



## **Worlds of English**

### *Singlish Controversies*

#### **NARRATOR**

Although English is the dominant language of Singapore, a local vernacular known as Singlish is widely spoken. But the Singaporean government has attempted to discourage its use.

#### **COLIN**

Singlish is the local vernacular English, it's a, it's a mix of English with the dialects and colloquialisms of the various races that make up Singapore. Different Chinese languages actually, dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, we also have a lot of Malay terms and several terms from the Tamil, largely Tamil language as well and they're all mixed in one wonderful mess and it's possibly Singapore's only unique cultural identifier.

#### **NARRATOR**

English is seen by the Singaporean government as giving the Southeast Asian country a major economic advantage over its neighbours.

#### **LIONEL**

The government has always been concerned about obviously people speaking good English because they do see it as an important part of what it means to be economically viable and well prepared, so they're always concerned when we, I think come across situations which might compromise the ability of people to learn good English.

#### **COLIN**

What the government really wants is for everybody to be able to speak English and therefore close international deals with English speaking countries and they think that Singapore being a small country, language may be one of our only advantages. It's not as if we have natural resources, it's not as if we have a huge labour pool but perhaps because we can speak English better than anybody else in the region, more contracts might come to us.

#### **IMRAN, COLIN**

(Dialogue in Singlish)

#### **NARRATOR**

Singlish has a number of distinctive features.

#### **LIONEL**

It's got a bunch of discourse particles so lah, mah, hor and mah is a particle that I think often is used to indicate scepticism so one of my favourite examples is a television ad where, for phone, and a young man is saying to the camera that he needs to phone because he needs to call his girlfriend and his buddy next to him looks at him and says you got girlfriend mah, indicating I don't believe you actually have a girlfriend.

#### **COLIN, WOMAN**

(Dialogue in Singlish)

#### **LIONEL**

The other one would be reduplication of let's say verbs, cough, I cough cough a bit or I cough cough cough a lot so double and triple reduplication. Reduplication of adjectives to intensify the meaning, I like hot hot curries.

#### **NARRATOR**

Singlish is not one fixed language, it varies depending on who you are speaking to.

**IMRAN**

It can be more language specific, even though the base is English. If I were to speak to another Malay person about a recent event there'll be a lot more Malay words, some of which, some of my Chinese friends will understand and some more complex ones they might not and the same goes when I speak Singlish to a Chinese person, a Chinese friend, I may use a lot more Hokkien words which some of the, my other Malay friends may or may not understand. So it really depends on the intensity and. of the conversation and it's always very exciting because you can take it to a great length to see how it will evolve along the way because we also try to establish, between the two of us we are talking, how many of the phrases of, of other languages that I can use to melt into this topic that we can both understand. So sometimes you might just, what were you talking about, what are you saying, you know just stop each other and just learn along the way.

**NARRATOR**

Most young people are used to switching between standard English in a formal setting like a school or work place and Singlish when chatting informally with friends and family.

**WOMAN 1**

It's like a habit; it comes automatically when you start speaking a sentence, yeah especially when you are with your friends you know.

**WOMAN 2**

It's inbred into us, so it's like when I ask my friends to go and eat say come let's go makan, come let's go eat.

**MAN**

Well I, I think it's good, I use it all the time, every day so I think it's good.

**STUDENT**

Many a time as a Singaporean you question your identity as a Singaporean because our society is essentially a melting pot of different, different cultures and sometimes it becomes difficult to understand what it truly means to be Singaporean and I guess part, not all of it but part of what it means to be Singaporean is having our own unique form of colloquialism.

**STUDENT 2**

There's always this debate, it's either good or bad and I'm sorry to say that I actually do think it gives Singaporeans quite a bit of character when you use it. It's a lot of fun, it really is. It's so much of our everyday lingo that it's, you cannot completely remove it because It's so much part of our culture, we are Singaporeans and we speak Singlish, simple as that!

**NARRATOR**

But not everyone is so enthusiastic about Singlish.

**LIONEL**

I don't find Singlish particularly attractive frankly speaking. For me it's simply a social linguistically natural inevitable phenomenon. Singlish is simply a colloquial variety that arises when you have English in a new context as in anywhere else. I'm not particularly fond of Singlish but I'm not against it.

**NARRATOR**

Although many fluent English speakers code switch between English and Singlish, there are some Singlish speakers who struggle with standard English.

**LIONEL**

So you got I think a very interesting situation where the label has been used sometimes for what is clearly ungrammatical broken English and sometimes for what is also informal colloquial English and granted in the boundaries between the two aren't always clear but people use the labels as though it's quite simple and unproblematic to simply refer to these two different things but yet socially linguistically they're very different because in the first case

you're looking at people who are using whatever English they can because they don't really have much of a control over the standard and in the second case you're looking at people who are using a, a very informal variety because they have a control of the standard, and they are switching to something quite deliberately consciously.

### **IMRAN, COLIN**

(Dialogue in Singlish)

### **NARRATOR**

In the nineteen nineties, Imram Johri was a script writer on a popular local sitcom, who's lead character spoke in Singlish.

### **IMRAN**

It was into its third season and the, the writing team was great, we had a great executive producer and we are only into exploring various ideas, various story arts, various kinds of technical development. For this home grown character who is actually a contractor who is a Hokkien abing which is well his, his dialect is Hokkien and he's not really proficient in standard English so he communicates in the best way that he can which is through a lingo and through Singlish basically. But it wasn't a hard core Singlish that you listen on the streets or among the locals, it was just Singlish enough in this intonation to project that local flavour.

### **LIONEL**

When the sitcom became popular because of the main character and partly maybe because of his use of Singlish, the government starting getting concerned that this popularity was encouraging people to think of bad English in their view as legitimate and potentially compromising their ability to learn good standard English and after a couple of years of expressing these kinds of concerns about what would come, they decided that it was time to the Speak Good English Movement.

### **ECK**

The Speak Good English Movement started about eleven years ago and it was really to make sure that the standard of English didn't fall. It's important because it is a key advantage of Singapore and together with the Ministry of Education working with the schools, we work to ensure that the language standard is maintained. We help those from the very young to the older folks, to Unionists and taxi drivers and whoever feels that they need to improve their English we are here to give assistance.

### **COLIN**

The government's approach really is an example of what they call the road, you know, how the road to hell is paved with good intentions. They are under the impression that the merest exposure to bad grammar or unorthodox grammar will suddenly lead the entire nation you know to speak a kind of pigeon and therefore you know generations of commerce will be lost and everyone will just wither and die. So I think they are completely misguided and it's a hysterical and paranoid response and very very unfortunate.

### **STUDENT 3**

A phenomenon that has prompted this debate is that Singaporeans simply don't know how to go back into standard Mandarin or standard English and it's created a lot of problems for them when they take for example international exams like the O Levels or the A Levels because these Cambridge examiners see odd Singaporean colloquialisms creeping into essays and compositions.

### **STUDENT 4**

I think it's good that they promote the Speak Good English Movement because I think it's very important, especially that in a globalised world today where we go overseas very often and we have educational exchange programmes, emersion programmes in foreign countries whereby we use English to communicate with other people but I feel that Singlish should also be promoted because it's our cultural identity, it's who we are.

### **NARRATOR**

The government's attempt to discourage Singlish failed. Colin Goh was one of those who campaigned for Singlish and published a popular Singlish dictionary.

### **COLING**

I do think the government was unprepared for the level of passion and affection people actually had for Singlish. They assumed everybody thought of it as pigeon and you know would be happy to get rid of it, they didn't realise that many many Singaporeans speak it because it's fun. And not because we don't like to speak it, it's like the way we greet each other in default, it's our informal language and that filtered back. There was pushback there were people writing about the newspapers so people defending it, nobody expected people to defend Singlish. The government I think has moderated its stance a little.

### **LIONEL**

I spent about six years from two thousand to two thousand and six serving on the committee and explaining as far as possible why some, why it's important to promote good English but why it's also important to recognise that good English and Singlish are not necessarily mutually exclusive and I think over time it's sort of sunk in, not just because of me obviously but I think also partly because they realise that it is really difficult to promote good English if you are equating that with the elimination of Singlish, so I think you should look at the Speaking Good English Movement rhetoric in recent years. Singlish becomes less of a concern, less prominent, it appears less on the website and in speeches so they are still I think focussing on speaking good English, which they should have done so all along but I think they are now being, they are now more appreciative of the fact that there's no need to try to equate that with getting rid of Singlish.

### **ECK**

You can't force someone to learn if they don't want to, so we are not the Speak Good English police, we are just here to help those who do want to learn. So we of course want to encourage those who need to improve their English by making them aware that they need to do so to show them some benefits and to be available to point them to the right direction if they want some help.

### **NARRATOR**

The Singaporean government has had to accept that Singlish is here to stay.

### **COLIN**

I think English is going to enter a very interesting phase. I think as it gets wider it gets used by more and more people in more and more countries. People naturally begin to play with English as the Japanese have done and as China I'm sure will do as well. English is very amenable to word play which is one of its great assets but it will also lead to people playing with that in their own language. You're going to see a lot more, you're going to see the rise of Chinglish, you are going to see the rise of Spanglish, you are going to see the rise of many many vernacular Englishes, that's the way forward I see and everybody will sort of agree on a sort of standard thing that's used in conferences and on news programmes but I think more and more people will play with English and I think that's a good thing, it's a fun thing. English has always evolved and this is just the next step in its evolution.