Comparing Singapore English (SGE) Dialect & Standard English Dialect

Introduction

Singaporean English (SgE) has rapidly become a topic of discussion amongst linguists and anyone who studies language due to a distinct difference. Though the total population as of 2019 Mid-Year estimates to 5.7 million, only 3.5 million are Singapore Citizens, which amount up to 61.38% (SingStat, n.d.). When Singapore gained independence in 1965, the Government officialized four official languages: English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil due to its multi-cultured society.

There are differences between dialects based on various regions of the world. Language has different variations based on the different countries, and many reasons influence the fact that each country has its own dialect. In certain countries, understanding ethnomethodology is also important in learning the hierarchy of the language. In Singapore, the tremendous change in variation of English over the years incited the government to create a ‘Speak Good English Movement' to encourage the citizens to speak grammatically correct English to be universally understood.

This study aims to compare the difference in dialects between Singaporeans and Standard English. There are multiple syntactic differences when it comes to comparing a Singaporean's dialect, specifically influencing the grammar that we use. In the study, it will compare grammatical features such as mesolect and basilect in the recorded conversation.

It would also discuss some key colloquial features of Singaporeans when they are speaking to a fellow Singaporean. In this study, Standard English refers to English, where Standard Singapore English would resemble since control in the early years. This would be the standard that is accepted and spoken in formal registers such as workplace or by government officials. The study would compare these two since they are closely related, and it would show several differences that Singaporeans have picked up from being a multi-ethnic society.

Colloquial Singaporean English

Pronunciation and vocabulary differences are prominent examples when people are to distinguish different dialects of English, however, there are grammatical differences too. Before their independence, inter-ethnic communication within the country would use Bazaar Malay, a pidgin form of Standard Malay, which has since been replaced as English was introduced as the lingua franca of the country. Singapore-Malayan English evolved through English-medium schools, where different speech varieties were influenced by different ethnic groups (Tay, 2004).

As the school children mingled and interacted with one another, this was how Colloquial Singapore English (CSE), or more commonly known as ‘Singlish', was formed. Over the years, English in Singapore became distorted that a Speak Good English Movement was created in order to communicate in the global language of commerce, business and technology. This

campaign was aimed to improve standard English use in Singapore.

This section would discuss a few key grammatical features and syntax that Singaporeans have gathered and used as the different cultures mingled, which are some terms that have influenced the reason why the Singaporean government decided to launch the campaign. In the data gathered (Appendix A), this shows an example of how Singaporeans used colloquialism in the context of a casual conversation.

Syntax

Usage of “got”

The use of the word 'got' in CSE in polysemous, as their meanings differ based on the context of the conversation. Lu (2010) shows different usage of the word 'got' in its different forms of uses. In the recording, ‘(we) got exam right' which translates to ‘We have exams' (See Appendix 6), is an example of an existential usage, while (Appendix 12) ‘we got no energy' translating to ‘we have no energy' is a possessive usage instead.

Usage of “lah”, “eh”

In the audio recording, it is evident that both speakers use terms such as ‘lah' and ‘eh' at the end of their sentences. In (See Appendix 1), the sentence includes two ‘eh', which the former one would be equivalent to saying ‘hey' and the latter acts as a way of asking the second speaker to agree with them, but without actually sounding like a question. It is also another way of trying to emphasise their point but without actually using such formal words.

Typically when asked about 'Singlish', a majority would answer with the frequent use of an additional term at the end of sentences. Wee (2004) notes that there are eight terms that are commonly used: namely 'lah', 'ma', 'wat', 'meh', 'leh', 'lor', 'hor' and 'hah'. However just considering the conversation, 'lah' can be heard a few times, as a way of softening the sentence. Taking Appendix 6 as an example, when Sarah says 'okay lah', she meant it as 'It is fine', but in a more relaxed manner and trying to tell the other speaker to 'relax'.

Subject Pronouns

Colloquial Singapore English has also been noted to remove subject pronouns, following Chinese and Malay speech (Platt & Weber, 1980). This can be seen in when replying in conversations (Appendix A, [3]) where the subject, which would be ‘time' has been omitted, in response to her agreement with her friend about the time. In another example (Appendix A, [6]), it has even been replaced with 'got', which further shows the various uses of 'got' in Colloquial Singapore English.

Grammatical Features

Mesolect

Tay (2004) listed a variety of Singaporean English that would differ from Standard English, and one that stands out that can be heard from the conversation is the lack of marking in verb forms,

such as in Appendix 5 when the speaker meant to say they have a few more weekends to go, but she did not actually say 'to go'. Another mesolectal variety that Tay has stated is also the lack of plural marking in nouns, as we can see in Appendix 6 when she mentioned 'exams', despite knowing both of them are taking multiple papers.

Basilect

Basilectal variety in Singaporean English can be heard in along with the syntax differences that have been stated above, such as the use of particles like 'lah' and 'got'. Another particle that is used is also 'sia', in Appendix 4 when she agreed with the other speaker.

Rhythm

In Standard English dialect, it is commonly known to have a ‘stress-timed' rhythm, however, in Singaporean English dialect, they use a ‘machine-gun rhythm' (James, 1940) where the syllables recur at equal intervals, despite being stressed or unstressed syllables. This is where Singaporean English speakers would rely on the use of different syntax to express themselves in different situations, as opposed to Standard English speakers who use intonation of the stressed and unstressed syllables to express themselves.

register variation

The register variation in appendix A is based off a casual conversation between two friends. This explains the various colloquialism listed above heard in the conversation.

Should the register change, there is a possible chance of the variety of English spoken. Taking an example of a formal register in Singapore would be when the students are mandated to sit for General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE O-Levels), which is an examination that students are required to take upon leaving secondary school. Since the GCE O-Levels examination follows the Cambridge standard, they are assessed based on their ability to speak and write in internationally acceptable English (SEAB, 2019). This goes to show that despite the vast differences in Colloquial English, Singaporeans have also been trained to speak in Standard English, but in social contexts, they would still choose to speak in colloquial Singapore English.

Conclusion

The English used in Singapore is unique in its own ways. In a country where the population is approximately 5 million (SingStat, 2019), its variation of dialect from Standard English has many differences. Colloquial Singapore English has a wide variety of English that has been expressed in different ways that shows a variety of meanings. CSE over the years have been influenced by their multi-ethnic society such as a mix of Malay, Chinese, and Tamil, and there are certain terms that Singaporeans have picked up from each of the races that have formed the CSE that is been widely known now. However, despite the various CSE terms that are heard in the vernacular language, it is still difficult to trace the exact origin of the terms heard, especially when the languages are similar to one another.

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Recording

[1] Jannah: Eh next month we go back Singapore already eh

‘Hey, we are going back to Singapore next month!’

[2] Sarah: Ya I I cannot wait eh

‘Yes, I can’t wait’

[3] Jannah: Ya… like very fast ah

‘(The time) seems to pass by fast’

[4] Sarah: Ya damn fast sia

‘Yes, I agree. It’s passing by fast.’

[5] Jannah: I think… we only have like… four… four more weekends?

‘I think we have about four more weekends (to go)?’

[6] Sarah: No less than that what! But okay lah, got exam right

‘No, I think it is less than that! But (we’re) going to have exams soon too’

[7] Jannah: Ya, then almost every weekend also we go… going out right… like we have plans

‘Yes, and we have plans almost every weekend anyway’

[8] Sarah: Ya we have like so much plans

‘Yes, we have a lot of plans together’

[9] Jannah: So so this weekend where are we going?

‘So where are we going this weekend?”

[10] Sarah: I think this week… we just go Blue Mountains lah… since the weather quite nice right

‘I think we should visit the Blue Mountains this weekend. The weather has been really nice (these days)’

[11] Jannah (background): Ya ya ya ya

‘I agree’

[12] Sarah: But then right… I don’t know eh cause… I feel like we are so tired.. then like later our plans get ruined because we got no energy

‘At the same time, I’m not sure we should go because we’re both so tired lately. (I’m afraid) our plans might get ruined because we have no energy’

[13] Jannah: No lah.. but then.. so so where else do you suggest that we go

‘I don’t think so, but where else do you suggest we go as an alternative?’

[14] Sarah: Oh… we can go like for brunch, or like I don’t know lah maybe like also study.. Eh wait we going study.. we’re gonna study on Saturday right

‘Maybe we can go for brunch, or we can go study. Wait, are we going to study on Saturday?

[15] Jannah: Ya ya ya

‘Yes’

[16] Sarah: Oh… okay…

‘Okay’