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GWEE LI SUI

SPIAKING SINGLISH
A COMPANION TO HOW SINGAPOREANS COMMUNICATE

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GWEE LI SUI, PhD

Praise for *Spiaking Singlish*

More than any cunning linguist who has produced cheem publications (self included), Dr Gwee Li Sui has been the one to put Singlish on the map, in world media, and, most of all, in our mouths. *Spiaking Singlish* is what it's all about – not just a list of quaint sayings, formally explained, but a whole book, in Singlish. Perhaps most crucially, Gwee shows how Singlish – indeed, any emergent contact language variety – isn't a handicap. Articulate and persuasive, he amuses, he expounds, he argues – fully grounded in theories of language contact and change – and all in Singlish! His performance throughout the book is a delight to proponents of translingual practice, seamlessly bringing together the more “standard” and more Singlish dimensions of his repertoire. I especially appreciate how much he sayangs Singapore's diversity and multiculturalism, in word and in deed. He continues to do for Singlish what many of us only talk about – revel in it even on the most formal of platforms, use it as one would use any language. This is precisely how any once-maligned language variety can increase in international intelligibility, garner greater acceptability, and attain legitimacy. I'm putting this book on my course reading list.

– Dr Lisa Lim, Associate Professor and
Head of the School of English, University of Hong Kong

When I approached Dr Gwee to write a Singlish column for *The Middle Ground*, I knew I might be asking for trouble. Would *The Middle Ground* kena suan for promoting Singlish? If so, I would argue that the rest of our columns and news reports clearly showed our support for good, standard English – and at a high level too. We can't deny that Singlish is part of our heritage, so why not delve into it more deeply? Dr Gwee obliged. He very nice one.

– Bertha Henson
Veteran journalist who declines to reveal her age

He's done it! Gwee has written a book explaining Singlish... in Singlish! Champion! So better fasterly buy this powderful book before it kena banned or dunno what!

– Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen
Editors of *The Cxford Singlish Dictionary*

Singlish has always been a big part of my personal and maybe even more so of my professional life. I am excited that Gwee Li Sui has decided to embark on this project to make Singlish accessible to the masses not just locally but for the international market to appreciate something we can really call our very own. Don't play, play!

– Gurmit Singh
Artist, author, and director of InDaHouz

Actually ah, I neh intended to be the Queen's-English-enemy-number-one with my op-ed in *The New Paper*. Just so happens at the time, bladdy TV execs and mega-angkat cronies were telling us TV sitcom writers to write "proper English". So, of course, everyone angry la siol. Liddat the tone of voice sure salah one what. Hallo, when have writers EVER listened to cockanaden execs?! Big surprise meh? Ah Gwee, you hantam them properly, can?

– Imran Johri
Scriptwriter for *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd*, Season 3

Wah seh! Who more tokong to write about Singlish than Dr Gwee! His England is more powderful than Queen of England sia! Also, inside the book got mention me, so I lagi must sappork! You may think Singlish is just anyhowly one but acherly is quite cheem ok? Dun say I bojio! Buy his book now!

– mrbrown (aka Lee Kin Mun)
Blogfather of Singapore

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Ah Kong, we miss you!

For Review only

CONTENTS

Publisher's Note	9	22. Law by Law	100
Terima Kasih!	11	23. Leh	103
Cheem Introduction	13	24. Lor	106
i. Simi Book is This?	14	25. Lugi	109
ii. Can Dun Anyhow?	15	26. Mah	112
iii. Singlish Got History	17	27. Meh	115
iv. Sayang Singlish	20	28. Mugger	119
v. Basic Singlish	22	29. Politisai	122
vi. Almost There Liao!	24	30. Potong Jalan	125
 		31. Prata	128
Spiaking Singlish		32. Pumchek	133
1. Anyhowly	28	33. Shiok	136
2. Bakero	31	34. Si Geena	139
3. Balik Kampung	35	35. Sian	143
4. Betterer and Betterest	38	36. Siol	146
5. Bo Hee Hae Ma Ho	42	37. Siow Liao	149
6. Buak Gooyoo	46	38. Steady Poon Pee Pee	152
7. Cabut	49	39. Stir Ah Stir	155
8. Can Dun	52	40. Stunned Like Vegetable	158
9. Catch No Ball	55	41. Teruk and Jialat	161
10. Chapalang and Hampalang	59	42. Tikam-Tikam and Tombola	164
11. Cum	63	43. Uplorry	168
12. England	66	44. Wah Piang	171
13. Goondu	70	45. Your Head	174
14. Ha	73	 	
15. Horrigible	77	Singlish Air-Level Test	177
16. Kiam Chye Char Loti	80	Answers	188
17. KNN	84	Score	189
18. Kua Kua	88	 	
19. Lah	91	Index of Terms	191
20. Lai Liao	94	Afterwards	198
21. Last Time is Last Time, Now is Now	97	About the Author Cum Cartoonist	200

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

We have included this note for the sake of readers who might otherwise wonder what this incomprehensible, gibberish book is. *Spiaking Singlish* is arguably the first language book written entirely in Singlish. Not surprisingly, it also centres on Singlish.

Many people think that Singlish involves adding “lahs” and “lors” to regular sentences, but the truth is that it is so much more. The language has evolved since the 1970s when journalist Sylvia Toh Paik Choo wrote regularly about it. Acknowledged as the Queen Mother of Singlish, Toh’s columns in *Fanfare* magazine and her *Eh, Goondu!* books had generated much discussion. Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen of the website *Talking Cock* published *The Coxford Singlish Dictionary* and cartoonist Miel *An Essential Guide to Singlish* in 2002 and 2003 respectively. Today, over forty years after the term was coined, the Singlish discussion continues in earnest.

Singlish, just like its country Singapore, has undergone upgrading, and Dr Gwee Li Sui explains its development to what it is today here. Some readers may find *Spiaking Singlish* challenging to read because of a lack of familiarity with several terms used. For this reason, there is an index with over 600 entries at the end of the book to help you track down definitions within it. If you faithfully read all forty-five chapters, we guarantee that you’ll find every term explained at some point.

A couple of features need us to intervene and clarify though. Firstly, it may take a while for a reader to figure out the way some

For Review only

words appear in the book. For example, the root word “mati”, meaning die, can take a form in the past tense and thus be spelt as “matied”.

Secondly, because Singlish is oral and aural, Dr Gwee has put a spelling to several words that were previously only verbal. To give two examples, “liddat”, for “like that”, and “Gahmen”, for “government”, are spelt the way they are pronounced in Singlish. Hopefully, doing so can help form the basis of some future standard Singlish like how the initiative to standardise Malay spelling in the 1970s had worked.

The talented Dr Gwee goes the extra mile of adding to his writing a series of fun, expository comic strips. Exclusively curated and lovingly drawn by hand in coffee shops all over Singapore (the proof is in his compulsive Facebook posts), these strips are witty, hilarious, and often spot on. There is also a Singlish test near the end for diligent readers, and you can use this to gauge how good your grasp of Singlish is. We suspect that many will just skip straight to the test, but be warned that it is quite tough.

Finally, we will leave you with some solemn warnings. *Spiaking Singlish* has puns, wordplay, double entendres, and even a few cuss words. Reading it may also make you temporarily forget everything you were taught in English class. However, as with learning any language, learning Singlish is never easy. So do read at your own risk – and enjoy!

TERIMA KASIH!

Got people I need to say kum sia for their roles in the long journey of this book. First, Leong Ching from the Ah Kong School of Public Policy started me on the track of reflecting on Singlish. Dunno whether she realises it anot, but last time I deen know I got such a talent one! I just blur-blur spiak Singlish here and there. Then came her lobang of a public lecture I was invited to give on 13 April 2015, and the rest – as they say – is history.

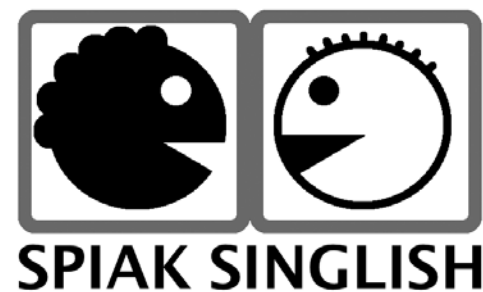
The earliest form of most material here came from the chapalang stuff I wrote for the news website *The Middle Ground*. Between June 2015 and October 2016, I had this Wednesday column named SinGweesh the lao jiao journalist Bertha Henson gave me to play with. I was asked to just talk cock about Singlish in a way that could celebrate Singaporeanness. *The Middle Ground* folks – Daniel Yap, Abraham Lee, Md Suhaile, and others – were full of sarpork throughout, and the stint was sibeh shiok.

Oso, how to forget *The New York Times* and its editor Stéphanie Giry who let me chiong with my op-ed “Politics and the Singlish Language”? Without that article published on 13 May 2016, I wouldn’t have kena buak gooyoo by the Gahmen soon after. I wouldn’t have become – kua kua – the latest Phua Chu Kang-level celebrity in the history of Singlish. All said and done, it had some abstract good lah. So, errr, thank ha?

For Review only

My kawan-kawan Zack Zainal, Prashant Thadathil, Brenda Tan, Chee Soo Lian, Lawrence Chong, and Lai Chee Kien helped me double-confirm some Singlish info. Kilat Singlish resources written by Sylvia Toh Paik Choo, Colin Goh, Woo Yen Yen, Lee Kin Mun (aka mrbrown), and Jack Lee I oso got consult. Findings Pte Ltd let me use its office equipments as masak-masak. Melvin Neo and Mindy Pang of Marshall Cavendish International keep sayanging me since the months leading up to publication.

Lastly, a big hormat to everybawdy I normally spiak Singlish with: my family, relatives, friends, neighbours, public servants, kopitiam people, whoever lah. You are the reason this gila effort is possible to begin with, and so, if I kena buak gooyoo again, please come rescue me hor? Seriously, it's all your fault: I want to spiak good England nia. Now that things have become liddat, let's just wish for the best. Keep calm and huat ah!



CHEEM INTRODUCTION

Dun siow-siow: this book *Spiaking Singlish* is sibeh kilat! It's hands-down the cheemest Singlish book in print ever or at least to date. By this, I dun just mean how it talks chapalang about Singlish. For that, you can always go consult those cheem publications on Singlish by cunning linguists, the kind I read I oso catch no ball. But my book is, in some ways, lagi steady poon pee pee than those. What it does is to discuss Singlish *directly* in Singlish wor!

If got people laugh and say who so stupiak try to explain a language in the same language, you point them to the *Oxford England Dictionary* first lor. Then you point them to hampalang single-

language dictionaries, thesauri, and encyclopaedias out there. With that, you invite them to laugh. Please lah! Now market got all kinds of Singlish-to-England reference books liao. The classic ones by Sylvia Toh Paik Choo, Colin Goh, and Woo Yen Yen have done solid work, and unker clap for them. What they have achieved is mo tak teng in the history of Singlish.

But now Singlish oso must advance, can? If we seriously consider it a language, then a book like this must happen sooner or later. *Spiaking Singlish* doesn't want to describe Singlish words and phrases and crack jokes nia – liddat where got still fun? Rather, it aims to show Singlish being used

For Review only

confidently, in a zai and stylo-milo way, to communicate. I'd like Singlish to become more than something observed lah. It should appear practical enough to talk all kinds of cock. It should seem so steady that people won't anyhow see it no up.

What is Singlish ah? If read until this point you still need to ask, then you cannot make it liao. Briefly, Singlish is the unofficial language of Singaporeans. Singapore has four official languages – England, Melayu, Mandarin, and Tamil – but the most tok kong one everybawdy must know is England. Singlish is different: it gets no love from the Gahmen, and yet, unlike the others, it's actually made in Singapore one! Singlish is what happens when the various languages and dialects on the island campur. It gasaks words, phrases, and syntaxes from these and transforms them with wit and charm. So shiok!

i. Simi Book is This?

OK, so first I must make clear that this book *Spiaking Singlish* is my book

hor. My book means what? It means that here I discuss what I suka discuss. I consider what I suka consider. It's not about showcasing the stuff Singaporeans or foreigners know well or the most solid Singlish expressions or the most important or enduring or notti, whatever lah. It's oso not about being comprehensive – so dun later complain why I dun expand on this word or that word ha. You want to kolaveri, tolong go write your own book, can?

All I want to do is to jot my long love letter to Singlish nia. I want to be able sometimes to call up old or forgotten Singlish words and phrases. Other times, I want to focus on new, happening, or kuai lan components. Sometimes, I want to observe origins and histories; other times, I suka just play the cunning linguist. So this book is less about Singlish terms per se than about what they mean to me and, by extension, a people called Singaporeans. Singlish must be owned and used in context one, and my writing wishes to recreate the world

of Singaporeans even as it chiongs with Singlish.

In this sense, *Spiaking Singlish* can further be considered a historical document wor. Wah, really? Well, as diction and syntax in Singlish change with the times, with influences and usage, what I write must ownself be part of its development mah. My book only shows Singlish as used at this point in Singaporean history – and, to be precise, it's a certain mode of Singlish hor! The elements I find in current use may well fall out of circulation eventually. Others I fewl people bo hiew may terbalik become trendy again. Meanings, pronunciation, and spelling may change while new components continue to emerge. So take note ha: some explanations I give are steady only for now.

But there is another way my book is contributing to the development of Singlish leh. Indeed, I cannot act blur and tembak that this hasn't been a conscious experiment. I am trying here to see whether Singlish can be written

long-long and with intelligence anot. My prose is thus more England-based and sikit cheemer, not macam what you may find normally elsewhere. It's a thinking Singlish and oso a reading, as opposed to talking, Singlish. Unker got pay attention to standardising, spelling, and sentence structures one! All this work to move Singlish from an oral to a textual or even literary form may end up looking too zhng. Or maybe – just maybe – it can help potong a way to a lagi tok kong Singlish?

ii. Can Dun Anyhow?

For writing this book alone, I will sure kena left, right, centre from all kinds of buay song people one. It's only to be expected – but why neh? Because we Singaporeans suka anyhow critisai others mah. Whacking others somehow makes us fewl tua ki. Several folks may even politisai the issue and either sarpork or tekan me for celebrating a language they deem anti-Gahmen. Liddat sibeh sian, you know? To be kind, I suspect that most of them act out of a teruk or plain salah understanding of Singlish nia.

For Review only

For example, got those jokers who think Singlish is pecah England and so spiaking it can screw up their grasp of the ang moh tongue. The more Singlish is used, the more Singapore's international business climate will suffer... and, ten years down the road, we're a fishing village again. Kawan-kawan, Singlish and England only sometimes seem and sound sama-sama hor. The two are, in fact, macam apples and oranges – and becoming more and more so. Besides, if got England words must mean is England, then won't Melayu be England too since it oso got England words, some more always misspell?

Oso, as much as Singlish isn't England, it isn't Melayu, Mandarin, Tamil, Hokkien, or so on either lah. It is spoken not by a particular ethnic community and lagi not by a particular generation. But there are kukujiaos who use Hokkien or street Melayu with a few ang moh words and then call it Singlish. Others are so yaya that they fewl expressions they haven't heard before aren't Singlish. Hello, bodohs?

Singlish is bigger than any speaker or group of speakers, and what we still *dunno* makes this point. As Singlish is a rojak shared among different linguistic communities, we are always learning how it is being used and transformed. Nobawdy spiaks all of Singlish in the same way nobawdy spiaks all of England one.

But what about people who suka make the cockanathan point that words and phrases aren't Singlish because they're actually Melayu or Hokkien or Sinhalese or whatever? Unker got two reactions here: firstly, those blur sotongs think Singlish is what ha? I am curious since, without foreign words, ninety-nine per cent of Singlish is habis liao. Having bits from other tongues is the *whole* idea of a multicultural language – which, by the way, describes England oso, in case you're so stupiak that you want to keep arguing.

Secondly, in Singlish, as in *any* language, kapoed expressions take on the meanings accepted by its new users. Original meanings are bo pakay liao.

As such, what Singlish gasaks has to be understood in its precise context, which is why I sometimes buay tahan those who suka-suka condemn this and that as offensive. They say “ang moh” is racist, “kuniang” is sexist, “Ah Beng” is demeaning, “walao” is filthy, blah-blah. *Kong simi?* Yes, Singlish got a few horrible terms we shouldn't celebrate, but, before kolaveri-ing, can tolong first consider broadly what a word or phrase implies?

Then – alamak! – oso got champion critics who claim that Singlish sayangs Singapore's ethnic majority. Those argue that many Melayu and Tamil words in Singlish got koyak sense, pronunciation, and spelling because cheena people any-o-how. *No lah!* When any language absorbs something, it tends to distort it so as to reinvent and then own it. Language is liddat one! In fact, consider “pokkai” which distorts Cantonese, the way we say “xiao mei mei”, and so on: cheena terms oso kena! England terms lagi worse. So can dun stir and simi sai oso politisai? Tolong, tolong.

iii. Singlish Got History

Now here is some history hor. Nobawdy knows for sure when Singlish emerged, but last time kampung people could spiak a few languages one. During British days, England was oso taught in several schools while a lot knew pasar or market Melayu – so most geenas would at least be bilingual lah. But, after World War II, with growing pro-independence fewlings, young people wished for our own idiom. In fact, even got a literary movement called EngMalChin, which campurred words from our various languages!

Soon after Singapore's independence in 1965, bilingualism – limited to England and Melayu, Mandarin, or Tamil – became policy. But you think leh: having people learn two tongues well will increase their talent for code-switching and chum-chumming languages anot? Some more, the birth of NS saw Melayu and Hokkien become powderful stems for talking cock among young men. Then came the Spiak Mandarin Campaign which, from 1979,

For Review only

began tekanning cheena forms like Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, and Hakka. It ended up *domesticating* them, making us lagi able to switch and think between languages.

To be sure, what we now call the Great Singlish Debate has been around long-long liao. Singlish was studied at university level as early as in 1975.¹ Its rise and rise led the Gahmen to buang it out of the classrooms from 1982.² But even Sir Randolph Quirk, a leading England authority who was Ah Kong Distinguished Visitor in 1985, praised Singlish as “beautiful” leh.³ Sylvia Toh Paik Choo’s gila books on Singlish, *Eh, Goondu!* (1982) and *Lagi Goondu!* (1986), were oso super-huat during the time.

Then came dark days once the Gahmen noticed how general England proficiency got more and more kena

sai. I dunno whether it relooked at teaching in schools anot, but a link was soon established between Singlish’s huatness and England’s lack of. The teruk link has persisted to this day! Ah Kong famously warned all si geenas in 1999:

Do not popularise Singlish. Do not use Singlish in our TV sitcoms, except for humorous bits, and in a way that makes people want to speak standard English. We will see a difference in another one generation. The people who will benefit most are those who can only master one kind of English. Singlish is a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans.⁴

That same year, Lao Goh, who was then PM, hum-tummed a tok kong TV sitcom called *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd*

for zhnging Singlish. The central actor Gurmit Singh became Lumber One to kena buak gooyoo for Singlish – kua kua! Some more, it happened in the National Day Rally speech:

Gurmit Singh can speak many languages. But Phua Chu Kang speaks only Singlish. If our children learn Singlish from Phua Chu Kang, they will not become as talented as Gurmit Singh.⁵

The next year saw the birth of the Spiak Good England Movement. That Gahmen campaign to make England huat at first came paired with a mission to whack Singlish jialat-jialat. For hailing Singlish as “our national language” in his *The New Paper* op-ed “Singlish No Good Meh?” in 2001, Imran Johri, who wrote for *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd*, was next in the buak gooyoo corner.⁶ Ah Loong, then

Deputy PM, made him famous at that year’s campaign launch, clarifying:

There is nothing wrong for us to inject a few Chinese or Malay words to our daily usage of English when we are talking about local things, especially food. Char kway teow is char kway teow, not rice noodles fried with egg, cockles and sweet black sauce. Even chao guo tiao does not quite taste the same. Likewise with nasi lemak. But it is wrong to think that we are only Singaporean if we speak Singlish. We want to strengthen our common Singaporean identity, but let us do so in other ways and not by using Singlish.⁷

But Singaporeans generally bo chup that advice leh. Singlish-using satirical

¹ “Chandry’s Singapore”, *New Nation* (20 July 1975).
² “Dr Tay Says it Again: Singlish is Out”, *The Straits Times* (16 May 1982).
³ “Singlish is Beautiful, Says LKY Visitor”, *The Straits Times* (7 December 1985).
⁴ “Speech by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew at the Tanjong Pagar 34th National Day Celebration on Saturday, 14 August 1999, at the Tanjong Pagar Community Club”, *National Archives of Singapore*.

⁵ “Prime Minister’s National Day Rally Speech, 1999”, *National Archives of Singapore*.
⁶ Imran Johri, “Singlish No Good Meh?”, *The New Paper* (4 March 2001).
⁷ “Speech by DPM Lee Hsien Loong at the Launch of the Speak Good English Movement 2001, Thursday 5 April 2001”, *National Archives of Singapore*.

For Review only

websites *Browntown* and *Talking Cock* became sibe popular, and Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen’s *The Coford Singlish Dictionary* (2002) sold like siow. The powderful blogger mrbrown is *still* using Singlish to talk cock sing song today! But, frankly, such a war against Singlish cannot win because you know why? The Singapore system – from army to the tourism industry, which uses Singlish to sell Singaporean mystique – ownself needs this language!

University professors can see how shiok Singlish is and sarpork it. Writers such as Arthur Yap, Elangovan, Haresh Sharma, Alfian Sa’at, Ann Ang, Joshua Ip, and Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan got use it. Increasingly, politicians oso – especially during election time to connect with voters. Even the Spiak Good England Movement has since rileked and focused more on... errr, England. At the Jubilee National Day celebration in 2015, we all saw floats with “lah” and “blur like sotong” big-big in neon wor – wah say!

But then, just in 2016, unker still kena buak gooyoo for sayanging Singlish leh. I wrote an op-ed titled “Politics and the Singlish Language” for *The New York Times* – yea, dun play-play! – but I goondu, suggested that our leaders at last grasped how “irrepressible” Singlish was.⁸ Unker was wrong lor. The PM’s Press Secretary Chang Li Lin wrote back to suan me:

Not everyone has a Ph.D. in English Literature like Mr. Gwee, who can code-switch effortlessly between Singlish and standard English, and extol the virtues of Singlish in an op-ed written in polished standard English.⁹

iv. Sayang Singlish

So now here we are sial. Hopefully, my short history lesson can show how cheong hei it all is lah. Singlish’s development has been tied to Singapore’s teruk past, to its struggle

with a last time colonial language. It’s further tied to our multiculturalism, to not just different communities but oso different languages meeting. Then got the history of language policies and national changes to keep in mind. Oso got how Singlish ownself kena politisai, made to seem anti-Singapore or anti-Gahmen.

All these help explain why Singlish can fewl so Singaporean lor. It isn’t how Singlish is an image of our chapalang society nia. It’s oso its transcendence, how it can rise above all its parts to make hampalang hang together. Indeed, to mention coherence here, I am already admitting how Singlish has both depth and grammar. Depth comes from Singlish changing or resonating across generations of speakers. Grammar involves the shiok internal logic reached by the whole jin gang across space.

At the core of Singlish is surely *pragmatism*, a sibe Singaporean hallmark. Singlish can suka-suka bo hiew articles, tenses, infinitives, pronouns, and so on one.

For example, rather than saying “What is it you’re looking for?”, one can say “What you want?” Or, for “Where are we heading?”, just “Go where?” can liao. This efficiency plays up other elements such as tone and rhythm. So Singlish is liddat in-your-face and hardly subtle. It cucuks yayaness because, as with how it suans other languages, it suka compromises and impurity.

People who say Singaporeans lack humour and cannot ownself laugh at ownself therefore dunno or dun spiak Singlish well lah. The language is chock-full of wit, sarcasm, and all kinds of linguistic shiokness. Humour is used precisely to disarm, creating connections between culturally different people. A Singlish speaker is practically suanning, kacauing, tnehing, and talking cock all the time! The most kilat presentations of Singlish – on TV and online and in filems, plays, and books – are sibe gila one.

I’ve named positive features, but we still need to address that long-long official charge against Singlish. Our Gahmen

⁸ Gwee Li Sui, “Politics and the Singlish Language”, *The New York Times* (13 May 2016).

⁹ Chang Li Lin, “The Reality of Singlish”, *The New York Times* (23 May 2016).

For Review only

has always said that, while Singlish is harmless to folks like me whose England very can, it sabo those with jialat England who oso cannot code-switch. For these, only either form can be learnt, and, so if they spiak Singlish, their England will kena sai. We all have heard this argument macam forever liao! It's sibeh smart to blame social immobility on Singlish and then try to kill Singlish, which – dunno whether the Gahmen knows anot – cannot be done.

You see, Singlish is in a unique context. If you have multiculturalism and you have institutionalised bilingualism, then cannot stop languages from chum-chumming liao. But, if you campur England and, say, Melayu, you can still tell what is England and what Melayu because you *know* from school what each involves. So why cannot do the same for Singlish ah? Why people must link Singlish to pecah England and then confuse other people?

Even here we must law by law too leh! It seems obvious to unker that,

for England to huat, the sure way is to teach it better. Whack Singlish for fiak since you cannot stop people from anyhowly? Without Singlish, they can still turn to other open colloquial forms such as street Hokkien or Melayu, American England, and internet lingo. A multicultural society will always have a multilinguistic space – and I'd rather ours be defined by something truly shared like Singlish lor.

v. Basic Singlish

So what are the parts of Singlish ha? Unker cannot hampalang describe for you here because this isn't that kind of book. I bo eng lah! Maybe if everybawdy helps make *Spiaking Singlish* a bestseller, I may consider writing? So let me simply say first that Singlish got a growing vocab. There are England terms like "act cute" and "act blur" whose meanings we tweak, Melayu ones we keep like "cabut", "pakat", and "jalan-jalan", cheena ones we use like "cheong hei" or translate into England like "wait long-long", Tamil words like "goondu" and "aiyoh", distorted Japanese words like "bakero", and so on.

Then oso got words whose forms kena changed, from "cucuk" to "chochok", "poon" to "pom", and "sabotage" to "sabo". Others kena expanded into new words: so "agak" becomes "agakration" and "cheem" "cheemology". Some terms gain unique sense from their use in Singapore's social context, such as "half past six", "akan datang", and "kua kua". Then got phrases made with words from different languages that become something lagi tok kong, such as "buay tahan" and "jiak kentang".

Going now into groups of words, Singlish oso got idioms and proverbs wor. Such kinds of expression make natural sense within a language and often cannot be translated into another language without lugi-ing some depth. Consider how much shiokness "bak chew tak stamp" and "blur like sotong" bring to a situation with clueless people being tekanded. Use "pattern more than badminton", "mee siam mai hum", or "last time policemen wear shorts", and you'll have pecah lobang your true fewling on a matter without saying more.

Every language oso got its own syntax one. Syntax involves the way words and phrases are arranged to form sentences, and unker can name two tendencies in Singlish syntax for now. One is I mentioned earlier: efficiency. Why say "Do you think that you're that smart?" when you can just keep the central elements and go "You smart meh?" Another tendency is multiculturalism, which lies in how a line can sound lagi Singlish the more rojak its word choice. Then got pronunciation and the singsong Singaporean accent to consider, which you'll need a Singlish speaker more than my book to show lah.

All these aspects are still one part of Singlish nia! It's neh complete without talking about the particles that appear a lot to end clauses and sentences and are growing in lumber. Now got "lah", "leh", "lor", "liao", "ha", "ah", "hor", "mah", "meh", "sial", "sia", "siol", "nia", "neh", and so on liao! Each of these changes the meaning of a whole sentence in an exact way, and I can illustrate my point with the table on the next page.

SINGLISH	ENGLAND
I dun have lah.	I really don't have it.
I dun have leh.	For some reason, I don't have it.
I dun have lor.	I wish I had it, but sadly I don't.
I dun have liao.	I used to have it, but I don't anymore.
I dun have ha.	I'm telling you that I don't have it.
I dun have hor.	Don't look at me; I don't have it.
I dun have wor.	What do you know! I don't have it.
I dun have mah.	It would help if I had it, but I don't have it.
I dun have meh?	You think I wouldn't have it?
I dun have sial!	I can't freaking believe I don't have it!

You see how choobi these elements are? They are sibeh powderful although it's hard to describe what they are, being macam suffixes, interjections, and adverbs rolled into one. In fact, unker dare say that half of Singlish mastery involves the kilat use of these end-particles. If steady, even if you spiak England, Melayu, Mandarin, or Tamil, people can still tell that your Singlish oso can. Tombalik, if you use salah or dun use at all, even with the right Singlish words in the right order, you'll still sound koyak and sikit cannot make it.

vi. Almost There Liao!
Finally, let's be clear of one thing hor: there is *no* pure Singlish, notchyet. This book doesn't make me an authority on Singlish, and anyway I dowan to be! Sekali people buay song with what I write because – face it – every Singlish speaker thinks he or she is an authority. Indeed, everybawdy who spiaks Singlish holds the power to wayang and can thus affect the direction it goes. So, if you fewl, say, Singlish got not enough Tamil words (and that's true), you can keep sprinkling a few lawa Tamil ones in your conversations... and who knows?

For Review only

Oso, Singlish sometimes isn't spoken alone but *slides* into England and nowadays Melayu, Mandarin, Tamil, and so on too. As it branches everywhere, it becomes more and more susah to draw a circle around what it *must* be. Last time we could just call Singlish all the chapalang stuff plus Singaporean England. Through the years, we have oso discovered Singlay or Singaporean Melayu, Tamglish or Tamil England, Singaporean Hokkien, and others. Unker is happy to lump all these within Singlish rather than have to decide where Singlish ends and something else begins. It's more practical and oso more sensible lah!

Unker basically suka imagine a big Singlish, can? So, in *Spiaking Singlish*, I have welcomed much of what others may consider debatable. First, certainly Singlish as it is spoken, but I oso got notti words and funny sounds like "kua kua". I further spell some words the way we spiak them, as with "fewl", "liddat", "lumber", and so on. Second, since written Singlish is now tok kong

especially with the digital age, I have gasaked abbreviations. England words Singaporeans use in a quaint manner, like "cum", I have oso gasaked.

Third, I fewl affectionate names for national figures we talk cock daily about must include lah. Fourth, on this note of identity, old Singlish words maybe bo lang use now I've revived too. Fifth, I oso got sibeh new words, some still experimental and notchyet tested by time. The last two concern historical and future Singlish, and my use of them can make many readers gabra. But dun panic – I do this to signal my wish for the words to tahan outside my use nia. Last, got words I fewl we need to spiak more for the sake of diversity.

This garang idea of a big Singlish is my way of acknowledging complexities in how Singaporeans spiak. With Singlish as now not just an England variant, the name Singlish becomes more and more a misnomer liao. So there's work to clarify what a goblok

For Review only

linking of Singlish with England blurs, bo sense in day-to-day interactions.
the autonomy of Singlish. Terbalik, Singlish should, first and foremost,
we must oso blur the acts of linguists sayang multiculturalism, and it can
and speakers *within* communities keep huating so long as we leave every
who create compartments of speech door to its heart open.

SPIAKING SINGLISH





I. ANYHOWLY

“Anyhowly” is a fairly recent Singlish permutation of the word “anyhow”. I believe it was popularised by that kilat blogger mrbrown? It got the same meaning as “anyhow” and the same sense of acting **suka-suka** – that is, as you like – as “anyhow”. It **oso** (how we say and spell “also”) can be used as an adverb or on its own like “anyhow”. So maybe you ask: if a word sounds and looks like an existing word and got the same meaning and use as it, why the *fiak* did Singlish speakers go and make another word? For what?

Kawan-kawan, you steady poon pee pee – unker hormat you! Here’s a good time for me to share one typical way I fewl Singlish as a language develops. To be sure, “anyhow” is a sibeh tok kong word for the Singaporean mind, which is always stuck between a love of freedom and a fear of luanness. It’s macam God made this word for us one! But, when a Singlish term kena used a lot, something I call Gwee’s First Law of Singlish Dynamics kicks in. This law states that a frequently employed expression tends towards a *rhyme*.

The history of “anyhow” proves this law lor! Other than its normal form, a lumber of other versions exist in Singlish. The oldest, “**any-o-how**”, follows the England term “any old how”. If today you dun hear “any-o-how” much, it’s because mostly ah peks and ah mms, who have lived through last time British colonial era, use it. Even our late great Lee Kuan Yew, aka **Ah Kong**, got use before although I need to double-confirm with some expert – from preferably the Ah Kong School of Public Policy – first.

Soon after, two rather different forms came into play: “**anyhow hentam**” and “**anyhow pong**”. These phrases are an improvement because they **buang**, or throw away, the whole need for speakers to remember and name the action verb. So, there’s no need to say “Dun vote anyhow!” or “Dun any-o-how vote!” – just “Dun anyhow hentam!” or “Dun anyhow pong!” can already. If the context is clear, the meaning should automatically be clear one.

“**Hentam**” and “**pong**” are quite generic action words in Singlish lah. “Hentam” or “**hantam**” which oso takes the corrupted form “**hum-tum**”, means whack or hit, and so to hentam someone or something means to hit that person or thing. It is in this sense that we have the equally popular variant form “**anyhow whack**”. As for “pong”, it comes specifically from the mahjong game, where a player forms a pong by grabbing three identical tiles and shouts “Pong!” People who anyhow pong in real life as in mahjong are damn one kind.

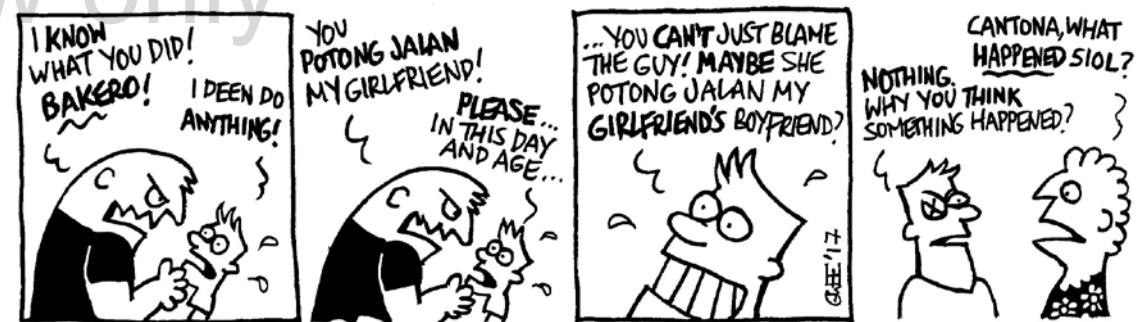
Then – wah say! – “anyhow” evolved further. “**Anyhow-anyhow**” as construction is lagi best as it dispenses with not just a

precise verb but a verb altogether. Song bo? But note how Gwee's First Law of Singlish Dynamics has crept in liao: there is a rhyme. Oso note how, while “anyhow-anyhow” looks weird, it shows awareness in a way the earlier forms dun. “Anyhow-anyhow” is careless – in having two adverbs with no verb and the same word twice – and so highlights how “anyhow” is about carelessness. It becomes what “anyhow” means!

Do you see how self-consciously funny Singlish is yet? Notchyet? Well, people who dun geddit can go on and on studying Singlish for this and that influence and wholly miss the point here. Singlish is a creative language in the steadiest sense meant: it's not no-brain one! If a wordplay fewls shiok, we Singlish speakers will sure use it more and more and **arm chio** – or snigger – in the knowledge that we may be abusing a word but our version is *better*. All this will soon become part of Singlish at some point.

So it is that we arrive at what I call Gwee's Second Law of Singlish Dynamics, which states that a frequently used expression tends towards *humour*. In “anyhowly”, “anyhow” has found its most compact rhyming form yet. It is oso its most kilat since it can be used both with and without a verb! But never mind or, as we say it, **nemmind**: we mustn't miss the pure Singlish shiokness that is at play. This lies in the joke that “anyhowly” has improved on “anyhow” – by making an England adverb look lagi like an England adverb.

For Review only



2. BAKERO

Like the vocab of England, the vocab of Singlish tells the history of its speakers. But, while we talk cock a lot about ang moh, cheena, Melayu, and Indian words in Singlish, we hardly talk about one small and quite **throw face** or mortifying influence. Yes, what about **jit pun** or **Nippon** words ha? By Nippon, I dun mean Nippon Paint hor (hello, focus please?) – I mean Japan, *Imperial* Japan. After all, Singaporeans did kena jialat-jialat from the Empire of the Rising Sun back in the day. Surely our speech would therefore show trauma? Surely got some traces, tio bo?

Well, actually, got! I dun just mean in something like “**banana money**”, which we use on things that look valuable but worth **kosong** or nothing. So you can say to a guy who owns a few bad properties, “Wah, you got a lot of banana money hor!” “Banana” here isn't linked, as some bedek kings claim, to the term “banana republic”, meaning a politically unstable country that exports monyet food. Rather, it points to the cantik banana tree

For Review only

on last time ten-dollar notes issued by the jit pun **Gahmen** or government – which became worthless after the war!

“Banana money” still isn’t quite about absorption, and so we look elsewhere more. You’d think that Singlish might have words like “ohayou” and “konnichiwa” – but strangely dun have leh. **Bo** leh. I guess politeness wasn’t something we took away from jit pun culture? Instead, we have “**anone**” – pronounced “ah-no-nay” – which, in Singlish, denotes a Japanese **mei mei** or cute girl. Today’s geenas won’t know this word since they’re lagi likely to say “AV star” or “Miss J-Pop” or whatever. “Anone” is agak-agak in Nippon “well” or “you know”, what you say as you act blur lah. You’re quite smart if you can imagine how it came from jit pun mei meis approaching locals and going “Anone, anone...”

The opposite of an anone is an **obasan**, a label still in use today. In jit pun, an obasan means an aunt or mature lady, but, in Singlish, we have a word for that liao: it’s **auntie**. So “obasan” comes to mean rather some char bor whose dress sense is auta or **obiang**, that is, out of fashion. Nowsaday, we may deem Japanese aunties stylo-milo, but last time we thought they sibeh obiang, cannot make it one. “Obiang”, by the way, has unclear origin: some say it came from Hokkien or Teochew and others from Melayu. I’d like to propose that it’s a corruption of “obasan” – you think possible?

But the **champion** or winning Japanese-inspired word is surely “bakero” – which is so saat that even the Japanese dunno it!

“Bakero” is a corrupted form of the Nippon “bakayarou”, an RA word for idiot or moron, and it’s pronounced “buck-kay-ro”, not “baked roe”, hor. Last time jit pun soldiers must have used this word a lot on Singaporeans for its meaning to be understood right and its form absorbed. It was certainly something we geenas, as late as in the 1980s, used on each other to express extreme disdain or hostility. It is especially nasty when spat at a **cheenapok**, a traditional Chinese or Chinese-educated person, given the horrific history of what jit pun soldiers did to the cheena community in the region.

The revival of “bakero” in the 1980s, decades after World War II ended, can be blamed on one phenomenon – walao, *cheem* word! That was the TV historical dramas made by the now-defunct Singapore Broadcasting Corporation or SBC, which often told a patriotic, popular form of Singaporean history. Wah, there were so many back then I lost count liao! But those SBC dramas needed to confront the sibeh teruk Japanese period, which played a big part in the trauma leading to the birth of modern Singapore. They hampalang depicted jit pun soldiers destroying families, killing and maiming men, and raping women – all while shouting Singlish “Bakero!”

Those SBC series fed the memories of a young nation **aksi** or proud about its independence and its swift achievements. They became so successful that the cheena actors playing Japanese soldiers and local traitors would kena from the public whenever they went jalan-jalan. Yes, “bakero” is a dun play-play insult that ranks among the most **kuai lan** or rascally words you can ever

ABOUT THE AUTHOR CUM CARTOONIST

This Gwee Li Sui sibeh notti! How old already still whole day talk cock? But you dun see him no up hor. People got write a pioneering ang kong book – these days call dunno what graphic novel – called *Myth of the Stone* (1993). Oso got write poetry books *Who Wants to Buy a Book of Poems?* (1998), *One Thousand and One Nights* (2014), *Who Wants to Buy an Expanded Edition of a Book of Poems?* (2015), *The Other Merlion and Friends* (2015), *Haikuku* (2017), and *Death Wish* (2017). Then oso got this book on how to read poetry like an atas professor called *FEAR NO POETRY!: An Essential Guide to Close Reading* (2014).

Like still not enough, he oso edited kilat anthologies *Sharing Borders: Studies in Contemporary Singaporean-Malaysian Literature II* (2009), *Telltale: Eleven Stories* (2010), *Man/Born/Free: Writings on the Human Spirit from Singapore* (2011), *Singathology: 50 New Works by Celebrated Singaporean Writers* (2015), *Written Country: The History of Singapore through Literature* (2016), and *Places: A Graphic Anthology on the East of Singapore* (2016). Wah piang eh – the fella steady poon pee pee until the pee pee cannot poon liau! Some more write cheem aca-de-mic essays, teach for several universities, and can simi sai oso give lecture. Come, hampalang si geenas say, “Next time I grow up, I want to be like this unker!”