

IN DEFENSE OF SINGLISH: A CULTURAL INTREPRETATION OF SINGAPORE ENGLISH

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Last year, when I was still living in Singapore, I attended a public lecture that was part of a national linguistic initiative called the “Speak Good English Movement.” In the opening speech, the speaker made a contrived attempt at humor:

Ladies and gentlemen, we have no guest of honor for this year’s launch of the Speak Good English Movement. No, we have not been stood up. We did not invite one. This is because we want grammar to take center stage. Today, grammar rules.

Amid the strained smiles and forced laughter, I was squirming in my seat. But it was not just the affected humor that made me feel uncomfortable. What I was hearing was in fact a poorly executed rallying call of sorts to denounce the use of Singlish, a creolized variety of English spoken widely in Singapore, in favor of Standard (British) English.¹

Singlish has its roots as far back as the establishment of British colonial rule in Singapore. Over time, British English became creolized with linguistic influences from the predominant ethno-migrant communities in Singapore’s early history. That resulted in an early pidgin form of Singlish used primarily for communication with the British colonists. But now Singlish thrives in both the public streets and domestic spaces of independent Singapore. It is spoken along a continuum: usage varies with the respective ethnic influences of the speaker, and it is veritably neither standard nor singular.

This is the *raison d’être* of the Speak Good English Movement, which is a governmental response to the perceived threat of linguistic nonconformity on a national level. The underlying paradigm is clear: if language is primarily a tool for communication, standardization and conformity should improve its comprehensibility. Despite fifteen years of attempted linguistic engineering, the government is nowhere close to eradicating all vestiges of Singlish. Many Singaporeans continue to speak Singlish, and foreigners continue to associate it with the distinctive Singaporean identity. What the Singaporean government failed to recognize early on is that language is not simply a communicative tool, but an experienced reality. When the government appraises the value of Singlish with an instrumentalist pragmatism, it risks the possibility of misconstruing what language genuinely is—a kind of cultural capital and lived experience. Singlish is the product of Singaporeans’ collective

consciousness, formed by reinventing themselves in the aftermath of their colonial experience.

In the English-speaking world, the discourse on language has drawn in lexicographers, linguists, and writers from various backgrounds. The late David Foster Wallace, who was a professional writer and English professor, dichotomizes the debate into two broad camps in his essay “Tense Present.” According to Wallace, the Prescriptivists, in the same spirit as the policymakers behind the Speak Good English Movement, are fervent proponents of precise grammatical usage, while the Descriptivists are those who characterize “[language] as self-exploratory and expressive rather than communicative” (Wallace 45). Given its heterogeneous roots and variable usage, Singlish more faithfully embodies the Descriptivist philosophy.

Wallace, who presents himself as a Prescriptivist,² observes that language was invented primarily as an instrument of communication. He compares linguistic rules to social norms: “The whole point of norms is to help us evaluate our actions (including utterances) according to what we as a community have decided our real interests and purposes are” (48). Adhering to these standardized rules ensures that a speaker’s meaning is conveyed both accurately and economically when he communicates with his intended audience, or what Wallace terms the “Discourse Community” (50). When people are “judged” based on how faithfully they adhere to the rules of a given language, the result involves the “actual acceptance or rejection of somebody’s bid to be regarded as a peer, a member of somebody else’s collective or community or Group” (50). This philosophy is central to the Singapore Government’s earliest position on Singlish. Shortly after gaining independence from the British in 1959 and later from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore’s political leaders were compelled by circumstances to promote Singapore as a viable and attractive business hub for Western companies and capitalists. Consequently, Standard English was instituted as the lingua franca of public administration and commerce. Politicians feared that a lack of proficiency in Standard English among locals could potentially threaten the economic viability of the nascent city-state (Teo).

Certainly, Wallace’s perspective on language offers a pragmatic rationale for adhering to the rigid rules of Standard English usage. But those were the unforgiving economic realities of the 1970s and 80s; the Speak Good English Movement was, ironically, conceived in the early 2000s. This was long after Singapore had achieved a considerable degree of prosperity and unquestionably had demonstrated its sustainability as an autonomous nation-state. Therefore, the government’s utilitarian justification for standardized language seems scarcely germane.

Indeed, the mainspring in the emergence of the usage war against Singlish must lie elsewhere. Novelist and essayist Zadie Smith repudiates the idea that language is primarily a tool for communication and challenges the principle of language as an autonomous, self-governing semantic system. In her essay “Speaking in Tongues,” Smith discusses how language is a reflection of our experiences with different “worlds,

ideas, cultures, [and] voices” (3). The individual constantly thinks, feels, and perceives; wanting to express those thoughts, feelings, and perceptions is part of the human condition. Ordinarily, the purpose of linguistic expression is to convey this interiority to other people, but this is not always the case. There are moments when the individual needs language to frame his inner thoughts. For instance, it is not entirely outrageous to think of a person reasoning to himself—in his own language—within the privacy of his own heart. All of this is done in the absence of a “Discourse Community.” The common denominator in these dissimilar uses of language is not communication with others but individuality. If language is to be anything, it is not a tool but a living experience, or what Smith calls a “voice.”

A voice is, by definition, idiosyncratic and thus reflective of the speaker’s identity. Voices are also powerfully evocative of specific worlds and cultures because identity is often socialized. Smith illustrates this argument through her own experience of different worlds and voices: “Willesden was a big, colorful, working-class sea; Cambridge was a smaller, posher pond, and almost univocal; the literary world is a puddle” (2). In the same vein, Singlish evokes the cosmopolitan society that is Singapore, with its culturally diverse history and heritage.

More crucially, Smith resists the idea that “voices are meant to be unchanging and singular” (2). This reluctance reveals an important distinction between how Wallace and Smith perceive the semantic processes behind language. Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin developed this distinction as the foundation for his cultural theory on language in his work *The Dialogic Imagination*. He distinguishes language as either dialectical or dialogic. Wallace views language as a dialectical process, which involves the interaction and resolution of competing paradigms. That was the entire point about “norms”: society agrees on one putative set of language conventions that establishes primacy over all others. Conversely, Smith sees language as a dialogic process, which emphasizes relativism and change. Language does not exist in a vacuum; it can neither escape from its history of usage nor insulate itself from external influences. In turn, language is emblematic of a living conversation, containing a multiplicity of voices. The dialogic contrasts with the dialectical because in the dialogic, there is no one “best” voice or language.

Indeed, the semantic and cultural interpretation of Singlish would seem to confirm its status as a dialogic language. In its early stages, Singlish underwent a process of calquing words that had no English equivalent from languages such as Malay, Tamil, and Chinese. Moreover, grammatical conventions in Singlish are a far cry from their British parentage. The language adopted many of its conventions from dialectal varieties of Chinese, including Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, and Teochew (Platt 364). Literacy in Singlish therefore demands a quasi-fluency in all the languages that have contributed to what Smith might call its “collective human messiness” (6).³ As she writes of George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion*, Singlish is like “an orchestra of many

voices, simultaneously and perfectly rendered, with no shade of color or tone sacrificed” (4).

Hence, in Smith’s view, Wallace’s understanding of language is incomplete at best and discriminatory at worst. Although Wallace is supportive of dialectal diversity in the English language, he sees dialects as realities that are parallel to, but ultimately separate from, Standard White English (SWE). Furthermore, Wallace believes that the desire to be “taken seriously” (Wallace 54) justifies the acceptance of and conformity to SWE. In “Tense Present,” he relates his failed attempt to convince an African-American student to adopt SWE over Standard Black English. Even Wallace confesses that the reasons for this were “baldly elitist” (53) and might even seem racist (54).

Smith offers a radically different solution to the problem of interpersonal connection raised by Wallace. She proposes a “voice [that] relinquishes ownership of itself [and] develops a creative sense of dissociation in which the claims that are particular to it seem no stronger than anyone else’s” (Smith 13). In the case of Singlish, it allows its speakers to express meanings and ways of thinking traditionally associated with at least four different cultures (including the Anglo-Saxon one), and thus fully captures Singapore’s experiential realities, with its essence of interculturalism (Wierzbicka 330). Interculturalism is not the same thing as multiculturalism. In a multicultural society, multiple cultures can coexist without significant amalgamation (330), as evidenced by the myriad of dialects and native tongues spoken in the United States. In Singapore, however, different cultural traditions interpenetrate one another. Singlish reflects this, and thus conveys distinctively Singaporean ways of thinking and relating to people. In the context of a young independent nation, Singaporeans have created a new voice that is, to borrow Zadie Smith’s words, a “synthesis of disparate things” (1) in order to quell what she calls our “anxiety about voice” (7).

The symbiotic relationship between ways of thinking and language is also important in understanding the hidden dangers of the Singaporean government’s war against Singlish. In his essay “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell argues, “If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought” (Orwell 137). He is railing against what he terms “ready-made” language, which is reinforced by standardized forms of language (137). The phrase “ready-made” describes the “bad habits” (128) of writing that, according to Orwell, “spread by imitation” (128) and produce passages plagued by “staleness of imagery” (129). This is reminiscent of the kind of language promulgated by the Speak Good English Movement: it promotes the use of Standard English that is extensively modeled on Standard British English. Against the backdrop of a culturally diverse Singapore, grammatically correct Standard English, which is utterly devoid of culturally relevant imagery, would therefore be considered insincere. Also, many of the older generations of Singaporeans simply did not receive a formal education in speaking Standard English, as English-medium schools in the past tended to be exclusively reserved for wealthier segments of Singapore society. This exclusion was a direct consequence of our colonial legacy.

Thus, a speaker also risks sounding aloof if he speaks only Standard English to a Singlish speaker. Orwell's argument about the insincerity of language is applicable to underlying issues of linguistic elitism that operate within the ranks of the Singapore government. Many of Singapore's political leaders, past and present, received their education at English-speaking universities in the United Kingdom, such as Oxford and Cambridge. Consequently, what one finds in modern-day Singapore is a ruling technocracy that privileges speakers of Standard English, particularly in the political sphere.

With this in mind, the government's linguistic initiative seems all the more insidious. By cultivating a generation of Singaporeans who speak only Standard English, the government can come close to producing a citizenry that speaks in its own voice and replicates its own thoughts. Orwell explicitly warns against the dangers of becoming victim to dictated language: "A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance towards turning himself into a machine. . . . And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity" (136). Noticeably, Orwell's theories explain the practical implications of language policies beyond Wallace's dichotomy between Prescriptivism and Descriptivism. The campaign against Singlish is not merely a stereotypical conflict between conservatism and progressivism in language usage. It is part of a broader political struggle between the technocratic elite and the individual citizen.

Orwell appropriates the fundamental tenets underpinning Prescriptivism to advocate for an attitude towards political thought that is Descriptivist in nature. By eliminating the manifestations of conformist language, "one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration" (128). The ideological subjugation of an entire citizenry, one that earned its independence from colonialism only in recent history, is too steep a price to be paid for the expediency of standardized language. In order to avoid a regressive homogenization of political thought, all Singaporeans must exercise autonomy in their language choices—whether they use Standard English or Singlish. Singapore, as a fledgling nation, needs that kind of dynamism and diversity.

I certainly think of my homeland, Singapore, when Zadie Smith describes "Dream City" as "a place of many voices, where the unified singular self is an illusion" (6). My fellow countrymen are people born, as she says, "between cultures, between voices, [who cannot] help but be aware of the extreme contingency of culture" (15). Today, Singlish is more than a simple linguistic choice: it is an affirmation of our newly earned independence and identity. Even though the Singaporean government continues to wage its war against misplaced modifiers and truant articles, it is unlikely that it will succeed in eradicating Singlish. The failure of the Speak Good English Movement is thus a compelling reminder of the indomitable spirit of language as it lives on in the hearts and minds of people.

NOTES

1. See Platt's "The Singapore English Speech Continuum and Its Basilect 'Singlish' as a 'Creoloid'" for a more detailed historical survey of Singlish.
2. In "Tense Present," Wallace refutes several of the principles that underpin Descriptivism. He is more sympathetic towards the Prescriptivist camp but concedes that its position is based on an erroneous sense of elitism.
3. Although Singlish was derived from Standard British English, it has been so syntactically altered and phonologically transposed that its current form is virtually incomprehensible to an Anglophone's untrained ear.

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