Title	Singapore English on stage
Author	Robert Yeo
Source	*English in Southeast Asia Conference (1996), National Institute of Education, Singapore, 21 - 23 November 1996*

Singapore English on stage

Robert Yeo
National Institute of Education, Singapore

My focus is the English language theatre in Singapore from the early sixties to the present, and television in the nineties. My contention is that English as a medium for writing for the stage was accepted around the mid-eighties, nearly a full decade before it was accepted on television. The reference to TV is minimal, and confined only to the next paragraph but it serves a useful comparative purpose.

Contrast between stage and TV

Acceptance by whom, it will be asked? My answer is, firstly by serious critics and secondly, by audiences and viewers. The reasons for the time lag in acceptance between stage and TV is that stage language did not suffer too much from official (ie governmental) regulation [1], but TV language was over-regulated. This has to do with governmental perception and control of the two modes of expression. The English language theatre is seen as elitist, appealing not only to a linguistic community of largely English-language speakers but also to the few well-educated middle class [2]. TV, on the other hand, is seen as mass-based, ubiquitous in *kopi tiam* (coffee shops), hotel lounges, pubs, community centres and most importantly in homes. Because its impact is greater, expectations from TV are higher and therefore more demanding. TV is expected, according to its charter, to 'entertain, educate and inform' and consequently, the role of the four official languages (Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and of course English) comes under close scrutiny. The enactment of these roles often produces confusion not only *within* but also *between* roles. The arising confusion is the result of having to accommodate official policy about language in the education system. The Speak Mandarin campaign discourages Chinese dialects and the result is that TV programmes in dialect (Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese) are not shown. This elevates the *educative* role in TV of what may be described as standard Singapore Mandarin. If the *educative* role is emphasized, and this includes the propagandistic, other roles will be reduced. The perception among top TV bureaucrats is that Singlish is an inferior variety (which is sociolinguistically unacceptable) and spoken mostly by those with little or no English education (which is incorrect). Translate this view into programming and we have the spectacle first of the soap opera *Masters of the Sea* in which most of the main players speak a grammatically correct English

which is unrecognisably Singaporean or if they sounded Singaporean, they come up with howlers which point to foreign producers supervising local script-writers.

Problems in the early sixties

The attempt to find a viable and successful stage language in the sixties was successful when the characters are well-educated English speakers and use English as their dominant language; it was less successful when the characters are less educated in English or not at all. For the less educated, the problem is one of the speech being 'not in character'. For example, pioneer playwright Lim Chor Pee wrote two largely successful plays in English in the early sixties, *Mimi Fan* (produced in 1962) and *A White Rose at Midnight* (produced in 1964). In both, he wrote authentic dialogue where the characters are dominantly English educated.

Baram Very funny, Tony! Not for long though, I am getting married soon.

Tony What do you know, Fei-Loong? After more than thirty years of blissful bachelorhood, this chap here is letting the side down. Bad show, old chap, let's drown your sorrow with another stengah. Stengah, boy.

F.L. Who to?

Baram She's the purest and sweetest lady you have ever come across.

Tony Must be quite a change for you.

Baram Don't be impertinent, Tony. She is a very respectable lady, a school teacher.

Tony My God. You certainly need one.

Baram What do you mean?

F.L. Do we know her?

Baram You might. I hear you just came back from England. So did she. Diploma in Psychology and all that.

Tony What's the dowry like?

Baram Oh, shut up.

F.L. What's her name?

Baram Sheila Rani.

(The music is slowly ebbing way. Most people have left the night club).

Tony Well, it's getting late (looks at his watch). Have to work tomorrow.

Baram What's the hurry? We've only had one drink together. By the way, I thought Mimi was here with you.
Tony You've grown up, that's all old chap. How do you like Mimi?
F.L. Very much. Quite a girl, that one.
Tony Terrific, old chap. Here comes Baram. Hello, Baram. Meet Fei-Loong?
F.L. How do you do.
Baram How do you do.
F.L. What will you have?
Baram Brandy water please. First time here?
F.L. Yes.
Tony Baram spends all his leisure hours here. It's his second home.

(Lim Chor Pee *A White Rose at Midnight*, 1964)

But he fails when he tries to have working class characters speak. In this example, the female speaker is Ching Mei, an eighteen-year-old singer from the small Malaysian town of Kampar, in conversation with Hua Min, a cynical British-educated academic.

Hua Min It must have been a torture for you.
Ching Mei Me? No, I enjoyed it. Which woman does not enjoy being admired? It had a strange sort of fascination for me. For those few brief moments of a song, I was the cynosure of all the eyes of the audience, mostly men and some women.

(Lim Chor Pee *A White Rose at Midnight*, 1964)

In reality, Ching Mei is probably Chinese-educated, with a dominant dialect and a smattering of English. It is clear her syntax and vocabulary is impossibly accomplished.

A second problem about stage language in English is shown up when the characters are *not* English-speaking at all but speak either *only* Malay, Tamil or Chinese dialects. How does a playwright represent them in English since English is the writer's chosen language? Two possibilities offer themselves. The first is to have them speak grammatically in English, because in fact they would be speaking grammatically in their own languages, and to indicate their ethnic origins by pronunciation, tone, articulation and other phonetic means unique to the linguistic group. This is the best solution though it is not entirely

problem-free. The second is to represent characters as speaking a 'broken' English, one in which the words are English but the syntax is not. This is an example from *The Elder Brother* (1994) by another pioneer playwright Goh Poh Seng. The elder brother Kai Weng confronts his young brother Ah Tee because the latter shows signs of growing up and moving away from the former's influence.

Ah Tee	I know, I know. So everyone will be happy. But what about me?
Kai Weng	Why, what you want then? What you want to be? I thought you so clever, but I see you sometimes can be stupid like Hell. In spite of all your studying. Stupid like Hell. Well, what you want to be then?
Ah Tee	I just want to be independent, that's all.
Kai Weng	Independent: What, you not independent now? You not free, I control you so hard?
Kai Sun	You funny, Ah Tee. You talk like you are a colony, want to have your independence.

(Goh Poh Seng *The Elder Brother,* 1966)

If I remember correctly, the elder brother is a dialect speaker who speaks no English. In this extract, he is represented as speaking Singlish, with some of the features of Singlish that have been analysed by scholars like Tongue (1974), Platt & Weber (1980) and Tay (1993). The features are the omission of verbs like *do* in the sentence 'What [do] you want', and *were* in 'I thought you [were] so clever', and the omission of the pronoun *you* in '[You] want to have your independence.' The influence in these structures may be Malay or Chinese, as in Malay *Apa awak mahu?* (What you want?) and Hokkien *Le ai semik?* (You want what?). Since Kai Weng is identified as dialect-speaking, he is likely to say 'You want what?' rather than the Malay-influenced 'What you want?'.

There are other Singlish features pertaining to vocabulary and pronunciation, like 'I thought you so clever' and 'You funny', with both *clever* and *funny* used in the derogatory senses and pronounced with the stress on the second syllable.

Dr Goh Poh Seng, also a poet and novelist, has shown elsewhere that he has no problems with Singapore English, and I refer to the entire register (as described by Platt & Weber, 1980) to include acrolect, mesolect and basilect. But in this instance, he is clearly wrong in representing grammatical dialect as

ungrammatical English. There are ideological implications which space does not allow for elaboration of. I have hinted at these when I wrote the following in 1980, in the introduction to probably the first volume of Singapore plays to be published.

> The writer in English in Singapore (and Malaysia) faces considerable difficulties and sometimes insuperable problems when he/she tries to render in English speech conversation which, in reality, takes place in colloquial dialect. Across cultures, there are frequently no linguistic equivalents and where there are, it is often difficult to render appropriately the idioms that abound in colloquial speech. The author is forced to translate and translation (a complex skill) complicates writing.
>
> (Robert Yeo, ed, *Prize-Winning Plays 1*, Federal, 1980, p 11)

A third problem is mentioned by a distinguished theatre director Max le Blond and this has to do not so much with the language as printed but as spoken. As written, the language was standard Singapore English as characterised by Mary Tay (1993), but in the process of rehearsals, the players tended not to speak like Singaporeans but exhibited a preference for a foreign model. Recounting his experience of directing my second play *One Year Back Home* (1980), le Blond wrote:

> The section of dialogue I've quoted is in fact fairly representative of the texture of the writing throughout the opening scene. Yet for all its simplicity of language and tone, this wedge in the dramatic world of *One Year Back Home* generated a central problem in rehearsal and helped to focus one of the major issues which confronts local theatre. The characters initially would not be themselves; and the more experienced the actor (I think here especially of T Sasitharan, who played Reggie Fernandez), the greater the difficulty encountered in pinning down or evoking one of the play's crucial features — the 'Singaporeanness' of characterisation. Blatantly against the facts and demands of the script, the tendency was to shift up through the gears of accent and settle at a level tangibly closer to the norms of received pronunciation.
>
> (Le Blond 1986:117)

Le Blond's incisive essay, the first to analyse actual speech in the Singaporean theatre at length, pointedly says that some actors have colonised minds and have not freed themselves linguistically from the urge to ape foreign language models. He refers to it as a linguistic power game, a symptom of the malaise summed up in the phrase 'Foreign is better', and advocated the decolonisation of the English Language theatre. 'It is this shaping process which explains the assumption,' le Blond continued, 'so widespread in our cultural establishment, that before Singaporeans can produce good theatre they will have to speak 'standard' English and emulate the fruity tones cultivated so assiduously by SBC [Singapore Broadcasting Corporation] newsreaders.'

Le Blond solved this problem through ideological alertness and careful direction. Not a single reviewer complained that the stage language of *One Year Back Home* was alien and one reviewer, herself a fine actress Margaret Chan, headlined 'Local idiom brings play to life' and continued:

> Last night I had the closest encounter with good Singapore theatre and it was thrilling ... The local idiom of the play made it living theatre ... Sasitharan was so convincing as Fernandez, we could laugh at the character's naiveté. Chia Chor Leong was most relaxed and it was such a pleasure to hear an easy local accent to [sic] English rather than the tortured attempts at proper British enunciation which is the local fare.
>
> (Margaret Chan 'Local idiom brings play to life' *The New Nation*, November 21, 1980)

Another reviewer, *The Straits Times* leader writer, wrote:

> I was delighted with Kheng Lim in the cameo role of Mrs Ang, Hua's mother, whom Singaporeans can so easily recognise. [Her] Singapore English came across naturally and provided one of the few sources of humour. Credit for 'localising' the English and yet maintaining standards must go to the dedicated producer, Max le Blond.
>
> (Goh Kian Chee 'Not great, but ...' *The Straits Times,* November 21, 1980)

Clearly, stage language did not escape the reviewers' attention and rightfully the credit belonged to the director Max le Blond. As the playwright, I did not give him advice although we consulted and I was surprised later to hear of problems he had to get Singaporeans to speak Singaporean English. One year

later, le Blond resolved many of the problems of stage language with a very successful adaptation of Peter Nichols' *The National Health*, called *Nurse Angamuthu's Romance*, replete with a relatively large cast speaking and code-mixing the varieties of Singapore English. Le Blond's linguistic experimentation was to achieve culmination in 1985.

But a third reviewer was to focus on a problem that was to vex the English language theatre in the coming years, and this has to do with audience reaction to Singlish on stage.

> In fact the audience was quite often given to laughter especially at those spots when the characters were being very Singaporean in their mannerisms and speech.
>
> (Wong Hsien Cheen 'A success as political comedy' *Sunday Nation*, November 23, 1980)

Singaporean audiences would laugh whenever they heard a character speak Singlish on stage because they thought the *lect*, if I may use a specific term, was used for comic purposes only. Until Singaporeans went to the theatre in sufficiently large numbers and became accustomed to the stage play as a construct, and that in naturalistic theatre a character can and should speak Singlish, it seemed to them that the playwright was mimicking rather than reflecting an important variation of Singapore English. Audiences would laugh whenever they heard it onstage even though the lines may not have been humorous.

Emily of Emerald Hill* and *Army Daze

Two plays, produced in the mid-eighties two years apart, put a stop to this kind of mis-response and gave to Singapore English and in particular, its basilect variety Singlish, a credibility from which it did not look back. The first was *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1985) directed by Max le Blond and the other *Army Daze* (1987) directed by Lim Siauw Chong. *Emily*, written by Stella Kon, is a monodrama about a young woman who married into a Peranakan family and rose to be the dominating matriarch. Kon displayed exceptional knowledge and brilliant manipulation of the entire register of Singapore English as she demonstrated how the sole figure in the play, Emily, code-mixes according to her needs. An absolute mistress of manipulative speech, she adjusts syntax, lexis, tone and pitch to meet her needs. The following example from the beginning of the play is excellent.

ACT ONE

Main stage dark. Spotlight on phone beside large chair. Emily enters. Picks up phone and dials.

Susie ah! Emily here ah. This afternoon I'm going to town, anything that you're needing?

I've got the chicken you wanted from market; and I saw some good jackfruit, your children love it, so I bought one big one for you. What else you need? Ah, school uniforms for your two girls; I'll buy the material. I will take the sizes when I come to your house and send them to my little tailor down the road ... Ah Susie! Yesterday I went to Whiteaways to buy shirts for Richard to take to England, so I bought half-dozen for Freddy also: even though he's not going to England he can still wear them around town ... Ya-lah, I've got a lot to do, interviewing new servant, preparing for Richard's party. I see you, ya.

Rings off, dials again — speaks in an upper-class educated voice, in amazing contrast to her previous manner.

Hello, Adelphi Hotel? Good morning ... may I be connected to the patisserie please? Thank you ... Good morning, this is Mrs Gan Joo Kheong speaking. I've ordered a birthday cake from you, for tomorrow, may I enquire when it will be ready for collection? Yes, the message on it is 'Richard - many happy returns of the day'. And twenty candles. Thank you, then I'll come in to collect it tomorrow morning. Yes, thank you very much.

She rings off, dials again. This time her voice is warm, friendly and relaxed.

Hello, Bee Choo? Emily here. Just want to remind you, don't forget dinner tomorrow night, Richard's birthday. Ya-lah, the boy so big now, grown-up already, going to England next month. I asked him whether he's happy to go, you know what he said? 'Mummy, to go to England happy also —, but to leave my home very sad lah!' Yah, rascal-lah dia. All right, give my regards to your mother eh, hope she'll be better soon ... I see you eh Bee Choo? Bye-bye.

She hangs up the phone. She calls.

Richard! Richard, come let Mother talk to you something.

Emily's son Richard enters: but all characters except Emily are unseen, and known to us only through her mime.

Hullo boy-boy, did you sleep well? Ah, big strong sonny, tomorrow going to be twenty years old, eh?

She laughs as Richard flatters her.

Ya, 'strong son, beautiful mother', indeed ... Eh, this afternoon I want you to come out with me in the car. I'm making five woollen suits for you at Chotirmall's, I'm taking you down for fittings.

(Stella Kon *Emily of Emerald Hill* 1985)

Emily appeared as part of the 1985 Drama Festival organized by the Ministry of Community Development, and *The Straits Times* acts reviewer, in a round-up of the Festival, had this to say about the play:

... switching in her speech does more than relate her life story — she conjures up a whole era.

(Caroline Ngui 'Breakthroughs: Drama Fest 85' *The Straits Times*, September 27, 1985)

If any member of the audiences that went to Emily had doubts of the successful arrival of Singapore English on stage, these doubts were dashed by the phenomenal debut of a play by Michael Chiang in 1987 called *Army Daze*. This play about national service made army slang respectable as a stage language. As this excerpt shows, it is so peculiarly localised to a speech community that those among the audience not acquainted with the colloquialisms would have problems understanding some of it.

Lights. The barrack room is empty. Ah Beng is the first to walk in. He's in a state of shock. Still holding his hair-brush. One by one, the other soldiers walk in, all shorn and shaven, all dressed in identical PT kits. All are slowly stroking their crew-cut heads.

Krishna Hey, cheer up, man. At least he didn't cut off our ears. We're all going to be sharing the same room for the next 12 weeks, so we might as well get to know each other better. My name is Krishnamoorthi. You can call me Krishna, or Krish, or Moorthi. Call me whatever you like. Except Maniam. Anyway, you are ...?

Ah Beng Ah Beng. Teo Ah Beng. Damn siong man. The sergeant talk talk-talk. Wah, listen also I catch nothing. Dunno what cock he talk. Then our corporal so bloody ngeow. Buay tahan. Wah, but the most hoggible is the barber!! Why the hair must cut until so short?? Wa-eh hairbrush ma mai leow!!

Kenny Jiang hua yi! Jiang hua yi! Don't worry. You look quite cute with short hair. Oh, I am Kenny Pereira. Ken also can. I don't know why I'm in this platoon. I'm supposed to join the Music and Drama Company. My mother has already written to my uncle — who is a captain or major or something at Mindef — to ask him to put me in MDC. I can sing, I can dance, and I can do a fabulous impersonation of Diana Ross — and the Supremes.

Johari Hi. My name is Johari Salleh. You can call me Joe. I cannot sing, I cannot dance and I cannot act like Diana Ross, but ... (*Music for 'Eye of the Tiger' starts, and he proceeds to put on his mercury-tinted sunglasses, his red head-band, and flexes his muscles, trying hard to look like Sylvester Stallone*) ... many people always say I look like ... you know ...

Krishna Who? Stevie Wonder???

Johari You damn joker!! Never mind, lah, not important. What is important is we all become good friends. If we can help each other along the way, lagi best. There's a part for everyone, and if everyone play properly, then life is no problem. The training is not so terok.

Ah Beng (*Makes the thumbs up sign as he looks admiringly at Johari's muscles*) You damn hero. (*Then to himself in Hokkien as he shakes his head*) Si peh tan chiak!!

Kenny Jiang hua yi!

Malcolm Er ... Hello. My name is Malcolm Png. I have two brothers, one 16 and one 12, and one sister, aged 15. I live with my family at Namly Avenue, off Sixth Avenue, off Bukit Timah Road. My father is a civil servant — he works in the Ministry of Health — and my mother is a teacher — she is teaching geography at Marymount Convent. My hobbies are stamp-collecting and reading, but sometimes I also do outdoor activities like watering my bonsai plants. Sometimes, when —

Kenny Oy!!! This is not the SDU, okay, so spare us the mouth-watering details.

Johari Ya, ya. Better not waste time. Must prepare, tomorrow morning got inspection.

Ah Beng Ya lah, must kiwi the boots. Can borrow me your cloth?

Krishna Ya, no problem. You better kiwi quickly. 11 pm lights off. Is your name really Ah Beng?

Ah Beng Ya what. So, how you find today? The makan not bad, Malcolm hoh? The sweet sour pork quite good.

(Michael Chiang *Army Daze* 1987)

There are lexical and syntactical borrowings from Hokkien (the most), Cantonese, Mandarin and Malay on an English base and the result is almost, in some parts, a pidgin. Its authenticity, especially its vocabulary, is validated by a study of young men in the army which appeared in a book called *Youth in the Army* (1978) written by Major C C Leong, a psychologist in the Singapore Armed Forces. Appendix 3 is entitled *Glossary of Slang Used in the Army* and for many Singaporeans, it introduced into the data bank of Singapore English, words that are now a common part of Singlish. They are items like *blur, gabra, havoc, joker, kian su* or *kiasu, ngeow, siong, terok* to name just a few. Four of these words are found in the extract from *Army Daze* demonstrating that the playwright Michael Chiang had an excellent ear. All these words, except *joker* and *siong* are found in Adam Brown's *Making Sense of Singapore English* (1992) a comprehensive A-Z of Singapore English.

Singlish as teen identity and revolt

After this play, Singapore English on stage did not look back. There are two reasons. Lee Gek Ling, a lecturer in the English Language Proficiency Unit of the National University of Singapore, provides the first reason in an article published in 1992 whose title is 'Is Singlish becoming a language of prestige?' Her answer is yes. A younger generation who had gone to school in post-1965 Singapore and in the seventies were rebelling against a form of grammatically correct English (both in structure and pronunciation) they were told to accept as a model. As a reaction, they embraced Singlish because it was denigrated and because it was their kind of language.

> I think being in school then, and being taught that under no circumstances would Singlish be tolerated only made it all the more delectable fruit ... the promotion of national identity and the teenage need for identity merged when the generation in their 20s and 30s adopted a less polished form of Singlish and their norm among equals.
>
> (Lee 1992:81)

Her explanation is very convincing because it links the acceptance of Singlish to the teen revolt. Her point supports the Audience Profile of Theatre Goers referred to earlier which showed that the majority of theatregoers were

relatively young (below 30). It is easy enough to accept that they would have identity problems and one result is the adoption of Singlish as the preferred way of speaking (among themselves) and listening as an identity marker.

It is obvious that the context of this paper is post-colonialism and I would like to end with a quote from a recently published book on post-colonial drama which sums up many of my concerns. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins (1996) succinctly write:

> Inevitably, post-colonialism addresses *reactions to* colonialism in a context that is not necessarily determined by temporal constraints: post-colonial plays, novels, verse, and films then became textual/cultural expressions of resistance to colonialisation. As a critical discourse, therefore, post-colonialism is both a textual effect and reading strategy. Its theoretical practice often operates on two levels, attempting at once to elucidate the post-coloniality which inheres in certain texts, and to unveil and deconstruct any continuing power structures and institutions.
>
> (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996:2–3)

I would like to end on a personal note by referring to my own practice as a playwright. Almost a generation apart from Michael Chiang, and although Max le Blond has documented in detail some of the problems his actors had with *One Year Back Home*, on the whole I do not write Singapore English self-consciously. I am aware of the register I can use and employ varieties according to the dramatic situations. My last full-length play, *The Eye of History* (in *Leaving Home, Mother* Skoob Books, London, in press) had Sir Stamford Raffles lowered from a crane to become the white statue beside the Parliament House. He then materialised to seek a meeting with then Prime Minister of Singapore, Cambridge-educated Mr Lee Kuan Yew. You can imagine the English they spoke. But I also used Singlish in the scene when the Raffles statue descended and the workmen made fun of the whole episode. I wrote naturally without having to refer to a manual of Singapore English or worrying about whether my knowledge of Singlish, as written, conformed to a correct linguistic definition. And in the collaborative nature of theatre in the post-85, post-Emily, post-colonial situation, I was pretty confident that the director and cast would not only faithfully get the stage language right but would also add their own nuances to give us authentic and aggregative images of Singapore.

Notes

1 There was, of course, regulation in terms of censorship. But censorship was confined largely to *vocabulary* references which are seen to go beyond what the governmental censoring body called the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit (PELU) considered sensitive ie race, language and religion and offensive remarks pertaining to these. See my article, Robert Yeo, (1982), 'Towards an English Language Singaporean Theatre', *Southeast Asian Review of English*, 4 and 5, July/December University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

2 A survey article entitled 'Audience Profile of Theatre Goers' by Liew Chin Choy in *Singa*, 13, 1986, emphasized 'overwhelming support of English-Language theatre'. Among the significant findings were that theatre-goers were relatively young (below 30), they were well educated (45% with degrees or diplomas, 21% with A level or equivalents), 57% were females and 60% held professional or managerial positions.

References (non-literary)

Brown, A (1992) *Making Sense of Singapore English* Federal, Singapore.

Gilbert, H & Tompkins, J (1996) *Post-Colonial Drama* Routledge, London.

Le Blond, M (1986) 'Drama in Singapore: towards an English language theatre' in Hyland, P ed *Discharging The Canon*, Singapore University Press.

Lee G L (1992) 'Is Singlish becoming a language of prestige?' in D de Cunha (ed 1992) *Debating Singapore* Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

Leong, C C (1978) *Youth in the Army* Federal, Singapore.

Liew C C (1986) 'Audience profile of theatre goers' *Singa* 13.

Platt, J & Weber, H (1980) *English in Singapore and Malaysia* Oxford University Press.

Tay, M W J (1993) *The English Language in Singapore* UniPress, National University of Singapore.

Tongue, R K (1979) *The English of Singapore and Malaysia* (2nd edition) Eastern Universities Press, Singapore.

Yeo, R (1982) 'Towards an English language Singaporean theatre' *Southeast Asian Review of English* University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 4 & 5 (July / December).