

## The Making of a Japanese Dictionary of Asian Englishes with an Emphasis on Singaporean/Malaysian English

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years Japan has been watching Asia very closely. Formerly Japan was an economic power and a role model in the Asian business scene, but nowadays the situation has been slowly but steadily reversed. Now as many as 500,000 Japanese people visit South and Southeast Asian countries every year and many of them stay in these countries for a long period of time for business and/or academic purposes. These people usually do some research on the country before they go. The literatures they pick up often mention that English is an official and/or a common language in many of the Asian countries, especially Singapore, the Philippines and India.

Once they arrive in these countries, however, they realize that the English used there is not the one they know – or at least the one that they are used to. Many businesspeople actually invest some money in their English language study at prestigious and expensive language schools like Berlitz prior to their foreign assignments and prepare themselves for efficient communication in “standard” American or British English. Therefore, they are stunned when they hear “Aiya! You looking for expensive condo, is it? Just like ang mo lah.” (Wow, you’re looking for an expensive condominium, aren’t you? You’re just like those Caucasian expatriates.)

They smile and scratch their heads in the first few days, but as time goes by, they get frustrated as they have to do business or studies in “standard” English, already a foreign language, and deal with local people in another kind of English. “Oh, don[’t] worry. No problem, lah. You get use[d] to it lo,” their Singaporean or Malaysian colleague or classmate might say. (Note: *lah* and *lo* are pragmatic particles peculiar to Singaporean/Malaysian English.) One would of course get used to the pronunciation and some of the grammatical patterns peculiar to the variety of English spoken in these Asian countries, but when it comes to vocabulary, one needs clear definitions.

*The Times-Chambers Essential English Dictionary* (2nd Edition), published in 1997 in Singapore, incorporated about 1,000 items of local terms and usage most commonly found in Singapore and Malaysia. In the same year, Australia’s *Macquarie Dictionary* (3rd Edition) added a sizable number of words and phrases used by Southeast Asian speakers of English. These dictionaries come in handy when one is already comfortable in getting definitions in English, but naturally, people would feel more comfortable if they could look up foreign words in a dictionary and obtain definitions in their native language.



Therefore, Nobuyuki Honna (Aoyama Gakuin University), Tetsuya Enokizono (Akita Prefectural University) and I have started working on a Japanese dictionary of Asian Englishes. A major dictionary publisher in Japan, Sanseido, has agreed to publish it. Prof. Honna is writing on Philippine English, Prof. Enokizono on Indian English and I am dealing with Singaporean/Malaysian English. The purpose of the dictionary is to provide sociolinguistic information so that Japanese businesspeople who work in Asia can appreciate why Asians use English the way they do, and of course, understand the meanings of words, phrases, and expressions they frequently encounter in Asian countries.

In this paper, I would like to introduce some of the features in Singaporean/Malaysian English that we have described in the upcoming dictionary and thereby show some of the characteristics of what we call Asian Englishes. The data are from both written and spoken English – local newspapers, magazines, books, movies, TV programs and actual conversations. The words to enter the dictionary have been carefully selected to meet the needs of the Japanese people who visit Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and India.

## **2. The Linguistic Situation in Singapore and Malaysia**

### **2.1 Singapore**

Singapore is a small city-state with a population of about 3.1 million. It is a fascinating real-life language laboratory owing to a geographical location at the crossroads between the Chinese, Indian and Malay cultural zones and the unique role that English has come to play in the daily lives of Singaporeans. There are four official languages in Singapore: Malay, English, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil. Many other languages are also used there. The majority of the population originally immigrated from South China, bringing speakers of various Chinese dialects, such as Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Hainanese and Teochew. The indigenous Malay population spoke and still speaks Malay, which developed variants such as Baba Malay (arising from intermarriages of Chinese and Malays) and Bazaar Malay (a pidginized form of Malay). Though Tamil is an Indian language spoken by the most number of Indians in Singapore, many others are represented there, including Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Bengali and Malayalam.

Increasingly, English has become not only the main language of business, education, government and the media but also the language of the home and informal social interaction. Thus, English in Singapore is not just a working language and the language of education but also the lingua franca of Singaporeans (Tay 1982:52). One of the major reasons for the widespread use of English lies in the education system. All schools in Singapore are now English medium schools with ethnic languages taught as a second language. With the government's strong emphasis on mastering English, it is becoming a first language for an increasing number of young Singaporeans. According to the 1990 Census of Population, the proportion of resident households speaking English at home increased from 12 per



cent in 1980 to 21 per cent in 1990. The number is expected to rise every year.

## 2.2 Malaysia

Malaysia, like Singapore, is a multi-racial and multi-lingual country. Since 1971, Malay, or Bahasa Malaysia, has been a medium of instruction from the primary 1 level (first grade). Although English remained as an alternate official language until 1967 to pay tribute to the British Colony, Bahasa Malaysia has replaced English and is a national, official and instructional language in present Malaysia. Platt and Weber comment that "Obviously Bahasa Malaysia is becoming more and more the language which will have increasing functional value for most of the population as it is becoming more and more the language of government and education and the language needed for social and financial advancement" (1980:154). On the other hand, English still is a means of social identification for Malaysians and is a symbol of urbanization and a mark of an educated person (Asmah 1975:24, 25). Therefore, an increasing number of younger Malaysians now prefer to mix English words even when they speak Bahasa Malaysia. Likewise, when they speak English, they mix in Malay and other vernacular languages and dialects spoken in the country, which actually make Malaysians proud to have a "Malaysian flavor" in the language of the Colony (Lee 1996: Preface).

It seems that the use of English is diminishing in Malaysia, as Bahasa Malaysia is the sole medium of education in the country, but English is still taught in schools as a second language and is considered the most important second language in the country. It is considered important to be well versed in English for social and financial advancement. English language newspapers and magazines are published and sold in Malaysia and radio and TV programs in English are very popular, especially in urban areas (Gill 2000). The government has been trying to raise the level of English spoken in Malaysia, especially among the educated, as this international language has set an important role in the international business, commerce and politics.

## 3. Singaporean/Malaysian English

The broadening of the role of English has led to the growth of a variety of English, popularly referred to as Singlish and Manglish, with distinctly Singaporean/Malaysian characteristics. Singaporeans and Malaysians are said to have an ability to speak three varieties of spoken English, namely Basilect, Mesolect and Acrolect. They choose which variety to use depending on the situation they are in. As Tongue (1974) says, "Anyone who has been only a short time in these countries [Singapore and Malaysia] will have had the remarkable experience of listening to a speaker who has been conversing in near-native discourse suddenly switch to a very informal version of English [Singlish and Manglish] when he speaks to someone familiar only with the substandard form, or chats on the telephone with an intimate friend." Acrolect is the educated model of language, typically regarded as grammatically "correct" and used as a model for teaching in school. Singlish or Manglish (Basilect), on the other hand, is used in daily social



interaction and reflects the speaker's situational and communicative needs. It is a language, in other words, that is shaped and developed by Singaporeans and Malaysians for their own use in informal situations. It is to this variety that Singaporeans and Malaysians in general fall upon naturally and use in varying degrees when speaking with one another. And it is to this variety of spoken Singlish and Manglish that foreigners are most likely to be exposed to, either through listening to local people talking to each other or when addressed by a Singaporean or a Malaysian when the person is feeling relaxed and friendly.

One marked difference between the varieties of spoken Singaporean/Malaysian English is in the area of vocabulary. Much of the vocabulary we have described in the dictionary has a "local flavor." The insertion of Singaporeanisms/Malaysianisms into their speech by Singaporeans and Malaysians is nothing unusual. In fact, however, many Singlish/Manglish speakers are unaware that some of the English words and phrases they use do not convey the intended meaning to native English speakers, let alone speakers of other varieties of English. It is clear in Leslie's example below.

It was after one of those congenial dinner parties that take place from time to time, and we were all about to set off for our various homes. "I shall follow you, if it's all right," said a Singaporean friend to me. I could not see that matters of precedence in leaving were of great concern, but I left before him, as he seemed to want me to do. It was only when I caught sight of him in my rear view mirror, running frantically after my car, that I realized that when he said "follow" he had meant "take a lift."  
(1981:11)

#### 4. Data Included in the Dictionary

Each entry in the dictionary will of course be accompanied by possible definitions in Japanese, word origins, and examples of usage for better understanding. Words and idiomatic expressions that fall in the categories below have been included in the Singapore/Malaysia section of the dictionary.

- 1) Loanwords from other languages spoken in Singapore/Malaysia
- 2) Terms which refer only to the Singapore/Malaysia context
- 3) Verbs that are used differently from standard British English
- 4) Idiomatic expressions peculiar to Singaporean/Malaysian English

##### (1) Loanwords from other languages spoken in Singapore/Malaysia

Allamak! (a Malay ejaculation, similar to *mama mia*!)  
 ang mo (Hokkien origin; Caucasian/foreigner)  
 Chiak loh! (Hokkien origin; Equivalent of *bon appetit*.)  
 chop (Cantonese origin; to seal)  
 jalan jalan (Malay origin; to walk)  
 kiasu (Hokkien origin; someone scared of losing to the competition)  
 makan (Malay origin; to eat)  
 rojak (Malay origin; mixture)



- (2) Terms which refer only to the Singapore/Malaysian context
- air-con (air-conditioner)
  - Cold Storage (a major supermarket chain)
  - condo (condominium)
  - shophouse (traditional terraced house previously used as both a shop below and a home above)
  - void deck (an open area in HDB or public housing blocks)
  - HDB (Housing Development Board)
  - MRT (Mass Rapid Transport railways)
  - SM (Senior Minister, as in SM Lee)
  - NUS (National University of Singapore)
- (3) Verbs that are used differently from standard British English
- fetch (to pick up (someone), to get (something))
  - follow (move in the same direction as someone, but behind him/her)
  - keep (put away in a pocket or a purse)
  - open (turn on (the light))
  - scold (criticize, tell off)
- (4) Idiomatic expressions peculiar to Singaporean/Malaysian English
- catch no ball (don't understand)
  - last time (before, previously)
  - marketing (go to the market)
  - over (plus, as in a woman who is 30 over)
  - schooling (going to school/education at school)
  - shake legs (idle away one's time)
  - until like that (not so much, not to that extent)
  - zap (zerox copy)

## 5. Conclusion

English is always given close attention by the Singapore government, which has been trying to make English the country's first language and has been emphasizing the importance of being able to communicate in English. Now that many young Singaporeans prefer to speak English in lieu of other languages used in Singapore, the government has begun to be concerned with the quality of spoken English.

At the National Day Dinner on August 14, 1999, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew indicated, "The people who will benefit most are those who can master only one kind of English. Singlish is a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans." Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and the Ministry of Education immediately took action. The government has started a "Speak Good English Campaign" this year (2000) to urge the nation to speak an English close to standard British English. This movement, in turn, has influenced many Singaporeans to start a debate in various forms of media on the quality of English.

Many journalists and young Singaporeans do not think a measurable difference will come immediately, no matter how the government emphasizes the use of



"better" English. Colloquial Singaporean English is a colorful variety of English that is unique to Singapore. It has gained social acceptance as the main vehicle of communication in informal social situations.

With the implementation of Bahasa Malaysia as the sole medium of education in Malaysia, the use of English has been on the decline. However, as stated earlier, the Malaysian government has been trying to raise the level of English, since "skill in English is one of the prerequisites for achieving Vision 2020 ... which contains thoughts on the future course of our nation and how we should go about attaining our objective of developing Malaysia into an industrialised country" (David 2000: 41). As such, English is considered as an essential language in the country.

The upcoming dictionary will help foreigners understand the particular usages of English in Asian countries. Only with the understanding of this language of identity and indigenous culture, will foreign visitors and business people alike be able to enjoy the culture and society on the whole. It is hoped that the dictionary will be a big help to Japanese people who wish to understand Asian values and the variety of English spoken in Asia and to be open-minded toward and confident about communicating in English with other Asians.

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