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Chapter 4

The situation of English in Singapore

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This unit focuses on how English is used in the ecology of multilingual Singapore. It traces the socio-historical development of English in Singapore from the early nineteenth century to the present. It draws on concepts introduced in the first three chapters and provides a socio-cultural and historical overview from which the following sets of units are to be understood. How English came to Singapore. Who uses English, to whom, and in what circumstances. How the use of English relates to the use of other languages. How historical developments have affected the pattern of use of English, and (in general terms) the linguistic features of SgE.

The nineteenth century

Politics

English did not of course arrive in Singapore with Thomas Stamford Raffles in February 1819. English speakers had visited the islands of Singapore many times, trading and reconnoitring . But the Treaty which Raffles and Major William Farquhar made with the Temenggong and the Sultan began a formal connection with Britain which was responsible for the prominence that English has in Singapore today.

The links of the British government with its East Indian possessions were at first mediated through the East India Company. As often the case with British colonialism, commerce went first and rule later. Administratively, Singapore joined the other two settlements in the region which were under British control, Penang and Malacca. In 1826 the three trading centres were grouped together administratively, becoming known as the *Straits Settlements*, which were seen by the British authorities as the most Eastern Part of India. Their centre was at first the oldest of the settlements, Penang, which in turn was answerable to Calcutta, which in turn was answerable to London. Only 6 years later Singapore had developed so much at the expense of Penang that it became the capital of the Straits Settlements.

Gradually the role of the British government became more explicit and more direct, with the gradual withdrawal of the dominance and mediation East India Company. By 1867 Singapore was a Crown Colony directly ruled from London. Over the course of the nineteenth century more and more parts of the Malay peninsula and of Borneo were brought more or less under British control, but Singapore was always administratively

distinct from them, being first of all one of the three Straits Settlements, and later a Crown Colony (the standard history of the region is Turnbull 1980).

It is important to remember that the Straits Settlements were linked with each other and were a part of India. India now is a much smaller geographical area than it was in the nineteenth century, with several modern nations now composing the territory that once was India. When we write about historical periods we therefore need to use the place names that were used at that time.

The political history of British rule had impact in two areas that relate to the history of English in Singapore:

- movement of people
- development of educational policy

Incoming people

When we think of the history of colonialism we tend to think only in terms of people coming to Singapore from Britain. We may imagine the only English speakers to be people from the British Isles. We may even imagine that they all spoke late twentieth century RP. All these are wrong suppositions. The English speakers were from many places, both within and outside the British Isles. Even those from the British Isles did not predominantly speak RP -- for example many came from Ireland or Scotland. Furthermore RP itself did not really emerge until the late nineteenth century, and, as can easily be heard from archival recordings, has undergone many changes.

Native English speakers¹ came to Singapore not only from the British Isles, but also from the USA (especially in connection with the Methodist Church, see Ho 1964, Doraisamy 1985/86) and people came there from other parts of Europe (especially in connection with the Roman Catholic Church), some of whom did not know any English, and most of whom spoke it as a foreign language.. These three categories were referred to as *Europeans* in the documents of the time. But most of all, the situation of Singapore in Greater India meant that people of a variety of kinds moved from the regional areas of longer standing British control to the newer areas. The population of Singapore exploded in the early nineteenth century, with most of the rise being accountable for by non-European incomers. Singapore was the newest area of the Straits Settlements and was therefore a recipient of people from both Penang and Malacca but also from India and Ceylon. They encountered the other great movement of people into the Straits Settlements, which was from China.

Nineteenth century Singapore was an ethnically segregated city. In Raffles's 1819 plan for Singapore he allocated sections of the city to the Europeans, the Malays, and the Chinese (Buckley 1902: 56f). Malays and Chinese living in the wrong zone were supposed to move. By 1822 he was allocating areas to 'Bugis Settlers', 'Arabs', 'Amoy Chinese', and 'Chuliahs'. The *natives* (and that meant non-Europeans of all sorts) were

¹ In the discussion that follows I use the term 'native speaker of English' to mean someone who grows up speaking English from infancy (some other interpretations are discussed in Tay 1979, Singh et al 1995, Gupta 1994).

set aside from the *European residents*. Buckley (1902:450) quotes a contemporary account of ceremonial presentation of a sword of honour to the Temenggong in 1846, which “the natives seemed to consider ... a holiday, and at an early hour Chinese, Malays, Javanese, Chuliahs, Hindoos, &c., &c., were seen swarming into the town from all quarters.”

However, there also came to Singapore, from the older British settlements, people who were ambiguous, neither really *natives* nor really *Europeans*. Some of them were *Eurasians*, people of mixed European and Asian ancestry -- they came into Singapore from Malacca, India and Ceylon. While those of mixed ancestry from India and Ceylon usually spoke English (as well as other languages, often including Dutch in the case of those from Ceylon), the mixed people from Malacca usually spoke a Portuguese Creole at home, and were unlikely to know English in the early years. Another important group to move to Singapore from Malacca were the Straits Chinese, a group that may also have been of mixed ancestry (Chinese and Malay), but which saw itself as ethnically and culturally Chinese, and used a variety of Malay in family life. Others were from minority groups that had operated the British territories for generations -- Armenians and Jews, most of whom came from Baghdad via India. Many of these ambiguous people came in roles that are of key importance in the transmission of English: as teachers, translators, and clerical staff, and can be described as *brokers*. They had experienced British rule and many of them were familiar with English. They could be used by the Europeans to reach the natives in a way that was not possible to a European. These people had a tremendous impact on the way in which English developed in Singapore. We get a vivid picture of English-learning in the earlier years of the Straits Settlements in the account of Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir. Usually known as Munshi (‘Teacher’) Abdullah, he was a Malaccan of mixed Tamil, Arab and Malay background, who grew to become a linguist and a teacher of Malay to the British and Americans in Singapore, and who wrote an autobiography that has become a classic of Malay literature. In 1823 he decided to learn English (he already knew Arabic, Tamil, Malay and Hindustani):

I heard news that a newly arrived English padre was teaching children free, taking no fees or money even for his expenses. Everything was provided, even paper, ink and the like. When I heard this I was very pleased for I remembered the advice of Lord Minto and Mr Raffles who had said: “If you learn English it will be very useful to you.” Ever since they had told me this their words had lived in my memory. At that time it was very difficult to learn English in Malacca for there were no schools. The sons of rich men had tried to learn, calling teachers to their houses and paying them high fees. They were not good teachers: neither were they proper Englishmen, the majority being Eurasians from Madras or the Dutch possessions who had learnt a little English. These were the people who became teachers in Malacca and asked exorbitant fees. Nobody of any other race in Malacca could read or speak English correctly, for there were none who learnt it.

(Abdullah 1843, transl. A H Hill, in Hill (ed) 1969)

In his first encounter with the padre, a Eurasian child translated between the Englishman and Abdullah. Both that Eurasian child and Munshi Abdullah were acting as linguistic brokers.

In the nineteenth century very few Singapore residents spoke English. English was used among the Europeans residents, and was beginning to be taught in English medium schools. However, for most of the nineteenth century, the majority of those in English medium schools came from backgrounds with some contact with English. Very few of the *natives* went to school at all, let alone English medium schools (Gupta 1994). Nor did they learn English informally. There is no evidence that there was ever a pidgin English in the Straits Settlements. Well into the twentieth century, the predominant lingua franca was a Malay based pidgin, usually known as *Bazaar Malay*. Bazaar Malay was widely known by people of all ethnic groups and was the language that European residents of the Straits Settlements expected to have to learn in order to communicate with *natives*.

Malay has played a large part in the formation of Colloquial Singapore English. However the varieties of Malay that have been most important are Bazaar Malay and the kind of Malay spoken by the Straits Chinese (now usually known as *Baba Malay*). These two contact varieties of Malay had themselves been influenced by the southern variety of Chinese, Hokkien. The lexical items in CSE which are not from English are overwhelmingly from Malay and Hokkien --contributed from these two varieties of Malay.

Education policy

The educational impact of the political developments was essentially a move from the private to the public. As the British government became increasingly directly involved in Singapore, an education policy began to develop (Bloom 1986, Gupta 1994). In the early years education was largely in the hands of private organisations, churches, and charitable bodies. The Annual Report on the Administration of the Straits Settlements has a brief section on education from the report of 1856-57 onwards, and this report gets more and more substantial as time goes on. Schools, both government and non-government, were increasingly supervised and compliance with policy had financial consequences as the century progressed.

In the early years English medium education was essentially for European and Eurasian boys and girls, and for the sons of those few *natives* willing and able to afford it (Gupta 1996). Malays were encouraged to be educated in Malay and were especially discouraged from being educated in English -- education in the medium of Malay was given financial support. Gradually the government gave more financial support to education in English and in other mediums, but policy underwent many changes of direction and in financing (Bloom 1986, Gupta 1994).

It sometimes seems to be assumed that the early schools of the Straits Settlements taught British English with an RP accent. While some of the features of SE did emerge in Singapore, we cannot assume that the starting point was British English, let alone with an RP accent.

Let us look at the teachers in the English medium schools in nineteenth century Singapore. European teachers were largely restricted to senior posts. Indeed, 'Senior Teachers' were actually defined as those "not educated or engaged locally" (Report for 1915). An 1891 advertisement for Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) advertises "Ten classes

taught by the best trained European masters” (Ho 1964:32). Photographs of the teachers at ACS at the time show the majority of teachers as still being non-European, however.

In 1901 another advertisement for ACS Singapore advertised itself as having “6 European and 12 native teachers” while Methodist Girls’ School made a point that the kindergarten was “under trained American teacher” (Ho 1964:139). In 1884 a list is given of the names and salaries of the teachers in the government schools. Using a combination of salary and name it is possible to determine the race of most of the teachers: the salaries fall into two sets, without overlap, one with a range of \$240-\$600 p.a. and one with a range of \$960-\$2520 p.a.. Eight of the 31 teachers were on this higher scale, and all have European names (which could be Eurasian too, but probably were not, given the salary). Of those on the lower scale, 3 teachers have clearly Indian names, and 2 clearly Chinese. The remaining 18 are probably Eurasian, although of them, 7 have names of ‘Portuguese’ origin like Gabriel, Pereira, De Rozario, Gomes, D’Souza and Oliveiro which could be Eurasian or Indian. While we cannot retrieve exact figures from the nineteenth century documents, it is evident from official returns and from advertisements that *European* teachers were in a small minority.

Furthermore, “European” didn’t mean *British*, but *white*. The Methodist Church had a long standing link with a group in Minnesota, and many of its early Missionary-teachers came from the US. They also had teachers from the UK and Australia, as well as from India and Ceylon. Meanwhile the Catholic church was also drawing its European teachers from a variety of sources, including of course Ireland (English-speaking, and then a part of Britain) but also France and Belgium.

The input even of “European” English was thus very mixed. Many of the colonialists were people who had led complicated lives. Buckley (1902:133) reports how J H Moor, the first head of Raffles Institution, was an Irishman born in Macao --- with a "speech defect"!

In terms of pronunciation, RP would seem to have had little prominence in this rich dialectological soup. The single most important group in education in the earliest years were the Eurasians. Many of the early Reports of Education castigate the English of these Eurasian teachers (as did Munshi Abdullah). Their English should certainly be the starting point in the analysis of Singapore English *pronunciation*. While they did use Standard English², it was already as ‘New Variety’ type of English, and it is likely to have had some input into the lexis and syntax of SE. The impact is likely to be seen most in those few differences between SStdE and British Standard English, and especially in those features shared by South Asian Standard Englishes and SStdE, for example in the use of the invariable tag *is it*, and in the use of *will / would*.

Children in English-medium schools didn't just learn English from their teachers any more than they do today. They learnt also from other children, who in turn adjust their speech to accommodate those around them.

² I use the term *Standard English(es)* to refer to the varieties of English used throughout the English speaking world in educational and formal contexts. These Standard Englishes are strikingly similar, differing from each other only in pronunciation and in a few lexical items (e.g. *flip flops / thongs / slippers*). There are a handful of minor syntactic differences. The term *Standard English* can be used where it is not necessary to focus on these minor variations from one Standard English to another. See also Chapter 7 below.

It's often forgotten that many European families (not all of whom were British) kept their children with them in Singapore, especially their daughters, and especially in the earlier years: as late as the 1970s the schools of the Tanglin group, the main schools attended by the British community in Singapore, had more female than male pupils (Veronica Goodban, former headmistress, personal communication). So in the early years (especially up to the 1920s) there were a lot of European children in the schools, including British children. The 1891 advertisement for ACS promised that: "To English lads is offered a home, and to Chinese lads an opportunity to learn a correct accent and facility in expressing themselves in the English language." Until the end of the nineteenth century, around half the pupils in English medium schools were European or Eurasian. The composition was much comparable to that of the International Schools of modern Singapore. In the girls' schools, the proportion of Europeans and Eurasians was even higher -- other than these groups the main source of girls was from the Jewish and Armenian groups (both of which were officially classified as 'Indian' until 1915). Many of the non-European children in the 19C English-medium schools would have been exposed to English at home. The girls' schools were especially likely to have a majority of English-speaking children.

There are some similarities between the Eurasians, the Armenians and the Jews. Although the Jews were often Arabic speaking Jews whose families were originally from Baghdad, many had come via India. Many of the Eurasians in Singapore were also of Indian or Ceylonese origin, and members of the Armenian community also had come from India. Other Eurasians came from Malacca. Another important group of children who attended English-medium schools in the nineteenth century were the Straits Chinese who usually spoke their own variety of Malay (and often Hokkien too). These four communities were all prone to use both Malay and, increasingly, English. As early as 1858 an Israeli traveller described the Singapore Jews as becoming westernised (Nathan 1986:3). The Straits Chinese came to be known as the *King's Chinese* in the early twentieth century. The Jews, Armenians and Eurasians were also likely to educate children of both sexes in English-medium schools. The Straits Chinese were the first Chinese group to place daughters in English-medium schools. These four small communities with vital brokering positions were crucial in the development of English, and their access to English and to contact varieties of Malay began the development of English in Singapore which moved it away from the Standard Indian/Eurasian English that had been the major input.

We see here why Malay has been so important in the formation of CSE. But not Malay Malay -- rather the *contact variety* of Malay which Eurasians, Europeans, Indians, Jews, and Straits Chinese, all would to some extent be able to speak. Well-known features of SCE like *lah*, *ah*, and lexical items like *kiasu* which have their origin in Chinese varieties, appear to have come into SCE via contact varieties of Malay.

Some areas of Singapore were English/Contact Malay-prone areas. In the 19C this was especially the case for the Waterloo Street area on the eastern edge of the city -- here Eurasians, Armenians, Jews, and Straits Chinese lived side by side (Clarke 1992). The major English-medium schools were also in this area. Until the 1900s there was even an area nearby of European prostitutes, in whose houses English was used, though none of them were British. This was principally Malay Street, off Victoria Street and was of course conveniently located (Warren 1993:40f).

Later Katong, even further east of the city, became another English/Contact Malay prone area -- to some extent still is. There was the same English-oriented mixture of Straits Chinese, Eurasians and a scattering of Jews.

Malay also had an important role in the English medium schools: the syllabus of the English-medium schools in 1874 consisted of arithmetic and geography (from Standard IV to VI), plus four measures associated with English skills. In these, pupils were assessed on reading aloud (and translating into Malay -- English pupils were exempted from this) first words, then passages, of increasing difficulty; writing from dictation; parsing (from Standard IV) and writing a summary of a supplied text (from Standard V). This gave no practice in spoken language, or in free writing.

English speakers in 1900

There were two ways in which you could be an English speaker in nineteenth century Singapore:

- you could be from a family which used English. Possibly because you were of European British or part European British descent. Or because your family had received an English medium settlement in one of the older British settlements.
- you could have received some education in an English medium school in Singapore.

We can group these English speakers people as follows:

- European British (i.e. of British ancestry). Nearly all native speakers of English, but of many varieties of British English.
- Other European. Nearly all non-native speakers of English.
- English speakers of mixed ancestry (Eurasians) and non-Europeans with English-medium education outside Singapore. Many native speakers of English. Some non-native speakers of English.
- Non-Europeans with English-medium education within Singapore. Non-native speakers of English.

The proportion of English speakers coming from these groups varied over time, with the last group increasing to become the largest numerically.

It is generally agreed that SingE had its origins in the English medium schools of the Straits Settlements (Platt & Weber 1980, Bloom 1986). I don't think there's any serious doubt about this. Although in this general sense I agree with the analysis of Platt & Weber in Chapter 2 of their 1980 book, there are several differences between my account of the history and theirs.

Analysis of the composition and growth of the English-medium schools of the Straits Settlements suggests that there were two distinct phases in the development of SCE: first a stable period in which a high proportion of children in the English-medium schools were from English and Malay speaking homes; followed by a change in the first decade of the twentieth century which saw a sudden influx of Chinese-speaking children. The

increase, in the same period, in English-medium education for females is also important in the establishment of an indigenous variety of English (Gupta 1994).

The twentieth century

English on the rise

When the Chinese children thronged into the English-medium schools in the first decade of the twentieth century, they entered a set-up that had been linguistically stable for twenty years. This is the moment when SCE came into real being, as the English-medium schools coped for the first time with a majority population of non-English-speakers. Malay also receded into importance as fewer children came to school already able to use it. Apart from the Straits Chinese, the group of Chinese most enthusiastic about English-medium education were the Cantonese (Bloom 1986), making Cantonese a possible source of influence on the English that emerged. The school photographs of this period begin to show the dominance of ethnic Chinese boys among the pupils.

After the influx of ethnic Chinese in the first decade of this century, they became the major group of English speakers in Singapore. As the Chinese were numerically dominant in the Straits Settlements, even though few of them were English-focused, they quickly formed the largest group of English speakers. In the 1921 census, Nathan experimented with finding out the extent of knowledge of English. He expressed great doubts about the validity of the returns on this question, but it's worth looking at even so:

Ethnic Group	No. of English Speakers	% of community able to speak English	% of English speech community
European	5771	91	13.5
Eurasian	6090	78	14.3
Chinese	23361	6	54.7
Malay	1924	3	4.5
Indian	3939	8	9.2
Other	1588	23	3.7
TOTAL	42673	8	

Table 1: Ability to speak English in the urban areas of the Straits Settlements. 1921 Census (Nathan 1922).

From this period on, English-medium education became more and more popular. In the 1920s Chinese and Indian girls began to enter English-medium schools in larger numbers, and these girls grew up to be able to speak English as one of the languages used in the home, giving rise to a new generation of native speakers of English. The change in the student body had its impact on the teaching population ten years later. In the early twentieth century the prominence of Eurasians in the teaching force diminished and the proportion of Chinese teachers increased. After the 1942-45 Japanese occupation, Malay children in greater numbers began to experience English-medium education, and in the

post war years English medium education gradually became the commonest form of education for both sexes and all ethnicities.

After independence in 1965, education was further extended to reach all children (in terms of class, gender and ethnicity). In Singapore education is neither free nor compulsory, but it can be described as universal. The trend during the British period had been for government to take more and more control of educational policy, and this was continued after independence. Education is under tight government control, and the private sector is insignificant, being almost entirely restricted to foreigners. Gradually the use of English was extended after independence, so that it became first of all compulsory as either a medium or as a subject in all schools. The number of children electing to have education in a medium other than English dropped, and eventually (in 1987) all education under government control was required to be in the medium of English. In every generation a higher proportion of students would be second-generation English-educated, which would often mean that they spoke some English on arrival. The English-medium education of women is crucial for this step. This allowed CSE to emerge as a native language. By end of twentieth century about half of all students start education knowing English, in one sense a return to the nineteenth century picture.

Let us summarise the growth of English-medium education in the Straits Settlements.

Four phases in the schools can be seen:

- (1) In the nineteenth century years -- stable situation. High proportion of Europeans & Eurasians as pupils (even higher among girls). Relatively few Chinese and almost no Malays. Any Chinese pupils likely to be Straits Chinese. Teachers mostly Eurasian & from India / Ceylon with Europeans in senior positions. A high proportion of children would have spoken English and Malay on arrival in school. Some English taught through Malay.
- (2) Early twentieth century expansion period: progressive reduction of both Malay-speakers and of English-speakers in the school intake. Hokkien, and especially Cantonese speakers formed an increasingly high proportion of English-medium school attenders, but the school population was still very diverse. Malay still used to teach English. Influx of Chinese teachers in English-medium schools. Few girls educated.
- (3) Mid twentieth century. Diversity of the school population due to multiplicity of dialects among the Chinese, and the arrival of more Malays in English-medium schools. More girls. Proportion of students being educated increased, and the proportion in English medium education grew, though it did not exceed Chinese-medium until the 1950s (Bloom 1986). Greater use of English as a normal means of communication.
- (4) Post-independence. English-medium education becomes universal. Rise in number of Chinese, Malay and Indian children having English as a native language.

Terminological problems

Approaches to the study of Singapore English have varied greatly (see Chapter 5 below). Writers on Singapore English have ranged from those who see it as entirely ‘error’ based, through those who see it primarily as a second language, to those who focus on the native speakers. Terms like *native language* can hold different definitions for different writers. *Singapore English* as used by some writers may cover the whole proficiency range (e.g. Platt and Weber) or may refer only to the English of native speakers (Gupta). It is clearly important to understand the population on whom a writer is drawing for data, and to read in the context of a writer’s definitions.

Language is highly politicised in Singapore. The post-independence language and education policy has been a major factor in promoting the use of English in many domains. This politicisation gives rise to two main elements to be considered in assessing the readings:

- terms acquire a particular definition within the socio-political system.
- there is a clearly articulated language policy which has goals that are widely discussed and known by citizens.

It is important to understand that everyone in Singapore has an official ‘race’ which generally reflects paternal ancestry and which may not reflect actual language knowledge and use (Gupta 1994). The three official languages of Singapore other than English (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) are defined as representing the three major ‘races’ of Singapore. These racial groups are subdivided into ‘dialect groups’ or ‘ethnic groups’. As officially defined the *mother tongue* is the superordinate language of one’s official ethnic group. So the mother tongue of a ‘Chinese’ is deemed to be Mandarin, that of a ‘Malay’ Malay and that of a ‘Tamil’ or ‘Malayalee’ Tamil. The *first language* is the main medium of education (which is now always English) while the *second language* is the other language studied (usually the official ‘mother tongue’).

The term *mother tongue* in the Singapore political system therefore corresponds neither to the individual’s childhood language(s), nor to the individual’s ancestral language.

In Singapore one’s officially allocated ‘dialect group’ normally corresponds to the paternal ancestral language, but also does not necessarily correspond to anything in the individual’s personal experience. Linguists usually use the terms *mother tongue*, *native language* and *first language* in the same sense. These terms usually refer to a language (which may be one of two or more) that a child learns before learning any other language, though some linguists use them to refer to an ancestral language that the child may or may not have been exposed to. The term *second language* as used by linguists normally refers to a language that is not an individual’s native language, but which is used in daily life. Writings on language use in Singapore often use these terms without definition, with some using them in the same sense as the official definition, and others in the usual linguists’ sense. Some readings slip between the definitions, and even seem to assume that the senses are identical. In all reading on Singapore it is crucial to contest the meaning of these terms, where they are not defined.

Sources of data

It is extremely difficult to get accurate information on who uses English and in what circumstances. There have been some studies of the pattern of English use in Singapore, including census data. It is essential to assess this data. Asking people when and where they speak a given language is notoriously problematical. People simplify, misrepresent, forget, and lie. The choice of a language (or a mixture of languages) from within one's personal repertoire is not an easy one, as where there is choice, that choice has social meaning. A question such as, "If you needed to ask directions in the street, which language would you choose" is impossible to answer. It depends on your own repertoire, obviously, but it also depends on your assessment of the interlocutor's repertoire (based on ethnicity, perceived social class, age, and so on). Furthermore, people select who they ask directions of, and can therefore increase the likelihood of being able to use a preferred language. The census question, 'What language do you speak to your parents?' presumes that the same language is used to both parents, which is not of course necessarily the case. Questions of this type simplify, and force respondents into giving a straightforward answer where a hedged one would be more accurate. In all data of this kind it is important to examine the way the questions were asked and to predict the likely *direction of error*. To say that a survey or a decennial census has a likely direction of error is not to damn it. It is in fact extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to improve the quality of information about language use that can be obtained from a large scale survey, such as a census. Where enough information is given about the way in which questions are asked (as it is in the case of the census), the direction of error can be identified and caution applied where appropriate.

The contestation of terms and of facts in this area, means that it is necessary to approach reports with an open mind, and to bring to them any knowledge of one's own about the language situation in Singapore. In all readings, for better understanding it is essential to examine:

- the date of writing
- the date of data used
- the source of data
- the definition of terms

Those who are familiar with Singapore should compare data to their own personal experience of Singapore, either now or in the past. In a summary it is essential to simplify what is in reality great complexity, but the simplification should be one that is representative and that identifies larger patterns in a way that would be understandable to someone unfamiliar with the society. Those who are unfamiliar with Singapore face a harder task. They need to make assessments based on their experience of other societies, and will also find it useful to look for contradictions between one writer and another.

Who uses English and when?

The pattern of language use in Singapore was always complex, as in any multiethnic trading port. It has also changed substantially since the mid-twentieth century. The complexity and the rapid change together mean that:

- the relationship of English to Singaporeans varies considerably from one individual to another, so that the position of English in Singapore cannot be reduced to a single phrase such as *English as a second language*.
- descriptions of the status of English rapidly become outdated.

Descriptions of the role of English (or any other language in Singapore), including mine, must therefore be approached with extreme caution.

English exists in an linguistic ecology of several languages. A number of writers (such as Kuo 1980, Platt and Weber 1986, Gupta and Siew 1995) have discussed the patterns of individuals' repertoires. There are expectations about the languages likely to be known by people of certain ages, social classes, and ethnicities. And languages have niches or *domains* that tend (in a rather flexible way) to be associated with them. English has participated in this ecology since 1819, and can indeed be described as an exotic weed, which has become well established and has flourished at the expense of some of the other languages.

The general position of English in Singapore in the second half of the twentieth century has been that the *knowledge of English*, and the *domestic use of English* have spread from a small elite to a wider population. It must be remembered that the population at any time includes people born over the previous ninety years. Thus a snapshot of the population preserves patterns of language use from an earlier period. A Singaporean born in the 1970s is almost certain to be able to communicate in and to read English. But only a minority of those born in the 1920s know English. In data such as census figures, it may be difficult to see anything but the snapshot.

In what follows I delineate the overall patterns of English use in Singapore. Reliable figures for this kind of information do not exist. There is census data, which I have discussed elsewhere (Gupta 1994) and there are a number of smaller reports. But there is a great deal of opportunity for collecting data on language use in Singapore. (see for example Tay 1979, Platt & Weber 1980, Kuo 1980, Gupta & Siew 1995).

In the post-independence years, English-medium education became increasingly the norm. In earlier years education, and especially English-medium education, had not been evenly distributed across the population. There had been some ethnic variation (with the Indians being most likely to receive it and Malays least), but the major variation had been social. The higher the social class, the more likely a Singaporean was to know English. In post-independence Singapore the ethnic variation has been virtually removed (the majority Chinese are now slightly less likely to be literate in English than the other two major groups). To some extent the social differentiation remains.

Whatever measure of social class is taken it is still the case that the higher the social class, the more likely it is that English is an important domestic language (this pattern can be seen in the 1990 census data, e.g. Table 2). We need to consider the direction of error here. There are difficulties in this question whose effect is unpredictable (lying about income or about language use, making arbitrary decisions when one language is spoken to mother and one to father) but there are two areas where we can predict the effect of error. On the one hand, English is only recorded if it is the *main* language spoken to parents. This means that there are more people than this who speak English as a language to their

parents. Secondly, these questions related only to parents within the same household. The main effect of this would seem to be on age, as the younger people are more likely to be living with parents -- partly because they have not yet set up independent households and partly because the older a respondent is the more likely it is that their parents will have died (not many 70 year olds live with a parent). This will have the effect of increasing the number of English speakers, as the younger age groups are more likely to know English. None of these factors however will affect the very clear direction of these figures -- the richer you are the more likely you are to speak English to your parents.

Monthly household income from all sources (S\$)	% speaking English as main language to parents (in same household)
Below 1000	3
1000-1999	7
2000-2999	10
3000-3999	12
4000-4999	14
5000-5999	16
6000-6999	19
7000-7999	22
8000-8999	25
9000-9999	29
10000 and over	35
TOTAL	12

Table 2: English to parents: link with income (adapted from Lau 1993: 87).

By the late twentieth century, unlike in the past, English is not *restricted* to the social elite. The main route of English in Singapore until the 1960s was almost entirely through education, except for a tiny minority of people, and especially through English-medium education. Knowledge of English led to use of English, not only in transactions, but also in social and domestic settings. Once women knew English, it could become a native language for their children, as it was introduced, usually alongside other languages, into the home.

Within Singapore at the end of the twentieth century, then, there are adults:

- who know no English (very few people, mostly drawn from those born before the 1950s)
- for whom English is a foreign language they have little ability in and seldom speak (mostly older people, but also some less educated younger people)
- who learnt English at school and can use it but who have a dominant other language (many people, of all ages)
- who learnt English at school and for whom it has become the dominant language (many people, of all ages)

- who learnt English as a native language (sometimes a sole native language, but usually alongside other languages) and for whom English is still the dominant language (a minority at present, but an increasingly common pattern in younger age groups)

The rise of English in Singapore has, since the late 1970s, been paralleled by an equally dramatic rise in the use of Mandarin by member of the Chinese community. Benjamin (1976) identified Singapore's multiracialism as one which was based on encouraging ethnic identities, and in several areas this separatism has continued to develop (discussed in various recent books, including Chua 1995). One effect has been the expansion in learning and domestic use of Mandarin.

The extension of Mandarin has been largely at the expense of other varieties of Chinese (the 'dialects') but there are some areas of social life where now Mandarin is to be heard where previously English was the norm. In multi-ethnic workplaces, in residents' committees, and at times in the media, Singaporeans who do not speak Mandarin are beginning to feel excluded. The Singapore school system requires that children study the language of their ethnic group, and since the 1980s it has become increasingly difficult for children to study other languages than the one that is officially theirs (Gupta 1994, Chua 1995). With insignificant exceptions, non-Chinese Singaporeans are excluded from the learning of Mandarin within the school system. As Mandarin has been promoted, and as the Chinese are increasingly seen by political dialogue as the mainstream, which means that minorities may feel excluded and marginalised. Members of ethnic minorities, and indeed some Chinese, thus promote English as the language of pan-Singaporean identity. The minority groups have a greater investment in English than the minority Chinese (Gupta 1994).

English in Singapore can be identified as having a proficiency scale (see the discussion in Chapter 3). It is a traditional axiom of linguistics that all native speakers of a language are said to be equally proficient -- any distinctions between the standard of English of its native speakers are based on political criteria that rate some native varieties as socially superior to others. However, non-native speakers of a language are traditionally ranged on a proficiency scale. This is not a distinction I feel entirely at home with when applied to highly proficient non-native speakers, but for those at the lower end of a learner continuum it is meaningful.

One area that gives rise to much confusion in understanding Singapore English is that a feature which some may be an *error* may in fact be a dialectal feature of Singapore English. If a speaker who in formal settings does mark the past tense, then when the same speaker does not mark the past tense in a domestic situation, there had been no error -- the speaker is merely using more than one kind of English. Chapter 5 below discusses in more detail the *lectal continuum* and *diglossia* approaches to the study of English in Singapore, and Chapter 9 explains the importance of understanding what varieties of English a child is exposed to. At this stage I would like simply to emphasise that many Singaporean speakers of English move at will between StdE and CSE. Skill in StdE, as is the case in other English-using societies, is highly valued, and is often socially used to judge a person's social and linguistic status. In Singapore English, as in all or most languages, the way a person speaks gives information to other members of the community about their social position: their gender, age, social class and so on, and speakers often manipulate this information-giving either consciously or semi-consciously.

The areas in which English are used by Singaporeans varies considerably. Although linked to proficiency it is not only proficiency in English which determines the areas in which language is used.

In Singapore, English *can* be used in all aspects of daily life. There are a few Singaporeans who seldom if ever need to use any other language, who perform all their work life, all their emotional life, and all their commercial transactions in English. However, most Singaporeans habitually use two or three or even four or more languages on a daily basis, and for most of them, one of those languages is English.

Language choice is usually referred to in terms of *domain*. In Singapore English can be found in all domains (e.g. education, business, domestic, religious) and is used by all ethnic groups. It can even be found in religious and cultural activities which are linked to particular ethnic groups. Most Muslims in Singapore are Malays, but English may be used in mosque-based activities. The mosque is a domain in which both Arabic and Malay have major functions. English can even (sometimes) be heard in exclusively Chinese activities such as religious auctions, where traditionally Southern varieties of Chinese are used, and where Mandarin is also often heard. English is used domestically in many families of all ethnicities and (increasingly) all social classes. Although it *may* be used in all domains by just about anybody, that does not mean that it *is*. It is hard to pinpoint domains where English is *required*. The same predictivity applies to choices between StdE and CSE. There are a number of contexts where an effort at StdE is required -- these are the formal and educational contexts which require StdE around the English-using world. However, although there are some contexts where (given a choice of English) CSE is a likely choice (among close friends in a social setting, with family members), there are no contexts or domains where CSE is *required*.

There are some domains in Singapore, especially those involving contact with educational and governmental authorities, where English (and usually StdE) will normally be the first language of choice if those involved in the situation are able to use it. If English is not available to both parties, there will be a process of negotiation to find a common language or a means of translation. For example, parents registering their child at a school will have a prior expectation of English as the preferred language of the transaction. However, other considerations may enter. If for example, the school representative and the parents are both ethnic Malays, Malay is a possible choice, and ethnic solidarity may overcome the domain expectations.

This is true in all domains. The complexities of age, social class, ethnicity and language proficiency operate in all settings, so that it is not possible to simply specify the domains associated with particular languages. The asking of directions is an interesting example, because the asker has some choice in who to approach. Imagine you are an ethnic Chinese, whose English is excellent but whose Mandarin is weak. You are lost and want to ask directions. It may be that you have in the past been rebuked for not using Mandarin -- "Are you ashamed to be Chinese? Why do you speak to me in English?" You may therefore choose to approach someone you can speak to in English without fear of rebuke -- an ethnic Indian for example.

When we study the domains and patterns of English use in a society, we look at general patterns and statistical trends. There are many aspects of language use which are not categorial. The domains in which different languages are used, the links between

language and social class, between language repertoire and age, and so on, are all areas where there are many exceptions to the general behaviour and the general trend, and where individuals participate in complex choices.

The effects of history on form

In Chapter 3 we saw how there are no features that distinguish all the New varieties from all the Old. This is true of all varieties. We cannot identify a single feature of *Singapore English* which is characteristic of all and only Singapore English. Nor is there any such feature of *British English*. Singapore English is a range of Englishes used by the people of Singapore, and can be defined only on that geographical basis, not on the basis of its features. So when we step from a geographical base into discussing the features, we are, once again, talking about the general or the dominant pattern, rather than about something which is unvarying and with no exceptions.

When you read about how Singapore English comes to be the way it is, or about the source of features in CSE, you will see a good deal of speculation: e.g. does *lah* come from Malay? Hokkien? Cantonese? Could *ah* come from Tamil? And so on. Our answers to these questions must be plausible not only linguistically, but also historically. We need to assess which languages could have influenced SingE as we see it today (Chaudenson 1979, Mufwene 1990, Gupta 1994). This is part of what is meant by *sociohistorical*.

The initial model of English in Singapore was Standard English, as used by the teachers in the early English-medium schools. However, only about a quarter of the teachers in the Schools were Europeans of British Ancestry. Most teachers (and especially those in contact with the youngest children) were Eurasian and many were from India and Ceylon. It was their variety of Standard English and, especially their pronunciation, which must be seen as the principal starting point for the history of English in Singapore.

As larger numbers of non-English speaking children underwent English-medium education, they adapted this initial model. It is an axiom of sociolinguistics that we speak like our peers, or that we try to speak like those we want to be seen as our peers (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985). The role of children in developing the linguistic feature of new settlements has often been discussed (e.g. Kerswill 1996) -- children soon set themselves aside in their pronunciation from children in other settlements and from adult incomers. This basic process was presumably in operation in the first two decades of this century in Singapore. *Imperfect learning* (see Chapter 3) was no doubt also a factor at this point, as most children experienced few years of education. The requirement in many schools that all communication be in English led to a communicative need for English. The result was the emergence of a kind of English that was almost a relexified (see Chapter 3) Bazaar Malay. It was this that was to become CSE. Only CSE has a substrate. We cannot speak of Standard Singapore English having a substrate.

The most important of the languages that were in contact in the turn of century period which saw the origin of CSE, then, seem to have been:

- (1) **The superstrate:** Standard English. (Eurasian, Indian/Ceylon, British of various sorts, American).
- (2) **The principal substrate:** Baba Malay (the Malay of the Straits Chinese) and Bazaar Malay. Both these languages in turn had been influenced by Chinese (especially Hokkien) and possibly by Portuguese creole. The Portuguese creole may have had direct input too via the Malacca Eurasians.
- (3) **The secondary substrate:** Assorted southern varieties of Chinese of which Hokkien/Teochew and Cantonese are likely to be the most important. Hokkien was also a substrate to the two varieties of Malay which were the principal substrate.

The individual learners of English brought to their learning of English their own language backgrounds, but they also heard the crystallizing variety of spoken English from their multiracial school mates.

Most of the languages which were in contact during the period of development of SCE are still in contact now (as an *adstrate*). The two contact varieties of Malay that were so important are in recession now, although both Baba Malay and Bazaar Malay can still occasionally be heard. Two other languages are in the adstrate which were not in the substrate. One is Malay (Standard Malay and other varieties of Malay spoken by ethnic Malays). This was not in the substrate because few Malays were given the opportunity of an English-medium education until after independence. It is important in the adstrate because knowledge and use of English (alongside Malay) is very widespread now among the Malays, and because of its regional prominence. Another part of the adstrate currently is Mandarin, which was not part of the substrate, because few in Singapore learnt it until the 1920s, and few spoke it regularly until the 1980s. Mandarin is now probably Singapore's leading native language among the under sevens (English is the runner up), and has become a major language of everyday use in Singapore in the 80s and 90s. Although these adstrate languages are not part of the substrate of CSE, they are available to influence both CSE and StdSgE now.

The origins of features of Singapore English can be very complex. Elsewhere I have discussed the origin of CSE *one* (Gupta 1992), and in Chapter 7 below there is a discussion of the origins of *what* and *ma*. Many of the lexical items of Hokkien and of Malay origin are used in CSE used in Bazaar Malay and the Malay of the Straits Chinese. They may have come into CSE from one of those two contact varieties of Malay or they may have come direct from Hokkien or Malay. We can often not reach a firm conclusion about the route by which a feature reached CSE.

The same applies to features of pronunciation. The general absence of length distinction in SgE vowels (Chapter 6) could have come from influence from the substrate, but it could also have come from the Indian, Ceylonese, and Eurasian teachers in the nineteenth century schools, with contributions from the presence of Irish or American teachers. The same goes for the use of plosives where some other varieties of English have dental fricatives. This is common in many varieties of English, including the English of India, Ceylon, and Ireland. The vowels of GO and TAKE are usually monophthongs in Singapore English, although they are diphthongs in RP. However there is no evidence that the /o/ and /e/ of SgE are the result of monophthongisation, as there is no evidence

that diphthongal versions were the original model -- they are similar monophthongs in many varieties of English.

Conversely, a common feature of most varieties of British (and American) English is variation between /n/ and /ŋ/ in unstressed syllables (*singin' and dancin'*). This variation is completely missing from SingE, which always has /ŋ/ (although in recent years a trendy /n/ has appeared from the influence of the American media). This is all the more striking because in Singapore Mandarin /n/ and /ŋ/ are in variation (in words like 三 'three', 山 'mountain', 上 'up'), and for most speakers do not contrast.

In English from England (and in RP in particular) the contrast between stressed and unstressed syllable is important and the high contrast results in many reduced vowels. In Singapore English (as in Irish, Scottish, and Indian English, among others) there is less contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables, and fewer reduced vowels.

It is vital to examine the features of CSE in the context of its substrate, and to look at all varieties of SgE in the light of the other languages that may have influenced it. But this must be done in the context of a realistic assessment of the historical situation that SgE grew out of. Also variation within Singapore English must never be forgotten.

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Insertion of Footnotes:

[Extract from section]

FIRST FOOTNOTE

predominantly speak RP -- for example many came from Ireland or Scotland. Furthermore RP itself did not really emerge until the late nineteenth century, and, as can easily be heard from archival recordings, has undergone many changes.

The term 'native speaker of English' is a probalematic one, used differently by different writers. In the discussion that follows I use the term 'native speaker of English' to mean someone who grows up speaking English from infancy (some other interpretations are discussed in Tay 1979, Singh et al 1995, Gupta 1994). Native English speakers came to Singapore not only from the British Isles, but also from the USA (especially in connection with the Methodist Church, see Ho 1964, Doraisamy 1985/86) and people came there from other parts of Europe (especially in connection with.....

SECOND FOOTNOTE

Eurasian teachers (as did Munshi Abdullah). Their English should certainly be the starting point in the analysis of Singapore English *pronunciation*. The teachers would have used Standard English. I use the term *Standard English(es)* to refer to the varieties of English used throughout the English using world in educational and formal contexts. These Standard Englishes are strikingly similar, differing from each other mainly in pronunciation and in a few lexical items (e.g. *flip flops / thongs / slippers*) with a handful of minor syntactic differences. The term *Standard English* can be used where it is not necessary to focus on these minor variations from one Standard English to another. (see also Chapter 7 below). While the teachers did use Standard English, it was already a 'New Variety' type of English, and it is likely to have had some input into the lexis and syntax of SE. The impact is likely to be seen most in those few differences between SSE and British Standard English, and especially in those features.....

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