

3 Singapore Standard English revisited

Anthea Fraser Gupta

In the 1980s, Mary Tay and I outlined what we thought were the features of a Singapore Standard English (Tay 1982; Tay and Gupta 1983; Gupta 1986). At the time, our preference for a local (or ‘endonormative’) standard for Singapore English was seen as revolutionary, because the policy then was that the English taught in Singapore should be British Standard English with an RP accent. This was a policy in theory rather than one that could actually be delivered. Delivery of an RP accent was impossible because almost no teachers were (or ever had been) speakers of RP. In any case, it is evident that accents of Standard English are diverse and that to impose a particular foreign accent on a population is unnecessary, unpopular and impossible. It was also tacitly recognized that the English of Singapore needed words to meet the needs of expressing Singapore culture. By the end of the century, as a result of sociolinguistic research, it had become widely accepted that local words and local accents are necessarily part of local Standard English, and that it is neither possible nor desirable to look to a foreign country for all vocabulary, or for an accent.

Where grammar is concerned, even in 1986 I realized that “St[andar]d S[ingapore] E[n]glish would differ little from general St[andar]d E[n]glish, and that by and large its features would exploit possibilities within standard which ... are ... to be found in the spoken English — at times in the written English — of users ... who are thought of as standard users”. No-one has suggested that there are major grammatical differences between regional forms of Standard English. The way in which the minor differences are negotiated continues to be a source of discussion all over the world, and is an area of great concern in the teaching of English as a foreign language, especially in terms of the choice between ‘British’ and ‘American’ English. In these settings, differences are often exaggerated, for example in the form of a false belief that some forms (such as ‘I ate already’) would be wrong in British English, or in the false belief that the present tense is always replaced by the present continuous in Indian English.

By the 1990s, school textbooks knowingly incorporated local cultural terms, and there was a generally confident, tolerant, and empowering approach to Singapore English. Books and websites celebrating the local non-standard dialect, Singlish, appeared. In writing, Singlish was confidently used in informal communication and in creative writing, especially in dialogue and humour, in the same way as other non-standard English dialects are used in other parts of the English-using world. Then, in August 1999, speeches were made by Lee Kuan Yew (as senior minister) and the prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, which initiated a drive to promote Standard English in all contexts of use. This led to the establishment of the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) in Singapore. Its purpose was ostensibly to promote Standard English and discourage the use of Singlish: one of the things it had to do was to interpret the meaning of ‘Standard English’. It soon became clear that the SGEM was promoting a narrow concept of Standard English, which did not allow for anything local, or informal, rejecting even words that had been unproblematically accepted since the 1980s. At official levels, at least, there has been a move back to the attitude of the 1970s, when the local was seen as bad. Once again Singaporeans are being told to look overseas for correction of their English, and are being given advice that is often based on the strictest possible concept of correctness. Even the notion that a Singaporean accent is wrong has been resurrected.

Since the 1980s, my own theorization of Standard English has changed too, but towards greater tolerance of variation, not less.

I have observed that the differences between what I used to call ‘Singapore Standard English’ and the Standard English of other regions is minimal: the very few differences that have been suggested as distinctively Singaporean (or British, or Australian, or Nigerian ...) are not enough to warrant its being a distinct dialect. Most variation within Standard English is variation due to text type. Standard English includes an element of regional variation, especially in lexis. But when we look at non-standard dialects (Singlish, broad Yorkshire, Jamaican Patwa, etc.) we see that there are grammatical features that distinguish them from each other, and from Standard English. These include substantial differences in inflectional morphology and the construction of the verb (e.g., *Merlion kena hit by lightning; He were that punctual; mi done go a di show already*). No such grammatical features relating to major linguistic systems have ever been suggested as distinguishing one region’s Standard English from another’s. Important areas of grammar, including inflectional morphology and the structure of the verb, are unified in Standard English across all regions. The division of Standard English into multiple local Standard Englishes is not justified on linguistic grounds.

I no longer feel it is appropriate or possible to predetermine what is and what is not standard, and do not accept the methods we adopted in the 1980s. No-one can say what should or should not be Standard English, either in Singapore or anywhere else. Standard English is an organic and changing variety, not something fixed by fiat, and Singapore, like everywhere else that uses English, participates in its maintenance and development. Whatever is part of the Standard English of one region is part of Standard English as a whole.

Standard English should be conceptualized as a single dialect that includes a small amount of regional (and a large amount of functional) variation. It is important to understand that this is an inclusive concept of Standard English that places all English-using nations on the same footing and that recognizes that there is (a little) diversity of practice from one place to another. Because Standard English is a living dialect, controlled by unclear consensual processes, there is dispute and negotiation within Standard English. Areas of dispute are generally global, and only a few relate to regional differences. Although it would be foolish to deny that some regions have more clout within the politics of English — the USA has the most, as in other areas — the way power relations work within English are by no means straightforward. Few issues within Standard English are regionally motivated. The concerns expressed about Standard English in Singapore relate to areas of dispute within Standard English everywhere it is used, and not to circumstances peculiar to Singapore. This chapter considers the meaning of Standard English for Singapore in the twenty-first century, and develops the concept of Standard English as a global dialect. I examine the current public discussion of English in Singapore and argue that it shows that Singapore's concerns about correctness in English are the same as those of the rest of the English-using world.

What is Standard English?

Varieties of English can be divided into those which differ little from one place to another and those which are associated with specific regions of the English-using world. The main variety of English globally is Standard English, which is a single dialect of English with a small number of minor regional differences, most of which are lexical. To say that a variety of English is global or international means simply that it is used all over the world. It does not mean that it is used only in communication across national boundaries or between people from different countries. My stance here is different from the more usual stance in the study of English as a world language, and different from the stance I used to take.

It is usually argued that English is pluricentric, with a number of local standards. Bex and Watts (1999: 5) say that they are “quite clear that the notions of ‘Standard English’ vary from country to country, and not merely in the ways in which such a variety is described but also in the prestige in which it is held and the functions it has developed to perform”. I disagree with these claims. Notions of Standard English vary little from one country to another, and it is held in high prestige and performs similar functions in all the countries in which it has some official status and where it is a widespread medium of instruction in schools. Standard English is a concept that I regard as central to the understanding of English in a social context. Sociolinguists have a choice whether to focus on the shared features and uses of Standard English across the English-using world, or to focus on the differences. There are both political and linguistic issues here. We have spent too much time focusing on the rare features that distinguish the Standard English in one region from that in another, and too little time on the much more widespread features that unite Standard English all over the world. Standard English is a single dialect of English, used all over the world with minor regional differences. The same Standard English dialect is used in most written text types all over the world. All over the world, some text types require Standard English. This applies whether communication is within a country or across national boundaries: Standard English is not used only for speaking and writing to people from another country; it dominates every English-using community internally as well, especially in writing. It is in that sense local to nowhere and local to everywhere. It belongs to the entire English-using world and in it, on the whole, the regional origins of the writers are neutralized.

What are the linguistic features of Standard English?

What is and what is not standard is clear in some areas, especially in orthography and inflectional morphology (e.g., when to use *am* vs. *is*, *did* vs. *done*, *teacher* vs. *teachers* vs. *teacher's* vs *teachers'*; how to build a complex verb group). The concept of Standard English is most applicable to written English. We still do not fully understand the grammar of speech (Carter 2004), but we do know that there is more opportunity to express the self, more room for playfulness, and more regional and personal variation in speech than there is in writing. All of these are expressed in writing too, though mostly through variation within a dialect rather than across dialects.

There is no standard accent of English: Standard English can be spoken in any accent. For example, the word *dance* can be pronounced with a vowel anywhere from a mid front vowel, /dæns/ through /dæns/, to /dɑns/ and all points in between to a low back vowel, /dɑns/, and the vowel can be either short or long. However, some pronunciations, not associated with accent, are generally regarded as incorrect (for example, starting *choir* with the same sound as *chip*, or ending *picturesque* with /kju:/:). There are choices in the pronunciation of some words (such as *schedule* beginning with /ʃ/ or /sk/). Good pronouncing dictionaries will try to reflect areas of consensus and disagreement in such issues. We may use these — and we may use other people — in order to find out how to pronounce words that we may have seen only in print. Speakers of English will accept correction of word pronunciation in this way, but will not accept correction of their accent. There are substantial differences among accents of English around the world, and it is essential for all speakers of English to understand and be tolerant of accent variation and to develop techniques for understanding unfamiliar accents. Sensitive users of English also need to be tolerant of the ‘mistakes’ we all make, especially in the pronunciation of words we have mainly encountered in writing.

English is welcoming to new words, which enter English all the time from other language, from coinages, from informal English, and from other dialects of English. Within Standard English, there are minor differences in vocabulary from one place to another. Most of these differences are local words for local things, so that, for example, the seat of government might be called *parliament* in one place and *senate* in another. Such words are used by anyone referring to that institution, regardless of where they come from themselves. Others are what Görlach (1990) calls heteronyms: different words for the same thing (for example, *boot/trunk/dicky* — the same part of a car). All English users can expect to learn a few new words when they move around the English-using world, or when they refer to other parts of the English-using world than their own. Food names often retain regional associations. For example, *ravioli*, *pirogi*, and *won ton* (all in the *Oxford English Dictionary*) are similar foodstuffs, but the cuisines of Italy, Poland and China are sufficiently different to mean that English-speaking eaters retain the culturally specific words: and are they all *dumplings*? *HDB estates*, *council estates*, and *projects* might, similarly, be structurally similar, subsidized and governmentally organized housing schemes, but the way in which social housing is managed and its social and political associations are not the same in Singapore, the UK and the US, and nor are the words. Governmental institutions are one of the areas of language use where local terms have to be used by both insiders and outsiders.

But words as a whole are eminently portable and a word regional one year can easily spread across the world next year. I do not see Standard English as being only what every region shares. Standard English includes a small element of regional variation. *Boot*, *dicky* and *trunk* are all part of the single global dialect of Standard English and are best seen as choices within it.

Standard English is tolerant of internal variation in pronunciation and lexis, but there is almost no tolerance of variation in inflectional morphology. The structure of the verb group is especially strict in Standard English, where the ordering of auxiliaries (modal, perfective, progressive, passive) and the forms of each word are absolute (e.g., He *might have been being pursued* by the police). This is one of the most strongly definable aspects of the grammar of Standard English. There are a handful of forms where there is some choice (for example, the plural of *appendix* can be *appendixes* or *appendices*; the past tense of *dive* can be *dove* or *dived*). Such words are rare: most texts would include no words allowing choice. In contrast, dialects of English are distinguished from one another by the way in which they manage inflections, and by the way in which the verb is constructed (for example, the difference between *I am happy*, *I be happy*, *I happy*, *mi happy*). The areas of choice within Standard English are too small to justify any dialectal divisions within Standard English.

Orthography is also very strict in Standard English, with only a small number of words in which there is a choice (e.g., *colo(u)r*, *jail/gaol*, *adviser/advisor*, *café/cafe*) some, but not all of which, are the well-known differences between the ‘US’ and ‘British’ traditions, mostly arising from spelling variants of the eighteenth century. Such spellings account for less than 0.5% of words in any given text. This small degree of difference in orthographic practice is not sufficient to justify reference to different spelling systems: there is one spelling system which includes some areas of choice. In speech it is mainly the grammar that distinguishes one dialect from another, but in written English, dialectal differences can also be signalled by using conventional non-standard spellings that relate indirectly to features of the accent that is associated with the dialect: this creates an especially sharp distinction between writing in Standard English (unified orthography and grammar) and writing in another dialect (different spellings and grammar).

In addition to ordinary Standard English, there is one set of contextually restricted text types that I would like to exclude from discussion here. There are a set of text types which, all over the world, use an abbreviated form of Standard English in which structural elements (such as BE, first person subjects, articles) are routinely omitted, and in some of which particular abbreviations and alternative spellings may be used (such as *l8*, *GSOH*, *brb*, *appt.*,

gonna). Such abbreviated forms of English have always been used where space or time are precious (such as in notes, diaries, postcards, telegrams). In his great grammar of English, Jespersen (1948: 124ff) said that in some of these text types, such as headlines, a sentence is understood by “transposing it into ordinary language with its usual grammar” while others, such as book titles, cannot be said to be sentences. A skilled user of Standard English has to learn when to use this grammar, in order to construct SMS messages, advertisements, and so on. Despite many complaints that sending SMS messages is destroying children’s ability to write correctly, users seem to have little or no problem understanding when abbreviated English is appropriate or acceptable.

Communities in which English is used as part of everyday life often have local non-standard dialects of English, which are used in specific contexts (especially informal speech, literature, and humour). Singlish fills this slot in Singapore. The differences between Standard English and the non-standard dialect are generally well known, and users of English are conscious of them. Features of the non-standard dialect seldom appear in written texts where Standard English is the target (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1999; Gupta 2006a; Rubdy 2007). This is true of everywhere that has a well-known local dialect, such as the Singlish of Singapore, the Cockney of London, the Geordie of Newcastle upon Tyne, the Patwa of Kingston, and the Nigerian Pidgin English of Lagos. There is no evidence that the presence of a non-standard dialect in a community prevents the learning of skills in Standard English. The majority of the lexis is shared with Standard English. The features of the local dialects are generally salient and at a high level of consciousness and, because young children are sophisticated shifters of style, they do not find it hard to learn which features separate the local dialect from world-wide varieties. Local dialects can be seen as a sign that English is a living language in a place, with a range of cultural and stylistic expression. Even the SGEM pages occasionally use Singlish used in this way: in August 2007 there was a link from the SGEM pages to ‘Sayang Singapore’, the untranslatable Singlish name of Singapore’s storytelling festival (it means something like ‘Love to Singapore’ — *sayang* is a loan from Malay).

There are aspects of Standard English that are more contentious, some of which I will discuss in this chapter. There is some variation within Standard English in certain aspects of English. These include: the way in which the present perfective is used (e.g., *This is the first time I have seen/am seeing this play*); the use of the definite article (*to have (the) flu; in (the) university*); the way in which prepositions are used in some fixed expressions (e.g., *comprise (of), different to/from/than*); and the way in which the number of certain nouns is treated

(e.g., *The audience was/were, accommodations*). On these features and others like them, there are differences between regions in terms of relative frequency of one form over another, rather than presence or absence (Gupta 2006b). Some of these differences are the subject of public discussion and individuals may have strong feelings about their correctness.

The discourse of correctness in English is part of a normative tradition that goes back at least three hundred years (discussed in different ways by Leonard 1962; Mittins et al. 1970; Milroy and Milroy 1985; Cameron 1995; Wardaugh 1999). I will use the term ‘disputed usage’ to refer to usages that are found in Standard English texts but that some users regard as incorrect, and whose degree of correctness is a common topic of overt comment. In discussion of English usage, items which are disputed usage are more visible than, and at a higher level of consciousness than, items which are undisputed. For example, users of English in Inner and Outer Circle countries are more likely to be able to articulate that ‘prepositions at the end of sentences are wrong’ (which is disputed usage) than to explain why there is an ‘s’ on the verb in ‘She likes swimming’ but not in ‘I like swimming’ (a basic feature of Standard English concord about which there is no dispute).

Linguists have engaged with the normative tradition for many decades. One of the basic tenets of linguistics (stemming from desperate reiterations by Jespersen in introductions to various volumes of his grammar) is that ‘linguistics is descriptive not prescriptive’, from which it follows that linguists should not be concerned with telling speakers what is right and what is wrong, but rather should examine what speakers do and then infer the rules of the language from the practice of its speakers. Quirk (1958) long ago recognized that linguists had to be prescriptive in some contexts, part of the responsibility of teachers of English being to tell their students how to use the language, but that prescription should be firmly based on description. Cameron (1995) emphasized that it is important for linguists to engage with those promulgating notions of correctness: this is a debate that must be entered.

The major problem with the definition of Standard English is that we have to engage both with usage and with form. My starting point is to look at edited written texts in which Standard English is required. How do such texts compare formally from one region to another? Do they share criterial linguistic features that are central to Standard English? But all users of Standard English make mistakes. When I write *accomodation* or *concensus*, it does not become Standard English because I have written it. There are processes of monitoring, self-correction, correction by others and editing that writers of Standard English do in order to keep what they write in line with the prevalent practice in Standard English. There is a circularity here that cannot be avoided: it is the writing practices of writers of

English all over the world that determine what is and what is not Standard English; but those writers respond to notions of correctness based on tradition and wider practice. But we are not in an ‘anything goes’ situation, and there are specific linguistic features that can be used to identify the dialect, and, other than in lexis, choices are made and change occurs within linguistically specific confines.

There is very substantial variation within Standard English related to text type. Bhatia (2004: xiv) describes “the real world of discourse” as “complex, dynamic, versatile and unpredictable”. Variation linked to text type is far greater than variation linked to regionality. Some text types are prone to be playful, especially literary writing, which is the main domain in which non-standard regional dialects can be found. Although there is large variation relating to text type in Standard English, with the exception of the abbreviated texts, the variation does not relate to what I regard as the core areas of Standard English: dialect is consistent across text types. Differences generally relate to differences in degree or frequency (such as sentence length, proportion of passives, amount of nominalization, particular organizational features) rather than to qualitative differences in orthography, grammar or lexis. In this chapter the term ‘Standard English’ should be understood as referring to Standard English other than in its grammatically reduced abbreviated variety.

Standard English is of great importance. It is accepted as the norm for written English, and the overwhelming majority of all written texts are in Standard English, and have been in a single shared standard dialect since around 1500 (the form has changed a little since then). Writers go to great lengths to correct errors. Schoolchildren are examined on their skill in it. It is essential, and universally accepted, that Standard English is what is taught in schools and that editors should do their best to make sure that edited texts are written in Standard English (except in the case of those rare texts that deliberately use a non-standard dialect). Standard English is not some distant and unreal kind of English, but something present and immediate for all of us who learn or use English, at any level. I have made calls for realism in the teaching and assessing of the use of Standard English (Gupta 2001).

The concept of Standard English is strongest in writing, and English users vary in their skills. There is no English-using community in which everyone has a high level of skill in Standard English. While all Singaporeans (like residents of all English-using countries, and many others) need to have some skill in speaking, reading and writing Standard English, the production of high-quality written text requires input from specialist editors. High-prestige printed and electronic text is edited: this means it has been looked at by several skilled writers

who work together to eliminate as many errors in Standard English as possible. Not every user of English can be expected to have these high-level skills.

Everything I have said about Standard English applies to all English-using countries, including the United Kingdom, the USA, Australia, Nigeria, India, Jamaica and Singapore. Increasingly, it is coming to apply to speakers of English in countries where English has had little internal use in the past, such as Japan and France (some of the issues of English in these areas are discussed by Jenkins 2007). As I will show in this chapter, the way in which Singaporeans use English in formal and informal written material, and the language advice given in connection with the Speak Good English Movement, suggests that Singaporeans participate in the same uncertainty about Standard English as do users of English from other English-using nations.

There is no tradition in English of any central control of the standard. As is well known, there has never been an academy for English, and it is hard to imagine how there now could ever be one, given the range of countries that have made English one of their own languages. Even those languages ostensibly policed by academies have to face the onslaught of usage (Schiffman 2002). And in English, usage is all. What is and what is not Standard English is maintained by a mysterious process of world-wide consensus. There are important agencies, especially newspapers and publishing houses, but even these agencies are participants in a wider world and have to respond to innovation from many quarters, both social and regional. Change in English can take place rapidly. New words enter English constantly and become part of Standard English. Sometimes, when new technology comes along, the same word is used all over the world (e.g., *DVD*); on other occasions regional differences develop (e.g., *cell*, *mobile*, *handphone*). No-one makes a decision. When a word is used enough in texts written in Standard English, it becomes part of Standard English. Dictionaries and grammars react to English: they do not control it. However, dictionaries, grammars, and usage all participate in the feedback loop by which means users of Standard English monitor their usage and thereby maintain a unified Standard.

When Samuel Johnson planned his dictionary, the first on scientific principles, he thought English could be fixed and perfected. But the process of writing his dictionary taught him that language change was inevitable: hoping “to enchain syllables” was like wanting “to lash the wind” (Johnson 1755–56: 10). This has not prevented many of us, including myself, from trying to say what should and should not be regarded as correct. Jenkins’s (2000, 2007) promotion of a more tolerant approach to the pronunciation of ‘English as a Lingua Franca’ — that is, English as used between non-native speakers — has been criticized by those who

still hope to enchain syllables (the reaction to the earlier book is discussed in the later one). I feel that Jenkins does not go far enough because she makes recommendations that learners of English are taught some specific features that appear to make English more comprehensible. Among other things, she recommends that ELF speakers maintain a distinction between long and short vowels, and pronounce /r/ everywhere it appears in the spelling. Neither of these features is shared by all dialects of English. It seems to me that varieties of English in places like Germany, Japan, China and Thailand are also part of the organically unpredictable nature of English and we cannot expect to require specific features from speakers there any more than we can require it of speakers of English in London or Singapore.

The unclear way in which English is maintained applies to English as a whole, and also to English locally. When I came to live in the UK in 1996 after over twenty years' absence, one of the many words I had to learn was *manky*, which was then an informal word meaning 'bad, inferior, defective; dirty, disgusting, unpleasant' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). *OED*'s first example of this word is from 1958. Although *OED* labels it as "British colloquial", this word has been moving into Standard English over the years. Whereas the earlier examples in *OED* are all from representations of speech, the most recent two are in contexts that predict Standard English (a fishing handbook and a newspaper). The word has also spread beyond the UK: by 2007, Solomon Lim, writing in Singapore's *Electric New Paper* was sitting in *soft, slightly-manky swivel chairs*. In 1999 *bling* spread around the world, moving in twelve months from Black slang (in the form of *bling bling*) to global Standard English — one company in Singapore is even selling *fridge bling*. Why these words and not others? Decisions like this are made by the unclear process of the interaction of the gatekeepers (such as newspapers) with the body of users. Standardness emerges; it is not predetermined.

The whole world participates in the maintenance of Standard English. It is as much the property of Singapore and Nigeria, and perhaps even of Germany and Thailand, as it is of Australia and the United Kingdom. We need to understand that Singapore is not a passive recipient of Standard English but participates in the process of shaping Standard English, both locally and globally.

International assessment of standard of English

Whenever the attainment of schoolchildren in Singapore is compared to the attainment of children of the same age in other regions, Singapore comes out top or near top (Dixon 2005: 626). In 2003, Singapore's children were, as usual, the best in the world in maths and science (TIMSS). In 2006 (Mullis et al. 2007: 42) "[t]he Russian Federation, Hong Kong SAR and Singapore were the three top-performing countries" of those countries that took part in tests of literacy in schoolchildren aged 9 to 10 years. The tests were administered in the local language or languages of education, which means that in five countries (England, Scotland, Singapore, Trinidad and Tobago and the United States) they were administered only in English (Mullis et al. 2007: 287–8). The results mean that Singapore's primary schoolchildren could reasonably be said to be better at Standard English than children in the other four countries. Whereas over 70% of children in all the other four countries spoke only English at home, in Singapore only 21% spoke only English at home (only 5% spoke no English at home): bilingualism is clearly no handicap to excellence. Nor is bidialectalism: it can be assumed that the Singaporean children were competent in Singlish as well as in Standard English.

In all English-using countries, there are people who do not develop sufficient skill to write in Standard English. In both Singapore and the UK national examinations are taken at around the age of 16 years: in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland these are GCSEs and in Singapore they are O-Levels. In 2007, 62% of those taking the GCSE examination in English (taken by all children in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) attained a grade A–C (*BBC News* 2007). In Singapore, the success rate in the equivalent examination (O-Level) is much higher, at 87% in 2006 (Ellis 2007), but the examination is taken by an estimated 80% of the age group (Dixon 2005: 627). The proportion of the age group who pass is still slightly higher (at around 70%) in Singapore than it is in the UK, as one would expect from the 9-year-olds' better performance. We need to remember those 37% of children in the UK who did not pass at the required level. The vast majority of those children are British born and bred, native speakers of nothing but English, who have not developed much skill in producing Standard English. There is no reason why Singapore should expect that the proportion of children who can reach this level in Singapore should be any more (or less) than the proportion who succeed in the UK. The figures, the baseline for proficiency in Standard English, are similar in these two countries, and probably reflect the proportion that could be reasonably expected to succeed in learning to read and write Standard English to a societally agreed threshold for adults in any English-using country where education is effectively delivered.

Producing Standard English is a skill, like playing the piano or designing furniture: it has to be learnt and it is tested. We should see and promote it as a desirable skill, but one that some will succeed at better than others. Singapore is doing rather well at teaching it to its children.

The idea of a local standard

When Mary Tay and I looked at Singapore Standard English in the 1980s, we were using the old technology of paper and the old theory of deviance from an imagined Standard English. The methodology that I used in 1983 was to identify in texts published in Singapore those features that I believed would not be used in the English of the USA or UK, and then to indicate which of those features could be said to be standard. There were two problems with this methodology:

- (a) It is possible to say that something is used in a given variety. Attested use is concrete and important. It is much harder to say that something is *not* used in a variety. I identified this as a problem fairly early (Shields 1977) and discussed it further in 1986, but I persisted in using the expression ‘nonstandardism’ as though I knew what it meant. I applied this term, in some cases, to features attested in Singaporean English that I later found to be also used in other varieties, such as British and/or American English (including *accommodations*, *This is the first time I am doing ...*, and *less workers*). I thus identified as ‘Singapore English’ many features that are geographically widespread, some of which are disputed usage. At least I made the right predictions — that some of the features I identified as Standard Singapore English would spread to other varieties.
- (b) It is not possible to pick and choose what should and should not be standard. This can only be established retrospectively by the test of time based on the pattern of usage. Something becomes Standard English if it is often used in Standard English texts.

Since the 1980s, the internet has made it possible to scrutinize the English of the world as a whole. This has made it even clearer that (a) Standard English is one dialect and remarkably uniform; (b) most written English, of all text types, is in Standard English, while writing in local non-standard dialects is rare and is severely restricted in terms of text type;

and (c) that the patterns of usage are complex and no single person can rely on personal judgement to determine what is and what is not Standard.

It is not appropriate to take texts from Singapore and compare them to some idealized, fictitious, Standard British (or American, or Australian ...) English. Meaningful comparison of the English of different countries has to be based on the comparison of real texts of the same sort. So Singapore newspapers could be compared to newspapers from New Zealand; university essays by Singaporeans could be compared to university essays from the USA; charity websites from Singapore could be compared with charity websites in India, and so on. When this sort of comparison is done (Tottie 2002; Gupta 2006b; Paulasto 2008), we see that there is very little difference from one place to another in the features of English used in text types in which Standard English can be expected, and that most differences are differences of relative frequency of forms rather than qualitative differences.

There are few categorical differences (things that occur in one region but not in another), but there are regionally patterned differences in preference, where there are alternatives within Standard English (such as *don't have/haven't/haven't got*). All writers make errors in writing Standard English: where the criteria for what is and what is not standard are clear, we should not be afraid of identifying errors. Texts that are edited (such as newspaper articles) have very few errors, though they do have some errors, everywhere in the world. When it comes to unedited texts, there are more errors, but not noticeably more in one place than in another. We do start to see individual difference, however, and evidence that individuals vary in skill in writing Standard English. Some make more mistakes than others.

All users of English interact with English both locally and transnationally. Even if all face-to-face contact were with people from one's own country, reading and viewing is likely to include material from other countries. Enclosure within an exclusively Singaporean world is impossible. Pedagogy and policy need to be based on the real Standard English and not on some imagined perfection. The reality of Standard English is that it crosses borders. It does not make sense to talk about discrete local standards: there is one Standard English which incorporates some regional differences. Singapore needs to accept that its local words are part of Standard English as a whole, as are the local words of the USA, UK, Australia, Nigeria, and so on.

Kiasu

English is porous and global. I would like to give an example how a word can move into the mainstream. In Singapore, the word *kiasu* moved from informal use into Standard English when it started to be used in parliament and newspapers and is now in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. *Kiasu* has already gone through the early stages of global spread that *manky* and *bling* went through a decade earlier, but its starting location was Singapore.

The *Dictionary of Singlish and Singapore English* documents this movement into standardness. In the early days, its spelling was uncertain. Its first attestation, in the erroneous form *kian su*, is in 1978, in the glossary of a sociological study of national service which presents it as Army Slang. It was little known then: it did not appear in the early studies of Singapore words (including my own, Shields 1977), but soon moved to general colloquial use. Then it moved towards the standard: it was first used in the official report of parliament in 1990 (“I wish that the Government Ministers do not become infected with the same *kiasu* syndrome that they themselves have advised other people against”), quickly followed by multiple appearances in the Singapore press. Early examples are often glossed, but later ones are less likely to be.

The next step for *kiasu* is use outside Singapore, with reference to Singapore. The closely related English-using neighbours of Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei, start to use it, and when they do it is often, but not only, with reference to Singaporeans. In 2001, only a decade after a Singaporean newspaper used it for the first time, it begins to appear in the British press. The British newspaper, *The Guardian*, first used *kiasu* in 2001 (7 September), quoting, without any gloss, a Singaporean speaker (“This pursuit of material wealth combined with the constant need to be No. 1 has created the Singaporean we hear so much about — the *kiasu* Singaporean”). In 2002 (27 August) *The Guardian* got it slightly wrong, making it an abstract noun:

The answer is simply that there are not enough hours in the day — if a child wants to have a remotely successful adulthood in what is such an incredibly pressurised society that the fear of losing or failing, known as “*kiasu*”, is all-pervasive. Indeed, it so [*sic*] ubiquitous that there is a popular cartoon character named Mr *Kiasu*.

In 2004 (7 August) it got it right:

Risk aversion, a bureaucratic imperative, is valued in Singapore. It makes the place reassuringly predictable for businesses. Singaporeans have a word for it: *kiasu* (afraid to lose out).

And in 2007 (2 June) when *Kiasu*, a restaurant selling Singaporean food, opened in London, and by which time *kiasu* had made it to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, there was even more publicity for the word:

As part of the ongoing, industry-wide drive to appeal to the widest possible demographic base, today's review is targeted at those of you who hope one day to be a guest on Call My Bluff [a television show in which contestants have to guess which is the correct definition of an unusual word]. I don't think it's actually on telly at the moment, but when it is next revived, "kiasu" will probably be one of the thrice-defined words.

We can trace this process, but the nature of the agency of standardization is obscure. Who made the decision to use *kiasu* in parliament? Who decided it could appear in *The Straits Times*? These decisions initiated the move towards Standard English. What was the process by which its spelling became finalized? When will it move the next step, of being used far from Singapore without reference to Singapore? This final step has been taken by many words that once were regionally restricted. For example, *amok* came into English (from Malay via Portuguese) meaning "a frenzied Malay" in the sixteenth century (*OED*), but by the eighteenth century a person of any ethnicity, anywhere in the world could 'run amuck'.

The 'Speak Good English' Movement

Singapore launched the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) in 2000, following speeches attacking Singlish made in August 1999 by two senior political leaders, Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong. This movement was supposed to focus on spoken English, and to promote Standard English at the expense of Singlish. However, it was not supposed to attack the Singapore accent. Rubdy (2001), writing in the early stages of the campaign, predicted success. Seven years later, Singlish continues to flourish, and the SGEM remains as an arena for information on English, and a place where the linguistically insecure can seek answers. It

has been associated with attacks on the Singapore accent, and has dealt with written as well as spoken English.

Singapore has a long history of active and successful language planning, summarized with balance and clarity by Xu and Li (2002). Its “strong interventionist approach, or linguistic dirigisme” (Xu and Li 2002: 275) has been applied (from time to time) to promoting Malay, English, and Mandarin. Promoting a specific dialect of English is the latest challenge. But managing a change in speech is difficult. One reason for this is that speech is immediate and contingent: we speak to real people in a real situation. Most of the SGEM materials ask Singaporeans to imagine a foreign interlocutor, who cannot understand Singlish, and who may perceive its rapid fire delivery as signalling rudeness, but in real life most Singaporeans principally use English to speak to other Singaporeans, who can understand Singlish and who perceive it as informal and warm.

Promoting change in speech is difficult because when we speak we are doing our best to project a sense of personal identity (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). Some of the scenarios from the early years of the Speak Good English Movement promoted a stilted, colourless, over-formal kind of English, in situations where the Singaporean expected something more informal. Indeed, the ‘Standard English’ alternatives promoted are typically very formal for anywhere. There are a set of recommendations for phrases to use in service situations, such as:

Avoid: No more blue colour.

Say: I’m sorry, we have run out of blue.

Avoid: You want to try?

Say: Would you like to try that?

The alternatives, like the downloadable lessons on the SGEM site, promote a textbook English of full sentences and extreme formality. To anyone from a community where English is a living daily language, as it is in Singapore, they seem stiff, like the English that learners of English, rather than speakers, might use in the classroom (but not, of course, in real life, as Jenkins has shown). It is as if the SGEM wants Singaporeans to speak as if they have learnt English only at school, from a rather old-fashioned teacher. And as if they have learnt only one, very formal style of speaking it. In real life Singaporeans are more sophisticated users of English than this. Like speakers of English in all societies where there is a daily use of English in a range of domains, they need to have different styles of English in their repertoire.

The idea that a Singaporean accent is acceptable has also not been maintained in the SGEM materials. The SGEM website includes exercises in pronunciation which address some of the core features of the Singapore English accent, such as the conflation of the vowel of *pat* and the vowel of *pet*. Website readers are invited to practise the distinction, as in:

My cousin's name is Ellen.

My cousin's name is Allan.

Sometimes recommendations are given for how to pronounce specific words. Generally, where there are alternatives, the one recommended is always the most old-fashioned kind of British English that can be found. For example, when one questioner asks how many syllables *vegetable* should have, the answer is three, while the correct pronunciation of *Wednesday* is said to be with two syllables (and no /d/). Cross-checking *OED* and pronouncing dictionaries will show that there is variation in both these words, even within British English. When there are alternative pronunciations, the SGEM always seems to promote the one that has maximal reduction. The high-prestige British accent, RP, is at one extreme of English accents, with a great deal of reduction, while Singapore English is at the other extreme, with very little. In RP, many unstressed syllables use a reduced vowel (/ə/ or /X/) where other varieties, including Singapore English, have a full vowel. This applies both in words (as in the first syllables of *consider* and *exam*) and in sentences (in an RP rendition of 'I gave it to him' it is likely that only *gave* will have a full pronunciation). There is little doubt that as far as world-wide intelligibility is concerned (the supposed aim of the SGEM), the fuller pronunciations are clearer (Jenkins 2000 2007; Gupta 2005): the only motivation for recommending these extremely reduced forms is to promote a rather old-fashioned type of RP.

The 'Phone-in Lessons' (developed by the British Council in association with the SGEM), which have been part of the SGEM from the start, are built around a scenario of a Singaporean company employing foreign staff. In the first lesson, a worker from Britain is met at the airport by a co-worker from India. They speak together in the usual SGEM textbook style of English, with a slow and careful delivery:

Jane: Hello, I'm Jane. Are you Jaya by any chance?

Jaya: Yes, I am. Hi, Jane. I'm Jaya from HotDotCom. Pleased to meet you.

Jane: Ah yes. You're the webmaster, aren't you. Pleased to meet you too?

When they get into a taxi, however, Jaya and the driver have a discussion about the route in more natural-sounding Singlish:

Jaya: This way can.

Driver: No lah, this way cannot.

Jane thinks Jaya and the driver are speaking Chinese and wonders how long it will take her to learn. It is true that on hearing a new non-standard dialect of English for the first time, a hearer might think it is another language. I was once asked by a visiting American in Singapore what language a woman behind us on an escalator was speaking to her child (it was Singlish) but a Botswanan visiting Newcastle also once asked me what language the revellers in the streets on a Friday evening were speaking (the Newcastle dialect, Geordie). Tuning in to other dialects is part of what we have to do as English speakers, and foreigners who come to live in Singapore learn to understand Singlish easily enough. And most Singaporeans who encounter foreigners can adapt their English too. It is not clear why this dialogue is built around a non-Singaporean speaking Singlish: Are the writers suggesting that Indians are more able than British people to pick up the local dialect? Or that they are more likely to be corrupted by it? It is all rather neo-colonial. It is foolish to expect that stilted, unreal English, of a kind associated with foreign learners, could replace a living dialect. Even if Singlish does diminish in use over the years, it will be replaced by a form of speech that allows its users to express a Singaporean identity, and to express degrees of formality.

It is generally accepted that all English-using countries need their own vocabulary to deal with elements of local culture. But the commentary on the first SGEM phone-in lesson attacks even this, giving *ERP* as an example of something to avoid. Instead of using *ERP*, should Singaporeans say ‘Electronic Road Pricing’ every time? Or should they perhaps adopt the London expression, ‘Congestion Charge’, even though Singapore had this idea many years before London? Local cultural terms are essential for all communities.

Much of this is a return to the old days of the 1980s and before, when Singapore looked to Britain (an imagined, unreal Britain) for a model of excellence in English. The world has moved on, and the colonial cringe is over. Singapore is one of the success stories of the world, and can be confident about its English as well as about other areas of its success.

Singapore's SGEM movement seems to have given the world the impression that the standard of English in Singapore is poor, and that, as the current (March 2009) *Wikipedia* entry on the SGEM says:

The **Speak Good English Movement** is a program launched by the government of Singapore. Singaporeans usually speak a variant or dialect of English known as Singlish, which has heavy influences from Chinese and Malay in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, and can be incomprehensible to non-Singaporeans. According to the government^[citation needed], this causes problems when Singaporeans need to deal with people from other countries in business and trade, so the campaign aims to discourage the use of Singlish and encourage the increased use of a more standardized form of English (i.e. generally modelled on the British standard). The launch of the program has been reportedly^[citation needed] unable to effectively change the diglossia (two parallel languages for formal and informal situations) among Singaporeans. Singlish still remains as a "common language" among Singaporeans, and is mostly used in informal communication, while a more standardized form is used for formal communication.

Note that this entry assumes that even in 'formal communication', Standard English is not actually achieved in Singapore. Singapore should be attacking, not fostering, the erroneous view, still sadly widespread, that while people from the UK and USA (etc.) are perfect at Standard English, people in places like Singapore and India (etc.) never quite make it. Such a view is not supported by linguistic analysis.

Of course, criticizing the Standard of English (or maths, or behaviour) in a country is perennial. No country in the world is immune from this self-flagellation. Here, for example, is a claim from Clive James (Australian by birth, long-time resident in the UK, writing in an Australian magazine):

In which English-speaking country is the English language falling apart fastest? Britain. Are things as bad in Australia? I hope not. In Britain, in 2006, the Labour government is still trying to fix Britain's education system, but surely one of the reasons it's so hard to fix is that most of the people who should know how are themselves the system's victims, and often don't even

seem to realize it. They need less confidence. Even when they are ready to admit there might be a problem, few of them realise that they lack the language to describe it. (*The Monthly*, May 2006, repr. on *Clivejames.com*)

The rest of the world is not very conscious of Singapore and does not know the extent to which it is an English-using country. When I came to work at the University of Leeds from the National University of Singapore, one of my colleagues commented that it must be nice for me to be teaching students whose English was better: the truth is that the English of the students I taught in Singapore and the students I teach in Leeds is very much the same. Foreigners reading official sources will not get a good (or an accurate) impression of the real standard of English in Singapore. They might not realize that the notion that standards are falling is a myth as old (at least) as Plato — Bolton (2003) discusses the same myth in the context of Hong Kong.

I fail to understand why the very real successes of generations of Singaporean politicians and teachers have not been recognized. It is time for Singaporeans to understand that Singapore is no longer a British colony, and that the standard of English in Singapore has risen steadily since independence, is still rising, and has, for some years, been excellent by any reasonable measures. Singapore's school students regularly top international tests of educational excellence, and of English. It is hard to understand what is to be gained by wrongly presenting Singapore's education system as a failing one, and by wrongly presenting Singapore as a place where people speak 'bad English'. People unfamiliar with Singapore are likely to believe it.

Areas of uncertainty

The traditional areas of disputed usage continue to give rise to uncertainty and insecurity in most of those who use English, and continue to be the focus of diatribes from the language police. These areas loom large in the minds of users of English, and are the subject of a disproportionate amount of attention in schools and in the media. Most overt discussion of Standard English takes place not around those areas where the Standard is strictest (spelling, inflectional morphology, structure of the verb), but around these peripheral areas, where there is dispute about alternatives within Standard English.

The better style guides address the issues and explain the disagreement, but there are also pundits who set themselves up as experts in judging the disputes, often making capricious decisions not based on the linguistic or social facts. Such people are sometimes called ‘language mavens’. Language mavens do not refer to reputable dictionaries in their pronouncements, or to usage, or to history. They foster insecurity in ordinary users of English without any serious effort at improving their English, something that has been attacked by linguists for half a century (for example, Leonard 1962). Unfortunately, the SGEM appears to have fostered a maven culture for the English of Singapore, rather than empowering people to extend and develop their English. All over Singapore, there are advertisements for classes to improve English, many with a focus on pronunciation or ‘phonics’. Writing in the *Straits Times* on 21 October 2007, Janadas Devan reported that, at that time, ‘bad English’ was the second most popular topic of discussion on the *Straits Times Interactive* website.

The SGEM invites the public to ask questions of their language experts. Questions are answered on the SGEM pages, in a weekly ‘English as it is broken’ column in Singapore’s leading newspaper, *The Straits Times*, and in the *Straits Times Online Mobile Print (STOMP)*. The credentials of those who answer the questions are not on display, unlike the credentials of those who publish dictionaries, grammars, and style guides. Some of the SGEM answers appear to be provided by 938LIVE, a radio station, and others are reprinted from *The Straits Times*. The *STOMP* answers are provided by “the Ministry of Education’s English language specialists”, who do seem to be much better informed than the respondents from 938LIVE. I looked in detail at the four months of questions and answers in *STOMP* (March–June 2007), when members of the public asked 198 questions (some people covered more than one topic in a single posting, which is why the figures below add up to more than this). Answers can be grouped into 17 categories, the first 2 of which are not so much questions as jokes and complaints.

1. *Look at this* (44).

Members of the public send in photographs of notices that they believe include errors in English (e.g., *FOR EMERGENCY USED ONLY*, *figurine* for a life-size statue) or that they find funny (e.g., *GM FOOD CENTRE*). The supposed peculiarity is not always identified, and there are some of them seem to me to be just ordinary notices (e.g., *STOP BEWARE OF CHILDREN*). In one case a notice is photographed that is likely to have been a knowing use of Singlish (*INSIDE GOT MORE DRINKS AND BEER*). One of these pictures begins every page of questions.

2. *This is appalling* (6).

Members of the public complain about English they have seen in textbooks that they regard as wrong, about features of Singapore English they do not like (using ‘t’ for ‘th’ and pronouncing ‘w’ wrongly), and, sometimes, about previous answers to questions.

For example:

Many adults above 45 years pronounce the letter “w” as “dub-dew” which should be pronounced as “double-u” (quickly). I hope the younger generation is taught correctly. I am not talking about American pronunciation [*sic*] of “z” as “zee” and British slang as “zed” or “h” as pronounced as “hedge” or “edge”. Go and ask those over 40+ yr teachers how they pronounce “w”. THE LIST GOES ON!

The answers to these complaints, especially those on pronunciation, were generally tolerant of the feature that caused the complaint.

3. *Analysis and convention* (10).

Three questioners ask for technical terms to assist in linguistic analysis, one asks whether *off* is a part of the word *offer* (relevant to the rules of a game), two questioners ask what ‘full sentence’ means in the context of comprehension questions, and four ask whether other school tests were correctly marked.

4. *American and British English* (3).

British English (or English English) is referred to occasionally as a reference point in both questions and answers, but only twice does the question put this at the centre of concern. One questioner asks for information on where to learn American English, while another shows a clear sense of British English as the model, asking whether spellings such as ‘subsidised’ and ‘criticised’, believed by the questioner to be American, are “allowed as we need to follow the trend.” The answer comes down firmly in favour of British English: “Both are acceptable as both are British, not American.” A third questioner asks about the past tense of *dive*, and the answer addresses the US/UK difference. In other categories, most of the other issues raised are irrelevant in terms of the British/American differences, though some of the questions on pronunciation suggest that pronunciation differences between British and American English are behind them. The extent to which the answers address this is variable.

5. *Concord* (10).

Six of the questions about subject-verb concord relate to unclear areas of concord in which there is some mismatch of notional and strict concord, as in collective nouns (*troupe, pair, team*), *each*, and *X as well as Y* structures. One questioner was puzzled by the subjunctive ('If he *were* ...') while one asks a much more basic question, apparently thinking that if *always* occurs between a singular noun and a verb concord will be plural (*Mary likes* vs *Mary always like*). There was an additional question on the choice of pronoun after *someone* (the answer promoted the old-fashioned and controversial singular *he*).

6. *Determiners* (5).

Three of these are about the choice between *a* and *an* (an unusually regular feature of English). Two of the questions relate to 'an earring' and reveal a belief that *earring* begins with a consonant (like *year*). The answer corrects this (unexpected) assumption. The third, more predictably, relates to 'a useful answer'. The answer says that the 'usual rule does not apply to u' rather than saying that 'useful' really does begin with a consonant like 'year'. The other two questions about determiners relate to the idioms 'on (the) air' and '(a) sense of humour'.

7. *Prepositions and particles* (11).

These questions all relate to the choice of one or another preposition or particle, usually where choice is possible within Standard English (*in/on the bus* (twice); *run over/down/into/out*; *(to) home*; *through/across the underpass*; *prefer tea to/or coffee*; *between 9 to/and 5*; *go to/for lunch*; *good at/in*; *upon* in fractions).

8. *Singular and plural nouns* (10).

Of these, five relate to uncertainty about mass nouns (*lingerie(s)*, *flurry of activity/-ies*, *discrepancies*, *nuclear plant(s)*, *water(s)*, *translation(s)*, *feeling(s)*), and one to the plural of *fish*. The other five are all about the choice between singular and plural in noun modifiers (*Academy Award(s) Nominee*, *goody/ies bags*, *2-room(s) flats*, *Aesthetic(s) department*).

9. *Tense* (12).

Some of these are very broad. The majority of the specific ones relate to the use of either *will/would*, *can/could* or the use of tense in reported speech, especially in minutes of meetings.

10. *Other inflections* (17).

As with the questions on concord, with one exception (about *obsoleted*) these are questions about areas where there is choice or variation within Standard English, or

where the structure gives cause of confusion (*let it begin(s)*). Three questions relate to the comparative, with two questioners checking that double comparatives (*more cheaper*) are incorrect, and a third querying the comparative adverb *faster*. One question addresses *you are welcome(d)*. Three are about the possessive (*goat('s) milk*; the possessive of *James*; choice between inflectional and periphrastic possessive) and six are concerned with pronouns. The areas of uncertainty in pronouns are *whom* (the answer promoted it); the comparative (*taller than he/he is/him*) and the choice of *I/me* in coordinated subjects and objects (*John and I/me*).

11. *Word order* (2).

Both relate to the placement of adverbials (the answers drew attention to choice).

12. *Other grammatical* (9).

The questions relate to other assorted aspects of grammar, including two on the reflexive, four relating to idioms that affect the choice of verb form in structures such as *saw C shout(ing)* and *our mission to bring/of bringing*, one asks about the use of *But although ...* One is about the use of *both* with *not* (the answer approves it), and one just puts down a sentence (with errors of concord and punctuation) and asks if it is correct.

13. *Orthography* (5).

There are few worries about spelling, it seems. Of the five questions about orthography, two are about apostrophes, one about the choice of words or figures for numbers, one about the placement of full stops when a sentence ended with a quotation that was a full sentence, and one about *stationary/ery*.

14. *Words* (6).

There are six questions about the use of specific words. Concerns include whether *impact* can be a verb (yes) and whether *reservist* can be used to mean *reservist duty* (the answer is that this is “a grammatically incorrect shortening which has become commonly accepted”). The expert is less modern in the case of *email*:

Language grow and develops so e-mails may emerge as a plural of e-mail just as electronic mail become e-mail (now an accepted word) which will probably in time lose the apostrophe and become email (Did you know fortnight was originally fourteen nights?)

15. *Confusing words* (31).

A stunning 31 questions deal with words that either have similar meanings (e.g., *speak/talk, fetch/take/bring, lend/borrow, prohibition/ban*) or are similar both in meaning and form (e.g., *among(st), orient(ate), ironic(al)*). Two questions are about *What/how about*. Answers to these questions often draw attention to the presence of choice in English, but sometimes come out in favour of one alternative or another, not necessarily for good reasons. Which alternative is unpredictable. Sometimes the answer comes out in favour of the more Singaporean alternative:

Question: Can I “eat my dinner”? Or should it be “take my dinner”?

Answer: I would rather use “take” for meals.

In other cases, answers make a spurious distinction between words with substantial overlap, as in this answer, which defines *chicken* in a way not supplied by *OED*:

Chick would refer to the cute, fluffy, yellow baby chicken. In fact, the young of any bird can be called chicks.

Chickens are the fully matured females which taste so good when they are fried.

16. *Pronunciation* (9).

All of these relate to specific words. Three of them are linked questions about the vowel in the first syllable of *colleague*. Other issues are: the two pronunciations of *the*; the number of syllables in *itinerary* (the answer said there should be four, going as usual for a maximally reduced alternative), the initial sound of *Thailand*, the pronunciation of *film, tuition* and *laboratory*. It is surprising that the answer to *laboratory* does not address the large US/UK difference in this word, especially as a much smaller US/UK pronunciation difference is addressed in one of the answers on *colleague*.

17. *Miscellaneous* (11).

Eight questions relate to specific issues about particular idioms, mostly to do with collocation or idiom: *Should a ‘worst tyrant’ really be a ‘best tyrant’? (Back) home? Is it tautologous to say someone is a ‘dishonest liar’? Can meat be ‘freshly frozen’?* Two questioners are concerned with ways of talking about colours (*red colour(ed), colour red*). One questioner raises the Singaporean invariant tag *is it* asking whether it is true that ‘native speakers’ are now using it. The answer is “Personally, I haven’t heard

native speakers follow suit.” In fact invariant tags are common in a range of Englishes, and there is an invariant (negative) tag used by some speakers in colloquial British English, usually spelt as *innit*.

The topics of these questions suggest that those who send questions in association with the SGEM are not confused about the difference between Singlish and Standard English. There are no questions about well-known features of Singlish such as pragmatic particles (such as *lah*), or about omission of the verb BE (*He so stupid*) or about the use of the base form of the verb where standard English required some inflection (*Fatimah finish already*). No translation is invited of any sentence in Singlish. These questions are questions from within Standard English, and the vast majority of them deal with areas of difficulty and dispute that beset all users of English. They address areas that are intrinsically difficult or irregular in English, or where English users do not agree on what is and what is not ‘correct’.

These topics are the subject of advice directed at the insecure all over the English-using world. Clive James gives examples from the British (and American) press to illustrate his claim about the poor standard of English in Britain and elsewhere among “people who have learned English as a first language”. These are the usages he regards as appalling, attached to the numbers in my list of the *STOMP* issues:

- dangling participles (not mentioned by any of the *STOMP* questioners);
- mixed and dead metaphors (mentioned by some questions in 17);
- confused words: *hone it/home in; solecism/solipsism* (15);
- concord in complex subjects (5);
- determiners (6);
- lower case in name of a magazine (not mentioned by any of the *STOMP* questioners).

The areas of disputed usage that worry the *STOMP* participants (and James) are covered by usage notes in dictionaries and style guides published and online. They are among the areas discussed by the linguists who have attacked prescriptivism for decades. What we see here are Singaporeans attempting to negotiate those areas of Standard English about which there is uncertainty. The presence of dispute and uncertainty within Standard English is part of the essence of Standard English as an organic dialect: these are the areas where the linguistic features of Standard English are not firmly defined. The features associated with

the normative debate do not divide Standard English into multiple dialects: they are a debate about notions of correctness within a dialect in which concepts of correctness are central because it is a Standard and is required in certain domains. Engaging in areas of dispute is part of what advanced writers of English have to do, making informed decisions through the process of feedback and monitoring that is the agent of maintenance and change in Standard English.

Deciding what's right

It is quite a challenge to answer some of the questions in a non-technical way, briefly, and accurately. While it is easy enough to tell a questioner (for example) the difference between *its* and *it's*, it is much harder to explain the subtle difference between *bring* and *take*. We have seen that some of the *STOMP* answers are sensible, and some are capricious. None of them refer to any source of authority, either in works of reference from reputable sources, or in usage.

The answers on the SGEM's website are even worse. Of the 16 answers to questions in August 2007, only 5 could be verified as valid by checking against appropriate sources. Among errors in answers were the following very obvious ones:

- *learnt/learned*. The SGEM answer claimed that *learnt* is past tense, while *learned* is the adjective. It is true that the form of the rare adjective can only be *learned* (pronounced as two syllables, as in 'a learned doctor of the church'). However, any good dictionary (such as *OED*) will show that the past tense (and past participle) can be either *learnt* or *learned*.
- *inquiry/enquiry*. The SGEM answer says "In British English, used here in Singapore, if you make an enquiry, you are asking for information. An inquiry is an investigation conducted by an organization, the police for example. However, in American English, it is common that the word 'inquiry' is used for both instances." Most dictionaries (like *OED*) state that the two spellings are interchangeable, though some writers may try to make the distinction that SGEM wrongly claims is generally made by British English.

- *in/on a bus*. The SGEM answer says it should be ‘on a bus’. *OED* has examples of both.

Most of the erroneous recommendations in the SGEM site give a clear answer to an area of language where there is actually choice within Standard English. In many cases, they are not even disputed usage. These answers misrepresent English. They would constrain anyone who took them seriously, but would not result in someone saying or writing non-standard English. This is true of other answers to do with *(e)pecially*, *bring/take*, *fell for you/fell in love with you*, and *pressured/pressurized*. The only damage done to a reader would be to make them feel insecure because they cannot trust the evidence of their instinct or what they read or hear.

But there is one answer where the recommended choice would take Singaporeans away from what is now considered best practice in writing formal English. This is an area where there has been change since the 1980s.

Over the whole of the English-using world, the use of *he* to refer to a referent of either gender (“If a student submits his essay late, he will be penalized”) became progressively less acceptable over the course of the last two decades of the twentieth century. Most reputable publishers (including Hong Kong University Press) do not allow authors to use this ‘generic he’. If you see this usage in a printed book from a major publisher now, you can guess it is pre-1985. This change was accompanied by a great deal of discussion. Style guides suggest alternatives to the use of *he* where referents might be of either gender or both, such as making the whole thing plural (e.g., “If students submit their essays late, they will be penalized”). The use of the singular *they* has become more acceptable than it used to be, especially with pronouns such as *someone*, but is still disputed because of a number incongruity with verb concord (“If a student submits [not *submit*] their essay late, they will be penalized”). The *STOMP* and SGEM answers promote the singular *he* with *someone* and *no-one*, as in this SGEM answer:

Question: “Everyone wants to change the world but no one wants to change themselves.”

Should it be “themselves” or “himself”?

Answer: It should be “himself” because “no one” is singular.

This recommendation flouts all mainstream style guides and usage advice in modern dictionaries. Using *he* to refer to *someone* and *no-one* looks at best old-fashioned and at worst offensive. The *Online Style Guide* of *The Times* (London) takes the most traditional stand now possible without giving offence to anyone. It bans singular *they*, but does not even consider generic *he* as a possibility, recommending instead a compromise alternative — complete pluralization — that no-one objects to:

they should always agree with the subject. Avoid sentences such as “If someone loves animals, they should protect them”. Say instead “If people love animals, they should protect them”. (*Times Online*)

In the SGEM response we find an example of Singapore not following the current trend in usage found in most countries, but holding out for the traditional maven-favoured alternative. On the same lines, the SGEM website identifies Professor Koh (a woman) as the ‘Chairman’, something that would be proscribed in edited texts from many publishers around the world.

The SGEM has, as might be expected, been criticized from a number of quarters. The hardline approach to correctness lays the SGEM open to criticism from other mavens, who comb through its site and the speeches of its leadership for real or imagined errors. Among those who have done this are the anonymous blogger ‘The Grammar Terrorist’ in his (*Unofficial, Unauthorized*) *English as it is Broken* column, where he responds to *The Straits Times* column, and ‘Mr Brown’ (real name, Lee Kin Mun), in another blog, who on 26 July 2006 ‘corrected’ a speech by Koh Tai Ann, the chair of the Speak Good English Movement. Many of the corrections seem designed to render Koh’s elegant and idiomatic speech into the bland kind of English the SGEM seems to promote. The whole pernickety approach of the SGEM lends itself to the same response in others — this is how the SGEM is hoist by its own petard.

Solutions

This focus on ‘correctness’, and the promotion of one alternative as right when there is in fact choice, has long been known to be damaging to insecure users of English (Mittins et al. 1970; Milroy and Milroy 1985; Wardaugh 1999). Instead, those promoting excellence in English would do well to look at how English actually operates in the world. Those who pronounce

on usage should, before pronouncing, first check established and up-to-date dictionaries, grammars and style guides from major publishers, and then, if the information is not available from reputable published sources, they should investigate, by using internet searches intelligently, what the prevalence and the social and geographical pattern of usage of a given item is.

There cannot be recourse to the ‘native speaker’. The idea that the native speaker is the sole and reliable source of judgement on Standard English is a damaging myth. There are many ways of defining ‘native language’, and the definition of the ‘native speaker of English’ has been especially politicized. Any definition of ‘native speaker’ that has recourse to race, ethnicity or citizenship is invidious and unjustifiable. Any definition that requires different criteria to be applied to native speakers of English than to native speakers of other languages also seems to me to be linguistically unjustifiable. Any definition that denies native speakerness to speakers of dialects other than the standard one, or to people who have more than one native language, is politically and linguistically unjustifiable. The most usual definition among linguists is that you are a native speaker of a language (any language, any dialect) if you acquired it naturally in childhood (Li 2000: 497). We could make this stricter by saying it must be a language spoken by the age of three years. Let us take that definition and see what facts it leads us to:

1. Many Singaporeans (and most of those under forty) are native speakers of English, including Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s first Prime Minister.
2. Not all native speakers (in any region) are native speakers of Standard English.
3. Not all native speakers of English (including native speakers of Standard English) can write Standard English skilfully. This applies whether the native speakers are Singaporean, British, or whatever (remember the GCSE failures in English in the UK). Success in writing Standard English is societally defined and is measured by educational attainment in English.
4. Some non-native speakers of English are better at writing Standard English than are nearly all native speakers (e.g., Koh Tai Ann, Mary Tay, professors of English in Poland).
5. The high-prestige edited texts that set the standard for English are produced by people skilled in the writing of Standard English, regardless of whether they are native speakers or not.

What matters is skill in performing Standard English and we have traditional means of assessing this in the form of examinations, qualifications and ad hoc tests. These are the tests that should be applied, rather than any test based on accidents of birth. But any user of English with a high level of skills recognizes the need to use reference works, to keep in touch with trends in usage and to recognize personal limitations.

My appeal for a realistic approach to Standard English is not to be seen as ‘anything goes’. Because this is not how Standard English works. Skill in writing Standard English is a central part of validation in English-using societies. Getting it right matters societally: Standard English has cultural capital (de Swaan 2001; Blommaert et al. 2005). But it is not the property of any one region: it is a truly global brand. English is not a classical language with clear rules that exist outside practice. It is a living language with all the areas of choice and flexibility that that implies. The use of English takes place in real social situations where negotiation of communication is what matters.

Learning to use Standard English well can be thought of as progressing in stages:

1. Speak some English (anydialect/dialects).
2. Learn to read and write English. This is a process ideally, and usually, undertaken throughout childhood, assisted by teachers who are sensitive to the stage of the learner. Literacy is always developed in Standard English.
3. Develop skill in producing and understanding Standard English, especially by intensive and attentive reading of and listening to a wide variety of texts from many times and places, and by collaborative writing. This is a lifelong task.
4. Develop skill in producing a range of varieties of English, as appropriate to where you live, who you are, and what you do with English. Over your life you may live in different places and do different things with English: you will need to extend your range. Another lifelong task.
5. Develop skill in understanding the spoken English of other regions. Learn about non-standard dialects as well as about variation in Standard English. This is also a lifelong task.

All users of English progress through these stages but the levels of skill attained in Standard English are variable. There is no evidence that a vigorous local non-standard dialect is detrimental to the development of strong skills in Standard English. There is every evidence that using English in a range of domains, making societally appropriate adaptations in style depending on context, interlocutor and text type, and taking pleasure in the use of

English, promotes the development of strong skills in Standard English. A normative maven culture that promotes a judgemental approach to language is likely to create insecurity, possibly leading to less use of English, and a concomitant reduction in skill. The promotion of a single style is unrealistic and, if obeyed, would lead to a deterioration in the use of English.

Especially in speech, all users of English need to be tolerant of a range of proficiency and to negotiate the construction of communication in real-life situations. We need to be prepared to adapt vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation to the needs of those with whom we speak face to face. There is immediate feedback from interlocutors to help us do this. We need to be tolerant of the differences between the way we speak and the way others speak, and hope this is mutual. When speaking to an unknown or mixed audience we need to assess the audience and do our best to meet their needs. There are different levels of skill at doing this. There are also different levels of skill in listening (Gupta 2005). We understand best the accents we hear most often. This means that for a Singaporean the easiest accent to understand is almost certainly a Singaporean accent. In the world as a whole, the most heard accent is almost certainly the accent known as General American, thanks to the popularity of American mass media. But that does not mean we should all strive to speak it. Variety is something to celebrate rather than deplore.

In writing, things are simpler, because in many respects Standard English really is essentially monolithic. In any given text of Standard English (such as a newspaper article) more than 99.5% of words will be words spelled, inflected and used in the same way by Standard English everywhere. Standard English is so much a given that it is almost invisible. And it is not something remote and unattainable. It is something that Singaporeans are as good at as anyone else — indeed, possibly better than anyone else. Singaporeans' anxieties about English are shared by English users in the rest of the world.

References

British Broadcasting Corporation (2007) Education. *BBC News*, 23 August 2007.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6958992.stm>. Accessed October 2007.

Bex, Tony and Watts, Richard J. (1999) Introduction. In *Standard English: The Widening Debate*. Edited by Tony Bex and Richard J. Watts. London: Routledge, pp. 1–15.

Bhatia, Vijay K. (2004) *Worlds of Written Discourse*. London: Continuum.

- Blommaert, Jan, Collins, James, and Slembrouck, Stef (2005) Spaces of multilingualism. *Language and Communication*, **25**(3), 197–216.
- Bolton, Kingsley (2003) *Chinese Englishes: A Sociolinguistic History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cameron, Deborah (1995) *Verbal Hygiene*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Carter, Ronald (2004) *Language and Creativity: The Art of Common Talk*. London: Routledge.
- de Swaan, Abram (2001) *Words of the World*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Dixon, L. Quentin (2005) The bilingual education policy in Singapore: Implications for second language acquisition. In *ISB4: Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism*. Edited by James Cohen, Kara T. McAlister, Kellie Rolstad and Jeff MacSwann. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press, pp. 625–35.
- A Dictionary of Singlish and Singapore English* (2004–). Edited by Jack Tsen-Ta Lee. <http://www.singlishdictionary.com>. Accessed August 2007.
- Ellis, N. (2007) Adding to the cultural diversity: A short history of expatriate teachers at Nanyang Girls' High School. Nanyang Girls' High School. http://www.nygh.moe.edu.sg/RnD/research_2007_02.htm. Accessed July 2008.
- Görlach, Manfred (1990) Heteronymy in international English. *English World-Wide*, **11**(2), 239–74.
- Gupta, Anthea Fraser (1986) A standard for written Singapore English? *English World-Wide*, **7**(1), 75–99.
- Gupta, Anthea Fraser (2001) Realism and imagination in the teaching of English. *World Englishes*, **20**(3), 365–81.
- Gupta, Anthea Fraser (2005) Inter-accent and inter-cultural intelligibility: A study of listeners in Singapore and Britain. In *English in Singapore: Phonetic Research on a Corpus*. Edited by David Deterding, Adam Brown, and Low Ee Ling. Singapore: McGraw-Hill Education (Asia), pp. 138–52.
- Gupta, Anthea Fraser (2006a) Singlish on the web. In *Varieties of English in Southeast Asia and Beyond*. Edited by Azirah Hashim and Norizah Hassan. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, pp. 19–37.
- Gupta, Anthea Fraser (2006b) Standard English in the World. In *English in the World: Global Rules, Global Roles*. Edited by Rani Rubdy and Mario Saraceni. London: Continuum, pp. 95–109.
- James, Clive. *Clivejames.com*. <http://www.clivejames.com/>. Accessed October 2007.

- Jenkins, Jennifer (2000) *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins, Jennifer (2007) *English as a Lingua Franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jespersen, Otto (1948[1909]) *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles*. (seven volumes). London/Copenhagen: George Allen & Unwin/Munksgaard.
- Johnson, Samuel (1755–56) *A Dictionary of the English Language*. 2nd ed. London. From *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale Group.
<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO>.
- Le Page, R.B. and Tabouret-Keller, Andrée (1985) *Acts of Identity: Creole-Based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leonard, Sterling A. (1962) *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage 1700–1800*. New York: Russell and Russell.
- Li Wei (2000) Glossary. In *The Bilingualism Reader*. Edited by Li Wei. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 494–9.
- Milroy, James and Milroy, Lesley (1985) *Authority in Language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mittins, W.H., Salu, Mary, Edminson, Mary and Coyne, Sheila (1970) *Attitudes to English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ‘Mr Brown’ (Lee Kin Mun). <http://www.mrbrown.com>. Accessed July 2006.
- Mullis, Ina V.S., Martin, Michael O., Kennedy, Ann M. and Foy, Pierre. 2007. *PIRLS 2006: International Report*. TIMSS & PIRLS: International Study Centre.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. (1989) Edited by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner. Additions 1993–7, edited by John Simpson and Edmund Weiner; Michael Proffitt, and 3rd ed. (in progress) Mar. 2000–, edited by John Simpson. OED Online. Oxford University Press. <http://oed.com>. Accessed August 2007.
- Paulasto, Heli (2008) Focus fronting as a feature of vernacular English. Paper presented at The Thirteenth International Conference on Methods in Dialectology, Leeds, England, 4–8 August 2008.
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (1999) *Improving Writing at Key Stages 3 and 4*. London: QCA.
- Quirk, Randolph (1958) From descriptive to prescriptive: An example. *English Language Teaching* 12. [Repr. with small alterations in *Essays on the English Language: Medieval and Modern*. Randolph Quirk (1968). London: Longman, pp. 108–13.]

- Rubdy, Rani (2001) Creative destruction: Singapore's Speak Good English movement. *World Englishes*, **20**(3), 341–55.
- Rubdy, Rani (2007) Singlish in the school: An impediment or a resource? *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, **28**(4), 308–24.
- Schiffman, Harold F. (2002) French language policy: Centrism, Orwellian *dirigisme*, or economic determinism. In *Opportunities and Challenges of Bilingualism*. Edited by Li Wei, Jean-Marc Dewaele and Alex Housen. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 89–104.
- Shields, Anthea Fraser (1977) On the identification of Singapore English vocabulary. In *The English Language in Singapore*. Edited by W.J. Crewe. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, pp. 120–40.
- Speak Good English Movement (SGEM)*. <http://www.goodenglish.org.sg/site/>. Accessed July 2007.
- The Straits Times Online Mobile Print (STOMP)*. <http://www.stomp.com.sg/>. Accessed July 2007.
- Tay, Mary W.J. (1982) The phonology of educated Singapore English. *English World-Wide*, **3**(2), 135–45.
- Tay, Mary W.J. and Gupta, Anthea Fraser (1983) Towards a description of Standard Singapore English. In *Varieties of English in Southeast Asia*. Edited by R.B. Noss. Anthology Series 11. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, pp. 173–89.
- Times Online*. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk>. Accessed September 2007.
- TIMSS: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study 2003*. National Center for Education Statistics. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/timss03/>. Accessed July 2008.
- Tottie, Gunnel (2002) Non-categorical differences between American and British English: Some corpus evidence. In *Studies in Mid-Atlantic English*. Edited by Marko Modiano. Gävle: Högskolan, pp. 59–73.
- (The Unofficial, Unauthorized) English as it is Broken Column*. <http://englishasitisbroken.blogspot.com/>. Accessed September 2007.
- Wardaugh, Ronald (1999) *Proper English*. London: Blackwell.
- Wikipedia*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/>. Accessed August 2007.
- Xu, Daming and Li Wei (2002) Managing multilingualism in Singapore. In *Opportunities and Challenges of Bilingualism*. Edited by Li Wei, Jean-Marc Dewaele, and Alex Housen. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 275–95.