

Exploring the Unique Morphological and Syntactic Features of Singlish (Singapore English)

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Abstract

Singapore is home to a number of significant ethnic groups, including Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, whose contributions have shaped the distinctive characteristics of Singlish in comparison to standard English. This study aims to examine the morphological and syntactic characteristics of Singlish, an English-based creole spoken in Singapore, emphasizing its impact on interethnic communication. Using comparative analysis, Singlish's morphological and syntactic characteristics were compared to those of standard English and the languages of the three largest ethnic groups in Singapore (Chinese, Malay, and Tamil). Examining grammatical patterns, word order, sentence structure, and the use of particular linguistic features would be required. The findings demonstrate that Singlish utilizes distinctive syntactic patterns that frequently incorporate Malay, Chinese, and Tamil grammatical formulas. Singlish, in contrast to standard English, lacks subject and object pronouns and frequently employs "sentence-ending particles" such as *what*, *leh*, *lor*, *hah*, and *meh*, in addition to *lah*. In addition, the copula *be* is frequently omitted before adjectives, nouns, and locatives in Singlish. In addition, the presence of word repetition and word drop in Singlish can be traced back to the Chinese dialect Hokkien. The Singaporean government has attempted to discourage the use of Singlish; however, this has sparked controversy due to the significance of the language in interethnic communication and its reflection of interethnic identity. As a result, Singlish is a fascinating subject for linguistic and sociological study, with significant implications for language education and policy.

Keywords: *Singapore English (Singlish), Morphological, Syntactic, Sociolinguistics.*

1. Introduction

The impact of the English language on a global scale is a phenomenon that has been extensively researched and recognized as one of the most remarkable linguistic stories ever told (Rao, 2019). As Sayer (2018) pointed out, the use of English by more than one billion people worldwide has led to significant variations in English across

different countries, including Singapore, resulting in the emergence of Singlish, which serves as a liaison language for communication between ethnic groups.

The concept of Standard English serves as a point of reference for a single accent, encompassing multiple accents with minor regional lexical differences, and it is not exclusive to a particular country or region (Baratta & Halenko, 2022). As a global language, English exhibits some regional variations in usage, but it is widely acknowledged as an international and universal means of communication (Rahman & Saputra, 2021). Notably, certain nations, such as the United States, exert considerable influence on British politics, thereby establishing an indirect connection with the English language. As a result, discussions and disputes regarding the use of Standard English arise, and these issues extend beyond Singapore, a country with a relatively distinct association with the English language (Deterding, 2007).

Singlish, a unique linguistic phenomenon, holds significant importance in inter-ethnic communication within Singapore (Wong, 2014). Its popularity can be attributed to its familiarity among all ethnic groups, making it a shared language of expression and a means to foster a sense of community (Kalaivanan et al., 2021). However, there was a time when the Singapore government's attempts to eradicate Singlish, and this policy have generated substantial debates among scholar and practitioners (Goh, 2016; Chew, 2017; Tan, 2017). Supporters of the policy argue that Singlish is an integral part of Singapore's cultural identity and should be preserved, while others contend that it hinders effective communication and should be replaced by standard English (Ann, 2016). Consequently, the emergence of Singlish showcases Singapore's distinct linguistic and cultural context, resulting in notable variations within the English language.

While Standard English remains the primary variety of English used, the local context of Singapore has significantly shaped the language, giving rise to Singlish. This fact underscores the importance of comprehending the social and cultural factors that influence language variation and the necessity of recognizing the unique grammatical features that are available in Singlish as a universal vernacular (Leimgruber et al., 2021).

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the impact of Singlish on the social context of Singaporean English users, shedding light on its implications and role within the broader Singaporean society. This paper conducts a comprehensive analysis by comparing and contrasting the morphological and syntactic characteristics of Singlish with those of Standard English. In addition, this paper examines Singlish's impact on the social context of Singaporean English speakers, shedding light on its implications and role in Singaporean society as a whole. Moreover, through an

examination of these linguistic aspects, the research aims to identify and highlight the distinctive grammatical features of Singlish, which are commonly observed in vernacular languages around the globe. These findings demonstrate the significance of studying Singlish as evidence of the universal nature of vernacular languages. This research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Singlish's impact and significance in Singapore and beyond by examining its social and linguistic dimensions.

2. Methods

A thorough comparative analysis, this study is conducted to investigate and contrast the morphological and syntactic features of Singlish with those of standard English as well as the languages spoken by Singapore's major ethnic groups, namely Chinese, Malay, and Tamil (Kortmann, 2013). This analysis would delve into a variety of linguistic aspects, such as grammatical patterns, word order, sentence structure, and the use of specific linguistic features ((Kortmann, 2020). The data were gathered from the Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English website.

To begin, a thorough examination of Singlish grammatical patterns would entail identifying and comparing how the language constructs and expresses various grammatical categories such as tense, aspect, mood, and agreement. This could include looking at verb conjugation, the use of auxiliary verbs, and the presence or absence of inflectional markers in Singlish versus standard English and the languages of the major ethnic groups. Furthermore, studying the word order in Singlish would shed light on its syntactic structure and differences from standard English and ethnic languages. This would entail researching the placement of a sentence's subject, verb, and object, as well as the ordering of adjectives, adverbs, and other modifiers. The comparison of word order patterns would provide insights into Singlish's syntactic flexibility or rigidity and how it differs from other languages.

Analyzing the formation and organization of phrases, clauses, and sentences in Singlish would entail analyzing the sentence structure. This could include researching the use of prepositions, conjunctions, and subordinating markers, as well as any Singlish-specific syntactic constructions or rules. Furthermore, the comparative analysis would take into account the use of specific linguistic features that differentiate Singlish from standard English and ethnic languages. This could include investigating the use of loanwords, idiomatic expressions, or code-switching phenomena in Singlish, as well as the presence of sentence-ending particles and other pragmatic markers.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Sociolinguistics Backdrop of Singapore and The Rise of Singlish

Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and Malaysia are neighboring countries located near the southern landfall of the Malay Peninsula (Deterding, 2007). Historically, the Malay Peninsula witnessed the usage of multilingualism during the days of the Malay and Sumatran kingdoms. However, the region gradually fell under the colonization of British, Chinese, and Indian empires, primarily for plantation businesses and mining purposes. Singapore, officially known as the Republic of Singapore, has seen several name changes throughout its history, from *Pu Luo Zhong* to *Simhapuram*, and finally to Singapore, which means "Lion City" in Sanskrit (Guan et al., 2019).

Singapore is a diverse society comprising ethnic Chinese, Malays "*Bumiputera*", and Indian Tamils, who constitute 96 percent of the population according to the 2020 census. English was chosen as the language of instruction by the Singaporean government after gaining independence from British colonial rule fifty years ago, leading to the emergence of Singlish, a unique variation of English influenced by local languages. While Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil are recognized as official languages alongside English, English serves as the main language in government administration, business, education, and law courts in contemporary Singapore (Deterding, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2020).

The choice of languages in Singapore reflects the cultural and historical background of its population. Chinese-Singaporeans predominantly speak Mandarin, which is the dominant language of mainland China, although other varieties of South Chinese, such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew, are also used (Deterding, 2007; Leimgruber, 2013). Despite its minority status in modern Singapore, Malay is an official language in neighboring countries such as Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia, where it is spoken by approximately 300 million people. Additionally, Malay is spoken by 1.5 million people in southern regions, including Thailand, highlighting its significance (Kirkpatrick, 2020). The Indian population in Singapore hails primarily from Southeast India, hence the usage of the Tamil language (Leimgruber, 2013; Starr & Balasubramaniam, 2019). Singlish, the unique language in Singapore, blends elements of English with these three multiethnic languages—Chinese, Malay, and Indian—reflecting the linguistic diversity of the nation.

Singlish has undergone significant development throughout the 20th century, particularly after Singapore gained independence. As a result, it has become a widely spoken language by millions of people in Singapore today. Singlish is known for its vibrant and dynamic nature, constantly evolving to reflect the changing linguistic landscape. The emergence of new languages and variations can be attributed to the ethnic and racial diversity found in specific regions, which are further influenced by socioeconomic and educational factors. In the case of Singlish, this argument is supported by the findings of Deterding (2007) and Lo et al. (2016), who reveal that

Singlish predominantly incorporates elements from Chinese, Malay, and to a lesser extent, Tamil accents and grammar. While there are notable syntactic deviations from Standard English, the lexical features of Singlish largely remain influenced by Standard English, reflecting the creative adaptations made by its speakers.

The development of Singlish can be seen as a linguistic response to the unique sociocultural context of Singapore (Wei, 2020). The diverse linguistic backgrounds of its speakers, influenced by Chinese, Malay, and Tamil accents and grammatical patterns, contribute to the distinctiveness of Singlish. While there are syntactic variations compared to Standard English, Singlish predominantly employs lexical features derived from Standard English. This demonstrates the creativity and inventiveness of Singaporean English speakers in adapting and integrating different linguistic elements into their daily communication.

Furthermore, Singlish's evolution is an ongoing process, driven by factors such as globalization, technology, and interactions with other English varieties (Nurmalia et al., 2023; Babcock, 2022; Chow et al., 2022). The incorporation of new words, phrases, and expressions from various sources contributes to its dynamic nature. Singlish serves as a unique expression of identity and community among Singaporeans, while also posing challenges for communication with speakers of Standard English. Understanding the sociolinguistic dynamics and recognizing the distinctive features of Singlish can provide valuable insights into the complex relationship between language, culture, and society in Singapore. Further research is necessary to explore the ongoing development and sociolinguistic implications of Singlish in order to better appreciate its significance within Singapore's linguistic landscape.

3.2. Exploring the Morphological and Syntactic Features of Singlish: A Socio-Linguistic Analysis of Singapore's Unique Vernacular

Singlish, the colloquial form of English spoken in Singapore, possesses a plethora of distinctive morphological and syntactic characteristics that set it apart from standard English. One noteworthy aspect is its simplified grammar, where subject-verb agreement is often omitted, and interrogative and declarative sentences follow the same word order. Singlish's lexicon is enriched by loanwords from Malay, Chinese, and Tamil, creating a fascinating blend of languages. Additionally, Singlish pronunciation deviates from standard English, with notable variations observed in the pronunciation of the "th" sound. The widespread use of Singlish across various domains, such as daily communication, media, literature, and art, highlights its power in expressing emotions and fostering a sense of community, thus making it an invaluable component of Singaporean culture.

Scholars have debated the categorization of Singlish as a distinct language or a variation of standard English. While some argue for a clear distinction, others contend

that language classification is not straightforward in this context. Sociolinguistic researchers have explored the diverse linguistic competencies among Singaporeans. Educated individuals often exhibit a higher proficiency in acrolectal varieties, while less educated individuals display greater familiarity with basilectal varieties. Furthermore, emphasizing the pragmatic functions of the sentence-ending particle "-lah" in cultivating unity and support among interlocutors contributes to Singlish's nuanced sociolinguistic landscape.

The study of Singlish morphology reveals intriguing features, such as the manipulation of derivational suffixes like "-ism," "-ity," "-ology," and "-ness," often to create new words with similar meanings as their English counterparts. The plural marking of nouns in Singlish poses a unique characteristic, where the addition or omission of the "-s" suffix is influenced by contextual factors, potentially leading to deviations from standard English rules. Furthermore, Singlish syntax exhibits distinct patterns in the use of auxiliary verbs like "will" and "would," influenced by Chinese and Malay languages, as well as the notable absence of object and subject pronouns. Reduplication, derived from Malay and Hokkien, plays a significant role in Singlish syntax, with its usage serving purposes ranging from repetition to emphasizing closeness in communication. Sentence-ending particles, including "lah", "leh", "lor", "hah", and "meh", and contribute to the expressive and nuanced nature of Singlish.

By delving into the intricacies of Singlish's morphological and syntactic features, this comprehensive analysis seeks to shed light on the linguistic complexity and cultural significance of Singapore's vernacular. Understanding the rich and diverse linguistic landscape of Singlish is vital for appreciating the unique linguistic identity of Singaporeans and for promoting effective communication in this multicultural society. Further research is necessary to explore the sociolinguistic implications and ongoing evolution of Singlish, ultimately fostering a deeper understanding of its role in shaping Singapore's linguistic landscape.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the distinct morpho-syntactic features of Singlish, it is crucial to explore its differences rather than focusing solely on the characteristics shared by "universal vernaculars." By examining the rich dataset provided by Kortmann et al. (2013) and utilizing the resources available on the online Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English website, this research aims to shed light on the unique morpho-syntactic elements that define Singlish.

The inclusion of a broader range of features specific to Singlish, rather than conforming to a notion of universality, allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the language. Singlish stands out due to its distinctive linguistic characteristics, which have evolved through complex historical and sociocultural influences. By focusing on these striking differences, this study aims to capture the essence of Singlish and its contribution to the rich tapestry of global linguistic diversity.

1. No number distinction in reflexives (20 varieties).
Oursel for *ourselves*.
Feature area: **pronouns, pronoun exchange**.
2. The omission of StE preposition (13 varieties).
We're going there Ø Tuesday. He came out Ø hospital.
Feature area: **Adverbs and prepositions**.
3. Presence of subject in imperatives (8 varieties).
Go you there!
Feature area: **Discourse organization and word order**.
4. Invariant tag can or not (2 varieties).
I want to go home, can or not?
Feature area: **Negation**.

4. Conclusion

This paper explores the ongoing controversy surrounding the usage of Singlish in Singapore and the government's implementation of the "Speak Good English Movement." Scholars argue that Singlish is an integral part of Singapore's cultural identity, bridging social divisions between ethnic groups, despite government efforts to eradicate it. The debate centers on whether Singlish should be classified as a language or a dialect, with proponents emphasizing its distinctive grammar and vocabulary and opponents viewing it as a corruption of standard English. Despite government efforts, informal settings and younger generations continue to utilize Singlish. This debate sparks discussions about Singapore's language, culture, and national identity.

The government's campaign to eradicate Singlish has advantages, such as encouraging effective communication in professional and international settings, but it also has disadvantages. Singlish is an integral part of Singaporean culture and a symbol of national identity. It is widely spoken and understood by people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Scholars argue that Singlish is not merely a linguistic variation, but rather a construct that reflects Singaporeans' unique cultural identity. Its use can promote social inclusion and facilitate connections between ethnically diverse groups. Therefore, proponents argue that Singlish ought to be preserved and embraced as an integral component of Singaporean culture and identity.

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