A decade later: Singapore's Speak Good English Movement

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1   Introduction

Singapore, located in the heart of Southeast Asia between Indonesia and Malaysia, is a diverse city-state whose language policies and attitudes have been shaped by its colonial past and its historic involvement in Southeast Asian trade. Because of its strategic location within the region, Singapore is presently and historically a busy, thriving seaport. As such, Singapore has seen multiple waves of immigration that have shaped the tiny city-state into a diverse nation with people of a variety of different backgrounds.

Singapore has rapidly grown in the past few decades into a first-world country with a thriving economy. However, because of its tiny size, the Singapore government is quick to emphasize that Singapore must fight for its survival: The island lacks its own natural resources, and therefore must rely on human capital in order to drive its economy.

When located in this context, we can see that the Singapore government's approach to language is a direct response to this construction of Singapore as a global financial hub. Within this context, language is seen as a commodity (cf. Wee 2008), and it is constructed as a utilitarian tool for various pragmatic purposes. Unlike the other post-colonial nations in Southeast Asia, which have adopted local languages (e.g. Bahasa Indonesia in Indonesia) after their independence, Singapore has adopted English as an official language while also elevating Mandarin, Malay, and

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Tamil to official language status as well.

English is the language of government, education, and business, while the other three languages are regarded as "Mother Tongues" that bear cultural wisdom and identity. Singapore's government, then, draws a strict division between English and the so-called mother tongues: English is seen as a strictly functional, economic language, the learning of which is pragmatic and required for Singapore to be able to compete and have a place in the current global economy (Oon 2008). By contrast, the mother tongues are meant to carry and embody "traditional Asian values", counter to the Western values that English, as a "Western" language, supposedly carries. This dichotomy is problematic, in that this dichotomy enforces a strict compartmentalization and separation of language and also reinforces a simplistic understanding of identity and culture that, as I will discuss, is insufficient to describe and support the complexities of Singaporeans' current identity.

Singapore's local dialect of English, called "Colloquial Singapore English" (CSE) in the literature and "Singlish" by Singaporeans, is one such challenge to the government's rigid understanding of language and Singaporean identity. Its resemblance to creoles is a product of its past—Singlish grew out of early Singapore's racial and linguistic intermingling and has persisted since, replacing Bazaar Malay as the lingua franca of the nation.

However, Singlish is also the topic of a number of controversial debates, in particular due to, and sparked by, the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), which was enacted by the government in the year 2000. Following former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's functional and pragmatic views of English, Singlish has been condemned as "broken English" and as a "handicap" to Singaporeans in their progress as a nation. The SGEM began as a government response to what were perceived as threats to national productivity: the rising use of Singlish and the decline of English language standards.

In starting the movement, the government again emphasized the need for Singaporeans to know and speak good English in order for Singaporeans to be able to compete in the global marketplace: the lack of good English would prevent Singaporeans from being understood by non-Singaporeans, which would be detrimental to Singapore's ability to trade in the global marketplace and thus threaten Singapore's economic survival. The movement sports a different tagline each year and markets each year's theme in multiple ways, including various advertisements

throughout Singapore, newspaper columns that address various aspects of English usage, multiple workshops on different aspects of English, and other programs that aim to raise awareness regarding and promote the use of Standard English.

Attitudes towards the SGEM are varied. Most (cf. Rubdy 2001, Bokhorst-Heng 2005, Wee 2009) of the academic research on reactions to the SGEM have focused on the responses in the press, both from letters to the editor as well as on the news articles that have been published, but it is questionable as to whether or not this sample is an accurate reflection of the Singaporean public—for instance, only those who have a strong enough opinion towards the movement and care enough to express it would even write a letter to the editor, and only those who regularly read the newspaper would be aware of the ongoing discussion in that medium. Furthermore, letters to the editor often do not include important demographic information, such as the author's age and occupation—an indirect index of one's socioeconomic class—which can further color the author's views towards Singlish.

These problems prompted a number of questions: Are the opinions as seen in the press representative of the opinions of the average Singaporean? How aware is the average Singaporean of the SGEM? What is the average Singaporean's views towards the roles of English and Singlish in Singapore, and do these correspond with the government's views on language? Is the debate about English and Singlish as fiery as it seems from the academic and media perspectives?

My interviews showed that the typical Singaporean (a term which is in itself very vague, and which I will discuss in my demographics section) is not as aware of the SGEM as previous research has assumed, but that, regardless, their opinion of the importance of Standard English in Singapore aligns closely to that of the government's. I will then discuss these responses and locate Singlish in more detail in the Singaporean identity, as well as discuss current and potentially future shifts within the ideology of the SGEM as well as the government's approach to English and Singlish.

2   Terminology

"[C]entral to the Singlish debate are confusing definitions and applications of the term 'Singlish' itself … Some see Singlish broadly as the local brand of English (e. g. Brown 1999: v). Others see Singlish as a deviation from 'good English' (SGEM 2000). And still others see Singlish as

part of the variety of English used in Singapore (Platt and Weber 1980; Gupta 1989, 1991; Pakir 1995). Various participants manipulate the definition of Singlish to support their particular position in the debate, making the term itself a discursive construction."

(Bokhorst-Heng 2005: 190)

The debate over the roles of English and Singlish in Singapore is laden with various terms that are often used interchangeably; definitions are not set before discussions begin, as interlocutors often assume that the other knows what each term means. The definitions themselves, meanwhile, are often very fluid and lack clear boundaries. I will be using the terms as follows:

Standard English   The Singapore school system uses British English. However, the influx of American media—TV shows, music, and other pop culture—has also led Singaporeans to recognize American English and its respective standards. The term "Standard English", however, does not refer to any specific norms, but is rather a variety of English that is internationally intelligible and used in a more formal register. Standard English, then, is what is intelligible in writing, as well as what is used professionally and in international business contexts. It is not tied to a particular region or a particular phonological system.

Singapore Standard English (SSE)   SSE describes a variety of Standard English that differs from others in its phonological features, as well as some morphological, lexical, and discourse differences (Deterding 2007). These differences, however, are minor, and Singapore Standard English is intelligible in an international context and does not differ much from the international, general Standard English (Bao & Hong 2006).

Colloquial Singapore English (CSE)   The term CSE is primarily used in the literature as a more formal way to refer to "Singlish"; the term CSE, then, legitimizes Singlish as a language, and it also refers to the discussion of the various linguistic features of "Singlish."

CSE differs heavily from SSE and from Standard English and is perhaps best described as a creoloid or as a "new English". We can conceptualize CSE as existing on a continuum with SSE as the acrolectal variety; CSE, then, occupies the mesolectal and basilectal varieties. CSE encompasses a number of varieties, from those intelligible to speakers of other varieties of English to those entirely unintelligible to those who do not speak basilectal CSE. CSE's syntactic structures

are often very similar to Mandarin and to Malay; furthermore, most of its substrate influence and many of its lexical terms come from various Chinese dialects, as well as from Malay.

Singlish   The definition of the term "Singlish" varies widely depending on the speaker. Some interpret the term to be just that—*Sing*apore's Eng*lish*. Taken in this literal way, the term "Singlish" could very well refer to Singapore Standard English. However, "Singlish" generally refers to the variety that is also labeled as Colloquial Singapore English. For some, though, the term is laden with far more baggage, carrying with it political ideologies and interpretations of how Singapore should construct its identity. For instance, "Singlish" is defined by the SGEM as "broken English", a construction of the language that denies it any validity—yet this definition does not encompass instances of ungrammatical English, "broken English", that, at the same time, cannot be considered "Singlish;" nor does it consider the fact that some Singlish utterances can be considered grammatical or ungrammatical within Singlish, whereas broken English does not carry a grammar of its own.

Meanwhile, for others, the term "Singlish" refers not just to the variety of English covered by the term CSE, but also to Singapore's shared past and its racial and linguistic diversity—but, at the same time, this definition glosses over the fact that "Singlish" can occasionally be a marker of class, in that those who can only speak Singlish face difficulties in finding employment in the higher-paying, upper-class, white-collar jobs that require proficiency in Standard English to be competitive.

The term "Singlish", then, refers to the understanding by lay Singaporeans of the non-standard variety of English spoken in Singapore; "Singlish" is something that Singaporeans can recognize, but often have trouble defining. Therefore, because my research concerned itself with understanding Singaporeans' awareness of the SGEM and their own thoughts on English in Singapore, I will refer to the non-standard variety of English in Singapore as "Singlish", rather than Colloquial Singapore English.

3 Methodology

In order to answer the questions proposed above, I conducted brief interviews with random Singaporeans who were in public places. These interviews were completely anonymous; they were recorded on a Zoom Handy Recorder H2, then transcribed. The original recordings were then deleted.

3.1 Interview questions

I asked each person four basic questions, on which I would then occasionally ask the respondent to elaborate; each of the questions addressed different facets of the debate that I wanted to explore:

1. Have you heard of the SGEM? If yes, from where? What do you know about it? How do you feel about the movement?

2. What are your thoughts on English in Singapore? What is its role and function? Why is it important, or not important, for Singaporeans to know English?

3. How about Singlish? Is Singlish important to Singapore? Why or why not?

4. What is your definition of "Singlish"? If a foreigner asked you, "What is Singlish?" how would you respond?

3.1.1 Question 1

1. *Have you heard of the SGEM? If yes, from where? What do you know about it? How do you feel about the movement?*

The purpose of this question was to assess the respondent's general awareness of the movement: Is the movement something that is on the forefront of the average Singaporean's mind, or is it simply another government function that runs in the background? Additionally, by asking where the respondents had heard of the movement, I wanted to assess, where their awareness of the movement was being drawn from, and whether respondents were aware of the debates in the press and in academia. However, after collecting the interviews, it became unclear as to whether

the respondents were responding based on where they had first heard about the SGEM or where they continue to be exposed to it.

In asking participants what they knew about the movement, I hoped that those who were strongly opinionated and who believed that the SGEM was the government's attempt to get rid of Singlish—an opinion that I saw multiple times in academic papers—would pipe up and offer their opinion. Additionally, I hoped that, for those Singaporeans where the SGEM was simply another government function that ran in the background, their responses would indicate that all they knew about the movement was just a faint inkling of its function. Furthermore, by asking respondents how they felt about the movement, I hoped to see if they had any strong opinions about it—for or against—or if they were generally apathetic and/or unaware towards it.

3.1.2 Questions 2 and 3

2. *What are your thoughts on English in Singapore? What's its role and function? Why is it important, or not important, for Singaporeans to know English?*

3. *How about Singlish? Is Singlish important to Singapore? Why or why not?*

These questions were meant to assess Singaporeans' views toward English and Singlish. I wanted to investigate how Singaporeans felt about Standard English and its role in Singaporean society and in constructing Singaporean identity—did the average Singaporean take on the government views of the functional and pragmatic uses of "English", which generally refers exclusively to Standard English? Furthermore, by asking the same questions about Singlish, I wanted to discover whether or not Singlish did play a strong role in the construction of Singaporean identity—whether people felt as if it were a strong aspect of their culture as "Singaporeans", and whether Singlish differed from English in this regard.

3.1.3 Question 4

4. *What is your definition of "Singlish"? If a foreigner asked you, "What is Singlish?" how would you respond?*

This question addresses the difficulty of the term "Singlish" in itself, as I noted in the introduction. As Bokhorst-Heng (2005) describes, the term "Singlish" itself is amorphous: it is used

in different ways by different groups of people, and its varying definition changes the foundation and understanding of the various debates and viewpoints. The average Singaporean is not as linguistically aware as the expert academics that often provide the counterpoint in debates in the press and among academic circles—thus, this question seeks to understand what the average Singaporean's understanding of "Singlish" is, and how this view colors his or her position on whether or not Singlish is important to Singapore and Singaporean identity.

3.2   Data

3.2.1   Demographics

Interview locations   The interviews were gathered from various locations on various days; the majority of the interviews were gathered at the National University of Singapore (NUS) campus; because of this interview location, a number of university students were included in the sample, but interviews from other locations included those who were not university students. Other interviews were taken from other locations scattered across Singapore; most fell within the range of the city center and included the Botanic Gardens and the Marina Barrage (outdoor locations usually frequented by families and groups of friends generally within the younger age demographic), East Coast Park, and Orchard Road (Singapore's primary shopping district). Interviews were generally collected in public areas.

Gender   Of the 51 respondents, 29 (56.9%) identified as female, and 22 (43.1%) identified as male. The slight underrepresentation of males may have affected the resulting interviews, in that males in Singapore are required to participate in the National Service, where army slang and Singlish are commonly used and where there may be different attitudes towards Singlish.

Age   The majority of the respondents were under the age of 30; as this year's movement primarily targets 18–29-year-olds, I wanted to focus on this demographic. The majority (12 respondents; 23.5% of the total) of the respondents were 19 years old; the average was 26.7 years, with a standard deviation of 12.6 years. Table 1 summarizes the age demographics of the respondents.

Age		
15–19	19	37.3%
20–29	18	35.3%
30–39	6	11.7%
40+	6	11.7%
Did not state	2	3.9%
Total	51	100.0%

Table 1: Age of the respondents.

Race		
Chinese	40	78.4%
Malay	3	5.9%
Indian	4	7.8%
Mixed Race		
Chinese/Malay	1	2.0%
Indian/Chinese	1	2.0%
Other		
Chinese National	1	2.0%
Did not state	1	2.0%
Total	51	100.0%

Table 2: Racial makeup of the respondents.

Race I attempted to accurately represent the racial makeup of Singapore, which currently stands at 76.8% Chinese, 13.9% Malay, 7.9% Indian, and 1.4% Others. It is unclear how those of mixed race who are not Eurasian are identified and counted into these percentages; I created a separate category for the two respondents who were mixed race. Table 2 summarizes the racial makeup of the respondents.

Occupation Almost all of the respondents held positions in education or in other white-collar positions. Table 3 summarizes these occupations.

A note on the demographics While I made an attempt to be representative in the sample that I interviewed, the respondent sample is still slightly biased: the age and occupation/class demographics are skewed and represent a younger, educated/white-collar population.

The primary reason behind this bias is the language barrier—the older population in Singa-

Occupation		
Education	35	68.6%
Student	26	51.0%
Teachers/Professors/Tutors	8	15.7%
Management	1	2.0%
Sales and Hospitality	6	11.8%
Other Human Resources	9	17.6%
National Service Full Time	2	3.9%
Unemployed	1	2.0%
Did not state	1	2.0%

Note: Some respondents held multiple jobs; percentages were calculated out of a total of 51.

Table 3: Summary of respondents' occupations.

pore, as well as those who work in more blue-collar jobs, often tend to have less of a grasp of Standard English. I was thus unable to access those segments of the population.

Additionally, the sample size was still fairly small; more people would need to be interviewed in order to get a more accurate corpus of opinions towards these issues.

3.2.2   Responses

Awareness of the SGEM   Of the 51 respondents, 38 (74.5%) stated that they have heard of the SGEM, 11 (21.6%) stated that they had not heard of it, and 2 (3.9%) did not respond to the question. Of the 38 who had heard of it, 5 (9.8%) were currently working or had formerly worked with the SGEM.

For those who had heard of the movement, I also asked how much they knew about the movement: just the name, or additional details? Eighteen (47.4%) of those who were interviewed responded that they knew "just the name." Responses from the other respondents were more varied; some stated that they knew that the movement was a government initiative to encourage Singaporeans to use grammatical English, while others delved into more depth and stated that the movement was based on an economic rationale to encourage the use of good English in order to have an edge in the global market.

Altogether, combining those who had not heard of the movement and those who stated that they only had minimal knowledge of the movement, over half of the respondents (29 respondents,

56.9% of all interviewed) were minimally aware of the movement.

Intent of the SGEM   Six (11.8%) of the respondents explicitly stated that they believed that the SGEM was actively trying to get rid of Singlish. Other respondents were unsure of the intent and/or agreed that the government effort to raise the standards of English was a good effort. Of the five respondents who were currently working or had worked with the SGEM, two of them explicitly stated that the SGEM was not attempting to get rid of Singlish, but rather was simply attempting to raise the standard of English. One other respondent stated that, in the past, the SGEM did clearly demonize Singlish, but that, as a former volunteer for the movement, the SGEM may have changed its focus and direction since the time when the respondent was involved. The other two did not state whether or not the government was actively trying to get rid of Singlish, but did state that they themselves used Singlish and did not criticize it as a mode of communication; one of them, in fact, noted that Singlish is "more efficient" than Standard English.

Views towards Standard English   Overall, respondents echoed the government's rhetoric in constructing Standard English as a language of commerce and business, as well as a "neutral" language, in that it facilitates communication between all the races because it is a language common to all. Forty-two (82.4%) of the respondents answered question 2, pertaining to the importance and role of standard English in Singapore. Table 4 summarizes the top four reasons cited for the importance of English in Singapore; as the interviews were spontaneous and not multiple-choice survey responses, the statements in the table are general summaries of the ideas presented by respondents. 76.2% respondents responded that Standard English was important for Singapore in either facilitating communication or facilitating trade. Two respondents (4.8%), meanwhile, did not stress the importance of Standard English and instead stated that, as long as people could understand each other, the type of English spoken did not matter. None of the respondents described Standard English as part of Singapore's identity, although one respondent did call English Singaporeans' first language.

Views towards Singlish   The views towards Singlish were more varied than the views towards Standard English. Of the 42 respondents who answered the question of whether Singlish was

Response	# of times	%
English is the common language in Singapore that facilitates communication between the various ethnic groups.	20	47.6%
English is an important language for international business and therefore important for Singaporeans to be economically competitive globally.	13	31.0%
English is used internationally and therefore important for international communication.	13	31.0%
English is the main/official language of Singapore.	9	21.4%
Number of answers that included at least one of these responses:	32	76.2%

Table 4: Summary of the most common responses to Question 2. Percentage indicates number of responses divided by 42 total responses to the question. Respondents often cited multiple reasons for the importance of English.

important to Singapore, 13 (31.0%) explicitly said that yes, it was important; 5 (11.9%) explicitly said that no, it was not important; and the other respondents did not give a yes or no response, but elaborated on Singlish's use and function in Singapore. Furthermore, one (2.0%) of those who said that Singlish was not important still identified Singlish as contributing to Singaporean identity; two others (3.9%) who said that Singlish was not important to Singapore stated that, despite the lack of importance, "we can't help it". 85.7% of respondents stated that Singlish was in some way important to Singapore and primarily stated that its importance was because Singlish is a part of Singaporean identity. Others noted the communicative importance of Singlish, in that it both facilitates communication between the different races, as well as communication between different age groups and different classes.

> "I mean, you cannot speak to Auntie on the street in perfect English; she will not understand what you're saying."
> "She'll go like, 'Ah?'"
>
> —Two respondents

> "And [Singlish] also is a way to break down barriers—socioeconomic barriers, actually. So, for instance, if I'm talking to hawkers or people who may not necessarily be university educated or speak very good English, it's a way of getting people comfortable; it's not meant to be

Response	# of times	%
Singlish is an important part of Singaporean identity and culture.	24	57.1%
Singlish is important for social bonding and cohesion and allows Singaporeans to have a sense of familiarity with each other.	10	23.8%
Singlish differentiates Singaporeans from other English speakers, in the same way that Americans have American slang, the British have British slang, etc.	9	21.4%
Singlish is an important tool for communication and understanding among Singaporeans.	7	16.7%
It is important for Singaporeans to know how to code-switch between Singlish and Standard English.	6	14.3%
Singlish is not a problem.	5	11.9%
Number of answers that included at least one of these responses:	36	85.7%

Table 5: Summary of the most common responses to Question 3. Percentage indicates number of responses divided by 42 total responses to the question. Respondents often cited multiple reasons for the importance of Singlish.

> condescending. It's just a way in which everybody speaks that creates this sort of sense of community."

—Respondent

Defining "Singlish"   Forty-four respondents responded to the question of how to define Singlish. The most common definitions are listed in Table 5; there was less crossover in the responses than in the responses to questions 2 and 3, in that respondents usually gave only one of the definitions listed in the table instead of multiple responses.

A note on the interviews   Although I attempted to word the questions in a way that was both specific in the information I was requesting and yet open-ended enough for respondents to express their opinion, there is still a chance that some respondents may have misinterpreted the questions. Additionally, my status as an American with American-accented English may have prompted

Response	# of times	%
"Singlish" is a blend of various languages and dialects with English.	19	43.2%
"Singlish" is using "lah", "leh", "lor", and other particles at the end of your sentences.	10	22.7%
"Singlish" is broken English.	7	15.9%
"Singlish" is something you have to experience and immerse yourself in in order to understand what it is.	6	13.6%
I can't define/I don't know how to explain "Singlish".	5	11.4%
Number of answers that included at least one of these responses:	34	77.3%

Table 6: Summary of the most common responses to Question 4. Percentage indicates number of responses divided by 44 total responses to the question. Respondents often provided multiple definitions of Singlish.

some respondents to be less frank and honest about their true opinions, instead providing a safer answer that represented the public face of Singapore, rather than their own personal opinions.

4   Discussion

Despite the fact that the SGEM has been in place for ten years, almost one quarter of the respondents stated that they had not heard of the movement. Of those who had heard of it, just under half said that they only knew the name of the movement and nothing more, suggesting that the average Singaporean is not likely to be very aware of the SGEM or its intent. Not including those who were currently working or had worked with the SGEM, only 5 respondents (9.8%) had a strong opinion of the movement, all of which were critical; other respondents did not claim that the SGEM was trying to get rid of Singlish. Whether this was because they personally did not have that opinion or whether they were withholding that opinion is unclear. These findings are counter to the academic and media voices in the debate: The general awareness and feelings towards the movement among the public—or, at least, those I interviewed—was much more apathetic than what the literature represents.

> "I think [the average Singaporean] know[s about the SGEM], and most Singaporeans just laugh at it. We don't take it that seriously, 'cause we know that campaigns go. Campaigns go, and they don't always work, you know."

—Respondent

However, despite the lack of awareness of the movement, the respondents generally (76.2%) regarded Standard English in the same functional, pragmatic terms as the Singapore government has promoted it; however, these responses may have been influenced by the fact that all respondents used Standard English in responding to the questions and were providing their responses—many of which were about the international intelligibility of the language—to a foreigner.

The responses to question 3 suggest that Singlish—whether or not the respondents consider it as "broken English"—still overwhelmingly (85.7%) holds an important place in Singaporean identity and Singaporean life and is also very important in terms of its use as a communicative tool. Finally, the responses to question 4 suggest that lay Singaporeans themselves also have difficulty describing Singlish, even in the absence of strong political and social forces to construct Singlish in a certain manner.

4.1   Singlish as a marker of Singaporean identity

> "English is our first language. We are comfortable with it. But, like every other country, we like to localize it—and therefore, we have Singlish."

—Respondent

In the effort to provide Singapore with a strong financial and economic foundation and thereby stability as a nation, the Singapore government has been pressuring the Singaporean population to be linguistically efficient and pragmatic at the expense of Singaporean identity, therefore emphasizing the need for good English skills. At the same time, the government, in order to distinguish itself from the West, has emphasized that Singapore is an "Asian" city and emphasizes "Asian values", which is problematic in that it does not recognize that these values are often shared by non-Asian societies as well.

The government's strict compartmentalization of language and its simplistic view of language and identity is insufficient to represent the complexities and fluidity of Singaporean identity. In

fact, even the mother tongues themselves are an oversimplification of the racial identities of Singapore's three main ethnic groups—many of the Chinese in Singapore originally did not speak Mandarin at all, instead speaking various Chinese dialects; Indians in Singapore, if they do speak diglossic Tamil, use the low variety in the home, but are taught the high, literary variety in school. Peranakan Chinese originally spoke Baba Malay but are forced to learn Mandarin, a language with which they have little familiarity. Ironically, then, the government's attempts to recognize Singapore's diversity have instead resulted in homogenization and a superficial reassignment of culture and identity. The loss of the Chinese dialects through the Speak Mandarin Campaign already represents an "enormous psychic loss" (respondent) to Singapore, in that much of the knowledge and cultural identity that the dialects carried was lost in the quest to homogenize the Chinese population in order to facilitate communication.

Meanwhile, the importance of Singlish to Singapore and to Singapore's identity has been echoed again and again in the papers, in academic circles (cf. Koh 2010), and among everyday Singaporeans as well, as the responses to my interviews indicate. As Koh states, however, "[Singlish] does not of and by itself define that identity." (Koh 2010: 543) Singlish is an important part of Singaporean identity not because it in itself is seen as the crux of the identity, but because it is seen as representing other qualities that are common to Singapore and describe Singapore as a nation: racial diversity, linguistic diversity, and a common past of mingling together into a culturally heterogeneous society in which different groups live side-by-side. Little India is just a couple streets over from Chinatown; a Christian church, a Buddhist temple, and a Taoist temple can all share the same parking lot; foods from the various racial and ethnic backgrounds fill hawker centers.

> "Singlish is crude precisely because it's rooted in Singapore's unglamorous past. This is a nation built from the sweat of uncultured immigrants who arrived 100 years ago to bust their asses in the boisterous port. Our language grew out of the hardships of these ancestors. And Singlish is a key ingredient in the unique melting pot that is Singapore. This is a city where skyscraping banks tower over junk boats; a city where vendors hawk steaming pig intestines next to bistros that serve haute cuisine. The SGEM's brand of good English is as bland as boiled potatoes. If the government has its way, Singapore will become a dish devoid of flavor. And I'm not talking cock [nonsense]."

> (Tan 2002)

> "Singlish is a cultural asset that is often overlooked 'cause of the miscommunication it can cause. However, if removed completely, Singapore would lose a lot of its flavor and become damn fucking boring, like the corporate world. Everything would be unnecessarily formal and curt."

—Respondent

Despite the government's efforts to promote a sense of national identity and national cohesion, the government has repeatedly denied the real importance of Singlish in this national identity. At the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, where Singapore had the opportunity to present itself to the world, Singapore's promotional video focused on how resource-poor Singapore is, and how, despite there being "no hinterland, no natural resources of its own", Singapore still managed to transform itself from a third-world country into a "first-world oasis." In the construction of Singapore as a nation based on its successes, then, Singlish, constructed as "broken English", has no place. Furthermore, in the construction of Singapore as the optimal place to do business internationally, Singlish is seen as a stumbling block, as something "quaint but unintelligible," and, again, has no place in highly efficient Singapore.

This construction of Singlish as "broken English" is problematic in that (1) it ignores the complexities of Singlish, and (2) it places Singlish in opposition to Standard English and therefore suggests that the two cannot coexist. Regarding the first point, linguists have asserted that Singlish not "broken" or ungrammatical, but rather has a grammar of its own. Its various particles and constructions are indeed linguistically valid and mark various subtleties and nuances in meaning (cf. Bao & Wee 1998, Ho & Wong 2001, Lee et al. 2009). Additionally, the very fact that something can be considered ungrammatical in Singlish—for instance, a speaker would never say "lah okay", but can say "okay lah"—suggests that it does indeed have rules of its own, and its phonology shows a number of consistent rules (cf. Deterding 2007).

Regarding the second point, perhaps in part because of the SGEM, Singlish continues to be perceived as a "deviation" (*English As It is Broken,* preface) of Standard English, as "broken English" (the exact term that six, 11.8%, of the respondents also used), and as "inaccurate" (one respondent), rather than as a separate entity in and of itself. We can see this opposition in this excerpt from *English as It Is Broken*, a collection of English language questions and answers published in the column of the same name in *The Straits Times* and co-produced by the SGEM:

> **7. Singaporeans love "got" meh?**
> **Q.** Please comment on the widely used "got" and "meh" in Singlish, as in "His son got study overseas meh?"

A. In Singapore English, we tend to construct questions the same way we make statements. In Standard English, questions always begin with either a question word (such as "who" and "what") or a verb (such as "did" or "will").

So, in making a statement, we might say, "His son studied overseas."

But if we are asking a question, it should be, "Did his son study overseas?"

"Meh" appears to be operating as a marker to flag the sentence as a question, but it is unnecessary since it should be the word order and structure that indicate whether a sentence is a question or a statement.

However, in conversation, it is possible to indicate a question by using a rising inflection in tone, such as saying "Your son studied overseas (rising tone)?"

"Got" is unnecessary in this case as well. In fact, it is often misused and overused in Singaporean speech.

(*English as it is Broken* 4)

Because it is pitted in opposition with Standard English and viewed as a corruption of standard English, then, officially, Singlish cannot exist in a state of diglossia with Standard English, and Singlish can never be accepted officially as a part of Singaporean identity. At the same time, however, because the SGEM is presented as a movement and not as a campaign—I was corrected when I referred to it as a "campaign" when interviewing a SGEM volunteer—the SGEM and the government have limited power over their ability to control and/or destroy Singlish. It is unclear as to why the government chose to present the SGEM as a movement, rather than as a campaign; the government's success in eliminating the Chinese dialects from Singapore suggests that they could very well do the same in eliminating Singlish from Singapore. But because the SGEM is a movement, constructed in a way that it is meant to be supported by the people, the power ultimately is in the hands of the people.

The people, however, do not seem to show a desire to get rid of Singlish, but rather do recognize the importance of Standard English and choose instead to code-switch between Standard English and Singlish. In fact, seven respondents (13.7%) explicitly used the exact term "code-switching". Furthermore, it does also appear that the government and the SGEM are moving in a direction that is more tolerant of Singlish—or, at least, that recognizes the difficulty of removing Singlish in the framework that has been put in place.

"And ten years later [after the beginning of the SGEM], people write in to the newspaper and say the same thing, like, 'Oh, actually, [Singlish] really reflects us, like how *rojak* [a Malay salad] reflects us; it's a mixture of various things, because it's not exactly defined by any one of the race alone, but it's a mixture and it shows all our unique characteristics and things like that, so we should embrace it. And the government actually didn't write a rebuttal to it. So it's becoming more accepted."

—Respondent

While the SGEM in the past has been more openly critical about Singlish and the use of Singlish, the SGEM appears to have toned down this rhetoric in its recent campaigns, in particular its 2009–2010 program, taglined "Impress. Inspire. Intoxicate." The 2009–2010 program is different in that it no longer focuses on the message of "Speak Well. Be Understood." that previous years focused on; that is, it does not focus on correcting broken English and stressing grammaticality. Rather, it focuses on using English in more creative ways and fostering a sense of pride in the use of good English to be eloquent and to "impress", "inspire", and "intoxicate." This year's program, then, marks an "evolution", as one SGEM volunteer I interviewed called it after I had termed it a "shift".

> "[T]he movement started some ten years ago, or nearly ten years ago, and it was really with a very simple intention: to help those who don't even have a basic grasp of the English language to develop the ability to speak good, simple English. But I think it has evolved; it has come to a point whereby they see the need not just to work with those who are not good with the language, but also to work with those who are good with the language, not with the intent of improving their English—not that those people who are already good don't need to improve; everybody needs to improve—but the intention with those who are already good is to encourage them to become role models, to get them to help those who are not so good develop the confidence, develop the love for the language, so that they will come away using good, simple English on a daily basis, rather than using Singlish, which they think is good English; it's not."

—Respondent; SGEM volunteer

However, this respondent was also firm in stating that to attempt to get rid of Singlish is futile and unrealistic, and that whether or not people speak it is not of importance—rather, the important aspect is ensuring that each Singaporean has the ability to speak "good, simple English," rather than thinking that Singlish is an acceptable form of English for all communication. In any case, the rationale for this shift/evolution is still unclear. On one hand, this movement towards fostering love for the English language suggests a movement towards accepting the language as more than just a tool purely for communicative purposes, but rather also a language in which one can express him- or herself eloquently and creatively. On the other hand, this change could simply represent a shift in the way the government chooses to promote the use of good English and could simply be the same rhetoric in a different wrapper that approaches the use of Standard English in a less aggressive manner.

Can Singlish continue to exist in Singapore, then, and be recognized on a national level? It can be argued that Singlish and Standard English currently exist in a state of diglossia in Singapore, and many have indeed argued just that (cf. Bao & Hong 2006). Indeed, given that the respondents themselves have stated that it is important to recognize the different situations in which Standard English and Singlish are appropriate, it seems that Singlish and Standard English will continue to persist in this state of diglossia or, at least, on different registers. One of the SGEM volunteers that I spoke with was adamant in insisting that the movement was not trying to get rid of Singlish; another stated that the use of Singlish was fine, provided that one already has a strong foundation in standard English.

Regardless of whether or not the government supports Singlish, in order to truly foster a sincere sense of national identity that encompasses what the people truly feel, the government must at least accept that the English language is indeed a carrier of Singaporean culture, and that English is no longer limited to the West; rather, it has become a world language, and even an Asian language in itself as it becomes localized in Asian contexts. More and more Singaporeans are using English at home; more Singaporeans have English as their L1.

However, if the government continues to back the SGEM and the ideologies that are tied with it, it will continue to foster a sense of linguistic insecurity—suggesting that Singaporeans' English is not as good as that of its partners in the West. With such insecurity in place, it becomes difficult to claim the English language as Singapore's own language. Furthermore, this presentation of Standard English by the Singaporean government also ignores the fact that, even in Inner Circle countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia—countries that set norms for English language standards—people continue to have their own dialects and colloquial manners of speech that are also considered non-standard—yet these countries get by perfectly fine in international trade.

It is possible that, despite the government's strong backing of the SGEM, it may never have the same effect as the Speak Mandarin Campaign. Furthermore, as with any multiracial, diverse nation, it is impossible for the government to construct some sort of monolithic identity that represents all of its people—the true building of a nation, then, is up to the people, and, if the Singaporean government wants to create a sense of identity and nationality that accurately represents its people, it must respond to what its people believe is their identity. The reality is that English

is now not only a Western language, but also an Asian language, and that it carries what Singa-porean culture embodies—unlike the "mother tongues", which symbolize the culture and wisdom of outside countries, English, carries the culture of what is within.

> So can we introduce English as the lingua franca in public places, just as Malay was in the days of old? That should be the obvious solution but I think no authority would initiate such a move today.
> But my firm belief is this: **Speaking a common tongue in public places pushes out consciousness about race and its attendant differences.** It should be a language that all, in varying degrees of proficiency, can speak and understand.

(Lee 2009: 5, originally published in *Streats* on January 24, 2003; emphasis in original)

While the government may shift to accepting Standard English as an Asian language and a bearer of Singaporean identity, it is unclear as to whether or not the Singaporean government will ever accept Singlish. On one hand, it seems unlikely, given Singapore's focus on international trade and the need for efficient communication—this mindset has been in place since Singapore's independence in 1965 and seems unlikely to, or slow to, change. However, on the other hand, outside of the SGEM, government-promoted materials have a different take on Singlish, one that acknowledges its place in Singaporean identity, as this excerpt from YourSingapore.com, backed by the Singapore Tourism Board, shows:

> "The presence of other languages, especially the varieties of Malay and Chinese, has obviously had an influence on the type of English that is used in Singapore. The influence is especially apparent in informal English, an English-based creole that is commonly known as Singlish. A badge of identity for many Singaporeans, it represents a hybrid form of the language that includes words from Malay, as well as Chinese and Indian languages."

(YourSingapore.com)

The SGEM's intent is a good one, and it would be difficult to argue with the attempt to support all Singaporeans in learning how to speak English that meets international standards, particularly when we factor in that knowing standard English provides greater class mobility. Furthermore, a volunteer with the SGEM stressed that, if a person chooses not to learn standard English, that does not bar them from being successful in Singapore—a number of successful hawkers can get by knowing very minimal standard English. Thus, it is unlikely that the SGEM would completely fade, given that its basic intent would still continue to be relevant in the future.

Given the loose framework of the movement, however, it is possible that it could adapt to changing attitudes towards Singlish—the basic intent of the movement does not require that Singlish itself must be targeted for removal. Thus, should the government shift towards a tolerant or perhaps even accepting stance towards Singlish, the basic gist of the movement would not need to be changed. Instead of framing Standard English as the "correct" way of speaking a phrase and Singlish as the "incorrect" way to do so, the movement could frame the two in terms of difference, rather than in terms of a deficit with regards to Singlish. That is, instead of stressing Standard English as the "correct" way, the movement could simply stress that the variety they are showing and promoting is the standard variety, not necessarily something more "correct" or better, but simply appropriate for different contexts. Marking something as "right" or "wrong" may be simpler and easier to understand, but it becomes more complicated when representing a diglossic situation.

5 Conclusion

I have shown through a number of interviews with a random sample of educated, younger Singaporeans that the SGEM is, contrary to the image in the papers and in academic debates, more often than not not a very strong presence in the average Singaporean's mind. Despite the lack of awareness of the movement, Singaporeans' attitudes towards Standard English still align themselves closely with the government's utilitarian views towards the language. Furthermore, Singlish is considered a vital aspect of Singaporean identity, not because of the language itself, but because of the diversity and heterogeneity that it represents, two qualities that are seen to represent Singapore and which the government shallowly represents through its current language policy. Rather than its current mother tongue policy, the government must recognize at least Standard English as being a part of Singapore's identity and not solely a language of the West, but also a bearer of Asian identity, as well. Finally, I have suggested that a shift may be occurring within the movement itself, and that, should the government move towards a more tolerant or accepting view of Singlish, the SGEM could still continue to exist with some slight changes to its presentation, and that it could promote good English in a diglossic relation to Singlish.

The question of what forms the basis of one's identity in a multiethnic, diverse state is an issue

that any nation with a heterogeneous population on any front has faced. However, the question has become more pressing because of increased global mobility and intermingling, which blur traditional understandings of identity and make one's identity much more complex. In order for Singapore or any other nation to embrace new identities and changes to one's identity, it must first accept that one's identity is not just a simple matter, but rather complex and multi-layered. For Singapore, the first step is the official acceptance of at least Standard English, and perhaps Singlish, as central bearers of Singaporean identity.

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