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INTRODUCTION

SINGLISH IS WHAT AH? Singlish is Singapore’s unofficial language. It is *not* its official language. If you anyhowly say and then say I say, I sure kena buak gooyoo one. Singapore’s official languages got four: England, Melayu, Mandarin, and Tamil. But this does not make Singlish an underground language since everywhere you go can still hear it. Look at our commercials or even our Gahmen websites and social media – it is oso there. So why liddat?

As the pirate Chow Yun-fat in some filem sagely says, “Welcome to Singapore!” Singlish’s status is the tok kong metaphor for this real Singapore that chumchums the lawful and the unlawful, the said and the unsaid, the official and the subversive. Here got the full richness of Sinkie life in all its lawa and gila contradictions. It is where values and ideas get very the messy

and the different social layers acherly interact.

In this Singapore, our last time low-crass hawker culture can now become our yaya UNESCO-listed cultural heritage. In it, our leaders of a system that tekans Singlish can somehow be among its kilat speakers. Or consider the Sinkies who always how lian they bilingual or multilingual but, when it comes to Singlish, suddenly cannot. Terbalik got those we dismiss as bo tak chek – but some can spiak a whole range of local languages ler!

You see, the straight truth is this. What many say about Singapore is *neh* the whole reality, nor is, to be sure, what they dun say about it. One day, Singlish sure will tio enshrined as the island’s heritage language – but right now no lor. Singlish is what happens when not just Singapore’s official languages but hampalang languages and dialects used in it campur. It kapos their words lah, phrases lah, syntaxes lah, and transforms all these with wit and charm.

My this humble book series *The Leeter Spiaking Singlish* is something that more or less re-treads my original *Spiaking Singlish* from 2017. Wah, that one got sell macam hot kalipoks siol! But it has areas that still can make lagi steady such as its structure and its scope. Oso, unker fewls the material covered there needs some updating liao. So this one is same-same but different

– or maybe different-different but same? (Got anyone say liddis?)

I am now arranging my discussion by categories. Each volume got just a few chapters, so easier to digest and follow, but the chapters are oso *longer*, some even double their former lengths. Hampalang content is oso revised lah, boosted lah, and, where need be, corrected. New chapters sure must have one. The Singlish is cranked up, made lagi heow, because I fewl can liao lah. We can push this summere to achieve more Singlish huats.

The volume in your hands focuses on one sibeh tok kong feature in the spiaking of Singlish. It is the use of end-particles. I got say this many times liao. If you wan to learn Singlish, you can pick up all the funny words you suka – “teh siew dai” lah, “kopi-O kosong” lah, “alamak” lah, “steady pom pi pi” lah. That is a fun chow mugger’s way to learn, but dun expect to *sound* authentic lor. To be truly champion, you need to acquire the Sinkie accent.

You must oso know your Singlish end-particles – which, I tell you now, is *fifty per cent* of fluency. Unker no bedek you one. Master these, and you oredi halfway to becoming a solid Singlish speaker. Other Singlish words you may drop here drop there, but use just one end-particle salah and you pecah lobang. Everybawdy

will know you wayang king liao. Terbalik, if you spiak perfect England but, as your sentences end, you let slip zhun Singlish end-particles, we will know you Singlish can one. No use kay-kay!

Wait ah. Talk until now you know an end-particle is what anot? Simi sai ah? Well, a particle in any language is a unit that buay sai inflect – that is to say, cannot change to make a new, specific meaning. A noun in England can change from singular to plural by adding an “-s” or “-es”, tio bo? A verb can change by switching its tense, corright? So a noun or a verb is not a particle lor. While a particle may ownself not change, it can always link with other words to do this.

An *end*-particle is such a modifier that primarily comes at the end of a sentence or a clause. Its appearance changes the meaning of the whole construction – yes, it is that powderful one! In this book, we will look at a whole bunch of them: “lah”, “leh”, “ler”, “lor”, “loh”, “liao”, “ha”, “ah”, “hor”, “wor”, “mah”, “meh”, “siol”, “sial”, “sia”, “eh”, “nia”, “neh”, and “bah”. Some are long-long oredi got use although their uses may have evolved. Others are sibeh new even to my ears!

Got some pandai peepur claim “can”, “what”, and “one” are oso end-particles, but I dunno leh. “Can” in Singlish still works like an England modal verb what – except, when we ask a question, we can put it in front

or behind. So “Can we go kai kai?” and “We go kai kai, can?” are same-same. The case with “what” seems more related to the cow-peh form of “what” while “one” is so much more! Maybe we should talk about all these elsewhere.

I use the term “end-particle” to mark a departure from the normal term “sentence-final particle” cunning linguists got use. It is not to say that they are incompatible hor. Many East and Southeast Asian languages – from Mandarin and Japanese to Indonesian and Thai – got such sentence-final particles one. But I wish to free our Singlish ones from the restrictive senses tied to those. I see Singlish end-particles potentially and oredi doing more.

Flexibility and this freedom to be flexible must maintain for something that, at the centre, is still evolving. Unker is not exaggerating to say that today’s Singlish sure will not resemble macam Singlish in fifty years’ time. Just compare it now to how ah peks and ah mms remember spiaking when last time policemen wore shorts! So, insofar as we are dealing with a young language, we better get used to multiplicities and transformations lah.

As such, I try not to centralise the question of word origin since usage is negotiate – or we say chum siong – in multicultural societies one. Source informs as

anything historical informs, by providing an interesting note, but we cannot confuse it with *application*. Still hor, got some peepur so hung up on original meanings that they forget how language is a living thing. You just cannot turn back the clock to get speakers nowsaday to accept or keep to a set of meanings we no longer relate to lah.

In Singlish, as in any language, words that kena absorbed move away from their source meanings. Consider “goondu”, “pok kai”, and “shack” lor. These words have long-long gone on a journey of spontaneous transformation. Their uses and speowlings are macam in a dance, can change or, for a while, glance back, gain this meaning that meaning or lose old ones. With “lah”, if we focus on its Melayu and cheena senses nia, we will overlook how today it got meanings that dun fall into either. These are come from practical life ler.

Oso, a free hand must mean that words can always come and go. Words circulate as long as they still got their relevance. I may now hear new end-particles such as “bah” as once a pong a time I got hear “dong”, “deh”, “sih”, “siak”, and “siot”. My discussion here does not mean any end-particle is confirm-plus-chop will last or cannot change summore hor. In fact, one choobi development with regard to old end-particles is that they are

becoming *stackable*. Consider “The repairman cabut liao lah!” and “I sappork you mah hor?”

What is going on there siol? Saya tak tahu. Unker listens and writes books nia. I no create anything per se. So this is all I fewl I wan to say in an introduction. If got one thing I hope you can take away, it is this. Monoculture is shiok for clear, zhun meanings and for control over the whole linguistic field. But multiculturalism celebrates flux, ambiguity, and a broad range of meanings. A language *of* a multicultural society can think macam a homogeneous one anot? You say lah.

1

“LAH” YOUR HEAD LAH!

YOU KNOW WHAT IS the problem with Singlish’s street cred? Every joker who has ever heard it before thinks he or she can spiak it. Wah piang eh! Just ask that random ang moh who has been in Singapore for a few weeks. You may hear him or her how lian say, “You think I cannot speak Singlish lah?” Ang moh, acherly I dun think you cannot hor. I *know* – because that use of “lah” is sibeh salah.

Poor, poor “lah”! It has kena sai from so many lazy learners that sometimes we wonder maybe we still ang moh colony. Come on lah, show some respect to our Sinkie tongue, can? That line “Is ‘lah’ a note to follow ‘soh’?” not funny liao – we got hear it a gazillion times. Wilful ignorance liddis is not choobi, and yet all these

goondus still must ngeh-ngeh lai. “How go to Orchard Road lah?” “Lah your friend is so beautiful.” “The chicken rice nice-nice leh lah!”

What the *fiah!* (Yes, that is how to say the F word. “What the fish!” oso can.) “Lah” has to be macam among the most abused words in the history of abused words in the world. One time two times anyhowly nemmind, but dun say you love Singlish and then bo learn properly and keep talking cock. Tuan-tuan dan puan-puan, time we set the rules straight for the sake of all Sinkies’ sanity!

First, “lah” is used at the *end* of a sentence or a clause – almost nowhere else. Got one exception, but we will talk about it later. So no “Lah you is so funny” or “I take lah the bus home”. This is not French please, you bodoh. But you can say “Heck care him lah, let’s go!” or use with a filler like “OK”, as in “Please lah, OK?” (By the way, “Please lah” does not involve a request hor. It means “For God’s sake” – surprise!)

Second, nonid to use “lah” to end every freaking sentence lah. This point deserves a big aiyoh or aiyoyo, which we let out in dismay, shock, or impatience. One “lah” normally can liao – unless you wan to change the tone or to tneh. To tneh is to whimper. So it makes sense when you rugi money at a casino and tneh to a kawan, “Help me lah! Lend me money lah! Utang you

one time nia lah!” Otherwise, tolong dun go “lah, lah, lah”, can?

Third, “lah” is not bo meaning one. Dun be that kukujiao who treats it macam some slang form of address like “dude” or “babe” or “my man”. You certainly should not say “How are you lah?” when you mean “How are you, *bro*?” For that matter, no “Whazzup lah!” or “Yo lah!” ha. Can peepur dun anyhowly tembak and make Singlish speakers kolaveri until vomit blood?

Our “lah” is in part a Melayu suffix which works as an interjection or a command. So “Itulah” means “That’s it” while “Pergilah” means “Go away”. This “lah” can oso join with “to be” forms such as “ada” and “ialah”, creating here “adalah” and “ialah”. The most famous Melayu “lah” is the one in Singapore’s national anthem “Majulah Singapura” lor. The tok kong composer Zubir Said has the line “Marilah kita bersatu” – which translates as “Come *lah*, let us unite”.

But there is another major influence. Cheena peepur oso got a “lah” (啦), which comes at the end and in exclamations too. So someone who buay tahan being suanned may scream “Gòule la!” (“够了啦!”), or “Enough!” I got learn a use from Channel Eight dramas that goes “Tǎoyàn! Bùyào la!” (“讨厌! 不要啦!”), loosely translated as “Disgusting! I dowan!” Often it is tne-hing KTV hostesses who say one. This other lineage



can explain why “lah” is sometimes speowlt the Pinyin way, as “la”.

So the Singlish “lah” is acherly reflect Singapore’s cultural diversity wor! The Melayu “lah” softens the tone of a command or a request – although this is less true in Bahasa Indonesia, where counterparts such as “sih”, “dong”, and “deh” are milder. Meanwhile, the cheena “lah” is impolite and curt, as when we hear “Yea lah!” or “No lah!”... or maybe that oso comes from Indonesia one?

The sheer difference yoked in Singlish’s “lah” accounts for why it can be so expressive. It got multiple meanings, and each meaning is defined firstly by the

context at play. Depending on its point, “lah” can provoke reactions in listeners ranging from pek-checkness to shiokness. I identify its four main types here:

1. The *pleading* “lah” chuts exasperation. It appears in lines such as “Go away lah!” or “Go and die lah!”, oso “Pergi mampus lah!” The last two are just lagi jialat ways of saying get lost.
2. The *emphatic* “lah” is excited, angry, or shocked. You find it in, for example, “You see lah!”, which zooms in on you seeing – since, presumably, that is what you *deen* do. The cry means “Look what you did!” or “Deen I say to watch out!”
3. The *affirmative* “lah” is for rah-rah purposes one. It is heard in encouragements such as “Steady lah!” or “Solid lah!”, both of which mean “You’re amazing! Keep it up!” You can oso say “Siow lah!” – that is, “You’re positively mad!”
4. The only “lah” that need not follow the end-of-sentence or -clause rule is the *enumerative* “lah”. This “lah” oso neh comes once since it punctuates items in a list of at least two: “This lah, that lah” or “Here lah, there lah.” When asked “Where got

jamban?”, consider saying, “Level One lah, Level Two lah, Level Three lah...”

All these “lahs” can oso differentiate by tone. *None* of them involves the singsong “lah” from the film *The Sound of Music* hor. The pleading “lah” sounds like a deflating balloon: “laaah”. Can add vibration for effect. The emphatic “lah” is a spurt ending in a higher pitch, macam when something drops on your foot. The affirmative “lah” is a spurt too, but it pulls downwards after going up, showing the very control of fewling it signals. You can make the enumerative “lah” happy like bird or sian – so long as all instances sound same-same.

So, everybawdy – especially ang mohs – tolong, OK? Dun simi sai oso chut pattern and go “lah” lah. Some of you seriously pattern more than badminton. It hardly ennobles you and, in fact, makes you look stupiak even if you think you very can. Use “lah” must use sparingly and zhun-zhun lah. Study to get it tio. When at last you can, you sure will win over the sibeh easily wounded hearts of Sinkies faster than any HDB upgrading!