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# Englishization as an Aspect of Building Singapore Identity

Lian Hee Wee

Hong Kong Baptist University, [lianhee@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:lianhee@hkbu.edu.hk)

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## **Englishization as an Aspect of Building the Singapore Identity\***

L.H. Wee

[lianhee@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:lianhee@hkbu.edu.hk)

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper argues that Englishization must be understood as the combined processes of Anglicization and Indigenization. In Anglicization, non-English elements are made English-like while in Indigenization, English is used in a way to fit into local non-English contexts. Using Singapore English as a case study, one sees how Englishization took place in Singapore by melting together all the ingredient languages that have found their way into this tiny island. Some languages are local to the Southeast Asian region, some came from the Southern provinces of China, some from India, and English came with colonization. This provided all the fuel for the making of Singapore English that is to become an important part of Singapore identity because it inherits all that is valuable in the component cultures. Thus, while Singapore's survival depends directly on her ability to be part of the global culture, Singapore cannot give up SgE if she is to maintain her identity. The conflict between cultural preservation and global communication can be easily resolved if one recognizes that speaking "perfect" English is not the only way to communicate with the rest of the world. Since all languages have different registers, one can simply use an acrolectal variety of SgE for international communication and more basal varieties for casual purposes. This solution is not new and is in fact practiced by all Singaporeans consciously or unconsciously. However, it is rarely stated explicitly as a way of balancing the apparently conflicting needs of cultural preservation and global communication.

### **1. Introduction**

This paper looks at the linguistic aspect of the formation of Singapore identity. This is particularly interesting not only because Singaporeans can be easily identified by the way they speak but also because Singaporeans have mixed reactions about their linguistic endowment.

To foreigners, Singaporeans are highly multi-lingual, having proficiency in at least English and a combination of the Chinese languages, the Indian languages and also Malay. This is not to say that the average Singaporean speaks so many languages, but he would certainly have access and familiarity with all or some of these languages. This gives rise to the impression that the average Singaporean is effectively multilingual even though native competence may not have been attained for all the languages that Singaporean claims to speak. In other words, if person A speaks only English, person B only Mandarin, then even if person C speaks English half as well as A and Mandarin half as well as B, C will be revered by both A and B as an effective multilingual. The average Singaporean is like person C.

Among Singaporeans, there is increasing awareness that their competence in all the languages they lay claim to do not match up to the standards of standard varieties. In other words, Singaporeans do not speak English as well as the British, the Americans or the Australians, neither do Singaporeans speak Mandarin as well as the Chinese. For example, the typical Singaporean often finds himself in the awkward position of having to substitute words from one language with those from another. Whether one sees this as deliberate code-switching or unconscious code-mixing, there is something to be said about the extra effort needed by Singaporeans to avoid having

multi-linguistic codes even in a short discourse. One would, after all, expect a true multilingual to require no additional effort in using just plain English (or any other language) without having to resort to make-shift borrowings from other languages. To some Singaporeans, this code-mixing/-switching is undesirable, and is looked upon in disdain. The Singaporean government appears to be an ardent supporter of this view as may be seen in the various campaigns it has initiated to promote “good” English or Mandarin. Such campaigns include the “Speak Good English Movement” which began in 2001 (<http://www.goodenglish.org.sg/SGEM/>, accessed 23 Dec 2006) and the “Speak Mandarin Campaign” which began since 1979 (<http://www.mandarin.org.sg/smc/home.html>, accessed 23 Dec 2006). Both campaigns are still running. To other Singaporeans, the peculiar way of speech peppered with elements from all the languages that came into contact in this small island is cultural heritage and is what makes a person Singaporean.

In this paper, I will present examples from the English used in Singapore, affectionately referred to as Singlish or more commonly Singapore English (henceforth SgE). In these examples, I hope to show how SgE came about through a process that can only be described as “Englishization” if that term is understood as a bi-directional process where English is indigenized and where non-English elements are Anglicized. Englishization is thus one of the key elements in understanding the formation of a cultural and social identity in Singapore. The implication behind such a conclusion is that policy-makers, grammatical purists as well as their opponents, with their different goals and agenda in linguistic issues, should complement each other by incorporating and balancing the need for global communication with the need for preservation and development the cultures that grew from native soil.

## **2. Singapore’s Linguistic Scene**

To understand the Englishization that brought about SgE and its impact on Singaporean national and cultural identity, it is necessary to first study the Singapore linguistic scene. Until the arrival of Stamford Raffles in 1819, Singapore was a remote fishing village. Little of what happened before this period is of relevance to the development of SgE, quite simply because English was not spoken there then. Raffles is commonly described as the founder of modern Singapore because it was he who established it as a free port, thereby attracting the first waves of immigrants from the region as traders flocked in. (For a brief and comprehensive account, see Singapore 1972, Backhouse 1972)

Given the location of Singapore in the heart of Southeast Asia, it is unsurprising that most people who came are from the Southern provinces of China, India and the neighboring lands. Thus Singapore came to have languages from all these sources.

### The Nuclear Malayo-Polynesian Group

Native to the region are the Nuclear Malayo-Polynesian group of languages, which includes Malaysian Malay, Indonesian Malay, as well as Sundanese, Javanese, Acehnese, Chamorro and many others. Of particular interest is Malay (Malaysian or Indonesian regardless since they are highly similar) which is recognized in Singapore as her national language (along with 3 other official languages, English, Mandarin and Tamil). The lyrics of Singaporean National Anthem, *Majulah Singapura* (Onward Singapore.) is written in Malay, composed by an ethnic Malay (Zubir Said, 22 July 1907 – 16 November 1987) with Malay folk musical themes and idioms.

Malay continues to be important in Singapore even though Malay is hardly spoken outside of Malay families. The Malay language can be found peppered in SgE (e.g. *lobang* “hole”, *suka* “like”, *gila* “crazy”, etc) and continues to be used as place names (e.g. *Bedok*, *Katong*, *Eunos*, *Kembangan*, *Bukit Timah*, etc, ) and street names (e.g. *Jalan Sembawang*, *Geylang Lorong 28*, etc, where *Jalan* means Road and *Lorong* means Lane). The author used to live along *Lorong K* in an area called *Telok Kurau* which is right beside *Katong*. In the military, parade commands are given in Malay, e.g. *Senang Diri* “stand at ease”, *Sedia* “stand in attention”, *Hormat* “salute”, etc.

### The Chinese Group

The majority of Singapore’s population is ethnic Chinese.<sup>i</sup> Most of them have ancestry in the Fujian and Guangdong provinces. As such, most of the ethnic Chinese in Singapore are familiar with Min, Yue and Hakka Chinese languages, including Hokkien, Teochew and Hainan (all of the Southern Min cluster), Cantonese (from the Yue cluster), Hakka, and possibly other Chinese languages such as Fuzhou and Fuqing (Northern Min), Shanghai (Wu). (For more on the classification of Chinese languages, see Yuan 1959/89 and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing and Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra 1987-90.)

An interesting effect of having so many different Chinese language communities within the confines of the small island that is Singapore (640 square kilometers, two-thirds the size of Hong Kong) is the variety of pronunciation of Chinese last names. Take for example the common last name 陳, which is uniformly “Chan” in Hong Kong by virtue of transliteration from the Cantonese pronunciation. In Singapore, “Chan” is not the only transliteration, but “Tan” if your ancestral home is in Fujian, “Tang” if Teochew, or “Chan”, “Chen”, “Teng”, “Ten” depending on where your ancestral home is. Below, I provide a table showing some samples of common Chinese last names in Singapore and their variation.

Chinese last name	Ancestral home in Fujian	Ancestral home in Chaozhou	Ancestral home in Guangdong
黃	Ng, Ooi, Oei or Wee	Ng	Wong
吳	Goh	Goh	Ng
梁	Neo	Neo	Leong
王	Ong	Heng	Wong

Table 1: Examples of Chinese last names and their varied transliteration

As can be seen from the above chart, variation is rather substantial. In 黃 for example, even within the Fujian province, differences are evident. This is because even in that single province, there are many different speech communities. The situation is similar with the kinds of variations in Cantonese spoken in different areas of the Pearl River Delta, only in the case of Fujian, variation is a lot greater.

Clearly, if there is any sense of identity within the Chinese community, it would be rather weak. In fact, many associations and clan houses were formed along speech community lines by the Chinese population. These are then further subdivided into groups sharing the same ancestral home.

### The Indian Group

Ethnic Indians in Singapore are a minority, 7.6% of the entire population according to the *Census 2000* (<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/keystats/people.html#census>, accessed 25 Dec 2006). Most of the ethnic Indians in Singapore are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from the Southern part of India. Since this paper is most concerned with linguistic matters, it would suffice to note that in India, two major families of languages are the Indic languages (e.g. Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi), Gujarati) and the Dravidian languages (e.g. Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Telegu). In Singapore, all of these languages are found, but Tamil would be spoken by the majority of the ethnic Indians there (64%). Even though the ethnic Indians have been a component of Singapore since the early days of settlement, they have remained the minority. As such, their impact on SgE has been rather limited.

### English

Even though English is not native to Singaporean soils, it came with the colonial powers and had been playing a crucial role since. Quite expectedly, English is not spoken or used beyond the British circles in the early days. The situation should be familiar to the people of Hong Kong where even after 100 years as a British colony, English remains unpopular language among locals.

Little is known about the way the Chinese, Indians and Malays communicate with the British in early Singapore. Obviously some pidgin (a make-shift language) must have evolved during the period. Evidence of such a pidgin in Singapore is fragmentary, but nonetheless available. A few such expressions are presented in Table 2.

Expression	Meaning	Remarks
Gostun	“reverse”	From the naval expression “go stern”.
Godown	“warehouse”	The warehouse is generally located near the port which would be downhill.
Chop X	“X Company”	The company stamp was called a “chop”. Some shops inscribed on their signboards “Chop X”. Such signboards are still found today, but increasing rare.

Table 2: Possible early Singapore pidgin expressions

Today, English is the language of administration and the language for inter-racial communication in Singapore. In addition, English allows Singapore to communicate with the rest of the world where English is the de facto lingua franca. Not surprisingly, English is taught in schools for all subjects except second or foreign language classes. Today, every Singaporean knows enough English to carry a conversation, albeit with distinctive Singaporean characteristics (more on this later).

The linguistic and racial diversity of Singapore since its early history is significant because of Singapore’s early immigrant population. Thus, the population of early Singapore did not identify themselves as Singaporeans. Among the Chinese and the Indians for example, their loyalties were not to this island but to their homeland where they hope to return some day, and to where they send as much of their hard-earned money to every time they received their wages. In other words, there was no such thing as a Singapore identity. That is to wait until the 1960s, when

Singapore gained independence and when Singapore met with all kinds of challenges (see Lee 1999, 2000 for an interesting and insightful account of these events). This complex and rich linguistic make-up of early Singapore is to eventually weave itself into a crucial part of modern Singapore identity: the Singapore English (SgE)

### 3. Englishization in Singapore

The term “Englishization” could loosely be understood as the process of becoming English (B.Kachru 1994 and also Y Kachru and Nelson 2006:336). Simple as this may sound, there is clearly some difference between taking a non-English word and making it part of English and taking an English word and making it part of local culture. In the first case, we have examples like “mango” and “curry” which were borrowed into English. We also have, in the case of Hong Kong, Asian names like “Chan” which ends up sounding like [tʰɛn] rather than [tsʰan]. Examples of this kind are typically described as “Anglicization” – the making of non-English items English. In the latter case, we have examples like [si.tik] for “stick” or [ba.si] for “bus”, both common words in Hong Kong speech (Yip 1993, and for more on Hong Kong English phonology see Hung 2000). In these cases, we see English creeping into Cantonese, making Cantonese more English than before the two languages came into contact. In such cases, English is “indigenized”. This link between Englishization and indigenization of English is hardly new. Li (1998) describes it as “non-native speakers’ attempts to use L2 in such a way as to conform to their L1 pragmatic norms and cultural values.”

With the combination of Anglicization and Indigenization, eventually one arrives at varieties of English called Singapore English, Indian English, Hong Kong English etc. Hence Englishization cannot be understood independently of the two component processes.

In whichever direction one thinks about the issue of “Englishization”, one is left wondering: becoming what kind of English? Does English here refer to the English language or does it refer to English culture? What is the English language or the English culture anyway? Crystal (1997) suggests a more global interpretation when he explains that “English as a global language” is a headline that continues to make news daily in many countries. And so he asks rhetorically if that means that everyone in the world speaks English or if every country recognizes English as an official language. In the case of Singapore, English is an official language. This section takes a look at some of the characteristics of the English in Singapore, and demonstrates that this English is so very different and distinctive that it deserves the name Singapore English (SgE).<sup>ii</sup> SgE is the vessel that carries all the linguistic and cultural inheritance from all the ethnicities that made up Singapore (see section 2) and therefore deserves careful consideration by policy-makers and grammatical purists who seek to destroy it.

#### 3.1 PHONOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FROM SINGAPORE ENGLISH

Anyone who has met a Singaporean or has seen the movie “I not stupid” (Neo 2002) would have found the Singaporean accent ticklish. This section studies the assignment of tone in SgE phonology, which is one of the key elements to the ticklish property of SgE. From this study, one could see that Englishization is a combination of Anglicization and Indigenization. Non-English elements such as tone and English words combine to produce this peculiar pattern of tone in SgE.

In SgE, there are 3 level tones: high, mid and low. The distribution of tones is predictable as may be seen from the regularity of tone assignments in the examples below.

(1) Tones in Singapore English words

- |                |                            |                    |                             |
|----------------|----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| i. “cat”       | [k <sup>h</sup> et55]      | v. “origin”        | [ɔ11.ri33.dʒin55]           |
| ii. “intend”   | [in11.t <sup>h</sup> en55] | vi. “original”     | [ɔ11.ri33.dʒi33.nə55]       |
| iii. “manage”  | [mɛ33.neidʒ55]             | vii. “dictionary”  | [dik33.ʃn33.nə33.ri55]      |
| iv. “managing” | [mɛ33.nei33.dʒiŋ55]        | viii. “originally” | [ɔ11.ri33.dʒi33.nə.33.li55] |

In (1), pronunciations are given in IPA, using Chao’s (1930) tone letters to indicate tonal contours on each syllable. In Chao’s system, “1” denotes the lowest tone on a scale and “5” the highest. Hence, [55] is a high flat tone, [33] is a mid flat tone and [21] is a very low falling tone, etc.

As may be seen in (1), when there is only one syllable, that syllable will carry a high flat tone [55]. Disyllabic forms optionally begin with a low tone [11] or a mid-tone [33], but in polysyllabic strings, all non-edge syllables are pronounced with a mid-flat tone [33]. Like disyllabic strings, the initial syllable has the option of a low flat tone [11].<sup>iii</sup> One may further observe that the assignment of the [55] tone occurs after suffixation of both derivational (“-al” and “-ity”) and inflectional (“-ing”) morphemes. The pattern in (1) could be generated by the following procedure:

(2) Tone Assignment in Singapore English.

input	“cat”	“origin”	“manage” + “-ing”
	[k <sup>h</sup> et]	[ɔ.ri.dʒin]	[mɛ.neidʒ] + [iŋ]
Step 1 Morpheme Concatenation	[k <sup>h</sup> et]	[ɔ.ri.dʒin]	[mɛ.nei.dʒiŋ]
Step 2 Assign [33] to all syllables	[k <sup>h</sup> et33]	[ɔ33.ri33.dʒin33]	[mɛ33.nei33.dʒiŋ33]
Step 3 Assign [11] to initial syllable in specific cases	n/a	[ɔ11.ri33.dʒin33]	n/a
Step 4 Assign [55] to final syllable	[k <sup>h</sup> et55]	[ɔ11.ri33.dʒin55]	[mɛ33.nei33.dʒiŋ55]
output	[k <sup>h</sup> et55]	[ɔ11.ri33.dʒin55]	[mɛ33.nei33.dʒiŋ55]

Except for the tone of the initial syllable which requires some amount of specification, tone assignment in Singapore English is highly predictable. In a sense, this tone assignment procedure is very much like stress/accent assignment found in a number of languages, including Standard English, Indonesian and other varieties of Malay (Cohn 1989, Cohn and McCarthy 1994, Dellikan 2005). However, unlike English or Malay where stress is assigned to the final trochee (e.g. cali-FORnia and singa-PUra), Singapore English assigns a high flat tone to the final syllable.

Given (2), one might expect high tones to be assigned only to “-ry” in “strawberry” and “-board” in “blackboard”, since these are the word final syllables. No other syllable would carry the high tone. This prediction is not borne out.

- (3) Compounding
- i. “strawberry” [strɔ55.bɛ33.ri55]
  - ii. “blackboard” [blɛk55.bɔd55]
  - iii. “blackbird” [blɛk55.bɔd55]
  - iv. “teapot” [ti55.p<sup>h</sup>ɔt55]
  - v. “everything” [ɛ33.vri55.tiŋ55]
  - vi. “everybody” [ɛ33.vri55.bɔ33.di55]

In (3), we see that the high tone does occur word-initially and -internally, except that the words here are compounds, i.e. they are words made up of smaller words, e.g. “black” + “bird” → “blackbird”. The procedure in (2) only needs minimal modification to accommodate this fact. Quite simply, step 1 is constrained to affixation.

(3) is especially interesting when compared with Standard English. In Standard English, stress assignment happens after compounding, hence “black bird” and “blackbird” would sound different: [ˈblæk ˈbɜːd] in the former and [ˈblækbɜːd] in the latter.

The case of tonal manifestation is not unique to SgE. In Hong Kong English, for example, tone is related to stress so that stressed syllables are manifested as a high tone (sometimes high-falling) and unstressed syllables are manifested as low tones. So the indigenization of English is not unique to Singapore even though Singapore is the focus of this study.

The preceding paragraphs of this section show that Singapore English has its own phonological rules and that reflects its own phonological system. The source of this system is opaque though researchers have variously credited it to English, Chinese, Malay or any of the many languages that came to Singapore with immigration since as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Lim 1996, Lim and Tan 2001, Ng 2004). Whatever the source of this phonological pattern, it obviously allows one to identify a Singaporean, and thus serve to the building of a Singapore identity.

### 3.2 GRAMMATICAL EVIDENCE FROM SINGAPORE ENGLISH

We now turn to the syntax of SgE. Like the section on phonology, it argues that SgE is the product of Englishization on the basis that its syntax is quite unlike that of English or that of other local languages.

#### Relative Clauses

Alsagoff and Ho (1998) studied noun phrases (NP) that are modified by relative clauses (RC) in SgE and presented interesting evidence for the non-simplistic interaction between English and Chinese in the making of a whole new Singapore English syntax. Consider first a typical English RC:

- (4) [NP The boy who pinched the elephant]
- 
- Nominal head      Relative pronoun      Attributive clause

As may be seen in (4), the 3 elements of an NP modified by an RC are ordered such that the relative pronoun (RP)<sup>iv</sup> is sandwiched between a nominal head on its left and



With minor differences this is the accepted version that appears in K.K. Tam (ed) *Englishization in Asia*. Hong Kong Open University Press , 2009 (Chapter 3, pp. 46-69).

the attributive clause (AC) on its right. Here are now some examples from Malay, Chinese and Singapore English (data from Alsagoff and Ho 1998):

- (5) Malay  
Budak itu yang mencubit ibu saya  
Boy that RP pinched mother my  
“The boy who pinched my mother”
- (6) Chinese  
Nie wo mama de na-ge hai-zi  
Pinch my mother RP that-CL child  
“The child who pinched my mother”
- (7) Singapore English  
The boy (who) pinch my mother one  
The boy (RP) pinch my mother RP

The parenthesis in (7) indicates optionality, so in Singapore English, the noun phrase is acceptable with or without the relative pronoun “who”. If one extracts the order of the elements that make up the relative clause NP, a clearer but puzzling picture emerges, as in (8):

- (8) Order of elements in a relative clause NP

Language	Order			
English	Head	RP	AC	
Malay	Head	RP	AC	
Chinese	AC	RP	Head	
Singapore English	Head	(RP)	AC	RP

Notice how in (8), Singapore English allows for the relative pronoun (RP) to occur at the end of the NP, a situation unattested in the superstrate language English as well as in the substrate languages Malay and Chinese.

Alsagoff and Ho noticed that the RP occurred post-head in English and Malay but post-AC in Chinese. On the basis of this observation, they propose that NP-final RP in Singapore English is really the result of substrate influence from Chinese. Notice in (8) that the NP-final RP follows the AC. However Alsagoff and Ho also pointed out that the influence is not a simplistic one in that the choice of RP is restricted. While both “who” and “one” are possible RPs in Singapore English, “one” may not be used in the place of “who” and vice versa. The ungrammaticality is indicated by the asterisks in (9)

- (9) a. \*The boy one pinch my mother one/who
- b. \*The boy (who/one) pinch my mother who

If one were to simply combine the grammars of English and Chinese, it is not possible to explain why (9) is unacceptable. Thus, while it is possible for us to identify the sources from which Singapore English gets its characteristics, it is necessary for us also to recognize its “independence” in how those sources are to be used.

### The Passive

Another area of syntax where substrate influences are strong is to be found in the passive construction of Singapore English. Bao and Wee (1999) identified two forms of passives: the *kena* passive and the *give* passive.

- (10) a. *kena* passive  
John kena hit by the elephant.  
“John was hit by the elephant.”
- b. *give* passive  
John give the elephant hit.  
“John was hit by the elephant.”

Etymologically speaking, *kena* is the Malay passive morpheme which also exhibits verb-like properties with respect to reduplication. However, the use of *kena* strictly requires adversity upon the patient of the verb. In this respect, it is unlike English.

- (11) a. i. John is liked/praised by everyone.  
ii.\* John kena liked/praised by everyone.
- b. i. The book is published.  
ii.\* The book kena published.

In Standard English, the passive does not require any form of adversity upon the patient, hence the grammaticality of (11ai). The requirement of adversity by *kena* disqualifies (11a ii, b ii) in SgE. Bao and Wee explains that this effect of *kena* is inherited from Malay. So here, we see a case of strong substrate influence on SgE, which in turns argues against simple assimilation as the mode of Englishization. A similar case can be made for the *give*-passive. The word order in (10b) is evidently Chinese, where the passive is indicated by the morpheme *bei* and has the word order Patient-NP BEI Agent-NP V.

In this section, one can see the strong influence of substrate languages (i.e. non English languages in the case study here), either in licensing a particular word-order as in the case of relative clauses and the *give*-passive or in the additional restriction on certain constructions as in the *kena*-passive. The next section discusses the lexicon of Singapore English.

### 3.3 LEXICAL EVIDENCE FROM SINGAPORE ENGLISH

If you look at the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) online for the entry *lah*, this is what you would find:

*lah*, *int.*

(1a:) [Chinese (southern dial).]

In Singaporean English, a particle used with various kinds of pitch to convey the mood and attitude of the speaker.

**1972** *New Nation* (Singapore) 25 Nov. 8/4 ‘Come and see lah,’ he urged with a grin. **1982** TOH PAIK CHOO *Eh, Goondu!* 2 Don't act tough lah. *Ibid.* 90 You must have heard (or said it yourself) when answering a wrong number..with a ‘Sala, sala, wrong number lah.’ **1984** J. PLATT et al. *New Englishes* viii. 142 *Persuasion*. *lah* with a fall in pitch. Come with us lah! *Annoyance*. *lah* with a

rise in pitch. Wrong lah! Tsch! Write again here! *Strong objection*. *lah* with a sharper fall in pitch. A: Shall we discuss this now? B: No lah! So late already. *Ibid.* 143 A: Have you been to the H (restaurant)? B: Yes, the food there not bad what—can try lah. **1992** *World Monitor* Jan. 52/1 ‘This one is how much, *lah?*’ a passerby demands in the coarse pidgin English known here as Singlish.

[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00297560?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=lah&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00297560?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=lah&first=1&max_to_show=10) (accessed 8 August 2006)

As is typical of the OED, an entry is listed from its earliest use in reliable publication to its modern use, thus showing its evolution. If one subscribes to an argument by appeal to authority, this clearly indicates the acceptance of SgE words as English by the OED – the most authoritative dictionary of the English language.

Powerful as the OED may be, it does not list all the SgE words that are actually used. A richer source of SgE words can be found in Goh (2002) and its corresponding online version of the *Coxford Singlish Dictionary* at <http://www.talkingcock.com/html/lexec.php?op=LexView&lexicon=lexicon>, accessed 25 Dec 2006). Most of the Colloquial SgE data in the ensuing paragraphs are taken from this source.

The SgE lexicon may be thought of as comprising three kinds of words: words that are imported from various source languages such as English, Hokkien or Malay (e.g. *angmoh* from Hokkien “red hair” meaning foreigners, *suka-suka* from Malay “like” meaning by one’s whim and fancy); words that are the result of combining between elements found in different source languages (e.g. *panchan* combining Hokkien and English to mean “give a break” or *agaration* combining Malay and English to mean “an estimate”); and words that seem to have sprung up from nowhere and which sources are indeterminate (e.g. *kope* meaning to steal or *obiang* meaning “unfashionable”).

This section explores some of the words in SgE and how they might have come about. In the process, it should become clear that SgE has generated and is continuing to generate a lexicon of its own. The lexicon is arguably the result of Singapore’s modern local culture and the blending of source cultures that came into Singapore.

### Words by Import

Many words in SgE, especially in the colloquial variety, can easily be identified with the counterparts in source languages. However, the meanings and uses are often different. The table below provides some examples:

#### (12) Comparison of word meaning and usage

	<u>Word</u>	<u>SgE meaning</u>	<u>Source</u>
i.	arrow	to delegate some one to a task	English: weapon
ii.	basket	expletive for expressing annoyance.	English: woven receptacle.
iii.	blanjah	to give a treat	Malay <i>belanja</i> : expenditure
iv.	chiong	to have fun	Hokkien: to rush forward
v.	fetch	to give a ride in a car	English: to bring forth something
vi.	kilat	suave	Malay: well-polished
vii.	tuã	sabotage	Hokkien: to flick

One must not be misled to think that all words in SgE are used differently from the source languages. The point here is just that imports are not always faithful to their origins. This “infidelity” to the source may have been the cause to the Singaporean government’s policy against SgE. Implicit in the Singapore’s Speak Good English Campaign is the assumption that SgE (arguably not the acrolectal variety) is poor English. Take “fetch” for example. In SgE, it is possible for some one to say, “Will you fetch me to the airport tomorrow?” It is easy to see why a negative impression English acquisition would result.

### Words by Fusion

Because of the rich linguistic sources in Singapore, sometimes new words are coined by amalgamation.

#### (13) “Bastard” words

	<u>SgE Word</u>	<u>Combination</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
i.	panchan	Hokkien [paŋ11] “release” and English	to give a break.
		<i>chance</i> .	
ii.	untahanable	Malay <i>tahan</i> “push against” and English negation prefix “un-“ and adjectival suffix “-able”	unbearable
iii.	cheebalized	Hokkien <i>chee by</i> “virgina” and English verbal suffix “-ize”.	sarcastic remark for “civilized”.
iv.	agaration	Malay <i>agak</i> “estimate and English nominal suffix “-ation”.	an estimate

The formation of such “bastard” words is productive as it involves little beyond compounding as in (13i) or affixation (13ii, iii). Common affixes like “-ful”, “-ogy” and “-able” are frequently found peppered in SgE speech amalgamated with stems from local languages.

While such morphological concatenation has exciting implications for the description of SgE grammar, the main point here of this subsection lies in the marriage of languages.

### Words by Shortening

Common expressions sometimes fossilize into idioms and even words. For example, among Hokkien speakers, the phrase [kiã lai kiã ku] “strolling around” is often used to describe idleness. This oft-used phrase is borrowed into SgE as an abbreviated K.L.K.K. where each letter stands for the onset sound of the original Hokkien. Also of Hokkien origin is the term CAB which is an acronym for *chao ah beng* “unsophisticated youngster”. Another source of word formation is truncation, such as *cher* for “teacher”. Below are some examples:

(14)	<u>Word</u>	<u>Full form</u>	<u>SgE Meaning</u>
i.	C.M.I.	Cannot Make It	does not make the mark.
ii.	L.L.	Lan Lan (Hokkien origin)	crestfallen
iii.	N.A.T.O.	No Action Talk Only	
iv.	orbigoood	Oh very good	a term used to express that someone deserves his current predicament
v.	sabo	sabotage	same as English

(14i, ii) are examples of abbreviations. (14iii) is an acronym. (14iv, v) are truncated forms. It is hard to determine how productive such the “shortening” mode of word formation is. Abbreviations are very common, but I have also come to notice that not all abbreviations are shared by the majority of the speakers. Most abbreviations start off as an inside joke that sometimes grow into popular acceptance. This is also true of truncation. Acronyms are rarer.

#### Words of Indeterminate Source

There are of course also SgE words of indeterminate origin. Some examples are given below:

(15)	<u>Word</u>	<u>SgE Meaning</u>
i.	orbit	unfashionable (cf. obiang)
ii.	obiang	unfashionable (cf. orbit)
iii.	saht	groovy
iv.	shiok	refreshing
v.	kope	to steal

If it is true that the words in (15) are not inherited from any existent languages, then what we have here is a SgE that is so alive and autonomous that it would qualify to be a new language, albeit having roots in English and other local languages. It would be this historical link that allows it to be identified as a variety of English, but otherwise there is little reason to not consider it a language that has grown out of Singaporean soil.

#### **4. Implication for Language and Cultural Policies**

Section 3 presents only a small part of all the evidences one can gather to argue for the uniqueness of SgE. In looking through the dimensions of phonology, syntax and the lexicon, it should be clear that SgE is a language of its own. Despite its apparent English identity, an in-depth understanding of SgE can only be achieved by studying it in its own right and not as a list of deviations from any standard variety of English. It is only on this basis that one can then move on to compare SgE with standard varieties of English or with any other languages (Mohanani 1992). This was what was done in the previous section, and it had led to the conclusion of SgE’s distinctiveness. That distinctiveness, as mentioned in section 1, has become part of Singapore’s identity. Singaporeans can be easily identified by the speech pattern that is found in SgE, and numerous voices (albeit weak to avoid direct disagreement with government policies) can be heard asking for the preservation and recognition of SgE as a variety of English rather than as “bad” English. The evidence presented in this paper (and also in the references cited herein) argues strongly that SgE is not “bad” English. It is not the result of having learnt English badly, and it is not the result of deliberate destructive effort. It is in fact the result of having so many cultures and ethnicities blend in a small island.

If we accept that SgE is a language of its own, there are some serious and important implications. One could now ask if SgE is indeed a variety of English or if it is a totally different language. If it were a new language altogether akin to the difference between Latin and French (French having been born out of Latin, but certainly different), then one would need to ensure that Singaporeans can communicate with the rest of the world. As a country so small and so scarce in natural resources (none in fact, other than human beings), Singapore cannot survive if it were

isolated even linguistically. This is where the Singaporean government's main argument for the various language campaigns lie. Proponents of "Speak Good English" and "Speak Mandarin" are often heard asking rhetorically if Singaporeans would like their children grow up speaking only SgE when the whole world does not understand it. To be fair, it can be hard to understand SgE if one is not familiar with it, but I would not go so far as to suggest that it is entirely incomprehensible to the speakers of other Englishes.

Since SgE is the product of the colorful heritage of Singapore, is it wise, or even possible, to ask Singaporeans to give it up entirely, so that Singaporeans would speak only some kind of non-distinct variety of English? The complexity of this issue can be illustrated by considering, for example, the USA where considerable variation can be found in the English spoken there (New York, New Jersey, New England, Texan, Afro-American, to name a few). Despite the variety, there is a non-descript General American accent that is used in the media. To most Americans, General American is fine for work and communication, but most Americans would find the various dialects a lot more expressive and interesting (American Tongues 1986). Should one demand the same for Singapore, so that on the one hand Singaporeans speak an acrolectal SgE that is non-descript and easily understandable to the rest of the world, and on the other speak a heavily colored SgE amongst themselves when expressing ideas that are embedded deeply in their culture? This does seem like a reasonable move, and in fact most Singaporeans do speak differently in different situations. In formal settings, it is very unlikely that one would find expressions like *shiok* "refreshing", *orbit* "unfashionable" or *arrow* "relegate a task" or *chicken cannot eat one lah* "that chicken is not to eaten" coming from Singaporeans. In casual settings, the use of such distinctive expressions would increase significantly. It is important that grammar pundits and policy makers realize the inevitability of SgE's distinctiveness. With multi-culture, multi-ethnicity and multi-lingualism, it is ridiculous to seek a monolingual mode of communication. There will be local flora and fauna, local habits, local lifestyle, local values, all of which cannot possibly be satisfied by simply using the English from England, the USA or Australia.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper began with the question of Singapore identity and proposed that part of that identity comes from the very special English spoken in Singapore which is SgE. The formation of SgE did not come from a council who sat themselves in a meeting and made the grammar rules and words. Rather, SgE is the product of a very natural process of Englishization which must be understood as a bi-directional process of Anglicization and Indigenization. In Anglicization, non-English linguistic items (words and expressions) are made English-like either through the use of available English expressions or through the adoption of English-like pronunciations.<sup>v</sup> In Indigenization, English is made to conform to local habits. It is actually quite difficult to tell one apart from the other as these two processes often work together. Consider the assignment of tones in SgE. Is that Anglicization or Indigenization? In using tones, it is a form of indigenization because it has made the English expressions more like Chinese tonal phonology. However, in using the English words rather than words from any of the other languages, one can argue with equal force that Anglicization has taken place.

Whichever way one sees the process of Englishization, there is no room for doubt that there are important cultural implications. Firstly, one should bear in mind that no amount of policy-making can demand a community to speak English as is

recorded in an authoritative dictionary such as the Oxford English Dictionary, nor is it wise to do so. Secondly, Englishization and the melting of different cultures can be a source of strength for identity-formation. Thirdly, Englishization produces a new and distinct language that is neither better nor worse than the ingredient languages. In addition, Englishization offers the world a handle on developing a mode of communication that would truly make English as a global language. Thus one can now provide viable answers to Crystal's (1997:1) questions:

“What does it mean to say that a language is a global language?”

“Why is English the language which is usually cited in this connection?”

To the first question, I propose the response that a global language is one that finds itself being adapted to the use of all communities in the world and being enriched in the process. And to the second question, that English is usually the language cited in this connection can be seen in the case study of SgE as presented here. English had been adopted into the Singaporean community and has been enriched by it with new words, new expressions and new sound patterns. The story of SgE here is similar to the story of English in other places around the world. Although each part of the world where English is spoken has a slightly different and certainly unique story to tell, they all share the same core of “making the language part of the land and then enriching it”. We see this in the Anglo-Saxon times, we see this in the United States (including the Afro-American community), in Australia and New Zealand, in India, in Hong Kong and in so many other places too long to list.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Since the early 1960s, ethnic Chinese has made up 75-80% of the population, 10-15% ethnic Malays, less than 10% ethnic Indians and a small minority of other ethnicities.

<sup>ii</sup> With roots as a contact language, and also since English is so highly esteemed in Singapore, there exist a number of varieties which have been described as “educated”, “colloquial”, “high”, “low”, “acrolect”, “mesolect” or “basilect” (see Platt 1975; Platt and Weber 1980; Platt et al 1985; Gupta 1991; Pakir 1991, 1995; and Ho & Platt 1993; cited in Bao & Wee 1998:fn.1. Also see Bao and Hong 2006 for an updated discussion.). By “Singapore English”, this paper does not concern itself with these fine distinctions, but rather refers to the variety that is generally used in Singapore in all walks of life.

<sup>iii</sup> The low tone is in fact predictable with reference to the Standard English source. If the initial syllable is unstressed in Standard English, then the SgE counterpart would carry a low tone, e.g. “professor” has an unstressed initial syllable “pro-”; it has a low tone in SgE . If the initial syllable carries either primary or secondary stress, then the SgE counterpart carries a mid tone, e.g. “information”.

<sup>iv</sup> Tony Hung (p.c.) suggested that the clause final “one” could be a pragmatic particle (as in ‘you so stingy one!’ meaning ‘you’re so stingy’ or ‘so good one!’ meaning ‘this is so good!’) rather than a relative pronoun. One piece of evidence for the distinction between the pragmatic “one” and the relative pronoun “one” is the optionality of the former but not the latter. It is not possible to have a SgE relative clause without the “one” marker, but the pragmatic “one” can be freely omitted. However, Alsagoff and Ho had not presented strong evidence that “one” is a relative pronoun either, since non-optionality does not define relative pronominals. The same may be said of the Chinese “de” which certainly does not exhibit any qualities of pronominality in any context. In addition, it is noteworthy that Singapore English has the entire range of wh-words that can serve as RP in the position between Head and AC.

<sup>v</sup> I cannot resist giving one telling example of Anglicization from India. The expression *eve-teaser* “a lewd man” looks distinctly English but it is in fact an expression in Indian English.