

Text messages Travels with Auntie

Our text in this issue comes from a Singapore webzine called Talkingcock

We have taken an article from a regular column on this webzine, called ‘Travels with Auntie’. *Auntie* is used in Singapore to refer to older women in general, and this Auntie is a familiar figure in Singapore, ‘Toilet Auntie’, the woman who collects the entrance money at the door of a public convenience. This particular fictional Toilet Auntie has a passion for travel which she finances by charging a premium to enter her conveniences. Nevertheless, money is short and she is always on the look out for a bargain.

Our commentator is Anthea Fraser Gupta who teaches in the School of English at the University of Leeds and has written many articles on the subject of Singapore English.

Travels with Auntie: Scotland:land of the boh cheng kor

Yesterday my travel agent at Ken Brothers Reliant Air Travel call me and tell me got special to go Scotland.

“Scot-land”? I ask. “Go there do si mi lan?”

He say, “Got castle, got church, got countryside...”

I say, “How come nowsaday you don’ch have any more special to nicer places, like Genting Highlands?” 5

He say, “Scot-land not bad what, I think you might like because all the Scots-man supposed to be boh cheng kor one.”

I hear only, I stone five minute.

“Boh cheng kor? They really don’ch wear pants one? Why?” 10

He say, “I think maybe they drink too much the Scotch whiskey and need to pang jio more quickly. You ask me, I ask who? Go and find out yourself, lah!”

Then he say, “Some more I give you free Ken Bros. Reliant Air Travel bag.” 15

I say, “Like that is on, lah!”

So I go Scotland.

When I reach Scotland, I oredy know this place is condemn.

First, they all cannot speak properly. The capital is called Edin-burk, but they all say it like, “Edinbrur.” 20

(I think, ah, all that whiskey make them all “brur”.)

Some more their accent is si beh teruk, I hear also lia’h boh kiew.

For example, I went to the tourist office and ask, “Where can I find man who don’ch wear pants?” and they replied, (or at least I heard) “Rrruurrr rurr rurr hae noo rrruurrr.” 25

I just cannot understand how comes Singapore also is last time belong Engrand, but we spik Engrish so much better.

Anyway, so I have to K.L.K.K. around Edinburk. My book say I must walk the Royal Mile, which is this old street dating back to the 16th century.

I see all the old building only, I stone. If this was Singapore, ah, long time ago the URA would have come in and upgrade the place oredy! 30

The whole stretch can be change into like Boat Quay like that - maybe got some classy shops, like Giordano or AA Fashion - sure nicer than all these lao pok building.

Scotland food is also damn hojjiber. They got this thing call “haggis”, which is like minced spare parts boil in a bag. But no kway chap to go with it! 35

The only thing they do well is whiskey. (They call it “Scotch”, but they call themselves “Scot”. Why they anyhow stick a “ch” in words, I also don’ch know.)

Anyway, the whiskey is damn cheap compared to at home. Wah lau, the KTV launge all charge damn high for one small cup (but then, it comes with free hostess on the side). 40

So I buy a few extra bottles of Glenfriggitt Triple Malt to give to the people back home. And another few to sell to the KTV Launge.

After drinking a bit more whiskey, Edinburk begin to look a bit nicer. Acherly, the city is not bad one. 45

The only trouble is, I cannot find the men without pants, as my agent said.

Instead got all these chao ah quah walking around in skirts. The ah quah here all got no standard, not like Desker Road one. Here, they all never shave their beard, neh'mine shave their legs! Si beh argly.

Singapore still better

Language Notes

Some of the features of Auntie's English (and the travel agent's) are found in the Singlish of all types of Singlish speakers, while others are associated with less educated, working class, Chinese-focussed people like the Auntie character. In Singapore such groups are usually called 'Chinese-educated'. However, as all education in Singapore has been in the medium of English since the 1980s, the term 'Chinese-focussed' is a better one.

Spelling

The spelling is mostly Standard English, so it is easy to read. But a small number of words are respelled to give an idea of the English of Auntie and the travel agent. As this is written for Singaporeans, the 'ordinary' features of Singapore English that might be noticed by someone from the UK or New Zealand or India, for example, are not indicated. The respelled words mostly indicate pronunciations that Singaporeans associated with working class Chinese Singaporeans whose English is weak.

Respelling	Standard	Discussion
Scot-land, Scots-man	Scotland, Scotsman	Probably suggests a pronunciation in which both words are stressed.
nowsaday	nowadays	Doesn't seem to correspond to anything in speech: a humorous rearrangement of the spelling.
don'ch, acherly, hojjiber	don't, actually, horrible	Suggests affrication on plosives, and also a very unusual use of a plosive

		for /r/ in <i>horrible</i> .
?whiskey	whisky	In Standard English it is Scotch whisky but Irish and American whiskey. This might suggest Auntie's ignorance of the difference, or might be an error on the part of the writer (the site owner, Colin Goh is currently based in the US).
oreddy, hojjiber	already, horrible	Suggests omission of /l/.
Edin-burk	Edinburgh	An indication of how any English speaker would think Edinburgh would be pronounced, on the basis of its spelling. In most varieties of Singapore English /g/ would be rare in final position.
Engrand, Engrish		Use of /r/ for /l/. Confusion of /l/ and /r/ is a widespread stereotype of the English of Chinese and Japanese speakers of English (as in 'fled lice' for 'fried rice'). This feature is very rare indeed in the real English of Singapore, but invokes a stereotype of Chineseness.
spik	speak	In Singapore English in general, there is no distinction between long and short vowels, so that in most Singapore accents

		<i>ship</i> and <i>sheep</i> are pronounced alike.
Launge, argly	lounge, ugly	These spellings are probably intended to suggest that the vowels of both words are the same as the vowel of ‘arm’ and ‘bath’. In most varieties of Singapore English <i>luck</i> and <i>lark</i> would be homophones (with /ʌ/), though in higher prestige accents, <i>lounge</i> would have a diphthong, /au/.
neh’mine	never mind	Suggests that consonants are omitted.

Note that none of these spellings are carried through the whole text: only a very small number of words are respelled, to give the reader an idea that Auntie’s pronunciation is typical of a Chinese-focussed person.

This text also contains Auntie’s idea of what Scottish English sounds like. Scottish English is characterised by an excess of r sounds. Scottish English is a ‘rhotic’ accent: an /r/ is pronounced wherever there is an ‘r’ in writing. But Singapore English, like most varieties of the English of England and of New Zealand, is ‘non-rhotic’: /r/ is pronounced only when followed by a vowel. In some Scottish accents /r/ can be trilled, while a Singapore /r/ is the same post-alveolar approximant as is found in most accents of English. What Auntie heard in the tourist office is just /r/, with the Scots ‘hae noo’ (= ”have no”) in the middle: I can’t make any sense of what Auntie heard either!

Grammar

The grammar of Singlish is very different from the grammar of Standard English. Only some of these differences appear in the text. The most obvious are the following:

Verbs: In Standard English, verbs are marked by inflections for tense (*I ask* / *I asked*) and for concord (*I ask* / *he asks*). In Singlish the use of this inflectional morphology is optional. In this text the past tense is

usually not used, even where it would be obligatory in Standard English, as in Line 1: “Yesterday my travel agent ... call me and tell me...”. The -s for the third person singular present tense is also missing on this example, and elsewhere (e.g. “Edinburk begin to look a bit nicer”, Line 47).

Verbal inflections are not completely missing. The past tense is marked in “He replied” (Line 24), and there are some third person singular present tense endings (“it comes with free hostess”, Line 42). There is also an -s ending in “how comes” (line 26), where it is non-standard in the idiom ‘how come’.

The past participle is more often marked than not. Sometimes there is an -ed inflection (e.g. “all the Scots-man supposed to be boh cheng kor one”, Line 8; “The capital is called Edinburk”, Line 19) and sometimes there is not (e.g. “The whole stretch can be change into like Boat Quay”, Line 32).

As is the case in natural Singlish speech, the present participle is used (“After drinking a bit more whiskey”, line 47): this is the only verbal inflection that is required in Singlish.

Nouns: In Standard English nouns are inflected for number (*skirt / skirts*) and for case (*Singapore’s flag*). In Singlish nouns, as in Singlish verbs, the base form is always a possibility. In this text some plural nouns are marked (e.g. *places*, Line 6; *men*, Line 49) and some are not (e.g. *castle*, *church*, Line 4; “all the Scots-man”, Line 8; “all the old building”, Line 30). There are no examples of possessives in this text. Unlike in other contact varieties, such as Jamaican Patwa, in Singlish pronouns are usually inflected as they are in Standard English, and this is the case in this text too (e.g. “make them all brur”, “their accent”, “they replied”, Line 21ff)

Got: In Singlish *got* can be used as an existential, as it is many times in this text, such as in “Got castle, got church, got countryside”, which could be translated into standard English as “There are castles, there are churches, there is countryside”.

BE deletion: In Singlish the use of a part of the verb BE is often optional. In ordinary Standard English it is usually required, though there are many text types of Standard English (such as SMS messages and diaries) where BE can be omitted. BE is often omitted in this text, as

in the conclusion: “Singapore still better” (Line 52). There are also many uses of *is* a (“the whiskey is damn cheap”, Line 41; “The capital is called Edin-burk”, Line 19).

Particles: One of the most distinctive features of Singlish is the use of a set of particles, usually at the end of an utterance, most of which are discourse particles that indicate something about the speaker’s attitude to what they are saying. This text uses:

- *what* (Line 7), a discourse particle which indicates that what the speaker is saying should be obvious to the addressee.
- *lah* (Line 13), the most famous of the discourse particles, which indicates that the speaker is committed to what they are saying.
- *ah* (Line 30), which is used to mark the structure of sentences (here it shows the end of a subordinate clause) and also can be used to indicate that the speaker would like the addressee’s agreement.
- *one* (Lines 8, 10, 50), which is a grammatical particle that is used to pick out a noun phrase (probably: not all linguists agree on how this works).

Vocabulary

The small number of respellings and the light touch on non-standard grammar do not present any problems for readers of English unfamiliar with Singlish. The vocabulary is more difficult, and *TalkingCock* provides a (tongue in cheek) glossary.

Even without recourse to the glossary, some of the more crucial meanings can be inferred from the context. In this text it is crucial to understand the travel agent’s promotion of Scotsmen as being “boh cheng kor”. So this is glossed early in the text (Line 10): “don’ch wear pants”. *Pants* here is used in the sense ‘underpants’, not in the sense (more common in US English) of ‘trousers’. The meaning of “pang jio” is also easily inferred as ‘urinate’ from the context.

However, another crucial expression of Hokkien origin is not explained. Auntie doesn’t see any men without pants in Edinburgh, but does see “ah quah” in skirts (Line 49ff). I do not think it is possible for a reader to infer that in Singapore English an “ah quah” is an effeminate man (used of male to female transsexuals, gay men, and transvestites). Desker Road is one of the locations in Singapore where

there are registered brothels, and a number of the legal and illegal prostitutes are either transsexuals or transvestites, who make more effort to look like women than the men in skirts (i.e. kilts) in Scotland who do not even shave their faces! There is another allusion to prostitution in Line 36ff. Chinese men traditionally eat a stew of offal (or 'spare parts') to get strength for sex, especially with a kway chap (= 'prostitute', from the Hokkien for 'chicken').

It is rare to find spoken Singlish with as high a density of words of Hokkien origin as this. While most of the words are widely used by all speakers of Singlish, and certainly widely known, some of them are likely to be used only by someone who also knows Hokkien. The use of such a large number of words of Hokkien origin signals to readers that the characters represented are Chinese-focussed Singaporeans. These characters could not be of Indian or Malay ancestry.

Not all the Singlish words come from Hokkien, however. *Teruk* (= 'terrible') is from Malay, though here (Line 22) it is used with a Hokkien intensifier, *si beh* (= 'very'). And *stone* (Line 9, 30) appears to be from English *stoned*, here meaning 'astonished into silence', rather than 'under the influence'.

Although this text is written primarily for Singaporeans to be amused by themselves, and although it uses quite a dense Singlish, it is accessible. The grammatical and orthographic features of the Singlish present few challenges to the reader, and an online reader can use the glossary to understand the lexis. There are also cultural references to Singapore (e.g. Desker Road, URA, Boat Quay) and to Edinburgh (e.g. Royal Mile, 'Glenfriggitt Triple Malt') that different readers will understand to different extents. But most readers of English will be familiar with the convention of using non-standard dialects to satirise, and will be happy to get the gist without understanding 100%. The Scottish accent is *si beh teruk*, Auntie hear also *lia'h boh kiew*. Despite the different grammar, and the challenges of the lexis (*lia'h boh kiew* = 'don't understand', literally 'catch no ball'), when readers read *Travels with Auntie* they can understand.

Commentary

TalkingCock and Singlish humour

Talkingcock is a flourishing satirical website, founded by Colin Goh in 2000. The expression 'to talk cock' means 'to talk rubbish'. This expression is used in Singapore, but not restricted to the English of Singapore (it is in the *Oxford English Dictionary*): a similar use of 'cock' is found in 'poppycock' and a 'cock and bull story'. The name of the site should tell us what it is about. *TalkingCock* pokes fun at

Singapore society, its government, and the customs of its people. Like most satire, it works best for those most familiar with the things that are satirised. It is written primarily for Singaporean readers.

Singlish is spoken in Singapore at some time or another by most of its citizens. It is spoken among friends and within the family, usually mixed with Standard English or with languages other than English. But most written English, in Singapore and everywhere else in the world, is in Standard English. People do use non-standard dialects, such as Singlish, in writing occasionally. The main uses of non-standard dialects of English, all over the world, are in creative texts: in literature and in humour. The comic writer draws on the reader's knowledge of dialects in their spoken form to make fun (often affectionately) of the group associated with the dialect. Much of the humour on the *TalkingCock* website uses Singlish in its humour in this international tradition.

This kind of writing is always deliberate. The writers are people who can (and normally do) write in Standard English. The kind of Singlish used in this text is also not something that its author would use in daily life, because we have to imagine that this text is produced by a stereotypical Singaporean character. Auntie is a materialistic, uneducated, Hokkien woman, who enjoys travel mainly in order to confirm her world view: Singapore is the best place in the world, and foreigners are very very strange. She uses a kind of Singlish that Singaporean readers link to the actual English used by her real life equivalents, but we must remember that no woman as weak in English as Auntie would, in real life, write or speak like this. It is a humorous reminder of the real equivalent, not an exact copy. Auntie represents a Singaporean whose world is centred on Chinese (and, specifically, Hokkien) language and culture.

In the real Singapore, Singlish is used by all ethnic groups and by those who are highly educated in the medium of English as well as those who are not, and there are different forms of Singlish in daily use. Interestingly, *TalkingCock* has become so popular that it is possible to see Auntie's kind of English sometimes being used by educated Singaporeans in informal contexts such as blogs, internet forums or chatrooms.

References

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