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BOOK REVIEW

DETERDING, David, *Singapore English* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. vii + 135, ISBN 978 0 7486 2545 1 (paperback).

This book is a valuable addition to the growing literature on Singapore English (SgE). Thoughtfully written in clear, simple language, Deterding discusses various features of informal SgE based on the recorded speech of Hui Min (a Singaporean lady), data from the National Institute of Education Corpus of Spoken Singapore English, and blog entries. The discussion is entirely descriptive; there is no trace of prescriptivism or negative judgment. Deterding, in fact, is careful to point out that some features of SgE (e.g. the use of [f] in place of [θ]) occur even in English-speaking countries.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first outlines the demographics and history of modern Singapore as well as the languages used in the country. The reader is also given details about the data used in the book.

Chapter 2 is the longest chapter, as might be expected of a work based largely on the analysis of recorded speech. It contains 26 sections,

covering, among other features, the pronunciation of dental fricatives, simplification of final consonant clusters, vocalization of [l], vowel length, stress, and intonation. Of particular interest is the measurement of the first two formants for the vowels in Hui Min's speech (pp. 23–25) to show the pairing of vowels in words such as *fleece* ~ *kit*, *dress* ~ *trap*, etc. The closeness of the vowel sounds in each pair suggests that they may be merged in informal speech so that there is no (or very little) vowel contrast in words such as *beat* and *bit*. This in turn suggests a reduced inventory of monophthongs in informal SgE (p. 26) as compared to British Received Pronunciation (RP).

The third chapter on morphology and syntax addresses the usual issues regarding inflectional suffixes, absence of the *be* verb, use of *already* as a perfective marker, and reduplication. Deterding also offers an insightful analysis of the use of *will* and *would* in SgE; the former is used for regular events (e.g. *She will babysit for other people*) and the latter to indicate tentativeness (e.g. *So if I can, I would hope to learn swimming*).

Chapter 4 focuses on discourse and lexis. He starts the chapter with the hypothesis that SgE is a topic-prominent language and discusses if this feature could be used to explain the presence of null-subject constructions in SgE. He argues that 'a link between the two phenomena

remains a real possibility' (p. 64). This is a rather strange comment to make since Tan's (2007) study, which he cites, found little correlation between the two. In fact, none of the examples used to illustrate topic prominence contains null subjects (p. 63).

In Chapter 4, Deterding also discusses the shifted meanings in some SgE words (e.g. *stay* to mean 'living somewhere permanently'). While some words do display meaning shifts (in the sense that they are not used in quite the same way in other major varieties of English), this need not be true of some of the examples cited by Deterding. For instance, Singaporeans use the word *retrenched* (p. 81) in more or less the same way as Australians do (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2005, p. 1250), and *marketing* (p. 81) as the Americans do (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, online). In what sense, then, *meaning shift*?

Chapter 5 outlines the recent history of English in Singapore and attitudes towards SgE. It discusses two approaches to the description of language variation in Singapore (expanding triangles vs. diglossia), the Singapore government's position on (colloquial) SgE, and the perception among Singaporeans of falling standards. The positioning of this chapter is out of place. The first two sections on the history and varieties of SgE are more suited for the introductory chapter; the last two sections on

present-day attitudes towards SgE, by contrast, are more suited as a conclusion to the book. It seems rather odd that the first half of this chapter, which contextualizes the discussion in Chapters 2 to 4, appears only in Chapter 5.

The bibliography in Chapter 6 is extremely useful. The books and papers are grouped according to topic areas (history, phonetics/phonology, etc.) for easy reference. I should add that Deterding's recent move to the University of Brunei Darussalam means that the first web-based bibliography mentioned on p. 94 is now no longer active. The new web address, a more permanent one, is given below:

<<http://videoweb.nie.edu.sg/phonetic/books/singapore-english-bibliography.htm>>

The final chapter presents the full transcript of the data used in the book. The sound files of the data are also available on the publisher's website:

<<http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/dialects/>>.

Deterding has done an excellent job summarizing the main features of SgE. Readers familiar with SgE might point out that the description is incomplete. For instance, some syntactic features of SgE (e.g. the *or not* tag, word order confusion in *I don't know what is this*) and the semantic

shift in the commonly-used *spoil* (e.g. *Don't spoil my computer*) are not mentioned at all in the book. One should note, however, that as he relied primarily on the speech of one individual (Hui Min), it would not be fair to expect him to provide a detailed list of all SgE features. As he himself acknowledges, the data are not representative of all Singaporean speakers.

While Deterding does supplement the speech data with recent blogs, he should however have exercised care to use those that are clearly written by Singaporeans and select only non-contrived samples. He cites an entry from Vicky's blog on p. 40, but a cursory glance at the blogger's other entries shows clearly that she is not a Singaporean. Another blog entry is the one by Divya Menon (p. 56). Although Divya is a Singaporean, her *Friendster* profile and other entries indicate that she was a student at Boston University and is now working in New York city. The entry that Deterding looked at is a contrived one, created by Divya to exemplify the lack of courtesy among some Singaporeans. A look at some of her other entries shows that she does not, at least in writing, use the features she included in her example.

Notwithstanding these issues, the book is a very useful account of SgE. It is concise and easy to read. It is, above all, a reflection of Deterding's typical careful and thoughtful analysis, helped by his extensive teaching experience in Singapore.

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