Singapore English and international English

Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland and Germany),
Solicitor (England & Wales and Hong Kong)
Of Counsel, KGP Legal LLC
alexander.ressos@kgplegal.com.sg
www.ressos.com.sg

Standard Singapore English

The English of Singapore is a variety of English with its own features. Standard Singapore English follows British spelling and grammar, so that a Singapore contract writes *colour*, *realise* and *programme*. Its pronunciation is largely non-rhotic, on the model of southern British English, while its rhythm tends to be syllable-timed, unlike the stress-timed rhythm of British English.[1] A study by the National Institute of Education in 2003 concluded that a standard Singaporean pronunciation was "on the cusp of being standardised".[2] In written form, Standard Singapore English is difficult to distinguish from the English of London or Sydney, which is the point that matters for law and finance.

Linguists describe English in Singapore as a new variety of English in the second of the three circles proposed by Braj Kachru: an "outer circle" language that arrived with colonial rule and has become a language of the state, the schools and the professions.[3] Singapore is often cited as the case in which an outer-circle variety has moved closest to the inner circle. A growing share of its speakers have English as their first language and use it in every domain of life.

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Singlish

Beside Standard Singapore English there is Singlish, the colloquial English of Singapore, which linguists call Singapore Colloquial English. Its grammar is topic-prominent, often omits the verb *be*, uses reduplication and relies on discourse particles such as *lah*, *ah* and *what*. Its vocabulary is based on British English, with loanwords mainly from Malay and Hokkien and a growing influence from Mandarin.[4] Words such as *kiasu* (afraid of losing out), *shiok* (delicious or excellent) and *kaypoh* (busybody) are understood by Singaporeans of every community.

Scholars have described the relation between the two varieties in two ways. John Platt treated them as points on a continuum, with standard English at one end and the broadest Singlish at the other. From 1990 Anthea Fraser Gupta described them as a diglossic pair, in which speakers choose consciously between a high variety for formal purposes and a low variety for informal ones.[5] The second description fits the experience of the financial centre. The same banker who uses Singlish in the pantry switches to Standard English when she presents to a client from Frankfurt or drafts a credit memorandum.

The Speak Good English Movement

The government has long regarded Singlish as a threat to the economic value of English. In his National Day Rally of 1999, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong warned that "if we speak a corrupted form of English that is not understood by others, we will lose a key competitive advantage". He launched the Speak Good English Movement on 29 April 2000, under the slogan "Speak Well. Be Understood."[6] In his 1999 rally Goh had already singled out the popular sitcom *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd*, whose title character spoke broad Singlish, after which the programme reduced its use.[7] Lee Kuan Yew put the argument bluntly in 1999: "Singlish is a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans."[8]

Broadcasting policy followed the same line. The Free-to-air Television Programme Code of the Media Development Authority, the predecessor of today's Infocomm Media Development Authority, allowed Singlish only in interviews where the

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interviewee spoke no other form of English.[9] The Speak Good English Movement, renewed every year with new slogans, aims to encourage Singaporeans to speak grammatically correct English that is universally understood. Its message has always been an economic one. A financial centre that sells its services to the world needs a workforce whose English the world can understand.

From handicap to cultural marker

Public attitudes have moved since 2000. Surveys conducted in 2013 and 2018 found that about half of the respondents could speak Singlish well or very well, with younger respondents reporting higher proficiency than older ones. A study by the Institute of Policy Studies in 2018 found that 8 per cent of Singaporeans identified Singlish as their primary language, against about one third who named English.[10] Political leaders have softened their tone. In 2015 Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, speaking partly in Singlish, welcomed the growing confidence in Singapore's national identity. In 2019 the chairman of the Speak Good English Movement, Jason Leow, described Singlish as a "cultural marker for many Singaporeans".[11]

The Oxford English Dictionary has followed the same path. *Lah* and *sinseh* entered it in March 2000 and *kiasu* in 2007. A group of nineteen Singapore terms, including *ang moh*, *shiok* and *sabo*, followed in 2016. Eleven more were added in 2026, among them *BTO*, *wayang* and *kaypoh*.[12] The recognition of Singlish words by the leading dictionary of British English shows that Singapore English has become one of the recognised national varieties of the language, alongside those of Australia, India or South Africa.

Intelligibility as a commercial asset

For the financial centre the debate about Singlish has a clear practical answer. The value of English as infrastructure depends on its intelligibility to clients, counterparties, regulators and courts abroad. Standard Singapore English meets that test fully. A Singapore judgment, a MAS consultation paper or a Singapore law firm's opinion reads as standard international English and can be relied on by a reader in London or New York without explanation. Singlish, in contrast, is a

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language of intimacy and identity, used among Singaporeans. Its existence costs the financial centre nothing so long as professionals can switch between the two registers, which the great majority of them do as a matter of course.

The more serious risk lies elsewhere. A financial centre that works in a world language competes with every other centre that does the same. London, New York, Hong Kong, Dubai and the international financial centres of India and the Gulf all offer English-language law, regulation and dispute resolution. English gives Singapore access to the global market without giving it a distinctive advantage over its main competitors. The distinctive advantages must come from the combination of English with something else: a second Asian language, a reputation for integrity, a reliable state and a deep understanding of the region. The following chapters of Part J and the chapters on competition in Part K return to this point.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Singapore English" (accessed November 2026): Standard Singapore English "retains British spelling and grammar"; "Singaporean accents can be said to be largely non-rhotic"; Singapore English tends toward syllable timing, unlike stress-timed British English. ↩
2. Wikipedia, "Singapore English" (accessed November 2026), on the 2003 National Institute of Education study. ↩
3. Braj B. Kachru, "Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: the English language in the outer circle", in Randolph Quirk and H.G. Widdowson (eds), *English in the World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 11–30. ↩
4. Wikipedia, "Singlish" (accessed November 2026), on its pronunciation, its topic-prominent grammar, the omission of *be*, reduplication, discourse particles such as *ah*, *lah* and *what*, and its vocabulary based on British English with loanwords mainly from Malay and Hokkien. ↩
5. Wikipedia, "Singlish" (accessed November 2026): Platt (1975–1989) treated Singapore English and Singlish as a "creole continuum"; Gupta (from 1990)

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treated them as a diglossic pair, with Standard Singapore English as the higher and Colloquial Singapore English as the lower register. ↩

6. Wikipedia, "Speak Good English Movement" (accessed November 2026): launched on 29 April 2000 by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, with a committee led by David Wong; Goh's 1999 National Day Rally statement "if we speak a corrupted form of English that is not understood by others, we will lose a key competitive advantage"; slogan "Speak Well, Be Understood". ↩
7. Wikipedia, "Singlish" (accessed November 2026): in 1999 Goh Chok Tong singled out *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd* and its use of Singlish, after which the show reduced its Singlish. ↩
8. Wikipedia, "Language policy in Singapore" (accessed November 2026), citing Wee (2010) on *The Sunday Times*, 15 August 1999: "Singlish is a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans." ↩
9. Wikipedia, "Language policy in Singapore" (accessed November 2026), citing the Media Development Authority's Free-to-air Television Programme Code: Singlish is allowed only for "interviews, where the interviewee speaks only Singlish". ↩
10. Wikipedia, "Languages of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): a 2018 Institute of Policy Studies study found that 8 per cent identified Singlish as their primary language and about one third English; surveys in 2013 and 2018 found about half of respondents could speak Singlish well or very well. ↩
11. Wikipedia, "Singlish" (accessed November 2026), on Lee Hsien Loong's remarks in 2015; Wikipedia, "Speak Good English Movement" (accessed November 2026): Jason Leow, chairman of the movement at the launch of its 2019 campaign on 14 June 2019, called Singlish a "cultural marker for many Singaporeans". ↩
12. Wikipedia, "Singlish" (accessed November 2026): *lah* and *sinseh* in the OED from March 2000, *kiasu* in 2007, 19 terms in 2016 including *ang moh*, *shiok* and *sabo*, and 11 terms in 2026 including *BTO*, *wayang* and *kaypoh*. ↩

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