 212), but despite its level of entrenchment, the concept is simply no longer appropriate for Singapore. The time has come for it to be scrapped, or at least modified to be more in-line with present-day social realities.

Circumstances and their natural sociolinguistic consequences have resulted in the emergence of Singlish as "the quintessential mark of Singaporean-ness" (Chng 2003, p. 46). The government should regard this consequence as a gift, for Singlish clearly has immense potential for bolstering national cohesiveness. Singapore's government has a remarkable track record of success in its swift and effective implementation of policies that seem audacious to outside observers. Such policy implementation expertise should now be employed to produce citizens with what Wee (2014) calls "linguistic chutzpah" – "confidence that is backed up by metalinguistic awareness and linguistic sophistication, giving the speaker the ability to articulate, where necessary, rationales for his/her language decisions" (p. 85). We firmly believe that the classroom linguistic feature-based contrastive analysis approach we advocate here will indeed cultivate linguistic chutzpah in Singaporean students. With its focus on

helping learners make meaningful and useful links between the different features of SgE in their linguistic repertoires, we feel that it will help nurture English language users who make linguistic decisions informed by an awareness of situationally appropriate variation and equip them with the ability to confidently and proudly use all of their linguistic resources to effectively accomplish utilitarian language functions and project their Singaporean identities.

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[i] We use Singapore Standard English (SSE) to refer to a more recognisably standard variety of English used by Singaporeans. We do not deny the innate complexity of the term 'standard' but also note that, in this article, we use SSE to refer to a general variety of Singapore English that is used in more formal contexts and/or with non-Singaporean speakers of English. This variety does not vary too substantially from other standard varieties of English. We also use Singapore English (SgE) to include all varieties of English used by Singaporean English speakers.

[ii] On 10 March 1965, just a few months before Singapore gained independence, the MacDonald House building in Singapore was bombed by two Indonesian commandos as part of Indonesia's *Konfrontasi* campaign to disrupt the merging of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak. Although Sukarno's ouster in a September 1965 coup brought an end to *Konfrontasi*, the MacDonald House bombing, which killed three civilians and injured 33, impacted Singapore-Indonesia relations for years to come (Chua, 2015).

[iii] Unlike the usual sense of the term, *mother tongue*, in Singapore, does not refer to the chronological first language one learns from infancy. It instead refers to the language one is assigned to study as a second language in school – generally based on paternal ethnicity. As Gupta (1998) informs us, it is important to understand that everyone in Singapore has an official 'race'…which may not reflect actual language knowledge and use" (p. 117).

[iv] Relations between different ethnic groups in Singapore do indeed seem harmonious when contrasted with the ethnic tensions that still curse so many other societies. But a 2013 study conducted by OnePeople.sg and the Institute of Policy Studies found that over a third of Singaporeans had no close friends from a different ethnicity (Sim, 2015), so there is still a ways to go before Singapore, as a society, moves beyond mere tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

[v] Use of Singlish in direct speech has also long been perceived to be a way to get higher marks on O-level examinations as this supposedly appeals to the Cambridge markers.

[vi] While they do not discuss it in any detail, Tan and Tan (2008) also do suggest a contrastive analysis approach, arguing that Singlish “could be discussed and contrasted with the standard, somewhat like the British National Curriculum” (p. 477).

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Repositioning Singlish in Singapore's language-in-education policies

Tables

Table 1. Examples of Final Plosive Deletion in Singlish.

Word	Singlish	SSE
mask	/mɑːs/	/mɑːsk/
first	/fɜːs/	/fɜːst/
pact	/pæk/	/pækt/
prompt	/ prɒm(p)/	/prɒmpt/

Table 2. Examples of L-vocalisation/-deletion in Singlish.

Word	Singlish	SSE	Process
feel	/fiu/	/fiːɫ/	L-vocalisation
milk	/mɪuk/	/mɪɫk/	L-vocalisation
call	/kɔu/	/kɔːɫ/	L-vocalisation
	/kɔ/		L-deletion
girl	/gɜ/	/gɜːɫ/	L-deletion
full	/fu/	/fʊɫ/	L-deletion

Table 3. Examples of Subject/Pronoun dropping and/or Copula deletion in Singlish.

Singlish utterance	Implied meaning(s)	Process
Go where?	*Where are you going?* *Where shall we go?*	Dropping of subject/pronoun + Copula deletion
Don't want.	*I don't want.*	Dropping of subject/pronoun
I a bit tired.	*I am a bit tired.*	Copula deletion
You go or I go?	*Should you or I go?*	Copula deletion

Table 4. Examples of Optional Tense Marking in Singlish.

		Singlish	SSE
(1)	Question	*Where she go?*	*Where did she go?*
	Answer	*She go home.*	*She went home.*
(2)	Question	*She go/went home already?*	*Has she gone home?*
	Answer	*She go/went home already.*	*She has gone home.*

Table 5. Examples of Reduplication in Singlish.

Singlish utterance	Implied meaning

Don't play play!	*Don't take it lightly!* (Used in a casual setting)
Let's go look see look see!	*Let's go take a casual, non-committal look!* (No response/action is required)
They went to the garden to walk walk.	*They went for a leisurely walk in the garden.*

Table 6. Examples of Singlish Discourse Particles.

Discourse Particle	Tone Assigned (details of manner)	Example Utterance	Meaning	Function (details of underlying implications)
ah	low level	*Nice ah?*	*Are you sure that it is nice? I'm not sure.*	Asking for assurance (some doubt is implied)
	high level (slightly dragged on)	*Nice ah.*	*Yes, believe me, I think that it's nice!*	Emphasizing confirmation
	rise	*Nice ah?*	*Don't you think this is nice?/Isn't this nice?*	Seeking for agreement (support is expected)
	rise	*I tell you ah…*	*Let me tell you this…*	Marker of speech continuation
hor	low level (slightly dragged on)	*Nice hor.*	*You don't think so but I really think it's nice.*	Asserting personal endorsement (usually when the other party expresses doubt)
	rise	*Nice hor?*	*Don't you think this is nice?/Isn't this nice?*	Seeking for agreement (support is expected)
lah	mid level (slightly dragged out)	*Nice lah.*	*I think it's nice, why won't you believe me?*	Asserting a previously-made stand (potentially with a tinge of impatience)
	low level (usually said twice)	*Nice lah.*	*Ok, I didn't think it was nice but I'm giving in to your view that it is nice.*	Showing accommodation (with an implied reluctance)

leh	high level	*Nice leh!*	*I think it's nice, why don't you think so?*	Attempting to convince
lor	high level	*Nice lor!*	*I think it's nice regardless of what you think.*	Indicates certainty (despite disagreement of others)
mah	mid level	*Nice mah!*	*I'm doing this because I think it's nice.*	Marks information as obvious
meh	high level	*Nice meh?*	*Are you sure that is nice?*	Indicates scepticism
what	low level	*Nice what!*	*I'm certain it is nice (even if you don't think so)!*	Marks obviousness and contradiction
siah	rise	*Nice siah!* *Not nice siah!*	*This is really nice!* *This really isn't nice!*	Marks a level of emphasis (both negative and positive)

Table 7. Examples of typical Singlish lexicon.

Word	Language of origin	Meaning(s)	Example Singlish sentence(s)
lobang	Malay	Malay: hole Singlish: hole contact/ recommendation	*Careful ah, the box got lobang.* *Do you have lobang for household renovations?* *You got that item at a good price, you got lobang ah?*
paiseh	Hokkien	embarrassed/ embarrassing	*So paiseh, she treated us to a meal again!* *Paiseh paiseh, I'm so late!*
tapau	Cantonese	Cantonese: take-away Singlish: take-away retake	*Because of covid-19, we couldn't eat at hawker centres so we tapau our meals lor.* *I didn't do well this semester lah, have to tapau two modules!*

gostun	English	English: to go astern (to go backwards) Singlish: to go backwards	*The parking lot behind still got space, you can gostun some more.*