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## **Singlish is part of Singapore's heritage and history. Respect it for what it is**

As a son of Singapore, I grew up with Singaporean English. In the '60s and '70s, I was a school teacher in Singapore. I now reside in Richmond BC, Canada.

I believe there is a place for Singaporean English in the global scheme of things.

English is used by over a billion people today and barely a quarter of those speak it as a mother tongue. Of the world's 2,700 languages, English is the richest in vocabulary.

The Oxford English Dictionary lists about 500,000 words and a further half million technical and scientific terms remain uncategorised.

English grew from a minor Germanic dialect in the fifth century to its position today as the world's first truly global language. Along the way, it took on elements of Latin and Greek, French and Saxon, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Arabic, Hindi, and an American adoption.

Today it continues to be shaped by the ways of life of its diverse speakers, and takes on more variety of expression and more local colour. The dynamism of English is echoed by Melvin Bragg in his book, *The Adventure of English - The Biography of a Language*.

He wrote "A characteristic of English throughout is the ease with which it can borrow or steal words from other languages."

Unlike any other language, 80% of the ever-growing vocabulary of English is foreign-born. From its early humble beginning, English has grown to be a big family of many regional varieties - 104 territorial varieties of English as tabulated by Tom McArthur in 'The Oxford Guide to World English.'

Among others are the English variety of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, United Kingdom, United States, India and Singapore.

The many varieties of English reflect regional differences in the form of accent, dialect, vocabulary and minor grammar variation. Such differences are found in the British, Irish, Scottish, American and Canadian varieties of English, and it is such difference that characterises Singaporean English. Singaporean English shows many features comparable to indigenised Scottish and Irish English. Singaporean English sits on a spectrum of local language influences notably from such Chinese dialects like Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, and Malay and Tamil.

The indigenisation process is unavoidable. It is the influence of the customary way of speech, thought and conduct of a nation of people.

It is this part of Singapore that shapes and influences Singaporean English. We are second language speakers. For us, English is not a native but a learned language. After all these years, a recognisable Singaporean English or Singlish, with its own accent, vocabulary and idiom, has emerged.

I take Singlish to be the Singapore variety of English and not the pidgin form of the language, which is found in the other global varieties of English too. Singlish is growing and developing despite much efforts to discourage it and root it out.

In Bragg's book, he says "Some scholars believe that Singlish indicates the way in which future Englishes will develop. In so many ways, it fits the tongues and the traditions and the vocal rhythms of the people of Singapore much better than official English and could threaten to replace it. And is it not another dialect of English?"

To Bragg, words such as makan, cheem, ang mo, blur and kiasu are now being used as part of Singapore Standard English and they will change it greatly. He further adds that phrases like "You go where?", "She so pretty" and "Why you so stupid?" are easily comprehensible to more traditional English users, often full of bite and wit and energy.

Like other varieties of English, Singaporean English consists of a range, with an international standard variety at one end and a pidgin colloquial variety at the other.

The international standard variety is used in writing and in more formal situation, while Singlish is used in more casual interaction. Many Singaporeans shift from a standard usage to the more relaxed and local style of Singaporean English, comfortably and often effortlessly.

It is heartening to read what Tom McArthur has to say on the future development of Singaporean English in his Oxford Guide to World English, first published in 2002: "It seems very likely that its social flexibility will ensure that English becomes more and more firmly grounded in Singapore, and its range of usage from 'broad' Singlish to the standard language will make it, in twenty years or so, very much like any other English-speaking nation."

Language is an important nation-building block and history has shown that language alone had held a nation together, as it did for the English when Norman-French threatened to overwhelm it.

Singaporean English is our heritage and an essential part of our history and should command the respect and gratitude of Singaporeans.

Just as Brooklyn English speakers will feel at home with the pronunciation "erster" for oyster, and Australian English speakers with "as scarce as rocking horse manure" and "grabo" (garbage collector), feelings of home will be evoked and my heart will light up when I hear "This is too cheem (deep), I cannot understand" spoken on a street in Vancouver.

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