

**English in Singapore, a city of migrants:
Standard dialect ideology
and attitudes towards Singlish**

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Abstract

Singapore is a city state whose location and history as a trading post and a British colony has made it a wealthy multiethnic and multicultural country. The history and current trends of migration have resulted in four official languages: English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil. In addition to Standard English Singaporeans use an informal code known as Singlish, which is generally based on English but draws on lexical, grammatical and phonological resources of multiple languages spoken by Singaporeans. This paper investigates negative attitudes towards Singlish expressed by government-related sources such as websites and educational campaigns held in the late 2010's. It begins with defining language prestige and prescriptivism. Then, it describes the sociolinguistic context of English in Singapore, the local Standard English and selected features of Singlish. The main part of this paper is the analysis of texts and videos expressing prejudice against Singlish. The discussion attempts to explain the sources of linguistic ideology in Singapore by referring to ethnolinguistic vitality, historicity and so-called purity. The paper concludes that Singlish is a unique mode of expression for Singaporeans.

Keywords

language attitudes, language ideology, prescriptivism, Singapore, sociolinguistics

**Język angielski w Singapurze, miście migrantów.
Ideologia odmiany ogólnej a postawy
wobec dialektu *singlish***

Abstrakt

Singapur to państwo-miasto, którego uwarunkowania geograficzne i historia jako faktorii i kolonii brytyjskiej sprawiły, że stał się krajem bogatym, wieloetnicznym i wielokulturowym. Historia kraju i współczesne trendy migracji skutkowały uchwaleniem czterech języków urzędowych: są to angielski, mandaryński, malajski i tamilski. Oprócz odmiany ogólnej (standardowej) języka angielskiego Singapurczycy używają odmiany kolokwialnej zwanej *Singlish* (pol. *singlish*, *singlisz*), która jest oparta na angielszczyźnie, jednocześnie czerpiąc z zasobów leksykalnych, gramatycznych i fonologicznych wielorakich języków używanych przez Singapurczyków. Niniejszy artykuł bada negatywne postawy wobec *singlisha* wyrażane w źródłach publikacji rządowych, tzn. witrynach internetowych i kampaniach edukacyjnych, które miały miejsce w drugiej połowie lat 2010-tych. Artykuł zaczyna się definicją prestiżu w języku i normatywizmu. Następnie opisuje uwarunkowania socjolingwistyczne j. angielskiego w Singapurze, lokalną odmianę ogólną j. angielskiego i wybrane aspekty *singlisha*. Główną część artykułu stanowi analiza tekstów i filmów wyrażających uprzedzenie wobec *singlisha*. W części poświęconej dyskusji podjęto próbę wyjaśnienia źródeł ideologii odmiany ogólnej języka angielskiego w Singapurze poprzez odniesienie jej do żywotności, historyczności i tzw. czystości języka. Na koniec wysunięty zostaje wniosek, że *singlish* stanowi jedyny w swoim rodzaju sposób wyrazu dla Singapurczyków.

Słowa kluczowe

postawy wobec języka, ideologia językowa, normatywizm, Singapur, socjolingwistyka

1. Introduction: Language prestige and prescriptivism

Singapore has often been called a “melting pot” of nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, religions and languages; indeed, hardly any expression can better reflect the sheer social complexity of the city state perched on a small island at the southernmost tip of continental Asia. Singapore, with a total population of 5,685,000, including 4,044,000 residents (as of 2020, Department of Statistics Singapore), is a country with as many as four official languages: English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil (Bankowicz 2005: 69, Crystal 2003: 57, McArthur 2003: 338, Wardhaugh 2006: 101, 371), as well as dozens of other languages and dialects, in particular varieties of Chinese. A former British colony, it has also created its unique English-based variety: Singapore Colloquial English, commonly known as Singlish. The nature of Singlish is often controversial for prescriptive and descriptive linguists alike, an issue discussed below. Note that in this paper the name *Singlish* will be used as an axiologically neutral term despite the fact that it is sometimes used as a derogatory word by its opponents, and many linguists thus prefer to call the variety e.g. *Singapore Colloquial English*.¹ It appears that the grammatical (phonological, morphological, syntactic) and lexical disparity between Standard Singapore English and Singlish is far greater than between, say, informal and formal British or American English, which renders the adjective *colloquial* insufficient as a description of Singlish.

The main focus of this paper is the attitudes towards Standard Singapore English, linguistic “correctness” in this variety and the prejudice against the non-standard variety of Singlish that can be found in selected online sources: websites connected to the Singaporean government and related ones. The second part of this paper is a brief introduction to the use of English in Singapore. It is followed by a discussion of what the

¹ Another reason for avoiding the term *Singlish* is its apparent ambiguity, viz. it may also refer to “the learner variety of English in Singapore” (Tan and Tan 2008: 469).

present author has called “the voice of institutions”; this is briefly compared with an analogical situation regarding the use of Mandarin Chinese. The results are compared to discussions presented in recent literature on the topic, namely a set of criteria determining the vitality of a language or dialect in a multilingual environment. It is worth pointing out that this text does not constitute a detailed portrayal of Singapore English as a whole or Singlish, as such descriptions abound (Deterding 2007, Leimgruber 2011, Leimgruber 2012, McArthur 2003) and can be found even in popular works addressed to the general reader (Crystal 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004). Likewise, it is not an exhaustive analysis of Singapore’s language policy, another well described issue. This text was written without assistance from AI language models.

Before the discussion of Singlish, its definition, and its sociolinguistic context begins, it seems appropriate to define two key concepts whose understanding is indispensable in navigating the complexities of the Standard English-Singlish relationship: linguistic prestige and prescriptivism.

1.1. Linguistic prestige

Prestige in linguistics may be connected to single words or grammatical features as well as entire dialects and languages. Thus the question tags *aren’t I* or *am I not?* are generally more prestigious than *ain’t I?* (Matthews 2007: 317), while Standard American English is more prestigious than varieties such as African American Vernacular English, Chicano English or Appalachian English. More generally, standard language varieties and the forms that are typical of them are highly valued while non-standard regional or social dialects and their characteristic forms are not. However, this is but one aspect of the situation, for there exist two types of linguistic prestige, ones which oppose each other and may even be compared to centripetal and centrifugal forces in physics. These types are called *overt* and *covert* prestige.

Overt prestige is the aforementioned quality of the standard dialect functioning in a linguistic community which, according to its users, makes it “correct”, “proper” and therefore acceptable in all manner of formal contexts such as the government, law, schools, universities and colleges, science and technology, arts and literature (particularly the national canon of *belles lettres*), broadcasting (e.g. the news) and generally printed written texts as well as public speeches (for a study of British English speakers’ perceptions of Standard English, see Rataj 2016: 101-105, 126-134). This acceptability is a consequence or the last stage of the process of linguistic standardization, which also includes “selection”, “codification” and “elaboration of function”, terms introduced by Haugen (1966) and employed by numerous linguists since then. It is perhaps not surprising that standard dialects, along with some non-standard or pre-standard ones, enjoy overt prestige not because they possess any particular intrinsic merits but because they are native dialects of the upper classes, viz. people who have economic or political power and are often the most educated speakers (see Crystal 1994: 109). According to Wardhaugh’s (2006: 34) discussion of the selection stage in the standardization process, “The chosen norm inevitably becomes associated with power and the rejected alternatives with lack of power”. British Received Pronunciation (RP), for instance, is regarded as sophisticated because it is associated with the Royal Family – hence the popular, albeit misinterpreted, meaning of the term *the Queen’s English*. It is also connected with the oldest public schools (Eton, Harrow), universities (particularly Oxford and Cambridge, cf. the term *Oxford English*), the radio and television (Roach 2004: 239-240, Wardhaugh 2006: 46-47). As regards the latter, *BBC English* is another popular lay term, even though the BBC’s accent policy is less strict nowadays than it was in the past (see Crystal 2006: 184, Wardhaugh 2006: 47). The overt attitudes towards RP are a consequence of the British prescriptive tradition dating back to the eighteenth century, one in which writers regarded the upper-class southern English accent, which later evolved into RP,

as a major symbol of proper linguistic behaviour, politeness, good education and upward social mobility in a class-based society (as described by Mugglestone 2003: 50-76). Understanding the notion of RP and its popular associations is of key importance in a discussion of Singapore as a former British colony whose standard English is Britain- rather than America-oriented. For native English speakers in Great Britain as well as elsewhere in the English-speaking world pronunciation – called “speaking with an accent” or “without an accent” – tends to be the most salient feature related to the standardness of other people’s speech or, in linguistic terms, overt prestige. This in turn leads to all manner of social judgements, e.g. regarding class, level of education, position in society and even (in America in particular) ethnicity.

If speakers’ language attitudes were guided by overt prestige alone, there would be no need for non-standard language forms, varieties or non-standardized languages, and all speakers in a community would just speak and write the official, codified or upper-class language to the best of their ability. Consequently, there would be no diglossic communities, with the H variety used in all contexts instead, and the eradication of non-prestigious varieties by dialect levelling in other communities would be a rapid and efficient process, e.g. British speakers of English would universally acquire Standard English together with RP.² None of this has been the case and thanks to covert prestige, non-standard or non-upper-class dialects and accents are still in use. RP is a particularly vivid illustration of this: it is used by a low and constantly decreasing number of people in the UK (2 % of the population, according to Crystal 2004: 472, 2006: 184), perhaps not despite but precisely because of its association with the “posh” upper classes (Leith 1997: 55-56, see also

² Incidentally, RP is not always considered to be a defining part of Standard English. According to Crystal (1994: 109), “It is important to note that SE is not a matter of pronunciation: SE is spoken in a wide variety of accents (including, of course, any prestige accent a country may have, such as Received Pronunciation)”.

Rataj 2016: 22). Covert prestige is defined by Matthews (2007: 86) as follows: “The value implicitly attached by members of a speech community to forms or variants which they use quite normally but claim to avoid [...] forms which are overtly proscribed but which reflect the solidarity of each member with the others”. The most significant concept here appears to be that of *solidarity*. In communities speaking a regional or social (class-based) dialect covert prestige makes speakers conform to the linguistic norms of their families, friends and neighbours rather than showing sociolinguistic distance by using the overtly prestigious standard or upper-class language variety. As Matthews points out, speakers may do so unconsciously and even deny using non-standard forms that they do employ occasionally or fairly frequently. Covert prestige is by no means unique to native speakers of working-class or rural dialects: middle-class speakers and educated people also use varieties such as slang and features of vernacular dialects for purposes of in-group solidarity. To illustrate this point, a study by Kiesling (1998, cited in Wardhaugh 2006: 177) showed that a group of male university students in the United States fronted the velar nasal [ŋ] to the alveolar nasal [n] in the *-ing* suffix (i.e. used *-in*) regularly, in informal conversations even 75 % of the time. The students, who might have been expected to aspire to “proper” Standard American English and its academic register, chose instead to employ the lower-class non-standard pronunciation feature which had much appeal to them, symbolizing e.g. “hard work”, “rebelliousness”, “camaraderie” and “independence”. In a similar vein, one should not assume that Singlish is an exclusive domain of the uneducated and the working class: using it may as well be a conscious choice of those who are able and willing to use Standard English at work, school, or other formal settings and it may be appealing in a covert way just as the standard dialect is appealing in an overt way (which is one of the many reasons why diglossia persists in speech communities).

1.2. Prescriptivism

An indispensable part of language standardization, prescriptivism is the practice of presenting standard codified usage as if it were the (only) “proper” way of speaking and writing a given language. Textbooks of linguistics usually contrast prescription with description or prescriptive grammar with descriptive grammar: they mention the difference between writing how a language *is* used and telling speakers how it *should be* used (Aitchison 1981: 27, Matthews 2007: 316). They also tend to mention the difference between grammaticality and correctness or system and (standard) usage. However, this simplified account does not do justice to the complexity of the issue and the mutual dependence of linguistic description and prescription. Firstly, the prescriptive approach is necessary in foreign language teaching (i.e. pedagogical grammars) and, to a certain extent, also in teaching literacy skills in the mother tongue at school. In other words, avoiding linguistic prejudice in the classroom does not mean that standard written usage cannot be presented as the nationwide model for students to follow. Likewise, there exist contexts in which it would be difficult not to enforce consistent use of the standard dialect, at least in writing; hence courses and textbooks for writers, editors and translators, style guides in newspapers and academic journals prescribe just one model with as little optional variability as possible. Secondly, the fact that descriptive linguistics focuses on analyzing standard varieties of languages (Standard British or American English, Putonghua Chinese etc.) renders such accounts very similar to descriptions of “correct” usage, e.g. *The Oxford English Dictionary* is a comprehensive descriptive work which is frequently regarded as an authoritative source on “correct” English vocabulary (Cameron 1995: 8). The various approaches and linguistic traditions that can be observed in different countries (such as so-called “linguistic culture” in Poland, see Rataj 2016) often make it difficult to decide whether a given book or dictionary is concerned with presenting standard usage without much

comment or with telling its readers directly how they should or should not speak or write. Thirdly, although prescriptivism could be expected to slow down or even stop language change so as to prevent the language from what many believe to be “decay” (as discussed by Aitchison 1981), the rules nonetheless change as language changes and linguistic research develops. To provide an illustration, about fifty years ago many EFL textbooks still provided *I/we shall* and *I/we should* as the only “correct” first-person future and conditional/future in the past forms respectively; this has now disappeared, as prescriptive materials are likely to reflect current standard usage, i.e. *will* and *would* for what is known as simple predictions of the future. Likewise, the traditional proscription of grammatical features such as sentence-final prepositions in relative clauses or split infinitives is no longer considered to be of importance in the majority of present-day sources. Such changes in standard varieties of languages can also be observed in post-colonial societies. Depending on the views of codifiers such as textbook and dictionary writers, the alterations may try to follow the standardized language of the former colonizers (exonormative standardization) or steer away from it by reflecting the local use of the language rather than norms of foreign extraction (endonormative standardization). As will be shown, Singaporean prescriptivism displays features of both approaches.

Prescriptivism both as an approach towards language and as its practical outcome in the form of textbooks, grammars and dictionaries is part of two somewhat broader notions which have been described in reference to Standard English. The first concept is “standard language ideology”, which is discussed by Milroy and Milroy (1999) and has often been employed by sociolinguists dealing with language attitudes and prejudice. Milroy and Milroy (1999: 19) claim that spoken language cannot be codified as easily as written language; hence “it seems appropriate to speak more abstractly of standardization as an *ideology*, and a standard language as an idea in the mind rather than a reality – a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to

a greater or lesser extent” [original italics]. Lippi-Green (1994: 166) defines the ideology as “a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogeneous spoken language which is imposed from above and which takes as its model the written language. The most salient feature is the goal of suppression of variation of all kinds”. This top-down approach is of key significance in this characterization, for it reveals the role of codifiers or politically powerful language users imposing their vision of the (standard and thus “correct”) language on the rest of the populace. Needless to say, it is not necessary to regard the ideology as the enforcement of written usage norms in spoken usage – this pertains to the level of formality and/or register rather than the channel or means by which we use language, particularly now that the Internet allows ordinary people to write texts that can be accessed by millions of web users worldwide. The other concept is even broader than standard language ideology, as it encompasses all manner of normative practices: it is Cameron’s (1995) “verbal hygiene”. Instead of contrasting descriptivism and prescriptivism or regarding either approach as superior by definition, Cameron (1995: 5) reminds us that “all [languages] are subject to some normative regulation” and descriptive works are therefore normative as well (1995: 7). Both prescription and description are concerned with verbal hygiene, i.e. “a struggle to control language by defining its nature” (Cameron 1995: 8). A similar approach will be taken in the analysis below: it is impossible to avoid linguistic prescription in a modern society, particularly in areas such as education or publishing, but the questions remain, in Cameron’s words (1995: 11): “who prescribes for whom, what they prescribe, how, and for what purposes”. It will be shown what attitudes can be seen in prescriptive language commentaries in Singapore.

2. English in Singapore

Singapore Island is an optimal location for a trade and military outpost for those wishing to control the flow of people and goods

through the Malacca Strait. Historically speaking, whoever was in control of Singapore Island had an important advantage over other states and rulers in southeast Asia, which eventually resulted in the interest of Europe's colonial powers in the region. When British colonists led by Sir Stamford Raffles of the East India Company established Singapore in 1819, bringing English to the island was a natural consequence of the event. Crystal (2003a: 56) describes the early influence of English on the Federated Malay States, including the founding of *The Straits Times* newspaper in 1845 and the introduction of British education, in the form of English-language schools run by British schoolmasters, to Penang (now Malaysia) in 1816. In this sense, Singapore English was a colonial variety based on British English norms, spread through official use and education in a way comparable to English in India at the time. When Singapore declared independence of Malaysia in 1965, a constitution amendment confirmed English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil as official languages, with Malay given the status of the "national language" (Bankowicz 2005: 69). However, English became the *de facto* language of the government, courts of law, administration, and education, with an increasing percentage of young Singaporeans being raised bilingually in English rather than acquiring or learning it outside of the home (Leimgruber 2012: 3).

2.1. The ethnicities of Singapore

A motif that re-occurs in this paper in different contexts is the multitude of native languages spoken in Singapore. In order to understand why these languages are used, it should first be stated what the ethnic distribution of Singaporeans is. The "Census of Population 2020" infographic (Department of Statistics Singapore) states that 74.3 % of the population are Chinese, 13.5 % are Malays, 9.0% are Indians and 3.2 % are others. The document also provides an almost identical looking chart from 2010 and notes that "Resident ethnic distribution remained stable". When placed in the context of Singapore's geography and

history, the ethnic composition of Singaporean society shows that the majority originally came from the north, i.e. the south of China, with Malays, closest to the area's *ab origine* inhabitants, being the largest minority and people whose ancestors were British colonists so few that they are not singled out in the statistics. Since China and India are large, populous and ancient countries, a simple label like *Chinese* and *Indian* is necessarily a simplification – people's regional roots and languages connected to them (e.g. Hokkien, Tamil as opposed to Mandarin or Hindi) may be felt to be significant as well. It is also true that marriages between different ethnic groups occur in Singapore and assigning a person to one ethnicity or another comes from self-reporting on a census. This also means that a person's ethnicity does not have to be an indicator of their mother tongue(s).

2.2. The role of English in Singapore

As described above, English serves as the lingua franca among the different ethnic groups in Singapore and its use in formal contexts is often taken for granted, even if English is not regarded as one of the ancestral languages of native Singaporeans. Education in Singapore officially became bilingual in 1983, in that apart from learning English, all students, depending on their ethnic origin, are required to study Malay, Mandarin, or Tamil, which are called “mother tongues”. A child's mother tongue is actually determined on the basis of their father's ethnic background – educators do not ask families in which language the child has been raised (ELIS 2018: 3). Since 1987 English has been the only medium of instruction at all levels of education, including universities (Chye 2010: 4, Crystal 2003a: 57, McArthur 2003: 338-339, Waluś 2012: 64). One may note in passing that as of November 2023 the websites of the National University of Singapore and the Nanyang Technological University were available only in English.

Singaporeans pride themselves on their bilingual approach to education, thanks to which students rank high in inter-

national student assessment programmes. As regards English language skills, in the 2020 edition of the worldwide English Proficiency Index by Education First, a worldwide test administered to volunteers who are non-native English speakers, Singapore ranked tenth out of one hundred countries and the first among countries outside of Europe; two years earlier it came in third (EF EPI Singapore 2021). It should be noted that states with a monolingual English majority like the UK or the USA are not included in EF EPI surveys.

English is currently the second most popular home language in Singapore. Leimgruber (2012: 3, 2014: 48), citing Wong (2011) and older sources, notes a dramatic increase in the percentage of households where English is spoken the most often, from 12 % in 1980 to 32% in 2010. Mandarin is first, prevailing in 36 % of Singaporean households according to the 2010 census. Note that the statistics take account of the fact that more than one language is used in numerous families, which means that in many homes English is not used exclusively. Despite the official language policy that denies English the status of an “ancestral” language and wants it to be “culturally voided” (Leimgruber 2012: 2), it has become *the* or *a* mother tongue for a significant number of young Singaporeans.

2.3. Standard Singapore English

The multilingual and multicultural city-state possesses its own standard variety of English, which may be considered “exonormative” (Silver 2005: 57, Wee 2014: 85, 98), in that it generally tends to emulate Standard British English norms. However, nowadays American English also plays a part in shaping popular usage (McArthur 2003: 339). Wee (2014: 85) notes that an “Americanized” English accent is in fashion among Singapore’s radio DJ’s, much as it is criticized by some listeners (the emerging rhoticity, probably resulting from American influence, is noted by Deterding 2007: 21). Furthermore, in their study employing the matched-guise technique Tan and Tan (2008: 470)

recorded a speaker using American English, since they also recognized its popular “connotation of youth and modernity” and its use by some radio DJs in Singapore.

Like other official varieties of languages, Standard Singapore English is codified. It is thanks to products of codification such as grammar books as well as linguistic research that one can learn about the features that distinguish Singapore English on the world stage, mostly common abbreviated terms such as *HDB* “(flat in) a public housing block built by the Housing and Development Board” (Leimgruber 2012: 6) or *MRT* “Mass Rapid Transit”, a metropolitan public transport system including a modern underground (Fong and bin Ahmad 2008: 95-98). It would perhaps be a controversial decision to put some commonly known Singaporean words such as *kiasu* or *ang moh* in the standard or general usage category, which is why they are discussed as part of Singlish below.

Numerous sources (e.g. Chye 2010: 9, Crystal 2002: 296, Crystal 2003a: 174-175, Leimgruber 2014: 46-48, Wee 2014: 90, and above all Silver 2005), provide examples of politicians speaking about the importance of English for Singapore’s participation in international trade, business and politics, which entails the imperative to learn and use standard or “correct” English rather than what is regarded as local “corruptions” of the language. Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, for instance, deplored the use of Singlish in 2001: “Will we then write our own school and university textbooks in Singlish? Will Singlish help you to write a business proposal? Will MNCs [multinational corporations], banks or even local companies prefer to hire you if you speak Singlish instead of Standard English?” (Lee Hsien Loong, 5 April 2001, quoted in Silver 2005: 57, Silver’s explanation in square brackets). His fear is that what is probably a stable diglossic situation – to the extent to which we may call it diglossic – poses a danger to a consistent use of “proper” English in formal contexts and thus to the position of Singaporeans on the international market. It appears that for the politician Singlish stands for the low level or even total lack

of academic or professional standards. A particularly vivid instance, reported by Crystal (2002: 296), was Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's National Day Speech of 1999, in which he warned the nation against speaking Singlish and thus making their utterances unintelligible to foreigners. Goh went as far as calling out the use of Singlish by the protagonist of a popular televised comedy. That motif in the leader's speech received numerous comments. To summarize, Standard Singaporean English is a largely exonormative variety of English which is frequently discussed and described ideologically in opposition to "incorrect" Singlish.

2.4. Singlish: Selected features

Alongside Standard English, there exists the aforementioned dialect called Singlish or Singapore Colloquial English, a variety which has proved difficult to categorize. Some papers call Singlish a type of creole (Chye 2010), English-language Wikipedia also classifies Singlish as a creole variety, whereas other sources (Wee 2014) label it simply as a colloquial variety, though this term is often difficult to interpret. Leimgruber (2012) devotes an entire paper to the different attempts at classifying Singlish: the L variety in diglossia, the informal basilect in DeCamp's (1971) post-creole continuum, Local Singapore English in Alsagoff's (2007) "cultural orientation model" and finally a more complex description based on different levels of indexicality, inspired by Eckert (2008). The term *Singapore Colloquial English* is reminiscent of diglossia. However, as was mentioned above, the labelling of Singlish as the L variety with Standard English functioning as the H variety is a simplification of a complex and dynamic situation (Tan and Tan 2008: 469), particularly in view of the fact that other languages, including several dialects of Chinese, are also parts of Singapore's linguistic mosaic and most people in the state are bilingual. It is impossible to discuss all these issues in this paper. Suffice it to say that Singlish is most easily defined by means of listing its most

important features. It has a relatively simplified grammar, viz. less inflection and structural complexity than Standard English, which generally speaking resembles creole grammar. Hundreds of its words originate from a variety of Asian languages, namely Hokkien, Teochew, Fujianese, Cantonese, other Chinese dialects, Malay and Tamil (McArthur 2003: 341). Finally, it has a number of characteristic phonological features (especially when compared to accents like RP). Below are but a few instances, some of which can be applied to Singapore English as a whole: a smaller set of vowel phonemes, which entails the shortening of long vowels and monophthongization of some diphthongs, frequent realization of dental fricative phonemes as alveolar stops, reduced aspiration, and a syllable-based rhythm as opposed to a stress-based one (a detailed description can be found in Deterding 2007: 12-39, Leimgruber 2014: 49). It is important to note at this point that the percentage of non-standard or creole-like grammar and non-English words as well as sounds may vary to such an extent that some Singlish sentences can be easily understood by English speakers from outside Singapore while others cannot (Crystal 2003a: 165). There is, in other words, no hard-and-fast distinction between what could be regarded as “pure” Singlish and informal but nonetheless standard Singapore English. If anything, it is the presence and number of Singlish shibboleths that set the code apart from e.g. random attempts at speaking Singlish that could be made by a foreign national. Even though Singlish is not universally regarded as a creole variety, the same principle as the one described by Wardhaugh and regarding creoles (2006: 67-68) can be applied here: haphazard simplification of English will not yield an utterance in Singlish or anything easily intelligible to its speakers. In fact, a foreigner’s Singlish, however well-intentioned, could be regarded as a derisive parody of Singaporeans and cause offence.

Since this paper is not an attempt at a detailed portrayal of Singlish, the following quotations from three sources presenting the variety serve only illustrative purposes. The first one

consists of a few sentences that exemplify a number of its grammatical (syntactic and morphological) characteristics (Leimgruber 2011, quoted in Leimgruber 2014: 49):

- (1) (a) *That boat Ø very short one.* (Copula-deletion, emphatic *one* [...].)
- (b) *How much it will be?* (Lack of inversion.)
- (c) *Because she wants to sing mah. So she want to use, she want to join to sing, so we just groom her lor.* (Discourse particles [...].)³
- (d) *Because he want to see how we all talk, normally.* (Non-inflected 3_{SG}.)
- (e) *(That car) very expensive, you know.* (Null subject.)
- (f) *Christmas, we don't celebrate, because we are not Christians.* (Topic-prominence.)

As regards Singlish vocabulary, perhaps the best-known lexical items derived from different languages spoken in the region are *makan* (“food/to eat”, from Malay), *kiasu* (“afraid of losing out”, from Hokkien), *ang moh* (literally “red hair”, a Caucasian person or someone with features associated with Caucasian people, from Hokkien) (Leimgruber 2014: 49). Bars and cafés in Singapore also use the spellings *kopi* and *teh* for *coffee* and *tea* respectively, thus reflecting the local pronunciation. Singlish vocabulary is by no means limited to single words, for its speakers have created a number of longer fixed phrases and idioms, some of them akin to Standard English, some entirely non-English. The examples below and their descriptions come from a popular tongue-in-cheek source, *An Essential Guide to Singlish* (2003: 24-27):

³ Sentence-final particles derived from Chinese dialects and other East Asian languages, such as *lah*, *lor* and *ah*, constitute what is perhaps the most important defining trait of Singlish. They have a variety of functions, e.g. expressing doubt or adding emphasis in a way comparable to question and comment tags in other varieties of English.

- (2) (a) *Catch no ball*. No idea. To misunderstand. Example: “Don’t talk so much about technology, *I catch no ball*, just give me auto focus camera!”
- (b). *Cha si lang*. Noisy. A term that also means “loud enough to wake the dead”. Example: “That building construction next door *cha si lang*. Too much drilling!”
- (c). *Chinese helicopter*. To be Chinese-educated. Often used to describe people who do not speak English. Example: “You know, he’s *Chinese helicopter*, then you ask him a question in Mandarin lah! Talking English, what for?” [original italics]

As can be seen, the examples in the book illustrate the use of Singlish phrases and idioms in a context of sentences which also contain features of Singlish grammar: (2a) contains a zero article instead of an indefinite article before the direct object; (2b) lacks a copula verb *be*; the second sentence in (2c) is an example of the topic-comment structure, and unless *Chinese helicopter* is treated as a proper noun, a zero article is used instead of an indefinite one, even though an indefinite article appears before the noun *question*.

Finally, let us consider a slightly longer passage in Singlish and Standard English. It is not authentic material in the sense that it was prepared and used by Tan and Tan (2008) in their matched-guise study of attitudes towards Singlish and Standard English among Singaporean schoolchildren.

- (3) Passage 1: Today whole day rain, cannot go out mah. Have to stay at home, very sian leh. Hope won’t be lidat for long. What time your appoingment tomorrow? I tink you got to go very early izzit? Maybe we go drink kopi after that? By the way, I finally got my results arredy. Quite jialat la.
- Passage 2: It’s been raining the whole day, so I can’t go out. I hope it won’t hold up. I have to stay at home, it’s really boring. What time is your appointment tomorrow? I think you’ve got to be there quite early, right? How ’bout coffee after that? Oh, by the way, I’ve finally received my results. They’re pretty bad. (Tan and Tan 2008: 470)

Tan and Tan asked their Singaporean speaker, who was also fluent in American English (i.e. bidialectal), to read Passage 1 using Singlish pronunciation and Passage 2 twice, using a standard Singaporean English accent and an American one. This constituted the three guises used to investigate attitudes to Singaporean English, with two “foils” being English spoken by speakers from Indonesia and Hong Kong. The differences between these two passages are clearly visible even in writing since the spelling of some words provided the Singaporean speaker with cues concerning Singlish pronunciation. Apart from phonetics, the passages differ in terms of morphology, syntax and vocabulary; for instance, one may notice the absence of null subjects or borrowings from Asian languages in Passage 2. It is also noteworthy that while Passage 2 is in Standard English, it is still informal, with contractions (*it's*, *won't* etc.) and other features of spoken rather than written usage (*oh*, *right?*, *how 'bout*) making the speaker's utterance more similar in form and – more importantly – function to its Singlish counterpart than a formal text that would immediately strike the informants as mismatching the context of an everyday conversation between friends. This also reminds us that while Singlish is informal by nature, as are L varieties in diglossic communities and creoles in post-colonial societies where they function alongside standard varieties of European languages, Standard English can be written and spoken in a range of styles and registers. As Trudgill (2000: 120) puts it, “English is no different from any other (non-standard) variety of the language. Speakers of Standard English have a full range of styles open to them, just as speakers of other varieties do [...]”. At least theoretically, nothing can prevent a speaker of a non-standard dialect from trying to employ it in a formal style in formal contexts (Trudgill 2000: 120-121), though this use of Singlish does not appear to have been reported.

2.5. Singaporeans as a speech community

In any analysis of the linguistic varieties spoken in large urban centres it is necessary to bear in mind the complexity, heterogeneity and dynamism concerning their speakers. The traditional notion of speech community dating back to the 1960's or earlier times usually proves useful in studies of small rural communities. A case in point is Labov's 1963 study of English spoken on Martha's Vineyard, a small island off the coast of Massachusetts (Wardhaugh 2006: 197-200). However, with regard to entire nations or large cities which have been attracting migrants of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, it is often impossible to pretend that the researcher is dealing with a uniform group. Hence more recent studies of speech communities frequently take account of the diversity of speech communities inhabiting large cities and study local varieties which are used by speakers of different backgrounds (e.g. Multicultural London English as studied by Cheshire, Hall and Adger 2017).

Like other large urban centres and capital cities, Singapore is inhabited by native speakers of a multitude of languages – the more so if we take into account the diverse dialects of Chinese – and its native speakers of English are by no means a homogeneous group: some are locals raised in Singapore English and others are immigrants/expatriates from other English-speaking countries (the UK, the USA, Australia, India and the former British territory of Hong Kong). Singapore is a wealthy and significant business centre attracting migrant workers from all walks of life. It is also a post-colonial state, which makes its use of English similar to that in some other English-speaking countries in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. Arguably, all these factors and many more (age, gender, education, religion, profession, class etc.) determine Singaporean English speakers' use of Singlish and Standard Singaporean English, and their attitudes to both these varieties.

The reason why this diversity must be borne in mind is that for the purposes of a study of a language variety such as

Singapore English one needs to treat its speakers as one speech community although in fact one is dealing with a complex and dynamic network of speakers with different beliefs, attitudes, and ambitions, people for whom English is either the first or a second language. Within Singapore, just as in any other larger community, it is possible to distinguish communities of practice, i.e. groups of people whose sense of togetherness is determined by the way their members meet, act, and therefore interact verbally. According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992):

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a community of practice is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464)

Different communities of practice require or motivate the use of different styles, registers and even separate dialects, as is the case in diglossic communities; hence it is perfectly possible for the same Singaporean speaker to use Standard English on some occasions, Singlish on other occasions and another language or dialect (Malay, Tamil, Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin) on yet other ones. As will be shown below, it is not only linguists who should be aware of this multilingualism and multidialectalism of Singaporean citizens, particularly with regard to standard and non-standard English.

3. Standard language ideology in Singapore English: Government-related websites

Discussions concerning linguistic prescriptivism in Singapore and reactions to Singlish typically begin with the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), a government campaign which promotes English language “correctness” among Singaporeans and

the Speak Good Singlish Movement, a Facebook page whose anonymous authors express their support for the vernacular. A third popular source is Talking Cock, a satirical website that frequently uses Singlish and features “The Coxford Singlish Dictionary” consisting of over 800 entries. The SGEM in particular has been analyzed by several researchers, including Cavallaro and Chin (2009), Chye (2010), Leimgruber (2014) and Wee (2014), the latter focusing on the Singlish response to the governmental policy of prescriptivism. Besides, the Talking Cock website has been discussed by Chye (2010). This study pays somewhat less attention to the well-analyzed sources and focuses instead on some of the activities of the SGEM and the English Language Institute, part of Singapore’s Ministry of Education, in the latter half of the 2010’s.

3.1. The Speak Good English Movement

The Speak Good English Movement is a long-term campaign and organization whose activities resemble those of a language academy such as the Académie Française of France or prescriptivist language societies such as the Queen’s English Society of Great Britain. The SGEM began in 2000 under the auspices of the government, then headed by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, and has conducted a series of annual or longer campaigns with different leitmotifs and involving different activities: the publishing of new grammar books, language guidance, the promotion of book reading among children and adolescents, music and drama using “correct” English etc (SGEM). As can be seen, most of the activities and events are addressed to children, teenagers and occasionally young rather than older adults. The website states the following about the objective of the SGEM: “We encourage Singaporeans to speak grammatically correct English that is universally understood”. On the same page one can read that “[t]he English language is a complex one and the resources on this site are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to illustrate common usage of the language” (SGEM). There are two

questions that suggest themselves here: first, what is “correct English”, grammatically or otherwise? and second, how is common usage related to standard or “correct” usage? Some documents released by the SGEM reveal somewhat more. For example, the press release of the 2014 launch of the campaign quotes its Chairman Goh Eck Kheng as saying: “We are committed to encouraging Singaporeans to speak Standard English that is used all over the world” (SGEM 2014: 1). A similar statement, albeit a slightly confusing one, is to be found below in the same document: “Standard English is English with correct grammar and pronunciation, and is not about accent,” (SGEM 2014: 3, also Leimgruber 2014: 48). It is interesting that the notions of “accent” and “pronunciation” are not equated and that no mention is made of vocabulary or style (formality). It may be noted at this point that no further explanation of “correctness” can be found and that accent, however defined, occupies a large part of the website. To be precise, it has a pronunciation guide that “contains a list of commonly mispronounced words with correct audio pronunciations and definitions in a Singaporean voice” (SGEM). However, the accent recorded sounds considerably similar to British RP.

In 2014 the SGEM launched its annual campaign promoting “good” English grammar. The project involved a series of six short comedy videos probably intended for younger viewers that were added on YouTube. In the videos the Queen of Grammar of the Land of Good English, portrayed by the Singaporean comedian and drag artist Kumar, fights against the spell put on the land by the jealous queens of the neighbouring lands. The curse is none other than “bad” English resembling Singlish. The Queen travels around her realm to “bring peace and good English back again” (“Queen of Grammar - Episode 1” on YouTube). In the series the Queen, accompanied by Jester, encounters subjects who make the following errors: the use of the past tenses to refer to the present (Episode 1), non-standard word order, the word *irregardless*, the comparative form *more better* and shifted word stress (Episode 2), the use of *many* instead of

much with uncountable nouns such as *money* (Episode 3 – here the Queen is absent and Jester takes over), misused prepositions of place as in *between your head* (“over”), *in your side* (“by”), *after your back* (“behind”) (Episode 4), inconsistent subject-verb concord shown by characters who are conjoined twins (Episode 5) and finally the seemingly vague expression *a lot of people* instead of more specific collective nouns such as *a crowd*, *a congregation*, *an audience* or *an army* (Episode 6). In the final episode the Queen’s knights report that her castle is under siege, at which point the Queen delivers a short speech declaring that “good English” will be her army’s weapons in the battle. The Queen of Grammar also appeared live on stage in The Arts House.

Several conclusions could be drawn from the imagery used in the Queen of Grammar series: the government (the Queen) knows best how people should speak, speaking “bad” English such as Singlish is a curse while learning to speak “good” English stands for being cured of the affliction. Apparently, the protagonist is also based on the popular misinterpretation of Henry Alford’s term *the Queen’s English*.⁴ It is also interesting that the curse does not come from within but was put on the land by evil outside forces which can be defeated only by means of correct English. The probable idea of the creators is that if Singaporeans are shown that Singlish, in its various manifestations fought by the monarch, is not a natural part of their life, perhaps they can be more easily persuaded to abandon their vernacular.

⁴ The term *the Queen’s English* does not in fact stand for the native dialect of the British monarch. It was first used by Henry Alford in his book *The Queen’s English: Stray Notes on Speaking and Spelling*, published in 1864. He writes thus: “The Queen (God bless her!) is, of course, no more the proprietor of the English language than any one of us. Nor does she, nor do the Lords and Commons in Parliament assembled, possess one particle of right to make or unmake a word in the language,” (Alford 1864: 2). Just like “the Queen’s Highway”, “the Queen’s English” means that it is supposed to serve everyone in the nation: “It is, so to speak, this land’s great highway of thought and speech” (Alford 1864: 2).

“Improve your English” is a large part of the website containing advice on “correct” English usage. Apart from the aforementioned pronunciation guide, it includes book recommendations, a grammar guide, a list of common errors, spelling tips and some other categories. One of the more interesting and perhaps also controversial texts is “Tips for Parents”, divided into twenty-nine short texts with advice and examples of standard and non-standard usage. It focuses on advice on parent-child interaction which avoids errors, namely features of Singlish as well as offers hints on making children interested in reading literature. For instance, here is most of the text entitled “Finding out if your child has eaten”:

Are you a parent or a childcare provider? If you are, here’s a challenge for you.

Be a role model to your children. How many times have you asked your child, “*You eat breakfast/ lunch / dinner already?*”

I’m sure you’re aware that this sentence is incorrect. Yet, adults say it all the time out of convenience instead of saying “*Have you had your lunch?*” or “*Have you eaten?*”

Children learn and imitate what they see and hear. Parents play an important role in helping children on speaking right [sic].

Take on the challenge to become a good role model for your children. (“Tips for Parents”, SGEM) [original italics]

The following is a fragment of another text, entitled “Are you a bad influence?”:

“I tell you how many times already?”

Many parents say this in exasperation when their children or domestic help make the same mistakes repeatedly. This is a common non-Standard English phrase that has steadily crept into everyday language at home.

Imitating the Adults

Have you heard your child using your exasperated expressions? They will use the same words or phrases and even the way you say them. Adults often joke about how their kids learn and

imitate. Don't just laugh it off; remember that your kids may be picking up improper English from you.

Kids Don't Know Better

You may be able to switch between using proper English at work and non-Standard English at home. But often kids do not see you at work and they only hear you speaking at home. ("Tips for Parents", SGEM) [original italics and boldface]

In both of these texts one may easily notice the same attitude: Singlish or more generally informal spoken English usage is equated with "bad" or "incorrect" English – these terms being used alongside the linguistic label *non-standard* – and parents are urged not to speak in this way in the presence of their children lest their offspring acquire such "improper" features. In a way reminiscent of other East Asian cultures ("tiger parents" or "helicopter parents", as described in Singaporean society by Chong Siow Ann 2016) the tips state directly that parents are supposed to be good role models for their children, also educationally, hence they need to be careful how they behave linguistically so as not to be "a bad influence". The second fragment, "Are you a bad influence?", contains direct reference to the different styles and registers of English used at work and at home, i.e. usage that could be compared to diglossia. Parents are advised to be on their best linguistic behaviour at home just as they are in the workplace even when expressing strong emotions such as "exasperation". The idea of parents making an effort is also present in the tip "Finding out if your child has eaten", namely in the words that the present simple tense instead of the present perfect is used "out of convenience" and yet parents should make sure that their children hear the correct (standard) model. The conclusion that can be drawn from these and other tips is that education begins at home and parents are supposed to avoid Singlish themselves, correct it when they hear their children use it, and encourage (but not force) their children to develop their literacy by reading books.

As far as the notions of linguistic correctness propagated by the SGEM are concerned, one may find evidence for linguists' claims regarding the exonormative character of language codification in Singapore by looking at the books and online guides that the SGEM website recommends to its visitors for further reference ("Book recommendations", SGEM). A look at the books on language suggested to adults shows that most of them have been published outside Singapore and in fact deal with either British or American English, e.g. Glatzer (2003) and Rozakis (2005) were published in the United States and Wajnryb (2005) in Australia. As for the online sources, two of the websites are American, one is British, and two deal with both British and American English. It is also worth noting that the suggestions include sources for native speakers of English as well as websites that are clearly intended for EFL learners.

The SGEM website and YouTube channel contain a good deal of other material worth studying, the recurrent motif being a direct comparison of Singlish to "bad" English and the importance of making children and adolescents aware of the necessity to speak Standard English instead. There also exist other sources which complement the image of the prescriptivist language policy of Singaporean authorities.

3.2. The English Language Institute of Singapore

Singapore's Ministry of Education is another major source of statements concerning the role of English, in particular Standard English, in the country's progress. The Ministry is in charge of the English Language Institute of Singapore (ELIS), an organization supporting the teaching of English in Singaporean schools. It should be noted here that the following description comes from an analysis of the website conducted in 2015 and updated in 2018; since then the website has been moved to another address and many of the texts have been archived, rewritten or removed (Academy of Singapore Teachers 2021). In 2015 ELIS defined its mission as follows: "To drive excellence in the

teaching, learning and use of the English language in Singapore schools” (ELIS 2015). The “About” section of the website frequently emphasizes the significance of communicating clearly and effectively, yet it avoids overt references to Singlish. One of ELIS’s flagship projects is the Whole School Approach to Effective Communication (WSA-EC), whose description included phrases such as “importance of good English and its role in effective communication”, “[students] express ideas clearly and precisely, and where appropriate, in multimodal ways” and “[teachers] role-model use of Standard English when communicating with students” (ELIS 2015). The prominent motif here is the focus on clarity and effectiveness of “good” English in all the classes taught in the language.

While the information presented above is very general and rather uncontroversial – the value of a shared code which is intelligible to all speakers concerned is undeniable – it is enough to enter the word *Singlish* in the ELIS website search box to come across a number of opinions strongly prejudiced against Singlish and labelling it as “bad English”. A typical example is a short video interview with Carol Kuok, a secretary whose job involves writing and speaking “correct” English. In the video she talks about Singlish in a derogatory manner and presents the linguistic features which she particularly dislikes, such as non-standard verb forms as well as more general opinions about English language standards supposedly declining in Singapore and thus impeding understanding. Singlish, Kuok claims, is something that shows Singaporeans “in a bad light” and should therefore be eliminated for the sake of effective communication with the world. Since Kuok is not a linguist, her purist attitude is perhaps not surprising. The video is accompanied by a few questions containing quotations from Kuok’s opinions, e.g. “The standard of English has dropped to the point that it is hard to understand people.’ Do you agree with Ms Carol Kuok’s statement in this clip?” or “What are your views on code-mixing? In this clip, Ms Carol Kuok says that such utterances do not put Singaporeans in a very good light in the international arena”.

(“Carol Kuok”, ELIS 2015). These and other questions asked below the clip leave little room for interpretation: Standard English is presented as the only proper variety of English and Singlish as inherently incorrect and difficult to understand. Thus it may be assumed that the ELIS accepts Kuok’s prejudice against Singlish and expects the viewer to agree.

Another case in point is an article by Koh co-written with several Physical Education teachers and specialists. The aim of the article is to emphasize the importance of what is called “effective communication” in English-language PE classes, in view of the fact that groups of schoolchildren in Singapore are likely to be multilingual. The advice, apart from recommending brevity and clarity of instructions as such, also includes such phrases as “Eliminate all Singlish [...]” and “Communicate and instruct using only Standard English”. The most dramatic sentence in the article reads thus: “Teachers who lack clarity when giving instructions during PE will affect student learning behaviour and outcomes, with the possibility of injuries occurring”. One may draw the conclusion that if using Singlish makes instructions unclear and lack of clarity may lead to injury, then Singlish with its alleged imperfections is potentially dangerous to children playing sports. This arguably sends a very strong message to teachers and parents alike.

The views cited in the aforementioned paragraphs present the ELIS as if it were a society of language prescriptivists, not a government organization employing linguists or educators. However, the former is not the case, for the website also contains information about the English language teaching policies created and implemented (or at least recommended) in the classroom. A large part of the website is devoted to reports on research into teaching literacy skills and other language-related issues in Singaporean schools. The *ELIS Research Digest*, for example, is an open access brochure in PDF format which outlines various issues of interest to the public, in particular addressing English teachers. The website specifies its objective as follows: “The series aims to focus on English language-related

issues of immediate interest to the education sector in Singapore. Each issue of the ELIS Research Digest reviews theory and research in a targeted area and summarizes the results” (*ELIS Research Digest*, ELIS). For instance, volume 5 of 2018 is entitled *Students from Diverse Language and Cultural Backgrounds* and focuses on the importance of recognizing the needs of learners brought up in various home languages and thus arriving at school with varied English skills. This pertains particularly to children of immigrants who spent the first years of their lives outside Singapore or another English-speaking country.

Interestingly, compared to the video featuring Carol Kuok or the article by Koh et al., the ELIS Research Digest (vol. 5, issue 1, 2018) presents Singlish in a different light. It describes the linguistic situation of education in Singapore in the first decades of its independence. English was used by teachers as the common medium of instruction and communication and some students replied to (Standard) English by using Singlish. ELIS (2018: 3) reports as follows:

Hornberger and Vaish (2009) noted that Singlish was often blamed for what was described as the low standards of spoken English in Singapore. However, it was also seen as something quintessentially Singaporean by many and so represented “being Singaporean” as well as or even better than the Mother Tongues. (...) Hornberger and Vaish (2009) suggested that allowing some use of the Mother Tongues and Singlish in the classroom could give some students the resources they needed to better access English and improve their overall language skills.

Even though these words are a citation from Hornberger and Vaish (2009) and not claims made directly by a writer at the ELIS, the fact that they are included and left without a negative comment shows that the author of the digest does not share the prescriptivist views that can be found elsewhere on the ELIS website. The citation from Hornberger and Vaish (2009) is then followed with Dixon’s (2005) discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of mother tongue focus in bilingual education. Dixon

notes that while the insistence on English has allowed Singaporean students to score very highly in international tests, namely PISA, it has also caused students of Chinese origin to become less skilled at writing Chinese characters than young Chinese in China as well as more interested in reading books in English than in Chinese in their free time (ELIS 2018: 3-4). Singlish is mentioned further in the document in a citation from Pua, Lee and Rickard Liow (2017), who note that the use of Singlish by children, in particular features such as simplified verb inflection, may cause teachers to believe that such children have limited verbal skills. Fortunately, when combined, standardized tests, teacher reports and conversations with parents can lower the risk of misjudging a child's abilities (ELIS 2018: 8-9). The report concludes by emphasizing the significance of giving an equal chance to all children in Singaporean schools, regardless of their home language. To summarize, it may be claimed that by discussing the advantages and disadvantages of its current language policy the ELIS uses self-reflection rather than promotion of standard language ideology.

3.3. A different language, the same concerns: The Speak Mandarin Campaign

Although Singaporean Chinese is not the focus of this paper, the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) is arguably worth mentioning since it is based on a premise analogical to that of the Speak Good English Movement: the use of (Standard) Mandarin Chinese should be encouraged, as opposed to non-standard dialects whose native speakers inhabit Singapore. Just as the exornormative version of Standard English is distant geographically from Singapore, so is Mandarin, a variety of Chinese considerably different from the southern Chinese dialects that are spoken by numerous people in Singapore (Hokkien, Teochew, varieties of Cantonese etc, see Leimgruber 2012: 2, Leimgruber 2014: 58). Mandarin possesses greater overt prestige as the official variety in China, a language of business, diplomacy and

education. The SMC is older than the SGEM, having been launched in 1979 by the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, and its objectives are considerably similar to those of the SGEM in that it regards the standard language as a factor unifying Chinese Singaporeans of different linguistic (dialectal) backgrounds; speaking Mandarin is supposed to be intertwined with “an appreciation for the Chinese culture, heritage and language” (“About the campaign”, SMC). Similar to the SGEM website, the SMC website contains information about the literary, cultural and educational events organized as part of the campaign, learning tips such as vocabulary posters and infographics (accompanied by English translation on the English version of the website), and even a competition for parents and children (SMC). For the people involved in running the SMC, Mandarin, like Standard English for the SGEM, stands for a/the good language, one that is worth speaking and promoting. There is one major difference, however, which lies in the way that the two campaigns treat the respective non-standard varieties: while Singlish is clearly labelled “bad” and “incorrect”, no dialect of Chinese appears to be thus stigmatized on the SMC website. The probable reason for this is the relative novelty of Singlish when compared to the recognisable historicity⁵ of Chinese dialects.

4. The background of standard language ideology in Singapore English

The analysis of government websites conducted above shows rather clearly that Standard Singapore English enjoys overt prestige and is the model promoted by the Singaporean authorities not only in highly formal contexts but also in everyday oral communication. Standard language ideology in its Singaporean

⁵ Historicity is the feeling on the part of speakers “whether or not the language has grown up or grew up through use by some ethnic or social group. The possession of this attribute clearly divides L1 languages from L2” (Bell 1976: 148).

manifestation consists in promoting Standard English in opposition to Singlish as well as Mandarin Chinese in opposition to non-standard Chinese dialects. The situation regarding English is well known to linguists and has been widely analyzed. For instance, Alsagoff (2007: 39, quoted in Leimgruber 2012: 7) contrasts the features of “International Singapore English”, i.e. the exonormative standard variety of the language and “Local Singapore English”, i.e. Singlish: “International Singapore English: globalism, economic capital, authority, formality, distance, educational attainment; Local Singapore English: localism, socio-cultural capital, camaraderie, informality, closeness, community membership”. The following part provides more details to the claims regarding the roles of and attitudes towards Standard Singapore English and Singlish which have been put forward by Alsagoff, Leimgruber, and other linguists cited throughout this paper.

4.1. Singapore English and ethnolinguistic vitality

The vitality of a language or dialect, i.e. the extent to which it is used by a community of native speakers and its chances of survival in the foreseeable future, can be analyzed in detail thanks to an extended notion of vitality which combines the work of sociologists and linguists. This is known as ethnolinguistic vitality; its basic contributory factors are specified in Table 1.

Meyerhoff (2011) discusses ethnolinguistic vitality in a chapter on bilingualism and multilingualism, in which she also analyzes the linguistic situations of several postcolonial nations. In a similar vein, it is possible to contrast Singlish and Standard Singapore English by referring to some of the aforementioned factors.

Table 1

Factors contributing to ethnolinguistic vitality (Giles, Bourhis and Taylor 1977, quoted in Meyerhoff 2011: 113)

Vitality		
Status	Demography	Institutional support
Economic status Social status Sociohistorical status Language status -within; -without	Distribution: national territory, concentration, proportion Numbers: absolute birth rate, mixed marriages, immigration, emigration	Formal: mass media, education, government, services Informal: industry, religion, culture

Firstly, as regards the Status elements, it is clear that while Standard English is significant in all the categories, Singlish, being a vernacular variety common to Singaporeans, also enjoys covert prestige and as such has some social status. Since it may be said to continue the mode of communication which produced Bazaar Malay and other contact varieties spoken in the region in the past, Singlish perhaps has sociohistorical status as well (despite arguments to the contrary, see below). The status of Singlish is definitely oriented towards intracommunity use in Singapore, while Standard English allows its speakers to communicate with representatives of the outside world in Singapore, abroad, and on the Internet (intercommunity use).

Secondly, the Demography factors, which will not be analyzed in full here, are substantial as Singapore is a significant hub of international business, education, and research. The local roles of English as a native, second, and foreign language are therefore dynamic, with migrant manual labourers, foreign students, sea people, and corporation employees – some of them native English speakers – contributing to the multifariousness of the city state. These factors help exonormative Standard English rather than Singlish to spread and they are not infrequently

mentioned by politicians. More importantly, one may observe the fact that both Standard English and Singlish are not limited to parts of the city but appear to be widely used in every district of Singapore. Furthermore, no native Singaporeans appear to be monolingual speakers of Singlish (for using it requires drawing on the resources of other languages); likewise, it would be difficult to find speakers of Standard Singapore English who were raised in Singapore and yet are entirely unfamiliar with Singlish.

Finally, Standard Singapore English benefits from both formal and informal institutional support. The formal support manifests itself not only in official government-related documents or on the news in the mass media, but also in other places where in more typical diglossic communities the H variety (acrolect) is widely used and considered more appropriate than the L variety (basilect). Nonetheless, Singapore's popular culture occasionally employs Singlish for various purposes, again mostly in products addressed to Singaporean rather than international audiences. ELIS website also mentions the use of Singlish at school, which demonstrates that some teachers tend to use features of Singlish in less formal instruction or general classroom communication and probably also tolerate the occasional use of Singlish on the part of their students (one needs to be careful in this suggestion, hence the phrase "features of Singlish" instead of "Singlish", since the latter word would indicate its consistent use). Singlish has also become part of Singapore's literature: for instance, Gwee Li Sui writes poetry in Singlish (Ho 2017), as did Arthur Yap, whose 1981 poem *2 mothers in a hdb playground* is a Singlish exchange between two women talking about their children (quoted in Crystal 2003b).

To conclude this part, one may notice that more elements of ethnolinguistic vitality can be ascribed to Standard Singapore English, particularly as regards Status and Institutional support factors; however, Singlish is also widely used, though naturally in less official or formal contexts than the standard variety, and can even become a medium of literary expression.

4.2. Historicity and purity

The fact that Standard Singapore English is overtly considered superior to Singlish may be related to two more factors, namely historicity and purity. Historicity, as defined in a footnote above, causes speakers to regard older language varieties, ones connected to tradition and folklore, as more prestigious than fairly recent ones (pidgins, different types of jargon or slang). Thus ancient dialects of Chinese spoken in Singapore are more likely to be treated as symbolizing culture and tradition than Singlish, whose history is short in comparison. Even if it is suggested that Singlish continues the tradition of trade languages such as Bazaar Malay, its sociohistorical status is hardly comparable to that of Chinese, Malay or Tamil dialects. The other significant feature is purity, a notion that would perhaps require inverted commas since there are no “pure” languages. It is part of “*Mixture* – whether or not the language consists essentially of items and structures derived from no source outside itself” (Bell 1976: 152) [original italics]. Singlish by nature combines different phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical elements of a variety of languages and dialects spoken natively by Singaporeans, with general informal English being similar in function to superstrate languages in pidgins and creoles. Just as pidgins and creoles usually enjoy little respect from their users as well as outsiders, so does Singlish when compared to “pure” English. Needless to say, this is all a matter of perception, since Standard English vocabulary contains so many non-Germanic items originating from French, Latin, and other languages that regarding it as “pure” is ideological. Though not taken seriously by descriptive linguists, linguistic purity is nonetheless a significant part of the popular perception of languages and dialects, and may affect the vitality of a variety if a standard language is considered superior and promoted as such by official bodies like government-related language academies.

5. Conclusions

From the examples presented it can be inferred that while Singapore's policy makers and educators are aware of the features of Standard English, in most cases they can see no merits whatsoever in Singlish. Standard English is supposed to be clear, precise, and useful at work, in particular on the international market. It is equal to "good English" at school not only as a subject *per se* but also as the only acceptable medium of instruction. Furthermore, it is the defining trait of the Land of Good English, whose queen needs to heal her curse-stricken subjects. Just as the Queen of Grammar represents something foreign and probably British, so does the kind of English that closely resembles Standard British English and that can even be studied and practised thanks to British and American books and websites. The government sources analyzed here use the words "good", "correct", "grammatical" and "standard" in reference to English without really explaining what they mean by them: this shows that the sociolinguistic perspective is wholly absent from the SGEM website and most of the ELIS website. As regards Singlish, on the other hand, it is not always mentioned by name, however all local forms of non-standard English are seen as barbarisms that have to be eradicated. The vernacular is seen as an annoyance, a flaw visible to the outside world (Chye 2010: 5) and a source of confusion and miscommunication that may even lead to injuries in sports. Finally, it is a spell put on the land by its enemies and speaking it can even be interpreted as a sign of disobedience to the allegorical Queen of Grammar. Good subjects can please the Queen by learning to speak "proper" English and the message to Singaporeans is the same: they are to abandon "bad" English (Singlish) in order to be better citizens. The imagery of a curse is strongly reminiscent of the words used by the PM Lee Kuan Yew, who called Singlish "a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans" (Chye 2010: 9).

Linguistic prescriptivism does not have to involve fighting against the use of vernaculars in everyday life. Crystal (2006:

102) uses the LANGUAGE IS CLOTHING metaphor by claiming that we use different forms of language for different occasions just as we dress differently depending on the circumstances and adds, “The more types of clothing we have, the better. But having a large and varied wardrobe is only useful if we have developed a ‘clothes sense’”. If the vast majority of Singaporeans avoided Standard English altogether and insisted on using Singlish in all walks of life, including international business and academia, campaigns promoting the learning of Standard English and keeping Singlish confined to informal situations would perhaps be more justified. However, seeing that Singaporeans know when to speak Singlish and when to avoid it (Chye 2010: 22-23), the government’s prescriptive practices are not about developing people’s linguistic equivalent of a dress code or fashion sense but rather talking them into wearing the most formal suits and dresses all day every day, regardless of what they do and to whom they speak.

A different, more objective attitude can be seen in the issue of *ELIS Research Digest* (2018) discussed above. Although the document does not actually recommend the use of Singlish in education, it offers some hope in that it includes suggestions of other researchers that Singlish could support communication in the school environment just as the so-called “mother tongues”. Likewise, it cites a suggestion that a small child using Singlish is not linguistically challenged even though some non-standard features of Singlish grammar could be mistaken for limited verbal skills. Among all the government-related material discussed above only this document displays a degree of linguistic tolerance.

Does anyone need Singlish? The answer is yes. People who are descendants of several ethnic groups speaking a variety of languages and dialects arguably need a common code, something that is uniquely Singaporean, uniquely theirs. In the unofficial contexts of everyday life they do not wish to communicate using a largely exonormative version of a standardized language, one reminding them perhaps of their country’s colonial

past. Like other postcolonial nations Singaporeans have reinvented the language of their former colonizers to suit their needs. The fact that the Singaporean government does not seem to appreciate this duality of English-language communication suggests that it refuses its people the right to shape their linguistic identity on their own. It remains to be seen how its language policy, particularly in education, will be shaped, i.e. whether standard language ideology will yield to a focus on tolerance and equal opportunities for Singaporeans.

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