Teach Real English!
Teaching materials based on current research

Queen Mary
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Teaching unit 16: Grammar and code-switching in Singapore English

Background

English is spoken more extensively across the planet than any language in human history. Estimates suggest that up to two billion people use some English today. The language has developed different forms on every continent, and is used by increasingly diverse groups of users.

This unit looks at a newly emerging dialect of English: Singapore English. Singapore English, sometimes called 'Singlish', is a new dialect of English spoken in Singapore. Singaporeans have traditionally been native speakers of Chinese, Tamil, and Malay languages, but increasingly the country is shifting towards native English use. This is partly due to an active government policy of promoting English in schools. Like speakers of vernacular dialects around the world, Singaporeans often have a range of speaking styles that they can use, from more standard to more vernacular. The vernacular variety is called Colloquial Singapore English. Switching between two dialects (or two languages) is sometimes called "code-switching". The accompanying transcript and discussion points help students understand the grammar of the dialect as well as motivations for code-switching.

Optional activity: This unit forms an interesting comparison to the unit on African American English. These two native, vernacular dialects of English have developed in two entirely different parts of the world, in very different social situations. The map below shows the two locations. Both units show that the grammar of English dialects are not simply mistakes, but rather are systematic sets of rules that some individuals choose to switch on or off in their speech depending on the social circumstances. A comparison also shows that vernacular dialects have very different rules that outsiders would need to learn in order to use them correctly.
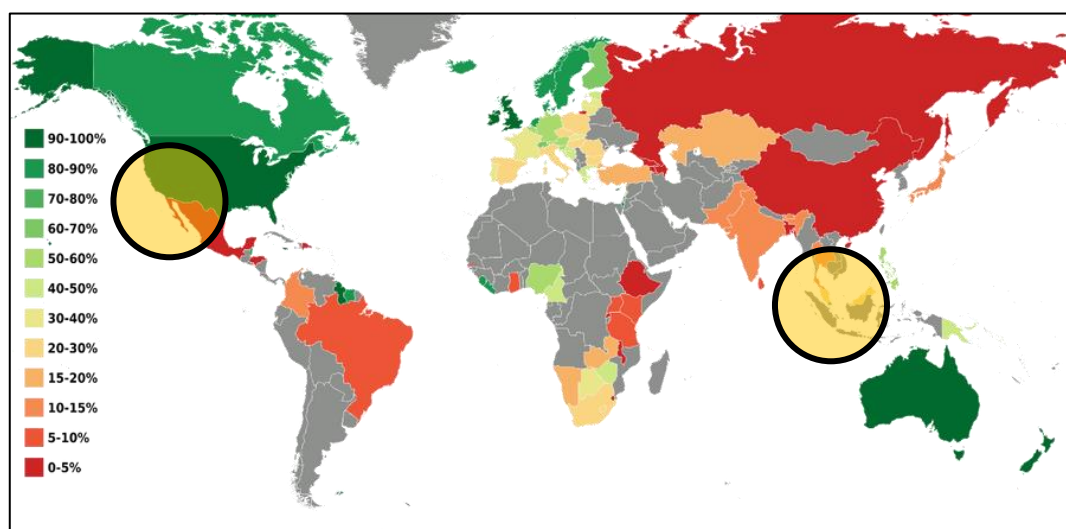
Discussion points

Questions for discussion

- What are some of the distinctive grammatical features of Colloquial Singapore English in the first part of the transcript?
- How do we know these aren't just mistakes? (Hint: Examine their command of standard English.)
- Why do you think they all shift away from Colloquial Singapore English in the later exchange?
- Are there some similarities to the case of African-American English (see separate Teaching Unit)? For example, do both the standard and the colloquial variety both have some advantages for the speakers?

Observable language features

Discourse particles: Singapore English uses a large number of discourse particles, most of which are derived from Chinese (*lah, hor, lor, leh, muh, mah, ah, uh*), though not all (*eh, what, one*). Use of these can be seen throughout the transcript. Each of these performs a slightly different pragmatic function. For example, *lah* can be associated with solidarity, emphasis, persuasion, explanation, impatience, and disapproval. Other discourse particles indicate questioning, confirmation, checking or holding the addressee's attention, obviousness, contradiction, resignation, assertion, comparison, tentativeness, and skepticism.

Omission of subjects and objects: In the more colloquial phase of the transcript, we see the omission of subjects (e.g. lines 3, 5) and objects (e.g. lines 10, 11). This is based on Chinese syntax which, like many of the world's languages, allows subjects and objects to be omitted from sentences, a phenomenon that linguists call "pro-drop".

Bare nouns: Articles can be omitted in Colloquial Singapore English (e.g. lines 3, 5, 9), but the rules for these bare nouns (e.g. *holiday*) are different to those of other dialects. For example, the unit on African-American English outlines a different set of rules for bare nouns in that dialect.

Omission of auxiliary verbs: We also see omission of auxiliary *be*. (line 11: *David Kwong very long-winded*). Again, the rules for omitting *be* in Singapore English are different to those for some other dialects. For example the rules for omitting *be* described in the unit on African-American English are different.

New grammatical meanings: Words such as *got* (line 10) have gained new grammatical meanings. *Got* marks existence in Singapore English, e.g. *Got at least one time everyone happy*. 'There was at least one time when everyone was happy.' Similarly, based on Chinese, forms such as *already* and *last time* have taken on new meanings of past tense, and are often used to mark past tense in place of the more standard *–ed* tense marking on the verb.

Non-standard word order: The order of words in Colloquial Singapore English is very different to that of standard varieties of English. For example, the object comes first in *Group pressure he cannot survive* (line 6).

Most of these features of Singapore English are modeled on Chinese grammar as well as the grammar of simplified lingua francas (languages of wider communication) that were spoken in Singapore before English was established, e.g. Bazaar Malay.

When spoken fast, Colloquial Singapore English can be incomprehensible to outsiders. It is one of the dialects that has changed the most in terms of structure over 200 years. Other postcolonial varieties of English, e.g. Indian English, are not as different from British English in their grammar. There are many reasons for these differences, including the type of languages found in the region, colonial language policies, postcolonial language policies, whether English was used as an informal trade language in the region (as it was in Singapore) or not (as in India), and whether speakers are becoming native in English (as in Singapore) or not (as in India).

Further reading
Filppula, Markku, Juhani Klemola, and Devyani Sharma (eds). 2017. *The Oxford Handbook of World Englishes.* Oxford University Press.