

# Gauging English as a Lingua Franca in the Singapore Context

シンガポールの社会・政治、文化的コンテキストにおける  
リンガフランカとしての英語

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## Abstract

How a language community's lingua franca (LF) is viewed can differ according to perspective: from in an institutionalized way Top down or more organically from the Bottom up. Using the context of English in Singapore, this paper considers three types of evidence: English language text produced during interactions between individuals in the Singapore English language culture; agendas relating to English knowledge and its communicative goals as per the Singapore public school Syllabus document; and the anthropology of English as an official mother tongue of the 'Others' ethnic communities outside of the more visible Chinese, Malay and Indian communities established in the Singapore nation.

This investigation takes place in a detached location (ie. outside of Singapore), which is also a factor. The utility, strengths and limitations of what each type of evidence shows are considered together, and a diglossia situation is observed. This raises other research and language-planning issues which are discussed, and a way forward for English language community stakeholders, and for investigation within the Singapore context itself, are presented.

言語コミュニティのリンガフランカは異なる視点（トップダウンの組織化された視点やより柔軟な草の根レベルからのボトムアップの視点）により様々なとられ方をする。本論ではシンガポールにおける英語コンテキストにおいて、3つのタイプのエビデンスに関して考察する。まず、シンガポール英語文化での個人間のインタラクションで生じた英語テキストに関して述べる。次に、シンガポールにおける公立学校のシラバスに基づく英語に関する知識やそのコミュニカティブな目標に関連したアジェンダに関して議論する。最後に、シンガポールの中国、マレー、インドコミュニティ以外の、よ

り少数派の民族コミュニティーの公的母語としての英語に関する文化人類学的に考察する。

この研究はシンガポール国外で行っている。そのため、それぞれのタイプのエビデンスがどのように今後活用できるかなど、長所短所を含めた議論も行う。また、ダイグロシアを適用している状況についても論評する。さらに、今後の研究に関してや言語政策論についても考察する。

This paper is about evidence of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in context, and the context is Singapore. Much of the discourse on ELF stems from applied linguistics or from some kind of ecological or anthropological base merging with culture and thence language. For much of the discussion and debate, of course proof and substantiation – evidence – is essential if the discourse is to be meaningful and applicable to real situations. This paper rather attempts to start at the other end, with evidence, in order to see what sense can be made of it and also to see how satisfactory it can be. Further, collection and evaluation of available evidence takes place from a remote location (Japan) away from Singapore. The ethos of this is that if viable conclusions can be made in a detached situation, certainly resources and impetus should exist inside the context of Singapore for attaining the same research goals.

Singapore is taken as a viable context for such an investigation, partly because relevant evidence is available and also because the social and cultural context there in some ways is a metaphor for the world situation – English has a clear lingua franca (LF) role and at the same time co-exists and competes with other languages.

After providing some theoretical and contextual background, three cases of evidence are considered in sequence. Following that, an attempt is made to gauge this evidence holistically, and to consider how the quality of evidence can be enhanced. Finally some basic relevant findings are drawn from what amounts to a very basic preliminary study of English in Singapore. Then on this basis a way forward for both English in Singapore and how to research and understand its situation more fully are suggested.

## **Background**

### **Key concepts:**

The register in this paper includes some terms whose conceptual meanings need to be grasped in order to make sense of embedded assumptions about the sociolinguistic context examined below. These include:

*a text:*

produced language sensed or recorded by people and as such artifacts of the language culture. The concept here is drawn from Gee (1996, 2001) and functional systemics (see Halliday 1985). A text can be temporary (eg. spoken language texts in real time) or lasting (eg. written language texts, recordings of temporary texts including transcriptions). Focus in this investigation necessarily is lasting texts. A *text-with-a-small-t* is quantifiable and tangible, as distinct from *Text-with-a-capital-T* which relates to the linguistic concept of *Text*.

*Language Culture:*

a culture defined by language behaviour characteristic of members of the community sharing this culture. Language culture is evident mainly, but not exclusively, in language texts which may be viewed as artifacts of the culture. This notion resembles the context of research on literacy events by Heath (1983)

*Language Community:*

a concept drawn from *speech community* (Romaine 1994, see also Patrick 2002 for historiographic discussion of the speech community concepts), *discourse community* (Swales 1990) and *communities of practice* (Wenger 2006).

*Top-Down:*

in a hierarchical sense, referring to origins in institutions of government and associated entities at the top of a community

*Bottom-Up:*

originating from members of or elements at different levels within the community without affiliations with institutions at the Top

*Lingua Franca* in a language community and its culture:

An LF is the main or common language mode customarily used for written or spoken communication among members of the community. Features of an LF may include

- may be evident as spoken or written modes but a more maturely developed language culture would incur both.
- a non-established language variety - a *de facto* functioning language "... without a complete set of conversational inferencing strategies found in established (language) varieties" (Firth 1990 cited by van Horn 2009 p 630)
- being "... an intermediary or contact language ...; ... language of commerce (or similar transactions) ... a medium of communication stabilized without much individual variation" (B.

Kachru 1996 pp 906-907)<sup>1</sup>

- language community size and cohesion among members can affect the extent of variability and flexibility in the forms and pragmatics of the LF.

Two further necessary elements for investigation are *language form* and also *pragmatics*, both of which are presumed to be two core aspects of an LF. Both elements should be recognizable, meaningful and significant to users of that LF in the language community.

### Why Singapore?

Singapore has a language ecology which works on two levels:

- as a community with at least four officially recognized languages of which one is English; and
- there are at least two varieties of English with different levels of public recognition or support

To some extent this mirrors the global situation with the notion of a standard world English competing with other English varieties and other languages, and at other times English acting as a *lingua franca* in context.

### Singapore: background facts

Singapore is a small island city-state at the southern end of the Malacca Straits at the base of the Malay Peninsula. Traditionally settled by local Malay and itinerant Chinese population with some indigenous mixing of the two ethnic groups, the island fell into British colonial control within the Malaya region from 1817. In 1965, Singapore seceded from the Federation of Malaysia.

Key officially-sourced demographic statistics (Population Trends 2010) include, in 2010

- population 5,076,700 including
- 3,230,700 citizens
- 541,000 permanent residents
- 1,305,000 non-residents.

The last two groups make up about 35% of the total population of Singapore – essentially people born outside of the country, who bring with them their own varieties of English or their own languages.

- 'Resident' Population (including Citizens) is composed of four groups:  
Chinese (74.1%)  
Malays (13.4%)  
Indians (9.2%)

<sup>1</sup> Y. Kachru & Smith (2008 pp 10-11) add that currently, "English cannot be assigned to any of the above categories"

Others (3.3%) (*Key Demographic Trends* 2010 pp 3, 5)

- Among ‘Others’, Eurasian and Peranakan communities are officially recognized (postcolonialweb.org) with their own Associations.
- The Chinese, Malay and Indian communities have officially designated home languages (Mandarin, Malay, Tamil) while the Others group has no such designated language (Wee 2010 p 313) but have English resembling a surrogate official community language (see *Ethnic and Religious Groups in Singapore* (2002) for summary of relevant factual information).

Politically Singapore is a republic with a multi-party democratically elected government ruled by the People’s Action Party since separation from Malaysia in 1965, and is a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

According to Article 154A of Singapore’s Constitution (which is recorded online in English), the national language is Malay through deference to that ethnic group as the original indigenous inhabitants (Article 152). It is also an official language with English, Mandarin and Tamil mentioned explicitly. There is constitutional provision of language protection, that

- (a) *no person shall be prohibited or prevented from using or from teaching or learning any other language; and*
- (b) *nothing in this Article shall prejudice the right of the Government to preserve and sustain the use and study of the language of any other community in Singapore*

(*Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Article 154A*)

According to the Singapore Embassy in Japan,

*The natural and ordinary meaning of the term "official language" is a language used for the purposes of the Government, including any purpose of a public authority. Thus all four official languages (Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English) may be used, for example, in Parliament.*

(Ng 2011)

In public education, English is the official language of instruction (*English Language Syllabus* 2010 p 6) though statutory basis for this policy has not been made clear.

To sum up, Singapore therefore has Anglophile and Anglophone institutions and traditions among others, as well as an institutionalized multilingual, multicultural, multiethnic community. It has English as an official working language but other languages are used extensively in various public and private contexts. Therefore in Singapore, English is not the only language though it clearly has a *de facto* LF status. However in smaller language communities inside Singapore,

other languages and varieties of languages can have similar status either complimenting or in competition with English.

### Views in Secondary Literature

In the literature, separate pictures emerge with different linguistic and cultural faces. Moreover, government policy and sociolinguistic reality seem more opposed there than in other places (eg. a similar situation with English exists in Cameroon, where pidgins and creoles such as *Camfranglais*, with heavy local basilectalization being pervasive, especially even in written texts (Kroega 2003, Schneider 2007)).

Yet *prima facie* evidence examined in this paper suggests a common aspect of reality and policy in Singapore: some kind of English *per se* as LF. Two qualifications of this view are frequently discussed in relevant literature. In order to distinguish these views, the following hybrid terms have been adapted, *monophone* and *polyphone*:

- a *monophone* view of English in Singapore identifies one common language variety as LF. This view is common among studies of global English (eg. Crystal 2003, Baugh & Cable 2002; Bragg 2004 p 291, based on a TV history of English saw Singlish as a separate creole distinct from standard Singapore English) and regional profiles of Asian and South East Asian Englishes (eg. Kirkpatrick 2007 pp 119-129 discusses English in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei within an ASEAN variety in which he searches for a basis for a regional ELF, pp 155-163; Bautista & Gonzales 2009 though they acknowledge “Colloquial and Standard sub-varieties” p 135)
- a *polyphone* notion of *Englishes* in Singapore. What to do if more than one variety is found – as diglossia (ie. individuals using more than one variety in different contexts); or if there are different varieties in competition (eg. Honna 2008; Jenkins 2009 and McCrum et al. 1986 pp 338-340 - in a TV history of English – have discussed basilect (Singlish) and meso- and acrolect (Standard) varieties in Singapore, while Hung 2009 satirises the distinction. There are also numerous studies done locally in Singapore (Gupta 1994, Pakir 1994, Lim 2004))

The polyphone perspective is more current (even vaguely implied by the Singapore government as in the second Evidence text discussed below).

### Resolving the Question of English as LF in Singapore

So, what is the LF of Singapore? Is it English? It seems so. If so, which English? So far no simple answer. A detached perspective looking at Singapore as either

- ‘A’ (singular) language community or as

- multiple language communities'

can shed light. However, for political and cultural institutions, especially in Singapore, such flexibility is either inconvenient or impossible. This circumstance is an outcome of peculiar political and ideological discourses manifest in history, perceived tradition or in other explicit and implicit agendas. Nonetheless, ideally the reality of English in Singapore should be grasped. Ideally it is possible to do this by

- *examining textual evidence of actual English used in Singapore* – what that English is – and within this scope consider the likelihood of more than one (variety of) English. This is looking at English from the *Bottom Up*;
- *examining what English in Singapore publicly is intended to be* – *from the Top Down*.

This paper attempts to do this, and also to gauge the quality of such evidence in the light of findings from it from a detached point of view.

If evidence is there it needs to be recognized and considered. Why? It is because quite simply, if an established institution at the Top (such as the government) does not, somebody else will. Is there toleration of such pluralism in Singapore? Pennycook (1994) saw a hardened attitude rooted historically in institutionalised discourses of sovereignty, autonomy, pragmatism and eventual meritocracy. However, his study lacked a *prima facie* evidence base (ie. Singapore English text evidence), and his vision of English in Singapore resembled the Colloquial/Standard-English dichotomized view common in studies sourced outside of Singapore, some of which are mentioned above. Nowadays things may have shifted: cracks in what Pennycook saw in the 1990s as a repressive government view may be opening up.

Also, a culture of English – or cultures of English - in Singapore grow, and extend in complexity. As well discourses of newer cultural phenomena in non-traditional electronic media develop. This became apparent in the run up to recent Singapore elections in May 2011, which is discussed later.

Another related example is the Fake Twitter accounts – whereby individuals adopt esteemed public institutions as parodies of the named institutions (Xin 2011). One example actually is *FakeMOE* (Fake Ministry of Education). Most entries were in English though actually showing none of the syntax forms evident in Evidence Text 1, Actually all the ones I saw resembled an “internationally acceptable English that is grammatical, fluent and appropriate for purpose, audience, context and culture” (*English Language Syllabus* 2001 p 3). In other words, the language form and pragmatics were such that I – outside of the language culture of Singapore – could understand the texts as well. Occasionally containing criticism, debate and benign protest, this type of network-based communication resembles a Gramscian cultural alternative to the

paternalistic Singaporean culture perceived by Pennycook in the 1990s, with a lingua franca that is English.

To sum up, it is reasonable to conclude that a current diglossia picture of English exists in the eyes of commentators on the subject. The next step logically is to see what English in Singapore actually is, forms that are actually used by people there. An instance of this is undertaken in Evidence Case 1

### **Evidence Case 1: Bottom-Up**

#### **Choice of evidence:**

As an online chat/discussion board text, this text mixes features of spoken and written language whose chief characteristics are its interactive spontaneity and need for English literacy skills to use this mode. Further, provenance of the text, from a wedding palace company website using it for publicity and information dissemination, is significant. This enterprise (wedding palace) in effect initiates the use of English in this text, in that its website is English-only – English is already perceived and reinforced as the LF of this small discourse community. Participants are adult females (Panky and Jeslyn – names altered for anonymity's sake) apparently from the Chinese community. In other words, the text appears to be representative of naturalistic discourse in English – both spoken and written - in this language community, with characteristic pragmatics and language forms both apparent.

The text is presented below (Text 1). Sample analyses are summarized in Figure 1.

#### **Text Analysis**

##### **i. Pragmatics:**

The discussion forum medium is a public, relatively uncontrolled, informal one. Its starting point however is with the company, a wedding planning agency whose website texts and links are entirely in a standardized world English (resembling what is prescribed in the text of the Singapore English Syllabus document examined next). Therefore English is at least the preferred language medium for contributions to their question/answer discussion board.

This interactive correspondence comprises six ‘turns over the space of a month in September and October 2006. The writers are two females, one who wants advice for planning her wedding (Jeslyn) and one who has had a wedding and gives advice (Panky).

Jeslyn, who online is clearly marked as from the Chinese community (though details like family

name have been removed), starts with polite fairly standard, even British-style register in her opening inquiry addressed to a general audience. Then she becomes less standard, more relaxed and Singlish in her style once she gets a reply from Panky. Panky's own community is never clear, but from the start she is more casual and relaxed using a more Singlish basilectal style than Jeslyn ever does. She seems to be less accustomed to formalized discourse in this type of forum or simply less concerned about the public aspect of the discussion board. In the end it appears that both are quite comprehensible to each other and more personalized to the extent that they share email addresses and photos on a more private communication channel. In this way, both social distance and correspondingly language distance decrease.

Posted on Friday, September 22, 2006-12:34 am:

**1. Jeslyn**

Hi, I am thinking of holding my wedding dinner at Shinshui Palace next year. Has anyone ever held their dinner there? Is it good? Any advices? Thanks a million

Posted on Monday, October 09, 2006-1:06 pm

**2. Panky**

I just had my wedding there on 30 Sept. A beautiful place and a memorable wedding 😊

Miss Loke is a great helper and she makes everything went smoothly, and i don't even need to engage any emcee. All my guests were attracted by the scenery there at lower lounge. Shinshui Palace is strongly recommended!!

Posted on Friday, October 20, 2006-2:18 pm:

**3. Jeslyn**

Thanks and Congrats! I already paid the deposit and is going to hold my dinner there next year. The only complain is the place is a bit far. Heard some grumbles already.

How was the deco of the place like?

Posted on Tuesday, October 24, 2006-3:57 pm

**4. Panky**

Actually i manage to get a coach from Ms Loke to provide transport btw the country club and Jurong East Interchange

I engage my own florist for my outdoor ceremony as I would like to have a pink colour theme. The indoor dinner deco I leave it to Ms Loke. It's very nice too!! She use red for VIP table and ivory colour for other tables. The stage also decorated nicely!!

Posted on Thursday, October 26, 2006-8:28 pm:

**5. Jeslyn**

hi panky you make me feel good about the place... keke I did ask Miss Loke about the theme they have.. but then she says she has only ivory theme.. Do u mind if u share pictures of the dinner? Wan to know how's the deco will be like before i decide if i wan to do more.. How much did u pay for the deco done by the florist?

My email is ICY\_SHUE@haaho.com [NB. NOT REAL EMAIL ADDRESS – FOR PRIVACY PURPOSES]  
Thanks.

Posted on Monday, October 30, 2006-10:53 pm

**6. Panky**

Hi joxuan

I've sent you the photos. I spent \$400 for the deco (outdoor only).

The indoor deco is very nice already, no need to spend extra for the decoration

**Text 1:** *Wedding Palace Discussion Board.* (Underlined items are subject of analysis reported below). (Source: From <http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/6/408525.html?1201493045>, Retrieved 29 July 2009)

<i>Jeslyn</i>	<i>Panky</i>	<i>Comments</i>
<b>Contextual details</b>		
Chat/Discussion board correspondence on Singapore Wedding Palace website, partly for publicity and also customer service. 2 female participants interacting 3 times each over 6 turns from 22 September to 30 October. Starts by one soliciting advice, then asking questions and describing plans; the other giving advice, recounting experiences and opinions		
<b>Pragmatics</b>		
Started correspondence; more formal, starting more standard form (acrolect) later more local Singlish;	More informal (basilectal) from start	<i>Decreasing language distance evident</i>
<b>Language Form</b>		
Fewer standard errors: 6 errors in 144 words (4.1%) – all but 1 in verb patterns; eventually adopting more Singlish form	More standard errors: 11 errors in 155 words (7%), including 8 in verb patterns; more consistent Singlish form throughout	<i>Errors of both cluster in start to middle (Turns 2-4)</i>
<b>Other</b>		
Communication frequency is over all on average 1 time in 6.3 days; but latter 4 turns from 22-30 Oct are on average each 1.75 days Discourse is linear like written text but grammatical forms more like spoken form		<i>Social distance decreases towards end of correspondence</i>

**Figure 1: Summary and Observations of Text Evidence in Case 1**

ii. Language form

Of the two, Jeslyn's English is more standard, despite the casual ad hoc way both writers compose. For instance, she makes just 6 errors in 144 words compared to Panky's 11 in 155 words, though with no errors in her final Turn (6). Jeslyn's errors include one error with verb tense

*how's the deco will be like (Turn 5)*

and one error with verb-person agreement

*I already paid the deposit and is going to hold my dinner there next year (Turn 3)*

In contrast, Panky makes 8 errors with verb tense form (six in Turn 4), and all of these are use of present time rather than past, for example

*she makes everything went smoothly (Turn 2)*

*The indoor dinner deco I leave it to Ms Loke. It's very nice too!! She use red for VIP table ... (Turn 4)*

However she uses past time verb forms correctly 5 times on other occasions. Both have occasions where their expressions would have an internationally accepted usage and meaning, but there is not enough evidence in this text to suggest substantial overall semantic shift in Singlish lexis from other varieties of English.

Though we may never know if Panky was distracted or affected in some way when she wrote Turn 4, her discourse resembles characteristic Singlish forms notably with verb formations (Bautista & Gonzales 2009 pp 135-136. Jenkins 2009 pp 127-129 provides an adapted version of language features of Bautista's & Gonzales' list) far more than Jeslyn's.

### **Significance of Evidence Case 1**

#### i. As Starting Point or as Outcome of Action

This form of text analysis resembles diagnostic testing for pedagogical purposes. Also, it has an ecological function which can affect things like public language planning and policy – an empirical view of language form and pragmatics establishes is *prima facie* evidence of what the language is. For instance, a textual record of language actually being used and a starting point for corpus linguistics of Singapore English. OR, if Jeslyn and Panky are not using language the way the government would prefer, then the appropriate institutions could act, for instance on an alternative language education policy, as in 2001 (The *Speak Good English* Movement and Campaign. See Lim 2010 & Blockhorst-Heng et al 2010). Findings from such evidence can be viewed respectively as a starting point for action on the one hand, or as an outcome of action on the other

#### ii. For English as LF

It is as an outcome that the textual evidence here is significant regarding ELF. The text shows people using a variety of English incorporating different forms, firstly different from each other (eg. non-standard use of verb time patterns as the error analysis showed). Yet Jeslyn and Panky were communicatively comprehensible to each other through other channels such as pragmatic inference and reference. In part this is due to the two women's shared pragmatic awareness being on the same cultural ground (for instance, the wedding palace culture and discourse community). This would then suggest that actuality of English as LF in Singapore is not dependent on form alone but also on pragmatics of the culture. Theoretically though, this is a common sense finding

Secondly, forms used extensively in the text are different from Anglo-American standard forms, given the so-called errors. Further, language forms differ from those prescribed proscribed in the bodies of public English syllabus documents (the forewords of which are examined below as Evidence Case 2). It suggests that this variety is different again from the English that the government and other institutions (including corporate ones like wedding planners) themselves use and require. Once again a clear and obvious finding.

### **Limitation of Evidence Case 1**

The primary limitation is that it is just one text from one context. In order to obtain more

conclusive reliability, examining as many texts as possible from as many various contexts across as many language modes, media and genres and as possible is ideal. Then, not only would substantial linguistic evidence become available, but also a substantial body of *prima facie* textual data. It is regrettable in hindsight, that a corpus of Singapore English has not been collected inside Singapore by the government or any other public institution. As a yardstick, it would facilitate language form comparison and analysis for better or for worse in this context.

## **Evidence Case 2: Top-Down**

### **Choice of evidence**

Basilectal variation of English (as in Evidence Case 1) is not unique to modern Singapore. It has occurred since the origins of English one and a half millennia ago. Singlish, as the bastard variety of English in Singapore, and has been lamented ever since it became widely apparent in the 1970s and 80s (Pennycook 1994 and Schneider 2007 provide detailed historical accounts and discussion). Leaders and academics from Minister Mentor Lee Kwan Yu down have commented as such.

There is however a double edge to this: the government has tried to resist colonial Englishes, trying to carve out a niche for a home-grown English communicable and acceptable on the world stage, a non-colonial, Asian English. The politics and debate surrounding this aside, what the Singapore government would have its citizens' children learn should reflect this goal. It is from this perspective that any text sourced from the government which deals with English language policy or education should be examined: as an account of the goals and rationale for teaching such a variety of English

Regarding *an* English as LF, the proscribed English and its rationale should ideally correlate with the English people actually use, such as in Text 1. If it does, then the issue is resolved using these respectively linguistic and sociological texts sourced from the Bottom-Up and Top-Down. If it does not correlate, then clearly there is an issue and greater investigation is necessary.

### **The Syllabus Document as a work in progress**

The original current English Language Syllabus document was released in 2001. After piloting new approaches to language concepts and pedagogy and re-appraising the role of language in information technology and other literacies, a supplementary updated Syllabus document was published in February 2010. In a sense both documents need to be read together to obtain a sense of the integrity of government policy. The original aims in 2001 were articulated in Chapter 1 originally as such:

### **AIMS OF THE SYLLABUS**

At the end of their primary and secondary education, pupils will be able to communicate effectively in English ... They will be able to: ...

- speak, write and make presentations in internationally acceptable English\* that is grammatical, fluent and appropriate for purpose, audience, context and culture
- interact effectively with people from their own or different cultures. ...

\* ‘Internationally acceptable English that is grammatical, fluent and appropriate for purpose, audience, context and culture’ refers to *the formal register of English used in different parts of the world, that is, standard English*.

*English Language Syllabus 2001 p 3. (Italics mine: the italicized segment is also reproduced in English Language Syllabus 2010 p 14. The ‘\*’ footnote is also drawn from the Syllabus text)*

The current 2010 Syllabus contains these addenda:

#### **English in Singapore**

Bilingualism is a cornerstone of our education system. Pupils learn both English and their own Mother Tongue language in school. English is the medium of instruction in our schools as well as a subject of study for all primary and secondary school pupils.

English operates at many levels and plays many roles in Singapore. *At the local level, it is the common language that facilitates bonding among the different ethnic and cultural groups. At the global level, English allows Singaporeans to participate in a knowledge-based economy where English is the lingua franca of the internet, of science and technology and of world trade.*

Singapore’s transformation into a knowledge-based economy, the rapid developments in technology, *the generational shift in home language* and an increasingly competitive international environment are some factors that make proficiency in English necessary for pupils. A proficient command of the language will enable pupils to access, process and keep abreast of information, and to engage with the wider and more diverse communities outside of Singapore

... This syllabus is based on the above considerations as well as the needs of our pupils and teachers identified in the course of *consultations with schools and from surveys and research*.

English Language Syllabus 2010 p 6 (Italics mine. Italicized segments are subject of observations made below)

Observations here are:

1. no reference to Singlish *per se*
2. no reference to English as native language or as second (or other) language
3. a dichotomization of the ‘*at the local level ... the common language*’ and ‘*at the global level*’, amounting to articulated institutional consciousness of different contexts for English to occur
4. use of the expression *lingua franca* only in a global information technology-science-economic context; and not mentioned anywhere else in the document.
5. tying English language to a knowledge-based economic development agenda. Relevant literacies and communication needs as teaching points are later articulated quite explicitly in the main body of the Syllabus.
6. mention of ‘*the generational shift in home language*’, tacitly acknowledging that language is a phenomenon occurring in the home culture, and that it can change.
7. reference to ‘*consultations ... surveys and research*’, suggesting that government policy is somewhat responsive to voices of different stakeholders in education.

Then come *Desired Outcomes for EL (English Language) Proficiency in Singapore*:

All our pupils will be able to use English to express themselves. **All should attain traditional skills, particularly in grammar, spelling and basic pronunciation.**

...

**The majority of our pupils will attain a good level of competence in English, in both speech and writing**

...

**At least 20% will attain a high degree of proficiency in English ... we can expect a smaller group of Singaporeans to achieve mastery in their command of the language that is no different from the best in English-speaking countries.”**

*(English Language Syllabus 2010 p 6)*

In a subsequent section, *Building on the Past* (p 7), appropriate communication is emphasised, in *internationally acceptable* English. Though the real world of English is actually something more various, the tone of such an expectation is realistic. However it is unclear if this implies language form or pragmatic appropriateness.

Chapter 2 in the Syllabus document contains 98 pages (pp 16-114) detailing grammar functions, vocabulary and four macro-skills to be taught at various levels, while Chapter 3 (pp 116-123) details the role of the teacher. Then follows a Glossary, References and Acknowledgements.

## **Significance and Limitations of Evidence Case 2**

The Syllabus document was chosen as a Top down reflection of public policy, specifically the foreword sections. These sections' purpose is to define officially and extensively the English to be taught.

In comparison with linguistic evidence in Case 1, there is little that correlates. To use the "Colloquial Singapore English (CSE)" and "Standard Singapore English" (SSE) typology referred to in literature with provenance outside of Singapore (explained by Jenkins 2009 pp 125), at best there is attention to SSE and near total neglect of CSE.

### **i. Reflecting Socio-Cultural or Linguistic Reality?**

Here is one aspect of real significance for understanding English as LF in Singapore: the English proscribed in the Syllabus Document is a target English – what the government would like to see. Other Englishes or varieties inside or outside of Singapore are not what they want to see. So, what about all the English outside of the government's range of vision which is used by people like Jeslyn and Panky? What if that is an actual LF variety outside the range identified by the government? What if the government ignores the sociolinguistic reality in the language community: the Top-Down view of English at odds with the Bottom-Up? Though it may not seem so, it is not so dramatic as that, and there is a partial explanation in the discursive integrity of the Syllabus document text.

### **ii. Educational rather than Sociolinguistic Integrity.**

It is easy to lose sight of the fact that this is primarily an education curriculum document with a different overall integrity to a statement of government language planning policy. For instance, in the Reference list there is not even one mention of empirical or ethnographic study of actual English used in any mode or medium in Singapore; still there is a very extensive list of English language pedagogical references reflecting attention to best practice in the world.

So, this text therefore is part of a larger policy field relating to Education in other subjects as well – including other languages. In this sense, the institutional view on English and the context for English education is presented as a rationale for education policy, not as a discrete end in itself. At best it reflects pervasive discourses at the Top. This does not undervalue selection of the Syllabus document as evidence here. In fact it acts as a Top-down wish list for English and a set of pictures in the mind's eye of the Singapore government. Figure 2 presents a summary of significances of the Syllabus document as evidence.

Significances
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulates aims and goals for English knowledge and use</li> <li>• Explicitly hierarchical picture of people's levels of English language awareness and usage</li> <li>• Focus on types of literacies as representations of language use</li> <li>• No reference to English as LF in Singapore, just internationally – BUT</li> <li>• Explicit dichotomization of social function of English; at local language community level and in the global English language community</li> <li>• As a planning/policy document it represents clearly the view from the TOP down of what the situation of English should be</li> </ul>
Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No reference to evidence of basilectal or mesolectal varieties of English (Singlish), empirical or other</li> <li>• Integrity of an education document rather than ethnographic language profile</li> </ul>

**Figure 2:** *Significances and Limitations of The Syllabus of English Document as Evidence for English as LF in Singapore.*

### **Evidence Case 3: ethnographic case studies**

In a recent collection of profiles of less prominent world Englishes (Schreier et al (Eds) 2010), two from Singapore were included: Eurasian Singapore English (Wee 2010) and Peranakan English (Lim 2010)

### **Reasons for Choice of Evidence: significance and limitations**

#### **i. Utility of case studies**

Case study is an ideal investigative precursor methodology prior to any broader, latitudinal research. According to Yin (2009) case study inquiry can deal with a peculiar situation with many variables and also rely on “multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion” (p 18), and further, can incorporate relevant theory as a “guide” (p 18). Such an approach can also potentially reduce bias and increase reliability. Alternatively, findings from case studies can be used to push theoretical development along. Though case study investigation with a narrower (sometimes single) data collection base is possible (Evidence Case 1 can be seen as an example), the current wide context of English in Singapore, requires a significantly broader scope of evidence. Figure 3 compares the scope and types of evidence in each study.

Lim's study of Peranakan English is broader in scope and is the more viable and useable profile. However both are restricted by context of situation: for instance actually pinning down members of a Peranakan language community who may otherwise identify with the official Chinese community.

#### **ii. Scope and Appropriateness of the Evidence**

Both researchers rely extensively on secondary sources, especially for background and historical

details. While adequate for a background profile, such evidence cannot be used reliably unless there is some way to substantiate it. This can be done by checking external validity (eg. by repeating or independently confirming the investigation) or internal validity (eg. by making a subsequent analysis based on data as available in the existing study). Assessing relative consensus of views – ie. high level of consensus signifies substantial reliability – is one way to check the latter, and Lim does this in a sense for Peranakan English.

Depending on purposes intended for findings from any study, first-hand reference to primary evidence is more reliable and more convincing if of course the evidence is relevant to what it is supposed to show. Further, does such evidence have sufficient scope? Again Lim's work shows more scope than Wee's, who limits his analysis to phonological data. Part of Wee's conclusions is the dated quality of Eurasian English as a variety: reference to older written, literary texts, even for comparison with some of the spoken text data (from, say, his older subjects) would have assisted triangulation of findings, as mentioned earlier.

At a more fundamental level, Lim has included grammar and lexis analysis as well as phonology, and has introduced written text analysis though very superficially. Quite simply, she provides more Peranakan meat to chew on making for a more substantial case study meal. Lim also addresses the issue of language corpora – catalogues of Englishes in Singapore. Unfortunately the absence of any public or substantial private initiative inside Singapore to establish a relevant corpus means that in these two studies and beyond, a valuable source of evidence is non-existent, as also it is absent for examining Evidence Case 1

Regarding context, including interested parties outside of the respective language communities, both mention the Eurasian and Peranakan Associations in Singapore, but do not describe these Associations' semi-public institutional bases, roles and functions. Further, one common qualification of both English varieties is that they are not recognized by the government from the nation's Constitution down. The fact that a different, standard form of English is recognized from the Top down is a point of relative neglect in both studies.

Finally, so far it is obvious that identifiable varieties of English are to be found in Singapore which may compliment or compete with each other at different times. Whatever the quality of the studies, both Wee and Lim have profiled two of these varieties. Yet only Lim goes so far as to identify the changing linguistic ecology as a factor influencing Peranakan English: young Peranakans being classified as Chinese speaking Singapore English (Singlish?) as a native language, and also learning Mandarin rather than the older entrenched Hokkien variety as a second language (Lim 2010 p 344).

### iii. Use of Available Demographic Data

Both studies could have been enhanced by better use of freely available demographic data. Although identifying the language community populations seems clearly problematic, at least it is possible to account for numbers of people who may fall into those categories.

For instance, according to Statistics Singapore (2010), the 2000 census statistics record ‘Others’ as numbering 46,400 or 1.4% in 2000. Historically this maybe so (subject to appropriate investigation). However the subsequent 2010 census – likely conducted after Wee’s study - records significantly different patterns:

- Eurasians are not identified as a sub-group
- ‘Others’ as a group has climbed from 46,400 to 125,800 out of total 3,771,700 – or from 1.4 to 3.3% of total population.

Separate statistics for the ‘Others’ group includes substantial growth in numbers of people born outside of Singapore. These people could fall into the ‘Others’ cultural group:

- Asian countries (excluding the Indian sub-continent, greater China, Malaysia and Indonesia) 22,400 or 0.7% in 2000 up to 90,100 or 2.4% in 2010
- Europe 5,500 (0.2%) to 13,400 (0.4%)
- USA & Canada 3,700 (0.1%) to 7,200 (0.2%)
- Australia & New Zealand 2,600 to 4,800 (*Key Demographic Trends*. (nd))

As well, there were 1,310,000 non-resident foreigners out of a total population of 5,080,000 (Population Trends 2010). Members of this group are presented as being often in older age groups older and less likely to congregate along ethnic lines. If trends apparent in demographic statistics above are accurate, the Eurasian subgroup could seem to be diminishing, and certainly becoming more diffuse with newer and more diverse membership of the ‘Others’ group.

Moreover, Lim obviously found estimating the Peranakan community problematic. Even so, that community is not limited to Singapore alone, and this fact could have been considered. In one Indonesian estimate, the whole Peranakan ethnic population could be up to 7,000,000 (Winarti 2008) mainly in Indonesia, the Singapore population being a distinctly small minority. Furthermore, subject to further investigation, it is worth considering the extent to which members of the Peranakan English language community are also members of the official Chinese community referred to in the Singapore Constitution.

Though I have been checking validity of these case study findings based on the original studies by these two authors, I have been doing this remotely online from Japan. It is likely that given more time, resources and better access, even more detailed publicly available data can be found and incorporated into better quality analyses. It would be well within the Singapore government’s

capacity to enable such studies.

iv. Currency

The decade-old census data used by Wee calls in the issue of currency. Actually both studies are simply not current. Data preparation and research publication delays notwithstanding, Wee's study of spoken language text data from 1985 have more historical than current relevance now; even Lim's more recent data from 2003 are now (in 2011) dated, though it may well have been collected at the time of her earlier research in the early 2000s. Data simply need to be as current as possible, and if this is problematic it should be acknowledged. Planning language policy or language education ideally should be based on what is than what was.

v. Use of Oral History and Discourse Analysis Data.

Recording oral histories is one way to obtain an historical perspective and both researchers have done this. The only problem here is if the focus is primarily on the present or future, it can be easy to dwell too much on the past. In fact both studies use data from three generations of each community. They find implicitly that both varieties may be in decline though for different reasons, being supplanted in younger generations' use of Singlish.

Regarding discourse analysis, Lee's examination of Peranakan discourse is more substantial than Wee, who focuses primarily on phonological forms used by one Eurasian subject. However, both could also have considered pragmatic aspects more, especially as that incorporates cultural assumptions and behaviour of members of the respective language communities.

vi. Use of Evidence from Other Sources.

Both studies rely heavily on other research and opinions in secondary literature. Though this is normal academic practice it is by no means a limit and if possible secondary sources need substantiation – to some extent what I am doing here. This is especially the case when such sources are not current, but the topic at hand is.

A critical comparative summary of Lim's and Wee's case studies is presented in Figure 3.

	Eurasian Singapore English (Wee 2010)	Data/Evidence Typology	Peranakan English (Lim 2010)	Comments on Evidence Availability & Use
1	Relies on secondary sources, including quotations from primary historical texts	<b>Historical, Theoretical Background information</b>	Secondary sources & discussions with 'consultants'	Minimal, negligible use of available primary evidence in both
2	From primary evidence quoted in secondary sources (ie. Eurasian Association); from secondary source	<b>Language Community definition criteria (ie. to identify target population)</b>	Analysis of extensive reference to secondary sources (deducing a figure of 5,000 Peranakan English speakers)	Interference from historically declining numbers and diffuse character of both language communities
3	Mainly percentile data from 2000 Census	<b>Demographic data</b>	Minimal – mainly deduced from secondary sources	Oddly underused
4	2 Oral History-type interviews (ie. DC & MM) from own previous study from 1985; interview data from 1 subject (ie. Jill)	<b>Primary evidence from target population subjects</b>	1 75-minute audio recording of Peranakan household of 3 generations in 2003; Peranakan Association Newsletters corpus 1994–2008	Minimal scope but appropriate. More extensive profile in Lim's study No attempts to substantiate views from secondary sources
5	None	<b>Primary evidence from other parties</b>	None	
6	Phonological – from authoritative secondary source; minimal description of characteristic expressions limited to analytical discussion	<b>Language variety form (including language corpora)</b>	Largely from own previously published research in 2004 (though titles mention Singapore English & Sounding Singaporean)	Limited by absence of corpora. Lim's use of own prior research increases research quality
7	Interview data (Jill) comprising of 3 dialogues: individually, with parents, with her sons – primarily phonological analysis	<b>Text evidence of spoken language</b>	Interview data from younger & older members of Peranakan household – analysis of phonology, lexis, grammar forms	Wee's phonological focus limiting usefulness as profile. Lim's broader scope more useable Lim's global analysis of expressions limited – texts from other sources would enhance quality
8	None	<b>Text evidence of written language</b>	List of expressions found in Peranakan Association Newsletters: short philological description	
9	None	<b>Other primary evidence</b>	None	No evidence from public or institutional sources Lim's discussion of cultural artifacts enhances picture of milieu for Peranakan language community
10	None	<b>Other</b>	Reference to and discussion of Peranakan cultural events, media as artifacts; discussion of views in secondary sources	

**Figure 3:** Comparison of Evidence Used in Wee's (2010) & Lim's (2010) Case Studies

### **Significance of the Case Studies' Findings**

The studies of Eurasian and Peranakan English are essentially ethnographic profiles. They focus on the people in the language communities and their use of the language, rather than language form or other language dynamics, or on language policy or other issues. In the context of Singapore, they identify varieties distinct from English prescribed by government policy, and distinguishable from more prevalent Singlish. These varieties are also removed from the customary labelling of varieties of English according to national culture or polity (eg. nation state). In the long run it opens up scope for identification of language communities distinguished by a variety of social characteristics.

If English is found to be the LF of these language communities there is scope for more equitable recognition. As such however, the English-as-LF map becomes even more complex. In any case, such evidence as is examined in these case studies should be well within the data-collection and analysis capability of the government if they so choose to undertake it

### **Discussion**

Obviously different varieties of English are used by different language communities. Also, people can belong to different English language cultures depending on context – even simultaneously. Yet ‘lingua franca’ implies the language common in a definable group. Viewing multiple language communities is self-defeating. In this sense, an over-reaching view – such as reflected in the government English curriculum is more practicable. However, is it socially equitable? Is the government view even reflective of the linguistic reality, as can be gauged in the analysis of authentic discourse such as the chat text?

There is tension here, centering upon just what variety or varieties of English there can be, and just what language community/ies are relevant. In some senses lingua franca as a definable concept may seem threatened.

How to deal with this inconsistency is not to tweak the evidence, rather to

- reinterpret concepts of lingua franca; and/or
- reconsider the sociolinguistic reality of English in Singapore.

This is evident in part in Evidence Case 1, in which Jeslyn starts the correspondence with a relatively acrolectal variety of English shifting to a more basilectal form as distance between Panky and her lessens. Further, even the syllabus document obliquely refers to a dichotomy of English in the local context and also a global context.

### **Language Communities & Culture: necessarily a diglossia?**

Another aspect relates to the whole language culture situation – if there are noticeably different varieties of English, there are also completely different community languages coinciding and even competing with English. To consider one of those for a moment, Tamil, in a paper on implementing language policy in Singapore, Schiffmann (2003) observes,

*Since Tamil is a language characterized by extreme diglossia, there is the additional pedagogical problem of trying to maintain a language with two variants, but with a strong cultural bias on the part of the educational establishment for maintaining the literary dialect to the detriment of the spoken one*

(p 105)

He also mentions economic advantage of English – as reflected in Evidence Case 2 – having further attritional effects on use and status of Tamil in Singapore, especially among culturally disenfranchised younger members of that community.

As bilingual users of English therefore, most *people in Singapore therefore belong to at least two language communities simultaneously* (this point is also made in Bao's & Hong's 2006 research on register variation) – and probably more than two. This points to a diglossia situation – ostensibly use of two or more languages or varieties of a language at different times, for different purposes or with different people (this is a broad view, incorporating aspects of code mixing and switching). Any qualification of English being LF in the language culture of Singapore needs to accommodate this point.

### **Singapore as a Site of Multiple Language Communities and Cultures**

As in any national or regional culture such as a nation state, there are other types of language cultures besides those defined by ethnicity. These can include:

- social (eg. gender, age, etc.)
- institutional (government, corporate, science/technology organizations)
- educational (school, colleges, university), occupational
- sociolinguistic (specific genre & communication purposes; online & social media communities – eg. Fake Twitter (Xin 2011); social media use by opposition parties in May 2011 election rather than main mass media (*The World Today* 10 May 2011))

These of course are not restricted to English, though literature and evidence examined here point to English being a LF tying all these together in Singapore. In the same context, evidence gauged here has been considered from two angles:

- The Top-down view is more conventional, tending towards a monophone, acrolectal (eg. an older British standard) variety. Alternatively a globally acceptable standard LF variety

is stated as a goal in English language education. There are people who use this variety. Yet Singlish is regarded as a bastard tongue of Singapore. This Top-down view is contradicted by evidence considered here.

- Alternatively a Bottom-up view holds to a more local, diffuse, non-institutional (except through softer cultural institutions, eg. media, TV, music, radio, online) language culture characterized by diglossia, basilectalization and other evidence of creolization. Its chief artifact, Singlish, becomes an icon of local cultural identity. This latter view is complicated more by demographic evidence showing that 35% of Singapore's population was not born in that culture – many of those people bringing their own varieties of English (& other languages) with them.

Ironically this dichotomy resembles *glocalization* in a linguistic sense (Alsagoff 2010 p 110-113 describes how this concept from business, a mix of the global and the local, is applied to the English-in-Singapore context) in the national curriculum discourse found in Evidence Case 2. The missing component is local initiative, in as far as institutions at the Top are not inclined to foster local tradition and local identity with Singlish, in contrast to the three other official languages, Tamil, Malay and Chinese. Even then for Chinese it is Mandarin Chinese at the sake of locally more traditional Hokkien dialect.

However beyond the evidence there is a way forward, which is to reconsider what English has evolved into: one standard tongue or more than that?

### **A Way Forward**

Evolution of English is occurring in Singapore, as in the world: new varieties becoming current, devolution from old traditional native-speaker models to newer non-traditional native-speaker models. Perhaps a view of English as a unitary language phenomenon becomes out of date. It is more than possible to switch from variety to variety as Jeslyn does, which seems to be a natural linguistic behavior.

As such, toleration of new varieties from the bottom up by institutions at the Top could ease adaptation processes, but old political, national and cultural agendas persist. For instance, as Blockhorst-Heng et al (2010) observe in statements from the Top advocating the Speak Good English Movement, from a former prime minister eleven years ago and from its then chairman five years ago,

*... by denying a place for Singlish in the official discourse English remains a language of the so-called native speaker; and a language to only be used – denying Singaporeans ownership (both in usage and positioning) of both standard English and Singlish.*

(p 141)

Yet, adaptation is already evident (in 2001 & 2010 Singapore English Syllabus articulation provisions on local ‘home’-use and ‘global’ English). Resources would be available in institutions in or outside of government to conduct broader, more rigorous and purposeful research into LF language varieties for various language communities & cultures.

Finally, recognizing the LF in Singapore should necessarily incorporate pragmatic aspects such as cultural inference and reference, not just language and its forms. Acknowledging the pragmatics of language varieties within the language culture in Singapore necessitates acknowledging the necessary diglossia situation there.

### **Conclusion: relevance to ELF.**

While the concept of lingua franca may remain constant, in the context of English in Singapore – and also the world – ELF requires a wider net than placing the label on single varieties of English. Perhaps the Syllabus Document comes closest to a hypothetical solution, the unwittingly glocalized *internationally acceptable English, grammatical, fluent and appropriate for purpose, audience, context and culture with toleration of the generational shift in home language*. Evidence suggests that more than one English can serve that purpose.

Yet as contact language in a given context, it would appear that, like Jeslyn’s on the wedding palace website, one’s own English modulated to the context of situation could suffice in the present day. In such a case discourse in LF concepts, like English in Singapore, need undergo its own evolution.

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