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# **ENGLISH AS A CONTACT LANGUAGE: SINGAPORE ENGLISH**

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## **Abstract**

English is undoubtedly considered a universal language today. However, as it is the case with all languages in the world, there is a major factor that has had an enormous impact on the English that is spoken nowadays: linguistic contact. English has been shaped as a result of language and dialect contact and this phenomenon is likely to continue in the future.

Besides, English has been one of the main languages of colonization throughout the world during different periods in history. Consequently, a number of vernacular languages have been in direct contact with English and this has led to the flourishing of diverse varieties of English, known as 'New Englishes'. The situation of each of these New Englishes varies considerably depending on several historical, sociolinguistic and geographical factors; and the consequence of this is that most of them can be considered or are close to being considered independent and autonomous linguistic systems. One of the most paradigmatic examples of this situation is Singapore English.

Singapore is a multi-ethnic country in which English serves as a *lingua franca* for Chinese, Malay or Tamil speakers, as well as being the language used for formal purposes such as administration and education. At the same time, there is another variety in Singapore, called Singapore Colloquial English or Singlish, which differs considerably from Standard English and is mainly used in informal settings. Thus, both the Standard variety and Singlish live together in Singapore. Since all these conditions make Singapore English a perfect variety to analyse, and the main objective will be to stress the relevant role that contact plays in shaping languages, this paper will focus on analysing some of the most relevant syntactic and morphological features of Singlish, together with describing the way in which both the Standard and the Colloquial variety co-exist.

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## 1. Introduction

Most if not all languages in the world are the result of language and dialect contact. English is no exception. The Englishes that we know today—including what some refer to as Standard English—are the by-product of both internal evolution and contact of different intensity levels with other languages and varieties.

English is also one of the languages of colonization in different parts of the world and has been so in different periods in history. One of the multiple consequences of this is the development of diverse varieties of English that have been in contact with a number of vernacular languages, a situation that has given English different “flavours”. Thus, the current linguistic outlook today is much more complex and heterogeneous than what the situation was like some years ago. As a result, it is clear that English has become a *lingua franca* for millions of people around the world, and this has not only directly influenced the already existent dialects and varieties of English, but has also given rise to new linguistic forms and structures which are gradually becoming more and more prominent.

One of the best-known representatives of these so-called New Englishes, which constitutes the main object of study in the present paper, is Singapore English. Due to its geographical position and its sociolinguistic situation, Singapore English is a perfect example of the relevant role that contact plays in shaping the language. In this paper I try to make that role explicit by illustrating the way some specific features of Colloquial Singapore English (Singlish) differ from other more standard varieties of English in order to highlight the diversity of this variety, and I try to analyse the possible causes of such linguistic heterogeneity.

Therefore, the two main objectives that this paper will aim to achieve will be the following:

- 1- To highlight the importance of English as a contact language around the world.
- 2- To focus on New Englishes, with a special emphasis on Singapore English, in order to show how contact plays a relevant role in shaping languages.

## **2. Language contact in the history of English**

Since the main goal of this paper is to provide a picture of English as a contact language, it is really important to mention its background and some relevant historical episodes, as well as to expound some relevant contact-inducing factors in the developing of the language as we know it nowadays.

About 450 AD, when Britain was mostly inhabited by Celtic people, a considerable amount of groups of Germanic settlers began coming into the country. The invaders represented three main tribes of people known as Angles, Saxons and Jutes. These settlers were later referred to as Anglo-Saxons, and it is believed that their language constitutes the root of English (Melchers and Shaw, 2011). Furthermore, there was another language from which English was highly influenced, namely Latin. Especially with the introduction of Christianity in 597 Latin became very influential in many spheres of life. Thus, Latin was integrated into the English system and it has remained strong to this day. According to Melchers and Shaw (2011), almost 30% of the English lexicon is derived from Latin sources. English also has a substantial Scandinavian influence, due to contact with the Viking invaders from Denmark and Norway at the end of the eighth century (Melchers and Shaw, 2011).

However, the historical event that had the greatest influence and effect on the English language occurred in 1066: the Norman Conquest. Before that moment, the use of English was socially restricted and unavoidably endangered. Surprisingly, English survived since, despite being considered a crude rural language during the Norman invasion, it became a marker of ethnicity and national identity. However, during this period, Norman French became the language of the elite, so French had an enormous impact on English. As reported by Melchers and Shaw (2011), 29% of English lexicon is from French origin (other authors claim that rate is even higher).

Approaching the end of the fifteenth century, once English was firmly established as the language of power, a standard language began to emerge. The developing standard was London-based and the University of Cambridge took an active part in this standardization (Melchers and Shaw, 2011). Nevertheless, English spelling and grammar were not codified in a standard form until 1755, when Dr Samuel Johnson published his dictionary.

As mentioned above, English is universally spread today, and it is present in very important areas such as education, administration and law in many countries all over the world (besides its influential role in today's music, film and show business). However, this spreading process has not been linear and straightforward at all. Regarding one of the most powerful countries nowadays, the USA, the story of English goes back to 1607 with the successful expedition that established the colony of Jamestown in Virginia (Mesthrie and Bhatt, 2008, among many others).

In Africa, the earliest contact between English speakers and the locals was informal and sporadic, and the first outcomes of this contact were pidgins and different forms of 'broken English'. The growth of a plantation economy brought along the importation of African slaves and, as a result, pidgins and creoles based on English and African languages emerged. Similarly to what took place in Africa, English was first introduced by traders in India and some parts of Asia (Mesthrie and Bhatt, 2008). In Africa, by the end of the XIX century, English finally turned out to be an official language of certain territories (e.g. Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon). Nevertheless, English coexisted with local languages in administration. Regarding education, as Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008) state, English was commonly associated with new knowledge and progress. Thus, the acquisition of English became an attractive goal and, consequently, the local languages were considered a gateway to achieve it.

In each of these types of colonisation, different linguistic needs and forms of language contact appeared depending on the different patterns of contact between the colonisers and the indigenous people (Sergeant, 2012). Obviously, English became mixed and diversified, as it was spreading worldwide.

Although the formal age of imperialism has inevitably declined, the phenomenon of globalisation has made English an important part of the linguistic ecology of most nations. Hence, the reasons for the current global spread of English can be summarised in three related major historical factors (Sergeant, 2012):

1. It was the language of the British Empire, beginning in the XVI. century when the language became a tool of imperial expansion.
2. It was the language of science and the industrial revolution: before WWI, the languages used for science were French, German and English.

3. As Crystal (2003) points out, it was the language of the United States as it became a political and economic superpower in the twentieth century (as cited in Seargeant, 2012).

All in all, we have seen that the picture of the roots and posterior spread of the English language is quite complex and takes innumerable different aspects into account. Importantly, a prominent element that has caused essential changes in languages is contact. Contact has definitely shaped all languages and, as mentioned above, it has been the driving force for the creation of new varieties of English, the so-called New Englishes, making the language more and more diverse and universal.

### **3. Varieties of English: New Englishes**

#### **3.1. New Englishes**

What do we mean by ‘New Englishes’? Is it not the case that there is a unique language called English? So why do we use the plural form? These questions seem quite obvious if we come across a term like ‘New Englishes’. This label is now widely used to refer to a great amount of languages or varieties all over the world. Consequently, in order to better understand the linguistic diversity and all its implications, it is essential to define this term as precisely as possible and determine which languages or varieties belong there. Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008) claim that the plural form ‘Englishes’ is used to emphasize how diverse language is today and, most importantly, to stress that English no longer has one sole base of authority, prestige and normativity. Focusing on the main topic of this paper, we can say that Singapore English is considered one of these New Englishes, whose main characteristics will be illustrated in section 5.

### 3.2. Kachru's Circle Model

Kachru's (1985) Circle Model might be a very useful tool to try to classify the countries in which English is used or their degree of contact with English (Melchers and Shaw 2003, Bauer 2002).

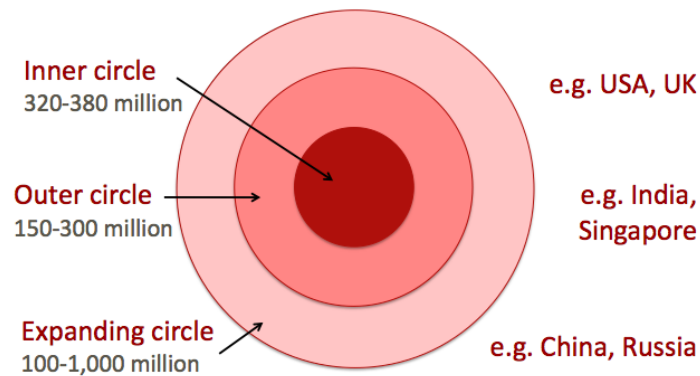


Figure 1: Kachru's (1985) Circle Model

Kachru divides English varieties into 3 different circles. Firstly, the Inner Circle includes the countries in which most people have English as their first language; UK, USA, Caribbean, Canada and Australia would be listed here. Secondly, the Outer Circle refers to the countries where people need English for secondary education, politics, law, business... India, Philippines and Singapore- whose English variety we will analyse in some detail below- belong to this Circle. Thirdly, we have the Expanding Circle, in which most European and East Asian countries are included. In these nations, people need English in business, politics and education for communication with speakers of other languages from outside the country. Logically, whereas some varieties fit perfectly well into one of the three categories, others, due to the growing use of English as the medium of instruction in EFL (English as a Foreign Language), are characterized by a shifting status.



### **3.3. Schneider's dynamic model**

With respect to the development of the New Englishes, Schneider's (2007) model (cited in Melchers and Shaw, 2011) is very helpful so as to highlight the role of contact in the evolution of these new varieties. This model draws special attention to the way in which postcolonial varieties are developed. Schneider identifies five stages in the evolution of World Englishes: foundation, exonormative stabilisation, nativisation, endonormative stabilisation and differentiation.

'Foundation' simply means that English is introduced to a new territory by settlers. Here, language contact and identity construction are of vital importance. 'Exonormative stabilisation' occurs when there is a stable colonial situation and the mother country sets the linguistic norms. Consequently, this may result in 'elite bilingualism' among members of the indigenous population. 'Nativisation' implies the weakening of ties and allegiance to the mother country, making settlers to adopt or accept a new identity. 'Endonormative stabilisation' refers to a situation in which local norms are gradually accepted and settlers and indigenous population alike embrace a growing national identity. Finally, 'differentiation' implies that the new nation begins to view itself in its own right. As a result, increasing dialectal differences may arise here. The model provided by Schneider (2007) seems to show quite an accurate picture of the process, although it is worth mentioning that the different phases proposed in the model will probably need an enormous amount of years to be completed and, thus, it is a slow and gradual process.

### **3.4. The question of prestige**

Another sociolinguistic criterion for classifying varieties would be the type of prestige the variety gives its speakers. Here, Labov (1972) (cited in Melcher and Shaw, 2011) makes a distinction between overt and covert prestige. Some rural varieties might have no prestige at all. Some other varieties might be stigmatised or associated with 'low class' but indeed give covert status. Besides, there are standard or near-standard varieties like Standard Singapore English, which seem to give both overt and a kind of covert prestige. Through its use, Singaporeans are able to express loyalty or solidarity with their own community, since they do not want to sound like Englishmen or

Americans. Finally, there are varieties which give overt prestige worldwide, principally US Standard with a General American accent and British Standard with an RP accent.

### **3.5. Singapore English**

With respect to the linguistic situation in Singapore, which will be dealt with in the central section of this paper, it is worth mentioning that it seems to be a perfect example so as to illustrate how linguistic contact can shape and modify language there, and to consider the main implications of this phenomenon. On the one hand, due to the geographical location of Singapore and its diverse linguistic influences, Singlish (or Colloquial Singapore English) has considerably diverged from Standard British or American English, to such an extent that they are far from being mutually intelligible. Nevertheless, on the other hand, English still plays the role of the international language in Singapore. The important implication here is that both an international standard (English) and a distinct localised variety (Singlish) can perfectly co-exist.

With respect to the different criterions that I have focused on below, Singlish would be placed in the Outer Circle in Kachru's (1985) model. Besides that, taking Schneider's Dynamic model (2007) into account, Singlish would be included in the 'Endonormative stabilisation' phase, since local norms are gradually included in this variety and settlers and indigenous do share some kind of national identity in Singapore. Regarding the question of prestige, it seems that Singlish is given both overt and covert prestige.

The main aim of section 4 will be to take a close look at this linguistic coexistence in Singapore. Therefore, I will first analyse different approaches that try to disclose the linguistic picture of Singapore. After that, I will present the most relevant syntactic and morphological features of Singlish; and finally, taking all these features into account, I will try to make some linguistic generalizations and to establish some links with other languages.

## **4. Linguistic situation in Singapore**

### **4.1. Introduction**

Singapore is considered a multi-ethnic country which is composed of Chinese (77%), Malays (14%) and Indians (8%). Thus, English is used as an inter-ethnic lingua franca for these three main ethnic groups in Singapore (Harada, 2009). The main reason for the presence of English in Singapore today is that in 1819 free port was established and, therefore, the first waves of immigrants were attracted. This means that the British obtained sovereignty of the islands in 1824, and Singapore became one of the British Straits Settlements (a group of British territories located in Southeast Asia) in 1826. Before this event, English was not spoken in Singapore. Singapore, today, has four official languages: English, Malay, Tamil and Mandarin (Chye, 2010). However, English is the main language used in government and administration, as well as the general medium of instruction in schools (Leimgruber, 2011). In these contexts, Standard Singapore English is the variety used. This variety does not display major differences from other versions of Standard English around the world. In addition to Standard Singapore English (SSE), there is also the vernacular, Colloquial Singapore English (CSE), generally called Singlish, which is quite different from the standard.

Chye (2010) points out that, over the years, English in Singapore developed and changed due to several circumstances, especially the presence of other languages as a consequence of interethnic mingling and the necessity of the local people to accommodate to the British (Platt & Weber 1980; Platt et al. 1983: 14; Kachru 1986). Singlish consists in some ways or others of English, Malay, Chinese dialects, and some Indian lexical items (Chye, 2010). Singlish shares many similarities with Malaysian English; however, Trudgill and Hannah (2008) assert that what makes them different is that while Manglish (as it is usually called) is mostly influenced by Chinese dialects, slang and colloquialism in Singlish seem to come from other forms of English.

As has been pointed out before, Singlish and Standard Singapore English (SSE) live together, creating a relationship that has been predominantly described as diglossic (Ferguson 1959, Richards 1983, Gupta 1989, 1994). As Leimgruber (2011) states, SSE is restricted to situations in which a high level of formality is required, whereas Singaporeans usually resort to Singlish in all other informal instances. Nonetheless,

different approaches attempting to illustrate this coexistence have recently arisen, since the diglossic characterization seems to be insufficient or not totally adequate.

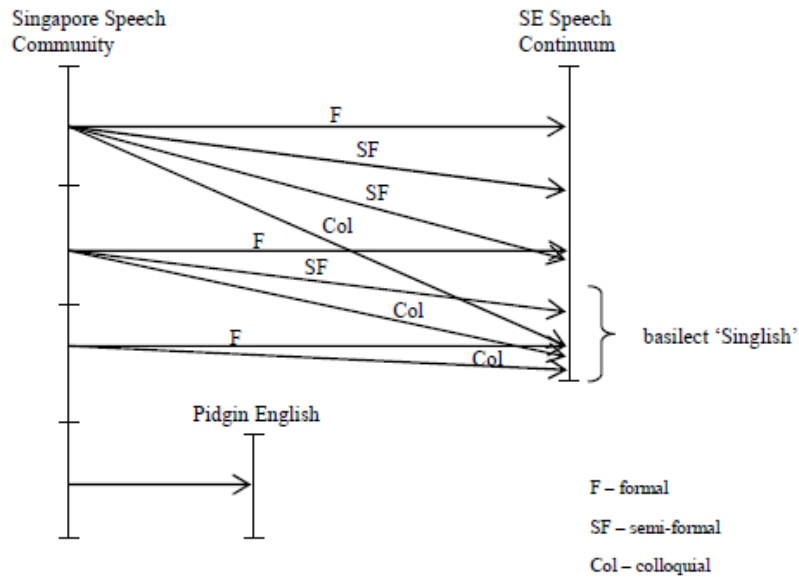
## **4.2. Approaches and models**

The coexistence in Singapore of SSE and Singlish has led some linguists to address this issue from different angles. Out of these, two major perspectives must be highlighted here: the continuum approach and the diglossic approach (Leimgruber, 2008). Nevertheless, the limitations and gaps found in these perspectives in relation to Singapore English paved the way for two more approaches which seem to better characterize the diverse linguistic reality in Singapore: the Cultural Orientation Model and the Indexical model.

### **4.2.1. The Continuum Approach**

Platt (1975) is considered the main supporter of the continuum approach. Platt defines Singlish as a ‘creoloid’, since he points out that it shares many features with creole languages, but no pidgin was involved in the creation of this variety, which is a basic requirement in all creole situations. Thus, Platt (1975) considers Singlish and SSE to be varieties placed at the opposite ends of a post-creole continuum.

Platt’s Continuum Approach implies that in Singapore there are sub-varieties of English that are progressively more like Singlish the closer they are to the lower (or basilectal) end of the scale, and increasingly more like SSE when they are closer to the upper (or acrolectal) end of this continuum. In the scale that is presented in Figure 2 below, the linguistic continuum is presented next to a social continuum. Consequently, Platt states that each speaker has at their disposal a certain range of linguistic possibilities of the continuum, depending on their social position in the scalar spectrum. This range will include the linguistic choices placed at the same level as their social position in the scale, as well as all possibilities placed between it until the basilect, which is the form considered to have the lowest prestige, and the one in which everyone is believed to be proficient.



**Figure 2: Sub-varieties of Singapore English available to speakers (Platt, 1975:369)**

The main implication here is that speakers placed in a low social position do not have access to more formal linguistic forms, since it is impossible to go up in the scale. Nevertheless, the boundaries are unclear and difficult to establish when we deal with a continuum approach.

Platt's Continuum Approach has been criticized because it relies on education as the sole medium (Gupta, 1994, Alsagoff, 2007), ignoring essential proficiency aspects, and thereby considering Singlish fundamentally a non-native variety.

#### **4.2.2. The Diglossic Approach**

Taking this criticism of the Continuum Approach into consideration, Gupta (1994) proposes that Singlish and SSE should be deemed as being in a diglossic relationship. In his proposal, SSE would be the H (high) variety and Singlish the L (low) one. Gupta's analysis of the Singapore speech community is unquestionably based on Ferguson's (1959) type of diglossia (as cited in Leimgruber, 2008, 2011). The term 'diglossia' implies that the H and the L form are used for different purposes. The L variety is the vernacular, Singlish in the case we are analysing here, and is mainly used in unmarked settings. This variety is generally acquired natively. In contrast, SSE is

used for formal purposes, such as education, administration and law, as well as in the written language. Hence, both the L and H varieties are in complementary distribution and do not overlap each other.






Two problems are worth emphasizing here. First, Gupta resorts to code-switching to explain the ‘mesolects’ (the linguistic forms which have medium prestige, placed between ‘acrolects’ and ‘basilects’) on Platt’s scale, referring to the situations in which a speaker may start a sentence in L and suddenly switch to H. As Ferguson (1959) defines each variety to be in a specific domain of use, this intra-sentential code-switching would be troublesome and thus difficult to support. Second, a further problem would be to make generalizations about the Singapore English community, due to its socially-stratified nature of variation. There, speakers belonging to upper social scales appeal to H forms much more often than those speakers of lower class.

In the same vein, as the prestige of both varieties is radically different when we deal with diglossic communities, it is commonly believed that the L variety is not a language, but rather a ‘corruption’ of the standard form (Mooney & Evans, 2015). The speakers’ attitudes towards both opposite varieties will be analysed later, highlighting the diverse social population of Singapore and explaining the government’s launch of ‘The Speak Good Movement’ in 2000 (this movement will be tackled in section 4.3. further below).

#### **4.2.3. The Cultural Orientation Model**

As both the diglossic and continuum approaches seem to be insufficient to try to determine what the linguistic situation in Singapore is like, a closer and more specific analysis is crucial here. Hence, in this regard, Alsagoff (2007) came up with the idea of the Cultural Orientation Model (COM). He proposes that the relationship between Singlish and SSE is not diglossic at all, but rather one of a reflection of varying degrees of orientation towards the Singaporean identity. Accepting some aspects of the Continuum Approach but changing other relevant ones, Alsagoff (2007) explains that Singlish and SSE must be placed in both extremes at the end of a Cultural Orientation Continuum. In this continuum, Singlish (renamed as ‘Local Singapore English’) indexes a Localist Orientation. On the contrary, SSE (renamed as ‘International Singapore

English’) indexes a more Globalist Orientation. He proposes a table (Table 1 below) in which cultural orientations are closely related to these orientations.

<b>ISE (Standard English)</b>		<b>LSE (Singlish)</b>
Globalism		Localism
Economic capital		Socio-cultural capital
Authority		Camaraderie
Formality		Informality
Distance		Closeness
Educational attainment		Community membership

**Table 1: Features of the two orientations in the cultural orientation model (Alsagoff, 2007:39, Table 1)**

This model is especially relevant in a multicultural place like Singapore. The COM seems to be a perfect model so as to explain typical examples in SSE like (1) below, where single occurrences of Singlish elements like *lah* (a particle used with various kinds of pitch to convey the mood and attitude of the speaker) can appear. Gupta’s (1994) Diglossic approach would consider such examples as instances of one-word switches into the L variety, Singlish. However, COM perceives it as a consequence of speaker agency, implying the speaker uses this resource consciously when making a particular stance. In other words, this switch itself creates meaning.

(1) *SG is NOT Beijing or Shanghai or Fujian or Canton, or UK or USA .... we’re uniquely Singapore lah!! And as a born and bred Singaporean .... I really think locals should be proud of their unique regional quirks, including Singlish. So what if we can’t enunciate [sic] perfect Queen’s English, so be it. Ditto Beijing-perfect Mandarin.* (Leimgruber 2011:14)

In (1) above, the use of *lah* is highlighted, since it is stereotypically considered a marker of Singlish. Nevertheless, this expression is likely to be conscious according to Leimgruber (2011), and the speaker is probably wishing to capture a Localist Orientation in that utterance and, hence, in the whole discourse.

#### **4.2.4. The Indexical Model**

In the same vein, another approach based on this Cultural Orientation Model will now be presented. Silverstein (2003) and Eckert (2008) (as cited in Leimgruber, 2011) determine that every linguistic variable indexes or marks one or more social meanings, which are appreciated consciously or unconsciously by the speaker and addressee. This kind of indexical analysis considers several layers of reference, such as semantic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic meaning, using what Silverstein (2003) calls ‘Orders of Indexicality’ (as cited in Leimgruber, 2011).

An aspect that is worth emphasizing here is that there is no such a thing as a fully Singlish or a fully Standard code, as simultaneous use of forms associated with H and also with L usually occurs. Features of H and L are thus likely to mix, and this means that Singlish and SSE appear together in a mixed code that includes features from both sets, rather than considering that both sets form uniform Singlish or SSE clear-cut codes, as would have been predicted by the traditional models (Leimgruber, 2011).

#### **4.2.5. Discussion**

All in all, and taking the characteristics of the four approaches/models into account, I would say that the Indexical Model is the most appropriate model in order to characterize the variation existing in Singapore English. Both the Continuum and the Diglossic approach are very general and, consequently, fail to show the complex variation attested in Singapore English. Undoubtedly, they can be very useful so as to better describe other linguistic situations, but they both lack accuracy and precision when referring to Singapore. As far as the Cultural Orientation Model is concerned, it does contain important cultural aspects which should always be considered and analysed, but the Indexical Model is definitely more complete. It is important to clarify that the COM served as a prototype for the Indexical Model, so the importance of the former is considerable in order to set up the patterns that should be followed, mainly related to cultural factors in the case of Singapore.



### **4.3. The Speak Good English Movement**

There is an important aspect that needs to be taken into account when focusing on a country such as Singapore which has a wide and varied linguistic diversity: the population's attitudes towards all these varieties. In this sense, the government of Singapore has definitely taken sides for the standard variety and is trying to suppress Singlish among Singaporeans. In 2000, the government launched the *Speak Good English Movement* (SGEM) to try to eradicate Singlish from Singaporeans. The SGEM's main aim is to encourage the population to speak grammatically correct English in order to be universally understood (Harada, 2009).

This movement was created so as to attempt to change the tendency of speaking Singlish in everyday life, which is very frequent among Singaporeans. Singlish, then, is treated as an ungrammatical and 'dirty' variety by the leaders of the government. Nevertheless, not all Singaporeans seem to accept this movement. As an indication, *The Straits Times* (2008) showed a survey conducted by the SGEM, announcing that almost half of the respondents believed they did not need to speak good English.

### **4.4. Language choice between Standard Singapore English and Singlish**

The aim of this section is to clarify the language choice between SSE and Singlish and language attitudes toward both of them, following a questionnaire survey conducted by Harada (2003: 37-59). The most relevant results and observations extracted from this survey are pinpointed below.

Singlish is used more frequently when talking with family members and friends, whereas SSE is used in conversations with teachers, bosses or government officials. Moreover, Singaporeans undoubtedly resort to SSE when talking to foreigners. In other words, Singlish is much more useful within more intimate circles while SSE is used fundamentally with superiors and most foreigners. We can conclude then that Singaporeans are able to switch between both varieties depending on the situation.

As regards language attitudes, most respondents exhibit a more positive attitude towards the standard form than towards Singlish in all respects. The results show that SSE is believed to be more suitable for communication, education and identity than

Singlish. It is important to note that the results related to identity seem to be inconsistent, since the respondents were all university graduates and hence acrolect speakers, while most Singaporeans, who are not graduates, are mesolect or basilect users. This implies that they speak Singlish much more than the mainly university graduates.

The results of market research by the SGEM between 2002 and 2004 reveal that 98% of the respondents do not consider Singlish to be a proper language for being taught at schools, and 96% assert they would choose SSE if they were asked to make a definite choice. Chew (2007: 85-87) points out that pragmatic reasons are put ahead of cultural ones when Singaporeans choose a language (as cited in Harada, 2009). Nevertheless, it has been clarified that Singaporeans have no need to choose between both varieties, since both can perfectly co-exist.

All in all, against what the SGEM defends, most Singaporeans support the use of Singlish for various reasons. Basically, Singaporeans who are in favour of Singlish have strong emotional attachment to it and regard it as a language of identity. In other words, Singlish connects them to their community and is an active part of many Singaporeans. As Harada (2009) asserts, Singlish is an essential element as an inter-ethnic lingua franca in the community. Thus, the policy of SGEM is doomed to failure, since it ignores the relationship between language and identity. Furthermore, as Wee (2009) explains, Singlish is neither the result of having learnt bad English nor the result of a deliberate destructive effort. In fact, Singapore is a small island in which many cultures and ethnicities are mixed, and Singlish should be considered a valuable cultural treasure instead of an obstacle to achieve progress, as the SGEM defends.

## **5. Main syntactic and morphological features of Colloquial Singapore English or Singlish**

In this section, I present some of the most distinctive syntactic and morphological features of Colloquial Singapore English (Singlish). Furthermore, I compare some of these features with more standard ones, and provide possible explanations for the different grammatical traits we come across, taking into account the contact component that clearly plays an essential role in this variety.

There are many important aspects about Singapore English that need to be highlighted in order to provide a deeper analysis of these features. In this respect, it is important to remember that Singlish is a contact variety. Most English contact varieties have resulted from a population shifting from their first language to English for a number of reasons including colonial pressure or prestige (Siemund, 2013). Singlish emerged from a substantial language shift basically of Chinese or Malay speakers to English. The variety resulting from this contact undoubtedly shows the influence of the language(s) formerly spoken by the community.

The features we will concentrate on can be classified in different ways. Here, I follow the division proposed by Wee (2004). Thus, I am going to illustrate some of the most distinctive features of Singlish taking into account whether they belong to the noun and noun phrase, the verb and verb phrase or to the clause.

### **5.1. Verbal features**

#### **5.1.1. Lack of verbal morphology**

In Singlish, the verb tends to appear in an uninflected form. Hence, time and aspectual information are conveyed lexically. As there is a lack of inflectional marking on the verb, there is also no subject-verb agreement morphology:

(2) *He eat here yesterday.*

(3) *They eat already.*

They have already eaten.

### 5.1.2. Aspect

Aspect is marked lexically, that is, via forms like *always*, *already* or *still*, as in (4) below:

(4) *She always borrow money from me.*

*Already* is a form used in this variety to convey perfect meaning, as reported in Bao (1995) and Bao and Min (2005). *Already* usually appears in Singlish with the present tense, or an untensed verb that carries the function of perfect.

(5) *After it rain already, we can go out.*

After it has already rained, we can go out.

As Bao (1995) explains, this perfective use of *already* in Singlish might be a substrate influence from Chinese (used as a general term for various languages and dialects such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Teochow and Hokkien that are spoken in Singapore). In Chinese we find a particle *le* that shares some similarities with Singlish, especially in meaning and distribution.

(6) *Ta qu niuyue le.*

He go New York LE.

He went to New York (Mandarin, Bao 1995: 185).

This analysis seems to be appropriate if we consider the inchoative (marking the beginning of an event) use of *already* in Singlish. This usage of the inchoative is also typical of the Chinese particle *le*. Uses of *already* together with an untensed verb are not so rare, since they can also be found in other post-colonial varieties (e.g. West African varieties), as well as in Pidgin and Creole varieties (Siemund, 2013).

## 5.2. Nominal features

### 5.2.1. Articles

Platt and Webber (1980: 70) find that in Singlish many definite and indefinite articles are omitted in positions in which their occurrence would be obligatory in standard varieties of the language. This phenomenon, as Siemund (2013) asserts, is abundantly attested in a number of varieties apart from Singlish: Malaysian, Indian South African...

(8) *I don't have ticket.*

(9) *Maybe you better have microphone a bit closer.*

Notice that (8) represents a typical mistake of Basque or Spanish learners of English as a foreign language, and it is probably a very typical feature of English as a L2.

### 5.2.2. Relative pronouns

Singlish makes use of all pronouns that Standard English has at its disposal to form relative clauses. Additionally, in Singlish there is a kind of relative clause that is quite different from its Standard English version. In (10) and (11), the relative pronoun *one* is invariant, and follows the modifying clause.

(10) *That boy pinch my sister one very naughty.*

That boy who pinched my sister is very naughty.

(11) *The cake John buy one always very nice to eat.*

The cake that John buys is always very delicious.

This special use of *one* as a relative marker seems to have been taken from Chinese (Alsagoff and Lick, 1998).

### 5.3. Clausal features

#### 5.3.1. Pro-drop

Singlish has been described as a pro-drop language (Gupta 1994; Platt and Weber 1980) in that the subject and/or object are often left unexpressed, particularly when the identities of the pro-dropped elements can be recovered from the context.

(12)  $\emptyset$  *Always late.*

You are always late.

(13)  $\emptyset$  *Must buy for him, otherwise **he** not happy*

We must buy a present for him, otherwise he won't be happy.

In (12) and (13) we also have absence of copula *be*. This phenomenon is also found in other contact varieties of English as well as in AAVE (African American Vernacular English). Notice that in the second clause of (13) above the subject pronoun is not omitted as the lack of morphology (the copula is missing altogether) and the change in the subject reference makes it harder to get the right interpretation if the subject is omitted, that is, we find Pro-drop when the right pragmatic conditions are met.

#### 5.3.2. Question formation

With the exception of echo-questions (*You are dating who? She works where?*) in Standard English *wh*-phrases occur sentence initially, as the result of what in generative grammar is typically referred to as *wh*-movement. In Singlish *wh*-interrogatives, the question word or phrase typically remains in situ, as in (14) and (15) below.

(14) *You buy what?*

(15) *This bus go where?*

This so-called *in situ* position of interrogative words can be found in some post-colonial Englishes, such as Cameroon English and Malaysian English, as well as in Pidgin and Creole English, where the syntax is usually used in a more simple way (Siemund, 2013).

With *yes/no* questions, Singlish makes use of the invariant tag *is it*. Nevertheless, the use of this invariant tag is not unique to Singlish. Increasingly, the invariant tag (*innit?* a variant of *isn't it?*) is used in the colloquial variety of English associated with the southern urban class in Britain. French and Chinese also make use of the invariant tags (Wong, 2014). Singlish also has another tag *or not*, as can be seen in (16) and (17) below:

(16) *The food good or not?*

(17) *You busy or not?*

According to Siemund (2013) this negative-disjunctive strategy (*or not*) is a highly reduced alternative question, and it can be found in Mandarin Chinese. Likewise, in Singapore English, the complex tag *can or not* is used, which seems to be calqued on a similar structure in Chinese. It has also been attested in Malaysian English (Siemund, 2013)

In the same vein, in the varieties spoken in India and Singapore, Siemund (2013) points out constituent interrogatives might begin with an interrogative word, but then follow the declarative word order, as illustrated in (18) and (19) below:

(18) *Where he went?* (Indian English, Bhatt 2004:1020)

(19) *Why you like give information?* (Singapore English, ICE-Singapore: S1A- 031)

With respect to the inversion of subject and verb in embedded interrogative clauses, not only is it quite common among post-colonial varieties, but it is also present in the 'Celtic Englishes' (Siemund, 2013).

(20) *Ya every time I go for those government interviews a lot of them ask me why don't I go into teaching* (Singapore English, ICE-Singapore: S1A-046).

This embedded inversion, according to Siemund (2013), can also be found in some traditional English dialects and in the variety of Irish English, as well as in the post-colonial English of India.

### 5.3.3. The passive

Singlish has two passive constructions, the *kena* passive and the *give* passive. Examples (21) and (22) below illustrate the *kena* passive, the agentive *by*-phrase being optional.

(21) *John kena scold (by his boss).*

John was scolded by his boss.

(22) *The thief kena caught (by the police).*

The thief was caught by the police.

The *kena* passive has an adversative reading (negative meaning) so that while *scold* easily allows passivization, *praise* and *like* do not.

(23) \**John kena praise his boss.*

(24) \**Mary kena like by her tennis partner.*

The *give* passive also has an adversative reading.

(25) *John give his boss scold.*

John was scolded by his boss.

(26) *The dog give the boy kick.*

The dog was kicked by the boy.

It is important to mention that there is a slight difference in the adversative readings associated with the two passives. With the *give* passive, there is an implication that the subject referent contributed in some way towards its own misfortune, like some *get* passives in American English (e.g. *We got arrested for driving too fast*); nevertheless, this reading is absent in the *kena* passive. Bao and Wee (1999) explain that the adversative effect of *kena* has been transferred from Malay. Thus, this is a case of strong substrate influence. Similarly, the word order in (26) is evidently Chinese, where the passive form is expressed with the morpheme *bei* and has the word order Patient-NP *BEI* Agent-NP V (as cited in Wee, 2004).



### 5.3.4. Adjectival reduplication

Adjectival reduplication in Singlish intensifies the meaning of the base adjective, as exemplified in (27) and (28):

(27) *Don't always eat sweet-sweet (very sweet) things.*

(28) *I like hot-hot (very hot) curries.*

Not all adjectives can be reduplicated. Wee (2004) finds the following morphological restrictions: comparatives are able to reduplicate too, while superlatives are unable to do so.

(29) *That one! That greener-greener one.*

(30) *That one! That \*greenest-greenest one.*

The use of reduplication as adjectival meaning intensification is not exclusive of Singlish. As a matter of fact, it can be attested in other contact-induced varieties of English such as Cameroon English, in Afrikaans (Michaelis et al, 2013), and in many other languages such as Basque.

(31) *Ariketa hau zail-zaila da.* (Basque)

This exercise is very difficult.

Since Basque is a language which seems to have uncertain origins and is very difficult to classify, this similarity with Singlish should be considered a mere coincidence. As it is attested in different languages and varieties we can say that it is a quite generalized strategy in the languages of the world, although standard forms of English do not make use of it.

### 5.3.5. Pragmatic Particles

Singlish has a vast amount of particles that typically occur in clause-final position. They are optional syntactically and some of the most common are *lah*, *wat* and *lor* (Wee, 2004).

#### 5.3.5.1. *Lah*

*Lah* is a particle used with various kinds of pitch to convey the mood and attitude of the speaker. Examples like (32) to indicate persuasion, (33) to show annoyance, and (34) to demonstrate strong objection, are very typical in Singlish. Exactly what mood or attitude is being conveyed will depend on specific contextual factors from which the addressee will have to infer.

(32) *Come with us lah.*

(33) *You shouldn't do that. Wrong behaviour lah.*

(34) *Are you meeting Peter?*

*No lah.*

On the other hand, for Singlish speakers, an objection like *No* without the particle would be perceived as being much ruder than one with the particle present. Hence, examples (32) and (33) are respectively requests and assertions that are made more polite by the presence of *lah*.

#### 5.3.5.2. *Lor*

Wee (2004) points out that the *lor* particle can indicate that a piece of information should be obvious to the addressee, and also conveys a sense of resignation.

(35) A: *What do I have to buy at the market?*

B: *Fish lor, vegetables lor, curry powder lor.*

The following shows *lor* marking obviousness:

(36) A: *But, um, I might stop working for a while if I need to, if I need to lah, especially for looking after kids.*

B: *But for me, I won't stop working lor. The most I won't give birth to kids lor. For the most I don't marry lor.*

By attaching *lor* to an utterance, the speaker can also indicate that the situation described by the utterance is one over which nothing can be done, and one has to simply accept the situation or its implied consequences.

## 6. General discussion

The goal of this paper is to provide an overview of the relevance of English as a contact language, taking Singapore English as a reference, and illustrating its most prominent characteristics and implications. However, I consider there are several aspects which need further consideration or should be more deeply analysed in further research.

One of the aspects I would like to reflect on is the great importance of English in a place like Singapore, considering it was the language spoken by settlers and does not represent any racial group in Singapore. Paradoxically, the status of English seems to be even higher than that of Malay, the national language. The reasons for this might be fundamentally two. On the one hand, English is the main language for education and, therefore, it is vital to students' future to have a good command of it. Many people in Singapore, especially the political leaders (the SGEM is the clearest example) believe the use of English is fundamental for the future of the country since it is the language which connects them with the rest of the world and gives them access to science and technology. Hence, English in Singapore and a proper development of the country are considered to walk hand in hand. On the other hand, being a neutral language for Singaporeans means that English in Singapore has no racial components and, consequently, no linguistic advantages or privileges over the rest, thus becoming an adequate language for interracial or intra-racial communication in Singapore (a situation similar to that attested in India and in a number of African countries in which English has been chosen as the language of administration in order to avoid favouring one of the local languages over the others).

Furthermore, I think there is an important gap in this paper. Due to space restrictions, almost nothing has been said about the cultural implication of Singapore English. Generally, language is closely associated with form and not with culture. Wong (2014) refers to it as ‘Acultural orientation’, asserting that pragmatic meanings in a cultural context are not usually taken into account when analysing a language. Languages are inevitably tied to culture and their evolution is connected to the cultural needs of the speakers. I would say that even the word Singlish itself conveys a cultural notion, which is more important in this case than a formal one. In Singlish, words, grammar and speech can reflect essential cultural norms and values that should be present when analysing a language or a variety. It is worth mentioning that Standard English was introduced in Singapore by its colonial masters long before Singlish was used (Wong, 2014). This means that Singlish is not the cause of Singaporeans’ failure to properly master Standard English.

In Singapore, then, Singlish is not merely a choice, but indeed a necessity for Singaporeans to express freely their ways of thinking and values. In my opinion, the example of Basque (together with many other languages) can be described in similar terms, since Basque people do not only see their language different to Spanish in form and lexicon, but fundamentally believe that the use of Basque permits them to transmit their culture and values in a better way and communicate in a more natural and personal way than Spanish.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper has highlighted that contact undoubtedly plays a vital role in the development and shaping of all languages in general and the different varieties of English in particular. In this sense, contact is definitely related to many sociolinguistic, economic, ethnic, individual, geographic, or even fashion factors, and this paper has attempted to take all those into account in order to get a closer view of the situation of English worldwide, underlining the growing importance of the so-called New Englishes. In particular, Singapore has been brought into focus here, since the importance of contact is accentuated in that part of the world, due to sociolinguistic and geographical factors. The analysis of the different models has shown how complex and diverse the situation in Singapore is, since the standard variety and the colloquial one

coexist with one another. Furthermore, I have briefly described some specific features of Singlish, comparing them with the standard and other English varieties, and trying to establish connections between them.

Some of these connections might be just coincidental, although languages are to a greater or a lesser extent interrelated, and the case of Singapore is no exception. What is extraordinary in Singapore, as has been mentioned before, is how the standard variety and Singlish have managed to live together, and this coexistence has caused some controversy, especially due to the Government's attitude and the launch of the SGEM. All in all, Singlish will always be a variety of identity for Singaporeans, and an element of emotional attachment to a quite small country like Singapore, and despite the inevitable changes that the variety will go through, I strongly believe Singlish will survive and gain strength in the future.

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