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Glocalisation, English and Singlish: Creating a Singaporean Identity

By Pravin Prakash

Synopsis

The English versus Singlish debate reflects an element of the social fabric of Singapore. The concept of glocalisation brings a deeper understanding to a weak argument on Singlish's role and imperative for competence in English. The need to redouble efforts at teaching Standard English is underlined.

Commentary

ENGLISH AND Singlish do not exist in a zero-sum equation where one gains at the expense of the other. Rather, both exist as two sides of the same coin and share equal currency when viewed through the lenses of glocalisation. Raising the level of Standard English in Singapore thus does not require the eradication of Singlish.

The recent re-visiting of the perennial debate on Singlish's place in Singapore in recent weeks suggests that the wrangle is more fundamental than one of speaking proper English. The anti-Singlish camp stresses that Singlish handicaps one's ability to learn and speak Standard English; an essential ability for citizens of a cosmopolitan city in a globalised world. This argument was made most recently by academic Eugene Tan who expressed concern that Singaporeans' competence in Standard English and hence Singapore's competitiveness in a global economy would be compromised by the valorisation of Singlish. For the pro-Singlish camp, the argument advanced is that Singlish is an organic Singaporean manifestation, a local phenomenon that should be treasured much like Scottish English or Australian English.

Glocalisation and Singlish

As the debate is unlikely to abate, it is perhaps of greater value for us to consider if its continuity is predicated on a flawed premise. It is also worth questioning if both Singlish and English fulfil different needs and thus share a complementary rather than antagonistic relationship. Much of the conversation in the public sphere thus far has been grounded on the idea that English and Singlish are locked in an epic battle for survival, with declining standards of English being blamed on the increasing popularity and valorisation of Singlish.

This presumption of a zero-sum game in which gains are relative and never absolute, it is contended, masks the reality that the use and popularisation of English and Singlish in Singapore are essentially produced by the same forces of history and possess great value due to the symbiotic relationship that they share in the evolution of the nation-state and its identity.

Sociologist Roland Robertson argues that most theories of globalisation which posit the local as being the opposite of the global are governed by a false dichotomy. Instead, he notes that a perception of the local can exist only in the acknowledgement of an encroaching global and that the two often exist in tandem, evolving together. Robertson uses the term *glocalisation* to describe this phenomenon where forces of homogenisation and heterogenisation subsist together, sharing a symbiotic relationship; thereby enabling local culture to come to terms and absorb global culture into its identity.

Other academics like David E. Nye, building on Robertson's work, have observed that a natural response to global influences is a process of "creolisation" of cultures and languages in which people through "selective appropriation" respond to the increasing presence of global cultures and languages by creating a local variant "involving a combination of languages and cultures that were previously unintelligible to one another." The creation of such a hybrid local variant culture and language according to these theorists is thus not in opposition to embracing global culture but instead a necessity created for it to comfortably co-exist.

Seen through the lens of glocalisation, Singlish is a natural manifestation that complements the presence and use of English in Singapore. English has long been lauded as the thread that has woven the social fabric in Singapore together through the provision of a common language for a multicultural society.

By that argument, the presence of Singlish and its potent resilience is evidence that not only have the different communities in Singapore come together, they have integrated to the extent of fashioning a shared imagined community with its own distinct glocalised language. Its continued presence thus is testament to the success of Singapore in creating a strong national identity.

Glocalisation, Bilingualism and English Education

If Singlish is an essential component of our social fabric complementing and not opposing the presence of English in Singapore, what then of the argument that it is detrimental to the promotion of Standard English as many Singaporeans struggle to

code-switch between English and Singlish? The answer to that may lie in two important steps.

Firstly acknowledging that Singlish is too critical to Singapore's national identity for any continued attempts to eradicate it must be accompanied by an appreciation that eradicating it will not improve the level of Standard English in Singapore. Instead, a more robust education policy that focuses more on developing a greater appreciation for the language and cultivating proactive learning habits with regards to English would greatly improve the level of Standard English in Singapore. This may include making exposure to English to children from a young age in pre-school a mandatory priority and making English language related subjects like Literature and Theatre a greater priority in Primary and Secondary Schools.

Secondly, it must be noted that in many ways Singapore is uniquely positioned in terms of glocalisation and its effects. This is largely because cultural diversity in Singapore has been carefully managed through a bilingual education policy in which the government has striven to preserve 'local' languages while promoting English as a first and working language. Most Singaporean students thus learn two languages and possess the ability to code-switch between them.

Improving this ability may lie in a greater focus on cultural sensitivity – students have to be taught the appropriate cultural context for language usage. Teaching students not to use their mother tongue in the presence of other students who do not speak it is as important and relevant as teaching them the importance of using Standard English in formal settings. This would create a culture in which essentially multilingual students learn both sensitivity and a capacity for code-switching from a young age.

A Singaporean Patois?

Viewed through the lens of glocalisation, one can conclude that the perennial debate over Singlish and its impact on English in Singapore has persisted largely because it has been predicated on a flawed premise. While English is the language employed by Singaporeans to converse with one another and the world, Singlish has become the patois through which Singaporeans bond with one another and identify themselves within the world.

As we continue to promote the need for a strong command of the English Language, we can thus stop agonising over the potential detrimental effects of Singlish in the public sphere. In short, both the proponents and opponents of Singlish can understand each other when they say *"keep cool"* and *"lim kopi"* (drink coffee).

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