

International Journal of Language, Translation and Intercultural Communication

Vol 1 (2012)

Special Issue: Varieties of English



English in Singapore

Peter K W Tan

doi: [10.12681/ijltic.14](https://doi.org/10.12681/ijltic.14)

To cite this article:

Tan, P. K. W. (2012). English in Singapore. *International Journal of Language, Translation and Intercultural Communication*, 1, 123–138. <https://doi.org/10.12681/ijltic.14>

English in Singapore

Peter K W Tan, *National University of Singapore*

Abstract

This article discusses the various ways in which it is possible to theorise about the varieties of English in the world, in particular Kachru's (1982) concentric circle model and Schneider's (2007) phases of development in post-colonial varieties of English and I try to fit Singapore English into these models, although in both cases there are some difficulties. I then provide the historical background to how English was spread to South-East Asia and note that English is moving towards first-language status. The key phonological, grammatical, lexical and discourse are outlined. I end by discussing some of the key elements to remember when considering non-Anglo Englishes like Singapore English.

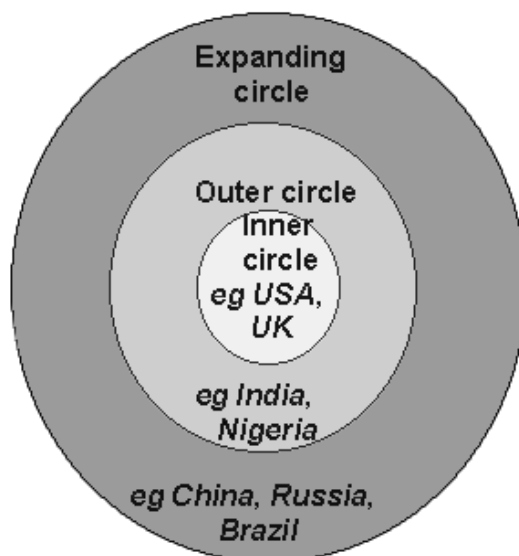
Keywords: English, Singapore, Singlish, Non-Anglo Englishes.

1. Ways of theorising English in the World

It is generally accepted that English spread during the time of empire building through *settlement colonies* or through *exploitation colonies* (Mufwene 2001), the former involving relatively large scale population movement such as that of English speakers from the British Isles to North America or to Australia. Singaporean English or Singapore English (SgE) will obviously be a variety that developed in the context of an exploitation colony. Among the key points in the contrast with settlement colonies in North America and Australia and New Zealand, on the one hand, and the former colonies of Malaya, India, Ceylon (as well as those in Africa and Central America), on the other would be that: the exploitation colonies were not repopulated with British settlers, although the colonial government might have encouraged migrant labour for the various industries and economic activities developed then; although English was adopted for administrative purposes in the exploitation colonies, the population continued (at least initially) to employ the vernacular languages so that there was multilingualism (and multiculturalism); the settlement colonies were not necessarily, and often not, multilingual; the exploitation colonies experienced the spread of English through its 'leaching' downwards as parts of the local population began to receive English-medium education and began to be employed as clerks in the colonial governments.

The character of the English language in the settlement colonies and the exploitation colonies therefore are different. Initially, the terms native (or mother-tongue or L1) varieties and non-native or L2 varieties were used to reflect the fact that in the case of the former, there was no break in natural transmission - in

other words, each generation learnt the English language from the previous generation. (L1 stands for 'first language'; L2 stands for 'second language'.) The Indian-born linguist Braj Kachru (1982) adopted another way of representing English varieties in the world in the form of three concentric circles (diagram on the right), and this model has been very influential. The inner circle contains the Anglo Englishes ('Older Englishes') and includes the UK, the USA, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand: English is the primary language in many situations for these nations. The outer circle (or extended circle) contains the non-Anglo Englishes (NEs, 'New Englishes'). The spread



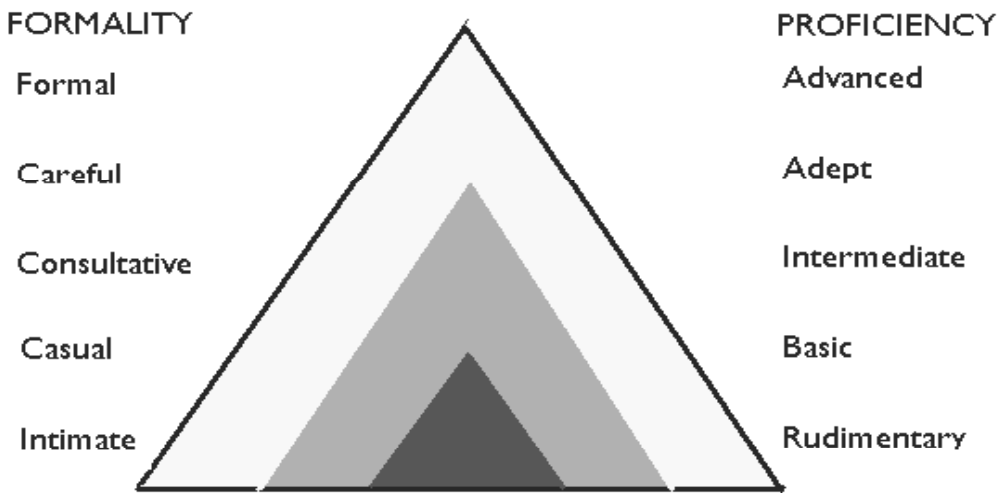
of English began through the colonial government when English became a part of the countries' chief institutions, and exists in a complementary fashion with other languages. The expanding circle involves those nations that recognise the importance of English as an international language, although they have no history of colonisation by members of the inner circle and English is not given official status in these countries (and is therefore a 'foreign' language [FL], as opposed to a first or second language [L1 or L2]). English in these nations, unlike in the inner and outer circles, is almost never used for intra-national communication.

Notice that national labels are used to describe the English variety in this classification. This is sometimes a little unsatisfactory particularly in places where there are many regional, social or functional varieties. When we think of Singaporean English, therefore, we need to make a distinction between different varieties found there. We need to consider **Standard Singapore(an) English** (SSE) - the kind of English that would be used in more official contexts, such as in the broadsheet *The Straits Times* or in current affairs programmes on television in Singapore. We also need to consider **Colloquial Singaporean English** (CSE) - otherwise known as 'Singlish' (a portmanteau word: Singapore + English), this is the informal variety used among friends and the variety most influenced by the surrounding languages. Finally, we also need to recognise the existence of '**learner English**' - the kind of English produced by people who do not feel comfortable with the language in Singapore. (Terminology can sometimes be difficult: the label 'Singlish' is sometimes used to cover learner English as well.)

These terms emphasise the distinctions often discussed in relation to *diglossia*, a term first introduced by Ferguson (1959). This describes a situation where there is High and a Low version of the language for different social situations. SSE takes the 'High' position and CSE the 'Low' position in this way of considering English in Singapore.

There is another way of thinking of Singaporean English, more prevalent earlier, in terms of lectal levels: the variety of English employed is assumed to depend on the level of education, among other things. The lowest level is the basilect, the middle level the mesolect and the highest level the acrolect. This way of considering varieties is often associated with the study of creoles and creolisation. We will not focus on this here.

Pakir (1991) attempts to marry the lectal variation account to the diglossic account in her expanding triangle model. At the tip of the pyramid is the most formal variety of English, available only to those with advanced English proficiency.



Schneider (2007) tries to account for some of this internal variation in his account of postcolonial Englishes which are said to develop through a series of phases - some complete them, some do not. There are maximally five phases.

1. **Foundation** This relates to the initial colonial occupation through which English is brought to the place
2. **Exonormative stabilisation** In this period, English is established through a period of colonial stability, but the norms are *exonormative* - in other words based on the metropolitan norms in the 'mother country' and outside of the place in question
3. **Nativisation** When the people begin to take some ownership of the language (to describe local realities) resulting in more innovative language use and diverging from the norms of the 'mother country'
4. **Endonormative stabilisation** After a significant event, *eg* independence, the local version of the language begins to stabilise, perhaps to emphasise a new identity
5. **Differentiation** Differences begin to be noticeable between different social groups

In each of these, an **indigenous strand** (the kind of English spoken by the local population) might co-exist with a **settler strand** (the kind of English spoken by

the population who were originally from English-speaking nations). Additionally, different nations might be at different phases; Schneider, for example, gives examples of nations in Phases 2 to 5:

- Fiji: Phase 2
- Hong Kong, Malaysia, Philippines: Phase 3
- Singapore: Phase 4
- Australia, New Zealand: Phase 5

There is no implication that all countries will complete the five phases, and it is possible for the development to stop at any of the intermediate phases. In the case of Singapore, we could well discuss whether it is suitably placed in Phase 4 (see section 3 below).

In the earlier discussion about the kinds of English in Singapore, it is clear that there is not just one kind of Singaporean English. Perhaps one way of illustrating this is to mention one personality who occupied the attention of many Singaporeans in 2009, and the focus of attention was on the way she spoke. This forms a useful illustration of the polarisation that can be found within Singaporean English and points towards the differentiation there, hinting at the possibility of Singaporean English nudging towards Schneider's phase 5.

Lui (2009), writing in the main English broadsheet in Singapore, the *Straits Times* provides a 'transcription' of the interview given by Ris Low, the original winner of the Miss World Singapore competition:

'Hi I'm Ris Low, currently I'm majoring in my diploma in health science, and hospitaterlity and travel tourism. Right now I'm studying still.'

'The most daring thing that I've worn is a piss of bigini and just gins and strut down Orchard Road.'

'Yes I'm a huge fan of South Africa. I lurf safari, I lurf leopard preens, zibbra.'

The respelling exaggerates some aspects of Low's accent and clearly signals it as being different from the accents of other Singaporeans. The video made its way to the video-sharing site YouTube, and links were put in Facebook, the social networking site as well as online forums. Some of the reaction is summarised in another news article.

What's the big deal? Well, nasty comments on this local beauty queen's diction - or lack of it - have been flying fast and furious. Netizens' comments have been overwhelmingly negative.

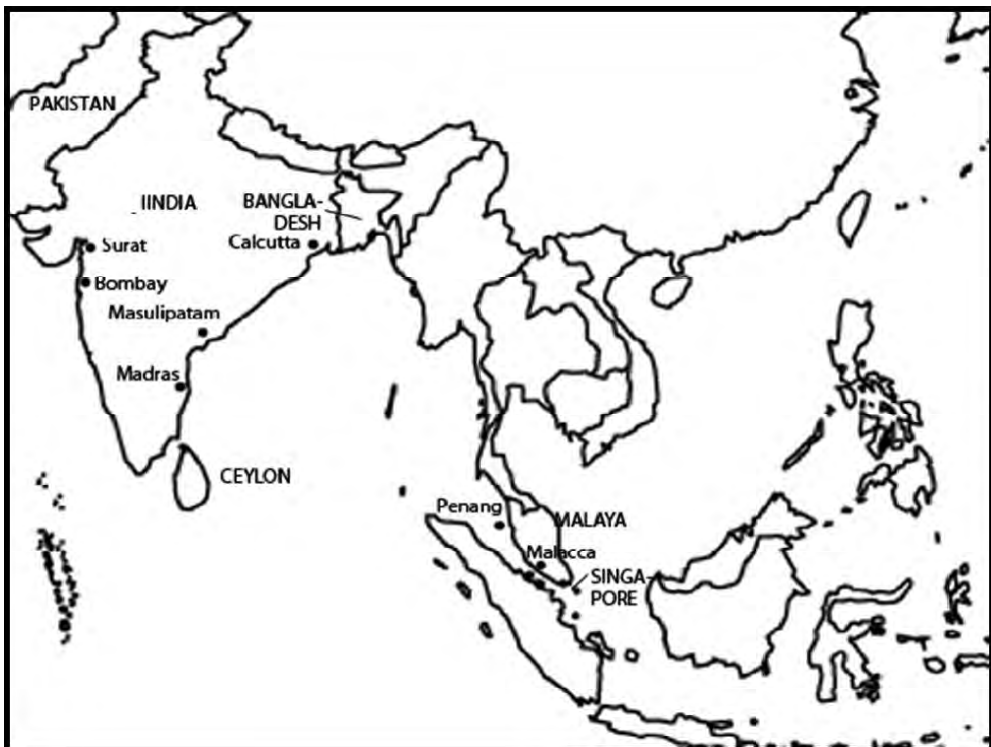
Take edr's reaction. 'Terrible diction! What's wrong with her speech? She doesn't seem to know what she's talking about or what the reporter is asking.' Espedine commented: 'Oh my, is this real? What is going on, lol (laughing out loud), she sounds like she has something in her mouth when she's talking and has to think 2-3s (two to three times) before giving a bimbo answer, lol.'

While such comments have been harsh, they aren't bothering this beauty queen, a first-year diploma student at the Management Development Institute of Singapore (MDIS), where she's pursuing courses in hospitality, travel and tourism. (Mathavan 2009)

Low's English, undoubtedly, represents a kind of Singaporean English. Those who put her down want to distance themselves from her, and this clearly illustrates the fact that there are not only internal variations, but that these can arouse strong feelings in Singaporeans.

2. General historical development

If we consider the former British colonies in South and South-east Asia, there is much that is common. Schneider, in his recent book *English Around the World* (2011), for example, deals with them in the same section. On 31 December 1600, the British East India Company (EIC) received a Charter from Queen Elizabeth I, giving it a monopoly of trade with India and 'the East' in search of spices and other raw materials such as cotton (and later on rubber and tin) to be supplied to factories in Britain in the years of the Industrial Revolution. However, the company began to be involved in the local politics and exercised military power. The EIC however eventually lost its monopoly in 1813, and the British Crown asserted sovereignty over the territories and took over the military and administrative role.



The EIC established stations in India in Masulipatam (1611, modern name: Machilipatnam), Surat (1612), Madras (1639, Chennai), Calcutta (1650, Kolkata) and Bombay (1661, Mumbai) and by the beginning of the 20th century, Britain controlled **India** (which at that time included today's Pakistan and Bangladesh).

The EIC took over Ceylon (Sri Lanka) from the Dutch in 1795, so that by 1802 Ceylon was a Crown Colony.

In **Malaya and Singapore**, the British established a settlement in Penang in 1786 and took over Malacca (Melaka) from the Dutch in 1824. Singapore, in the meantime, was acquired in 1819. These three became the Straits Settlement. Trouble in the Malayan sultanates, among other things, also gave rise to the establishment of the Resident system and to the setting up of the Federated Malay States (FMS: Perak, Pahang, Negri Sembilan and Selangor) in 1896, and in 1914 British control was extended over all the Malay States.

We see therefore a varied number of what Kachru calls Outer Circle nations in the region: a common history and the fact that there was some people movement within the region means that there are some points of similarity between the English found in these Outer Circle countries.

It is known that Stamford Raffles (1781-1826), the British founder of Singapore, was fluent in Malay, but he was the exception. The governments in the colonies were led by the British administrators who in general did not learn the indigenous languages, so that there was a need for a lower level of administration that could bridge the gap between the high levels of government and the ordinary people in issuing directives or implementing decision and the like. In such a situation, the rise of English-medium education for the local population makes sense. This is the dominant way in which English was spread. A significant document on British policy on English-medium education in the region is Macaulay's 'Minutes on education', 1835.

Lord T B Macaulay's (1800-59) was President of the Committee of Public Instruction in Calcutta. In his minutes, he argued the case for introducing English-medium education, as opposed to Arabic- or Sanskrit-medium education) because it would produce 'a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern - a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect' (paragraph 18).

Thus, English-medium education was established in the empire - including the Penang Free School (1816), the Singapore Institution (1834, eventually to become the Raffles Institution) and the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar (1909) in Malaya.

After independence, there was a move initially for English to be replaced by other languages as the official language. English was replaced by Hindi in 1950 when India became a republic. In Sri Lanka, Sinhala (Sinhalese) was made the sole official language in 1956. And in Malaysia, Malay (Bahasa Malaysia) was made the official language in 1967, and in 1970 former English-medium schools began to be converted to national (Malay-medium) schools. In 2003, English was re-introduced as the medium through which Science and Maths are taught in national schools in Malaysia. (Since then however a switch back to the Malay medium has been announced.) However, English did not die out in these countries - the Official Language Bill in 1963 allowed for the continued use of English in India. In Sri Lanka, English was given official status together with Tamil. In Malaysia, English continues to play a significant role in the country. In Singapore, English never lost its official status.

The reasons for the retention of English are related to the following points, all of which are relevant specifically to Singapore too.

- It continues to serve an important function as a 'link language' within nations and as a language to facilitate communication with other nations. In the context of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), it is the sole official language (see Kirkpatrick 2010).
- English has established its status as the primary language of science, technology, commerce, etc. and many nations are loth to give up on this advantage that English brings.
- The retention of English also does away with the difficulty of replacing English with other languages in the law courts and other domains for which there is a well developed English style and vocabulary.

These factors eventually led to the establishment English as the 'working language' of Singapore, although Malay, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil retain official status. English is also the sole medium of education in Singapore schools.

It is generally accepted that English-medium education played a big role in the spread of the language in Singapore, much of it documented in Gupta (1994).

The 2010 Census gives the following breakdown of the most commonly spoken language at home for resident population aged 15 and above.

| Most frequent home language | | Percentage |
|---|-----------|-------------------|
| English | 871,374 | 29.8 |
| Mandarin | 1,064,157 | 36.3 |
| Other Chinese (main variety: Hokkien) | 482,550 | 16.5 |
| Malay | 349,121 | 11.9 |
| Indian Languages (main language: Tamil) | 128,781 | 4.4 |
| Others | 32,196 | 1.1 |
| Total | 2,928,178 | 100.0 |

About 30% of the population have English as the dominant home language. This is significant because for these, English arguably represents a first language rather than a second language. The figure is also significant because English is not a 'heritage language' for the vast majority of them and the figure represents the 'indigenous strand', and at some point there was a language shift towards English.

A breakdown based on age is available General Household Survey 2005, and here residents of age 5 and above are captured in the count.

| Age (Years) | Total | English as most frequent home language | Percentage |
|--------------------|--------------|---|-------------------|
| 5 to 9 | 249,159 | 106,539 | 42.8% |
| 10 to 14 | 264,608 | 101,729 | 38.4% |
| 15 to 19 | 238,966 | 79,119 | 33.1% |
| 20 to 24 | 205,910 | 52,896 | 25.7% |
| 25 to 29 | 231,759 | 58,014 | 25.0% |

| Age (Years) | Total | English as most frequent home language | Percentage |
|--------------|---------|--|------------|
| 30 to 34 | 277,469 | 81,104 | 29.2% |
| 35 to 39 | 288,981 | 91,245 | 31.6% |
| 40 to 44 | 302,687 | 91,728 | 30.3% |
| 45 to 49 | 283,907 | 81,879 | 28.8% |
| 50 to 54 | 242,795 | 58,894 | 24.3% |
| 55 to 59 | 189,533 | 39,564 | 20.9% |
| 60 to 64 | 112,296 | 17,257 | 15.4% |
| 65 to 69 | 95,384 | 10,970 | 11.5% |
| 70 to 74 | 70,592 | 6,227 | 8.8% |
| 75 and above | 93,132 | 7,253 | 7.8% |

The clear pattern emerging is that the younger generations are more likely to have English as their dominant home language, and the pattern looks likely to continue in future generations. This is corroborated by newspaper reports on the subject:

In 2004, the number of Primary 1 children [aged 6+] giving English as their home language became the majority for the first time. The *Straits Times* of 18 March 2009 reported the latest figures which show that 60% of Singaporean Primary 1 children now speak English as their home language, with a mere 40% speaking Mandarin. (Kirkpatrick 2010: 31)

3. Features of Singapore English

In this section, I will outline some of the key features of Singapore English. The caveat is that in view of the variation within Singapore English, the generalisations will not necessarily represent Singaporean's speech. This will be especially so in the case of phonology. It is not my aim to go into the details of the features of Singaporean speech, and I will concentrate on features that are of interest for the discussion in the next section.

One version of the Singaporean phonemes is the one given in Deterding (2007) under 'Singaporean'. He overcomes the problem of variation in Singapore English by basing the description on the speech of one female ethnic-Chinese undergraduate. Singaporean vowels represented below with respect to John Wells's keywords (1982).

| | RP | General American | Singaporean | keyword |
|----|----|------------------|-------------|---------|
| 1. | ɪ | ɪ | i | kit |
| 2. | e | ɛ | ɛ | dress |
| 3. | æ | æ | ɛ | trap |
| 4. | ɒ | ɑ | ɔ | lot |

| | RP | General American | Singaporean | keyword |
|-----|-----|------------------|-------------|---------|
| 5. | ʌ | ʌ | ʌ | strut |
| 6. | ʊ | ʊ | u | foot |
| 7. | ɑ: | æ | ʌ | bath |
| 8. | ɒ | ɔ | ɔ | cloth |
| 9. | ɜ:* | ɜr | ə | nurse |
| 10. | i: | i | i | fleece |
| 11. | eɪ | eɪ | e | face |
| 12. | ɑ: | ɑ | ʌ | palm |
| 13. | ɔ: | ɔ | ɔ | thought |
| 14. | əʊ | o | o | goat |
| 15. | u: | u | u | goose |
| 16. | aɪ | aɪ | ai | price |
| 17. | ɔɪ | ɔɪ | ɔi | choice |
| 18. | aʊ | aʊ | au | mouse |
| 19. | ɪə* | ɪr | iə | near |
| 20. | ɛə* | ɛr | ɛ | square |
| 21. | ɑ:* | ɑr | ʌ | start |
| 22. | ɔ:* | ɔr | ɔ | north |
| 23. | ɔ:* | or | ɔ | force |
| 24. | ʊə* | ʊr | ɔ | cure |
| 25. | i | i | i | happy |
| 26. | ə* | ər | ə | letter |
| 27. | ə | ə | ə | comma |

*with /r/ following before a vowel only

Deterding's data suggest that many vowels that are distinct in RP and GA are merged in Singapore, largely as a result of the lack of distinction between short and long vowels. Therefore, these groups of words might not be distinguished: *cut* and *cart* (5, 21), *pull* and *pool* (6, 15), *cot* and *caught* (4, 13), *set* and *sat* (2, 3), *kin* and *keen* (1, 10). This can also be considered in the light about Ris Low's English (in Section 1): there are obviously Singaporeans who do make the long and short vowel distinction.

The set look as if /ʊə/ does not exist in Singapore English. This has, however, to do with the keyword chosen. *Sure* or *poor* would be pronounced [uə]. This illustrates how monophthongisation of /ʊə/ to /ɔ:/ is lexically constrained and in a different way from many British accents, where *tour*, *sure* and *poor* are monophthongised to /ɔ:/ but not *pure* and *cure*. The opposite seems to be the case in Singaporean accents.

These other phonological features have also been noted:

- Reduced vowels are used less than in British accents
- There is a greater reduction of consonant clusters than in comparable British contexts, and final stops can be substituted with glottal stops
- The consonant /θ/ can be realised as [θ], [t] or [f] (the last only in non-initial position); similarly, the consonant /ð/ can be realised as [ð] or [d].
- The Singapore accent is also said to be syllable timed, rather than stress timed. Brown (1988) describes it as having a staccato effect. Deterding's (2001) data indicate a difference in rhythm between his Singaporean and British subjects speaking in English, with the Singaporean subjects showing less variation between syllables in terms of length. He concludes that 'the occurrence of vowel reduction may contribute to differences in rhythm between these two varieties of English' (p. 229).

The main morphological features associated with Singapore English are those relating to morphological simplification in the non-standard variety generally called Singlish, although this is not done consistently and there is some disagreement as to the significance of the presence or absence of simplification:

- Plural forms for the noun and the verb in the present tense can be absent: this is especially in the case of Colloquial Singaporean English (CSE) or styles associated with the lower parts of Pakir's triangle: these are generally called Singlish in popular contexts. (Gupta 1988 highlights the presence of verbal and noun inflections as being indicative of Standard English, in contrast to CSE.)
- In a similar fashion, tense markings in verbs can also be absent. It is not always clear though whether this is to do with phonological in nature, *ie* to do with the simplification of consonant clusters.

There are also grammatical constructions associated with Singlish, among which I will only highlight these:

- The preference for simple verb groups. Gupta notes, for example that '[c]ertain types of complex verb group, including those with HAVE and BE are associated with [Standard English, as opposed to Singlish]' (1998: 125). The role of the auxiliary HAVE might be taken up by *already*. Hence, 'My father pass away already' in Singlish, rather than 'My father has passed away' in Standard English.
- The deletion of the copula BE (see, for example, Alsagoff and Ho 1988), as in 'She damn clever' rather than 'She is very clever'.
- Prominence is given to the topic, so that it takes initial position in the clause. This results in a topic-comment structure as in the following (taken from Tan 2003).
 1. *Model answers they have.* 'They have model answers.'
 2. *Which item can't remember.* 'I can't remember which item.'
- This can also result in subject omission (Leong 2003) as can be seen in the second example above (the subject 'I' is dropped). Gupta (1998) identifies this as the presence of 'subjectless verb group', and elsewhere this is known as pro-drop (*ie* pronoun dropping).
- Reduplication (where items are repeated) is also more prominent in Singlish, and the different kinds of reduplication are summarised in Ansaldo (2010):
 1. N-N for intimacy: *this is my girl-girl* = 'this is my little girl', affectionate, not very productive

2. V-V for attenuation: *just eat-eat lah* = 'eat a little' (or pick some)
 3. Pred.Adj.-Pred.Adj for 'intensification': *his face red-red* = 'really (quite) red'
 4. V-V-V for durative: *we all eat-eat-eat* = 'keep eating/eat a lot'
- Relative clauses constructed with *one*, as discussed in Alsagoff and Ho (1998), resulting in constructions like the following:

The man [sell ice-kachang one] gone home already.
'The man who sells ice-kachang has gone home.'

The vocabulary is another obvious aspect in which Singapore English can be distinctive from other varieties of English. Ooi (2001) proposes a concentric model of English vocabulary, based on a notion of core English, adapted from the Oxford English Dictionary. He describes English in Singapore and Malaysia, and so is applicable to the consideration of Singapore English:

- A: Core English. These are items found in varieties of English all over the world. Many items might be themselves derived from French or Latin - or indeed from languages spoken in the region such as Malay (*amuck/amok*), Cantonese (*typhoon*), Hokkien (*tea*).
- B: Singaporean words of English origin: formal. These include compounds and words that appear English and can be written and found in contexts where Standard English is expected. The combinations might not be found in other varieties of English and the words are used in a different way. Examples include *hand-phone* ('mobile phone'), *tuition teacher* ('private tutor'), *void deck* ('the opening area on the ground floor of a block of flats'), the calque or loan translation from Chinese *red packet* ('red or pink envelope which contains money'), *chicken rice* ('a dish of poached, braised or fried chicken with rice cooked in chicken stock').
- C: Singaporean words or hybrids of non-English origin: formal. These are loan-words in Singapore English which can also be used in contexts where Standard English is expected. These items often relate to flora and fauna; food and drink; or cultural items. The source is usually Hokkien or Malay. Examples include *rambutan* ('a succulent fruit with a hairy skin', from Malay), *beehoon* ('rice noodles, vermicelli', from Hokkien) and *songkok* ('a Malay brimless hat for men').
- D: Singaporean words of English origin: informal. Here we include words, compounds or phrases where the individual words appear to be English (as in category B above). However, these appear in informal situations, and these are more likely to be spoken. Examples include *cut* ('overtake'), *disturb* ('annoy'), *keep* ('put away'), *half past six* ('half baked'), *no head no tail* ('incomplete').
- E: Singaporean words or hybrids of non-English origin: informal. These are loan-words used in informal situations. As in category C, the source is usually Hokkien or Malay. Many of them are evaluative or judgemental in nature. Examples include *aiyah* ('exclamation indicating annoyance'), *sway* ('jinxed', from Hokkien), *malu* ('shameful, ashamed', from Malay), *sian* ('exhausted', 'annoyed', from Hokkien).

Over time, it is possible for items to move between categories. Gupta (2006), for example, traces the movement of *kiasu* ('afraid of losing out', from Hokkien) as a local, informal item, therefore belonging to category E. The item can be found, for example in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

kiasu, n. and adj.

kiasu, n. and adj.

Pronunciation: Brit. /'kjɑ:su:/ , U.S. /'kjɑ,su/

Inflections: Plural unchanged, -s.

Forms: 19- kiah su, 19- kiasu, 19- kian su.

Etymology: < Chinese (Hokkien) kiasu , lit. 'scared to lose'.

colloq. (orig. and chiefly in South-East Asia, esp. Singapore). depreciative.

A. n.

A person governed by self-interest, typically manifesting as a selfish, grasping attitude arising from a fear of missing out on something. Also: such an attitude.

1978 Leong Choon Cheong Youth in Army 308 Kian su. It means 'play safe': Hokkien. Used to describe a person, commonly a government official, who is rigidly over-cautious and unprepared to take any risk, however unlikely. A distinguishing characteristic of civil servants both within and outside the defence set-up.

1982 Toh Paik Choo Eh, Goondu 27 Anytime an over-zealous person is spotted putting in an extra minute or doing a centimetre more than called for, he's guilty of being a 'kiah su'. Not that he hates to lose, but he's afraid to be second best.

1992 New Straits Times (Nexis) 16 May 26 At last, a cure for the kiasu.

1993 South China Post (Hong Kong) 30 Jan. 5 There has been a slight tussle in the last week between the bulls, bears and the kiasu (those afraid to lose).

2006 Eastern Daily Press (Norwich) (Nexis) 27 Feb., Kiasu is what causes eager commuters to shove their way onto the MRT before other passengers can alight.

B. adj.

Chiefly of a person: characterized by a grasping or selfish attitude arising from a fear of missing out on something.

1990 Official Rep. Parl. Deb. Singapore 14 Mar. 181, I wish that the Government Ministers do not become infected with the same kiasu syndrome that they themselves have advised other people against.

1992 New Straits Times (Nexis) 16 May 32 They [sc. parents] felt that.. 'kiasu' parents would load their children with excessive, sometimes irrelevant, supplementary materials.

2005 E. Lin See My Kiasu Teenage Life in Singapore 172, I know I always think mean things of Alisa about her being kiasu and pretending not to study, but.. I realize that she probably also feels insecure about her own intelligence.

The quotations in the OED indicate how the item was picked up and used in more formal contexts in Singapore (the 1990 entry), therefore moving the item up to category C. This was then picked up by the Malaysian press (the *New Straits Times* entries), the Hong Kong Press (*South China Post*) and the British press (*Eastern Daily Press*), so potentially the item could be moved up to category A.

Finally, an element that has attracted much attention is the pragmatic particles of Singlish. These are also called discourse particles, and generally marks the variety as Singlish rather than Singapore English. These have been compared with discourse markers in English such as 'you know' (Besemeres & Wierzbicka 2003) and negotiate the shared knowledge between interlocutors. They also serve to intensify or attenuate the force of what is said; signal the kind of speech act being performed; or signal the attitude of the speaker. The most popular particles are *lah* and *ah* (with the latter receiving attention in the OED). Also significant is the fact that the particles retain their tones, and Wong (2004) demonstrates how the different meanings of *lah* and *ah* are distinguished by tone.

These are some examples from Wong:

- *lǎh* (low tone to signal an imposition): B grooms himself meticulously before the mirror for quite some time. A teases him: 'Nice already *lǎh*.'
- *lành* (falling tone to signal a proposition): Teacher suggests to pupils how a game should be played: 'You stand in the middle *lành*.'
- *láh* (rising tone to signal persuasiveness) : A urges B to take more clothes with her when going to a cold destination: 'Cold *láh*.'

It needs to be said that there is still a certain amount of controversy about *lah*, and Deterding (2007) remains less sure about the different categories of *lah*.

4. Singapore English: contact language and native language

What then are some key elements about Singapore English or indeed any contact-variety English variety that it would be useful to keep in mind?

Do not be misled into thinking that current languages in the linguistic ecology are the ones that have influenced the variety. It is commonly claimed that Singlish is just English spoken with a Mandarin Chinese word order. Whilst it is true that Mandarin Chinese is now a significant language with which Singapore English will have contact, there is still a lot in Singapore English that shows contact with earlier significant languages.

In considering the possible influence of language contact in the evolution of a language like Singlish, it is first and foremost to contact varieties of Malay and Southern Sinitic that we need to pay attention to (Ansaldo 2009: 504)

Malay has lost much of its position in Singapore although it is officially the national language of the nation. It was previously the main lingua franca between the different groups in Singapore, so that many older Singaporeans will remember the time when all Singaporeans were assumed to be able to speak at least some Malay. This is recognised by Fong and Ansaldo when they discuss the deletion of the copula BE.

if we assume that Malay was the original substrate of Singapore English, then Malay could be the source of these equative structures

without copula, a property that would be reinforced by the Sinitic adstrates. (Fong, 2004:135)

Some of the thinking about *current* influence in some studies that try to emphasise how some English speakers in Singapore are (over-)influenced by their other languages (such as in Tan 2005). This is significant in discussions about interlanguage in second-language acquisition. Features of the English used in Singapore are not only the result of the influence of the other languages spoken by Singaporeans; these features are there also because of historical influence resulting in a variety that is capable of being passed down the generations.

This leads to the next key point that we should keep in mind: *Singapore English is not only a second-language variety - for a significant number of Singaporeans, English is their dominant language.* The statistics given in Section 2 reinforce this. If Singapore English is a native language, it is also a language that is capable of being passed down the generations, as mentioned above.

The languages that interacted with each other are not necessarily the standard or prestigious varieties. The constitution of Singapore has four languages listed as official languages: Malay, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil and English. Education policy designates the first three as 'mother tongues': which one it depends on one's ethnicity. Partly as a result of this designation non-prestigious varieties of Chinese, generally called 'dialects', do not qualify as 'mother tongues'. The official policies have created a context where the *real* mother tongues (the 'dialects', rather than Mandarin Chinese, for the ethnic Chinese community) are regarded with 'fear and loathing' (Lim 2009). When considering language contact giving rise to Singapore English, it might be more helpful to consider Hokkien or Cantonese, rather than Mandarin.

This is especially the case when we consider the discourse particles used in Singapore. None of the key particles are derived from Singlish. In fact, Lim (2007) points out an interesting pattern emerges when we examine the particles in a chronological fashion. The most recent particles seem to be of Cantonese origin, although officially Cantonese has no official status in Singapore. The summary below is taken from Ansaldo (2009: 512).

| Period | Ecology | Singlish particle | Origins |
|------------|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1800-1950s | 1. Malay, Hokkien as lingua francas 2. Southern Sinitic 3. English | lah, ah wat21* | Malay or Sinitic unclear |
| 1950-1980s | 1. Rise of Chinese/Mandarin in education 2. English becomes lingua franca | | |
| 1980s-2000 | Increase in presence of Cantonese | lor33, hor24, leh55, me55, ma33 | Cantonese |

References

- Alsagoff, L. and Ho, C. L. (1988) 'The grammar of Singapore English', in J. A. Foley *et al.* (eds) *English in New Cultural Contexts: Reflections from Singapore*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, pp. 127-151.
- Alsagoff, L. and Ho, C. L. (1998) 'The relative clause in Singapore colloquial English', *World Englishes* 17(2): 127-138.
- Ansaldo, U. (2010) 'Contact and Asian Varieties of English' in R. Hickey, *Handbook of Language Contact*, Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 498-517.
- Besemeres, M. and A. Wierzbicka (2003), 'Pragmatics and cognition: the meaning of the particle "lah" in Singapore English', *Pragmatics and Cognition*, 11 (1): 1-36
- Brown, A. (1999) 'The staccato effect in the pronunciation of English in Malaysia and Singapore', in J. Foley (ed.), *New Englishes: the case of Singapore*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, pp. 115-128.
- Census of Population, Singapore (2010), Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion. Available online: <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/c2010sr1.html> (accessed: 10 January 2012).
- Deterding, D. (2001) 'The measurement of rhythm: a comparison of Singapore and British English', *Journal of Phonetics* 29(2): 217-230.
- Deterding, D. (2007) *Singapore English*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ferguson, C. (1959) 'Diglossia', *Word* 15: 325-340.
- Fong, V. (2004) 'The Verbal Cluster', in L. Lim, (ed.) *Singapore English: A grammatical description*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 57-74.
- General Household Survey, Singapore (2005). Available online: <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/ghsr1/t20-24.pdf> (accessed 10 January 2012).
- Gupta, A. F. (1994) *The Step-Tongue*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Gupta, A. F. (1998) 'A framework for the analysis of Singapore English' in S. Gopinathan *et al.* (eds), *Language, Society and Education in Singapore: issues and trends*, 2nd edn, Singapore: Singapore University Press, pp.119-132.
- Gupta, A. F. (2006) 'Singlish on the Web', in A. Hashim and N. Hassan (eds), *Varieties of English in Southeast Asia and Beyond*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, pp. 19-38.
- Kachru, B. (1982) *The Other Tongue: English Across Cultures*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Kirkpatrick, A. (2010) *English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN: A Multilingual Model*, Singapore: NUS Press.
- Leong, A. P. (2003) 'Subject omission in Singapore Colloquial English', English' in D. Deterding *et al.*, *English in Singapore: Research on Grammar*, Singapore: McGraw Hill, pp. 11-21.

- Lim, L. (2007) 'Mergers and acquisitions: On the ages and origins of Singapore English particles', *World Englishes* 27(4): 446-473.
- Lim, L. (2009) 'Beyond fear and loathing in SG: The real mother tongues and language policies in multilingual Singapore', *AILA Review* 22 (2009), 52-71.
- Lui, J. (2009, 13 September) 'My bigini is BOOMZ', *Straits Times* (Singapore).
- Macaulay, T.B. (1835, 2 February) 'Minute on education'. Available online: <http://www.languageinindia.com/april2003/macaulay.html> (accessed: 5 January 2012).
- Mathavan, S. A. (2009, 31 September), 'I know I can't speak well but ...', *The New Paper* (Singapore).
- Mufwene, S. S. (2001) *The Ecology of Language Evolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ooi, V. B. Y (2001) 'Upholding standards or passively observing language? Corpus evidence the concentric circles model' in V. B. Y. Ooi (ed), *Evolving Identities: The English language in Singapore and Malaysia*, Singapore: Times Academic, pp. 168-183.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. Third edition, December 2006; online version December 2011. Available online: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/251775> (accessed 8 February 2012).
- Pakir, A. (1991) 'The range and depth of English-knowing bilinguals in Singapore', *World Englishes* 10(2): 167-179.
- Schneider, E. (2007) *Postcolonial English: Varieties Around the World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schneider, E. (2011) *English Around the World: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tan, L. (2003) 'Topic-prominence and null arguments in Singapore Colloquial English' in D. Deterding *et al.*, *English in Singapore: Research on Grammar*, Singapore: McGraw Hill, pp. 1-10.
- Wells, J. C. (1982) *Accents of English*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wong, J. (2004) 'The particles of Singapore English: a semantic and cultural interpretation', *Journal of Pragmatics* 36: 739-793