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Singapore Colloquial English: Issues of prestige and identity

FRANCESCO CAVALLARO*, NG BEE CHIN**, MARK FIFER SEILHAMER***

ABSTRACT: Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) or ‘Singlish’ is a variety very distinct from Singapore Standardised English (SSE), and its use is a polarising issue in Singaporean society. In stark contrast to the results of most language attitude studies in which non-standardised varieties are rated positively along solidarity dimensions, participants of matched-guise studies investigating Singaporean attitudes toward SCE have assigned lower solidarity ratings for SCE than for SSE. This is in stark contrast to anecdotal and public opinion that SCE is a language of solidarity and identity for most Singaporeans. By including participants from non-tertiary sectors and a wider range of stimulus guises as well as supplementing matched-guise results with interview data, this study seeks to reveal the covert prestige that SCE does, in fact, appear to enjoy in Singaporean society. While the matched-guise results of this study largely conform to previous findings, the interview data suggest that many participants were basing their ratings on perceptions of SCE use in the public domain rather than the private domain. The study has implications for the extent to which we can extrapolate results from matched-guise studies, a widely used instrument for the study of language attitudes in the last 50 years.

Keywords: Singapore English, matched-guise, status, solidarity, language and identity in Singapore, public domain, private domain

INTRODUCTION

Just what are Singaporeans’ true feelings about their own brand of colloquial English? This local variety, commonly referred to as Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) by linguists, but known as ‘Singlish’ to most Singaporeans, has faced relentless attacks by an ongoing government campaign intent upon its eradication, been banned from local media, and been branded a major obstacle to Singapore’s global competitiveness. Yet despite the maelstrom of scorn it has been subjected to, use of this misfit ‘step-tongue’ (Gupta 1994) proclaimed by many to be ‘the quintessential mark of Singaporean-ness’ (Chng 2003: 46) appears to be continuing unabated. In the city state’s streets, housing estates, and shopping malls, there indeed seems to be as much SCE/Singlish flowing from Singaporean lips as ever, and as Rubdy (2007: 308) reports, ‘the presence of the vernacular in the classroom continues to be robust.’ For this to be the case despite continuous denigration by officials, one would think that there must be a great deal of covert prestige (Trudgill 1972) attached to SCE use as a means of conveying solidarity and rapport among Singaporeans, and it has indeed been our experience that most Singaporeans, when asked directly about their attitudes toward SCE, characterize it as their unmarked code for comfortable informal interaction with one another. As one of our study participants put it, ‘I think it’s something natural. When you see a Singaporean, you will naturally speak Singlish.’ Such attitudes, however, were not evident in the results of a study by Cavallaro and Ng (2009) – one of the few studies of Singaporean attitudes toward Singapore English that utilized an indirect methodological approach. The participants of this study, contrary to the expectations of the researchers, assigned solidarity ratings for SCE that were actually lower than those assigned to Singapore’s standardised variety of English (SSE).

*Nanyang Technological University, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies, 14 Nanyang Drive, Singapore 637332, Singapore, Email: CFCavallaro@ntu.edu.sg

**Nanyang Technological University, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies, 14 Nanyang Drive, Singapore 637332, Singapore, Email: MBCNg@ntu.edu.sg

***Nanyang Technological University, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies, 14 Nanyang Drive, Singapore 637332, Singapore, Email: MSeilhamer@ntu.edu.sg

The indirect methodology that Cavallaro and Ng's (2009) study employed was the matched-guise (MG) technique, which, in its purest form, involves presenting study participants with recordings, or 'guises,' of one bilingual or bi-dialectal speaker reading passages that are identical in all aspects except for the variable under investigation, with distracter guises made by different speakers interspersed to obscure the fact that the speaker appearing in the focal guises is actually just one individual. As they listen to the different guises, participants rate each guise on a range of attributes, such as 'educated,' 'intelligent,' and 'honest,' and if the recorded guises have been carefully constructed to ensure that variables not being investigated, such as rate of speech or tone, are equivalent across the guises, participants' attitudes toward the variable under investigation should theoretically be revealed in their ratings.

In the half century since it was first introduced by Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, and Fillenbaum (1960), the MG technique has come to be regarded as the gold standard for indirectly gauging language attitudes. Considered indirect because it asks listeners to make judgments about character traits of the speakers rather than focusing attention on their language, the method has been most widely used in research on attitudes toward languages (e.g., El-Dash and Busnardo 2001; Bilaniuk 2003; Lai 2007), language varieties (e.g., Luhman 1990; Garrett, Williams, and Evans 2005), and accents (e.g., Giles 1970; Chia and Brown 2002). Researchers have also employed the technique to investigate attitudes toward a wide variety of other linguistic phenomena, such as lexical borrowings (Hassall, Murtisari, Donnelly, and Wood 2008), /ing/ & /ng/ variants (Campbell-Kibler 2007), 'new' quotatives *be like* & *go* (Buchstaller 2006), and codeswitching (Gibbons 1987; Lawson and Sachdev 2000).

Why is it that this technique has achieved such sustained and widespread use over the years? According to Hassall et al. (2008: 64), the appeal of the MG technique lies in the fact that 'it has so often proven its ability to tease out two separate dimensions of "competence/status" on the one hand and "solidarity" on the other.' This is indeed the case. In study after study (e.g., Giles 1970; 1971; Hiraga 2005), researchers utilizing the MG technique have found that participants consistently rate speakers of prestige languages, language varieties, and accents much higher than those of low prestige on 'competence/status' traits, such as 'educated' and 'intelligent,' while the speakers of low-prestige languages, language varieties, and accents are more often than not rated higher for 'solidarity' traits such as 'honest' and 'friendly.' Furthermore, the administration of multiple MG studies in some communities has revealed it to be quite reliable. As Tucker and Lambert (1969: 463-464) note, the technique 'seems trustworthy in the sense that the same profile of reactions emerges in repeated samples of a particular group.'

With the study reported on in this article, we set out to test the reliability of the MG technique in the Singapore context to see if it would produce 'the same profile of reactions' as was found in a prior MG study with participants from the same community. This prior study is, of course, the aforementioned one by Cavallaro and Ng (2009), in which 75 adult Singaporean participants rated SCE guises lower than SSE guises not only for status traits, but for solidarity traits as well. These findings perplexed us, as they not only differ from the usual MG pattern of low-prestige varieties being rated higher than high-prestige varieties for solidarity traits, but also sharply contrast with the lived reality we experience and witness every day in Singapore society – Singaporeans projecting their local identity and establishing solidarity with their Singaporean interlocutors through the use of SCE in informal contexts.

SINGAPORE ENGLISH AND PREVIOUS STUDIES OF ATTITUDES TOWARD IT

Tourists to Singapore are likely to notice, within just a few minutes after arriving in the city state, that, broadly speaking, there are two varieties of Singapore English – SSE and SCE (Platt 1977; Richards and Tay 1977; Gupta 1994; Bao and Hong 2006), and that these two varieties follow (again, broadly speaking) diglossic patterns of use (Richards 1983; Gupta 1989, 1994; Pakir 1991). At an airport car rental desk, for example, our visitors might be greeted and have their car rental options explained to them by a Singaporean staff member using SSE, which closely resembles Standardised British English, but has its own phonological patterns (Wee 2004a; Deterding 2005), as well as a number of distinct morphological and syntactic features (Wee 2004b). Upon completing their customer service interaction, the visitors may subsequently notice this same staff member engaged in informal banter with a co-worker using SCE, a variety which our visitors might not find terribly comprehensible due to its extensive substrate influence from local languages such as Malay and Hokkien. A vast body of literature documenting SCE features, such as its pragmatic particles (e.g., Lim 2004; Wee 2004b), lexical productivity (e.g., Low and Brown 2005; Leimgruber 2011), substrate-influenced syntax (e.g., Alsagoff and Ho 1998; Bao and Wee 1999), and phonology (e.g., Lim 2004; Deterding 2005), has collectively made a strong case that SCE is indeed highly systematic and should be considered a legitimate variety of English in its own right.

A sizeable portion of the Singapore public, however, remain unconvinced and continue to view SCE as nothing more than ‘bad’ or ‘broken’ English. This is the attitude that has been encouraged by Singapore’s government and its Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), an ongoing campaign that has, since 2000, promoted the learning and use of SSE and, until recently, explicitly demonized SCE as an impediment to economic growth and prosperity, with official discourse such as the following from former prime minister Goh Chok Tong at the SGEM’s initial launch:

Investors will hesitate to come over if their supervisors and managers can only guess what our workers are saying. We will find it difficult to be an education and financial centre. Our TV programmes and films will find it hard to succeed in overseas markets because viewers overseas do not understand Singlish – this will affect our aim to be a first-world economy (Goh 2000).

Heated debates have been ongoing between Singaporeans who take the government’s position, stressing international intelligibility, and those that argue for the preservation of SCE on the grounds that it is a vital means of expressing Singaporean identity. These debates are often waged in public forums, such as Internet blogs and local newspapers, making a great deal of SCE attitude data readily available for discourse analysis. Rubdy (2001), Chng (2003), and Bokhorst-Heng (2005) are prime examples to this sort of approach to evaluating public sentiments toward the varieties of English spoken in Singapore. All three present voices from both sides of the debate and examine the ideological underpinnings of those positions, while pointing out that the voices passionately advocating SCE use on identity grounds tend to be those of well-educated Singaporeans with the ability to switch between SCE and SSE with ease – thus highlighting the fact that the segment of the population for whom SCE is the only available English variety has not publically taken part in this debate at all.

There have also, over the years, been quite a few studies of Singaporean’s attitudes toward Singapore English that have directly elicited opinions from participants through questionnaires and surveys. Kamwangamalu (1992), for example, used questionnaires to examine attitudes toward English accents, finding that participants held very positive views of Singaporean-accented standardised English and related more to it than British or American-accented English, but nevertheless highly valued British and American-accented English due to the prestige associated with them. Direct methodological studies in Singapore have also focused on attitudes to English in relation to other languages in Singaporeans’ linguistic repertoires. Xu, Chew, and

Chen (1998), for instance, used surveys and observation to investigate Chinese Singaporean attitudes to English and Mandarin Chinese, finding that their participants held both languages in high regard, but for different reasons, with English valued for its power and prestige and Mandarin Chinese for its solidarity functions. A notable questionnaire study focusing on attitudes to SCE *vis-à-vis* SSE is Chew (2007). The majority of this study's 1,205 participants reported using SCE daily, but overwhelmingly rated it as their 'least important' language, and, when forced to make an absolute choice between *only* speaking SCE or *only* SSE, 96% chose SSE. Chew (200: 89) attributes these results to a pragmatic Singapore populace, commenting that 'there are many other variables [besides Singlish] that make up a Singaporean identity, chief of which appears to be a materialistic mind-set.'

One limitation of Chew's study and most others that employ direct methodology is that participants' responses are based on their individual conceptualizations of what constitutes terms such as 'Singlish,' 'Singapore English,' or 'Singapore-accented English,' when there is, in fact, a huge amount of variation possible within any of these categories. On this count, attitude studies utilizing indirect methods like the MG technique are preferable in that all participants in MG studies are responding to the same recorded stimuli. While not plentiful, there have been a few MG and modified MG¹ studies involving Singapore English. An early one by Goh (1983) investigated attitudes to various Singapore English accents and English spoken with a British accent, with the British-accented English found to be the most favoured, followed by the Singapore-accented English that most resembled the British accent. The Singapore-accented English guises that received the lowest rankings were those that were identifiable as Chinese-educated Singaporeans². While the accents for the guises used in this study varied, it must be noted that all featured standardised varieties of English. As Goh (1983: 255) points out, 'During the recording [of the guises], all speakers were conscious of their role and tried to speak "good" English.' Chia and Brown (2002) likewise used only standardised English guises in their MG study, asking participants to evaluate speakers with British Received Pronunciation (RP) accents, Singaporean accents, and Estuary English pronunciation. In this study, the Singapore accent was rated considerably lower than RP, but much higher than Estuary English, leading the researchers to conclude that the Singapore English accent stood a better chance of being accepted as a teaching model for pronunciation in Singapore than the Estuary English accent.

Besides Cavallaro and Ng (2009), the only published Singapore English MG study to involve SCE is Tan and Tan (2008), which combined indirect MG methodology with a questionnaire that directly elicited attitudinal information from their secondary school participants. In their evaluation of three guises (standardised American English, SSE, and SCE), these student participants gave the SSE guise far more favourable ratings than the standardised American English or SCE guises on *all* traits. SSE, the researchers surmised, likely provided a Singaporean accent the students could identify with, while also conveying all the status and prestige of any other standardised variety. This evaluation of SSE over SCE is consistent with the results obtained by Cavallaro and Ng (2009), but this study also affords us a view of SCE attitudes relative to those of standardised American English. Standardised American English was rated slightly higher for status traits and SCE slightly higher for 'friendliness,' but in many cases, the differences were not statistically significant. In their questionnaire responses, participants reported that they valued both SSE and SCE, revealing an acute awareness of appropriate audiences and settings for each variety. Use of SCE with mathematics teachers, for example, was deemed far more acceptable than with English teachers. Observing that the participants 'seem to want to carve out a space for Singlish in some finely calibrated contexts,' Tan and Tan (2008: 477) concluded that their responses 'clearly indicate that there are occasions when some Singlish is appropriate, as well as occasions when it is not.'

ADDRESSING THE LIMITATIONS OF CAVALLARO AND NG'S (2009) STUDY

Cavallaro and Ng (2009) acknowledge that their study had several limitations – namely a small sample size (only 75 Singaporean participants), the fact that the status-stressing university environment where the study was conducted might have affected participants' ratings, and, since the focal guises were made by just one (Female) speaker, it was impossible to determine whether the speaker's gender or age might have played a part in determining participants' ratings. For the present study, we have attempted to address these limitations and add additional variables so as to allow for more detailed analysis.

The present study, first of all, differs from Cavallaro and Ng (2009) with regard to the sample of participants. Not only did this study involve more than three times as many Singaporean participants as Cavallaro and Ng (2009), but these participants came from two separate demographic groups. While half of the participants were university students taking part in the study on-campus, the other half were Singaporeans with no university education participating off-campus. The inclusion of the off-campus less-educated group provides us with additional variables for a more detailed analysis and also addresses the issue of the university environment possibly affecting MG results³.

We also addressed, in the present study, limitations that were due to the MG stimulus recordings employed in the Cavallaro and Ng (2009) study. Besides the distracter guises, Cavallaro and Ng (2009) only presented participants with two guises – one SSE and one SCE – both made by the same female speaker. Given the fact that Andrews (2003), examining attitudes toward standardised and non-standardised varieties of Russian and English, and Street, Brady, and Lee (1984), in a study focusing on the effects of speech rate on language attitudes, both found gender of guises to have a substantial impact on participants' social attractiveness ratings, we decided to include, in the present study, guises by both male and female speakers. Additionally, since the term 'Singlish' is actually used to refer to a huge continuum ranging from speech with just a few pragmatic particles peppering otherwise standardised English to speech consisting of more Hokkien than English influences⁴, we saw fit to expand upon the single guise representation of SCE presented to Cavallaro and Ng's (2009) participants. While the guises used in this study that we term 'SCE' would fall at roughly the same spot on the Singlish continuum as the SCE guise used by Cavallaro and Ng (2009) and would, for the most part, be intelligible to non-Singaporean listeners, an additional pair of guises featuring a liberal smattering of Hokkien lexical items was also used. We will here refer to the variety represented in these guises as Basilectal SCE⁵.

Our study design then not only allows us to compare responses from two groups with varying education levels, but also, by providing these participants a much wider range of stimulus guises to respond to, allows for a much more fine-grained analysis of responses. With the greater number of variables and much larger sample size, it was our hope that this study would be able to shed some light on the perplexing MG results obtained in Cavallaro and Ng's (2009) study and perhaps reveal the covert prestige that we sense SCE does, in fact, enjoy in Singaporean society.

While colloquial language varieties are stigmatized to varying degrees in most societies, MG studies, as we mentioned earlier, typically reveal covert prestige for these varieties in the form of high ratings for solidarity traits, such as 'friendly' or 'sociable.' Such results are exemplified by Hiraga's (2005) MG study examining attitudes to RP and other varieties of English, such as York English (see Figure 1). While Hiraga (2005) unsurprisingly found RP to be bestowed with great overt prestige, enjoying high ratings for status traits, such as 'educated' and 'intelligent,' York English ratings for solidarity traits surpassed those of RP, producing the cross-over seen in the visual representation of the ratings in Figure 1. This preference for colloquial language varieties for solidarity traits is the typical MG result and we thought that the results of this study might show a similar pattern, making those of Cavallaro and Ng (2009) an anomaly.

Figure 1. Matched Guise ratings for Status Traits (Hiraga, 2005)

THE PRESENT STUDY

Participants

259 participants were recruited through convenience sampling for this study. 129 were undergraduates studying at Nanyang Technological University who did the study on-campus, while the other 130 respondents were adults in their 20s and 30s without university education who did the study off-campus. The gender distribution was balanced for both groups with a mean age of 21.38 ($SD = 2.13$) for the on-campus portion of the study and a mean age of 31.97 ($SD = 15.15$) for the portion conducted off-campus. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants according to education and gender.

Table 1. Distribution of participants by education and gender

Variable	Grouping	N
Education	University students	129
	Without university education	130
Gender of Participants	Male	131
	Female	128

Guises

One male speaker and one female speaker were used to provide the stimulus guises for this study. The male and female speakers were each asked to make three recordings – one using SSE, one using SCE, and one using Basilectal SCE. Two additional speakers, one male and one female, recorded guises to serve as distracters. For the recording of these distracter guises, the speakers were simply asked to speak like they do in everyday conversation. In total, eight guises were recorded, all based on a topic deemed to be sufficiently neutral – the four speakers spontaneously spoke about occasions in which they had gotten lost.

A trial on the six focal guises was conducted to verify whether there were, in fact, distinct differences between the three types of guises (i.e. SSE, SCE and Basilectal SCE) and to evaluate their naturalness. The

three female guises were tested with a group of 10 male and 10 female Singaporeans, while the three male guises were tested with a separate group, also comprised of 10 males and 10 females. The guises were played in random order, and these trial participants were asked “Which speaker did you feel spoke the most standard English?” All 40 respondents selected the SSE guises as the most standardised English, ranking them as 10 on a scale of 1 (most non-standardised) to 10 (most standardised). They were then instructed to rate the SCE and Basilectal SCE guises on the degree to which they were perceived to be ‘standard’ language using the SSE guises as a benchmark. The results are tabulated in Table 2. In response to the question *Which speaker do you think sounds more like how normal Singaporeans speak (i.e. more typical of Singaporean speech)?*, all 40 respondents selected the SCE guises as more typical. Lastly, the trial participants were asked to comment on the naturalness of the three guises they listened to, and based on these comments, the three types of guises were deemed both distinct from each other and sufficiently natural-sounding for use in the study.

Table 2. Mean ‘standardness’ ratings in trials of the six focal guises (N = 40)

	Female Guises [M(SD)]	Male Guises [M(SD)]
SSE Speaker	10.00 (.00)	10.00 (.00)
SCE Speaker	5.25 (.44)	5.35 (.75)
Basilectal SCE Speaker	2.70 (.47)	2.00 (.80)

Procedure

All participants, regardless of whether they completed the study on or off-campus, went through the same procedure. They listened to the eight guises (in different randomized orders for the various administrations of the study – seven groups on-campus and six off-campus) and after hearing each guise in its entirety, were given one minute to spontaneously rate the speaker on ten traits (e.g., intelligent, confident, friendly) using a seven-point Likert scale in which (1) represented the lower end (e.g., not at all friendly) and (7) represented the higher end (e.g., extremely friendly). In addition, 133 of the participants (64 of the university students and 69 without university education) were subsequently asked the following questions:

- (1) When you were listening to the taped recordings and doing your ratings, what were some reasons which influenced your rating? For example, why did you think that some of the speakers were ‘friendly’, ‘kind’, ‘successful’ or ‘important’?
- (2) Do you have any other comments about the way English is spoken in Singapore? For example, do you think we all should sound like Standard Singapore English speakers?

Although these interviews were quite brief (ranging between two and six minutes), participants’ responses to these questions do complement the MG results quite nicely, providing further insights into their ratings and attitudes toward SCE.

Results

The results obtained in this study conformed to the widely-reported trends of other MG studies to the extent that factor analysis did reveal clustering of responses along the dimensions of status and solidarity. After two tests, *Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity* and the *Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy*, revealed that there was a sufficient relationship between the individual traits, Factor Analysis was performed on these 10 traits for both the male and female guises. Using *Principal Component Analysis* and *Promax with Kaiser Normalization* as a rotation method, two factors explaining 67.14% of the total variance for the male guises and 68.93% for the female guises were extracted (all eigenvalues >1). These two factors were labeled ‘Status’ and ‘Solidarity.’ As shown in Tables 3a and 3b, the male guise ‘helpful’ trait and the female guise ‘reliable’ trait had double loadings, appearing in both the ‘Status’ and ‘Solidarity’ dimensions. As such, these two traits were excluded from further analysis. –

Table 3a. Factor loadings of male guises

Traits	Factor 1 (Status)	Factor 2 (Solidarity)
Ambitious	.945	–
Intelligent	.914	–
Confident	.776	–
Hard Worker	.702	–
Reliable	.641	–
Friendly	–	.935
Likeable	–	.882
Honest	–	.755
Kind	–	.747
Helpful (excluded from further analysis)	.435	.462
Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings	4.58	4.38

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization. Only loadings above .4 are displayed.

Table 3b. Factor loadings of female guises

Traits	Factor 1 (Solidarity)	Factor 2 (Status)
Kind	.970	–
Friendly	.915	–
Likeable	.748	–
Honest	.733	–
Helpful	.656	–
Ambitious	–	1.021
Confident	–	.797
Intelligent	–	.792
Hard Worker	–	.522
Reliable (excluded from further analysis)	.413	.489
Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings	5.16	4.67

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization. Only loadings above .4 are displayed.

The SSE-SCE-BSCE continuum

This study is a doubly-multivariate one in which the independent variables are in a 2 (gender of guise: male and female) by 3 (type of guise: SSE, SCE and Basilectal SCE) within-subjects design. Across all participants (regardless of education level and gender), there was a significant main effect between SSE, SCE and Basilectal SCE guises [$F(2,496) = 323.266$, $p < .05$]. A Paired Samples T-test revealed that within SSE guises, Status traits ($M = 4.89$, $SD = .76$) were rated higher than Solidarity traits ($M = 4.83$, $SD = .76$); $t(254) = 1.223$,

$p=.223$ (two-tailed), but not significantly so, and within SCE guises, Solidarity traits ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .81$) were rated significantly higher than Status traits ($M = 3.68$, $SD = .79$); $t(257) = -13.03$, $p < .05$ (two-tailed). Similarly, for Basilectal SCE guises, Solidarity traits ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.00$) were rated significantly higher than Status traits ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .85$); $t(254) = -14.22$, $p < .05$ (two-tailed). That SSE would be associated more with status and that SCE and Basilectal SCE more with solidarity is, of course, not surprising. More surprising, but consonant with the results of Cavallaro and Ng (2009), is the fact that, across all participants, SSE received higher ratings than SCE and Basilectal SCE for both Status and Solidarity traits. A Bonferroni-corrected test of pairwise comparisons showed that for Status traits, SSE ($M = 4.89$, $SD = .76$) was rated higher than both SCE ($M = 3.67$, $SD = .78$) and Basilectal SCE ($M = 3.08$, $SD = .85$), and SCE was rated higher than Basilectal SCE. Similarly, for Solidarity traits, SSE ($M = 4.83$, $SD = .76$) was rated higher than both SCE ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .81$) and Basilectal SCE ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.00$), and SCE was rated higher than Basilectal SCE.

Figures 2a and 2b, showing the mean ratings for male and female guises, illustrate the clear attitudinal hierarchy of participants' responses to the three guise types. While SCE and Basilectal SCE guise ratings do spike upward for the traits that make up the Solidarity dimension and for some traits do come quite close to the SSE ratings, at no point do they ever surpass the ratings for SSE, as is normally the case for MG studies of attitudes toward standardised and colloquial language varieties, such as Hiraga (2005), depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 2a. Mean Ratings for Male Guises

Figure 2b. Mean Ratings for Female Guises

Gender and education

Differences between the ratings of male and female participants were not found to be statistically significant, but there were significant differences between ratings for male and female guises [$F(1, 248) = 7.084, p < .05$] across all participants (regardless of education level and participants' gender). A follow-up paired-sample t-test of the Status and Solidarity dimensions revealed that participants rated male guises higher than female guises for both Status [$t(254) = 4.140, p < .05$] and Solidarity [$t(253) = 0.686, p = .493$]. The difference for Solidarity traits, however, was not statistically significant.

Thus far, all of the results reported here seem to completely confirm the findings of Cavallaro and Ng (2009), with the participants of this study, when viewed as one group, rating both varieties of SCE lower than SSE for both Status and Solidarity traits. When we view the ratings of university student participants and those without university education individually, however, a slightly different picture emerges. Separate analysis of ratings by university student participants and those without university education revealed that there was a significant difference in how these two groups rated the guises [$F(1, 248) = 8.533, p < .01$]. Analysis of the Status and Solidarity dimensions separately showed that education level had a significant effect for Status [$F(1, 248) = 4.639, p < .05$] and Solidarity [$F(1, 248) = 9.828, p < .05$] in that university student participants rated all guises higher on both Status and Solidarity than those without university education. Figure 3 shows the mean ratings of all guises for both groups. The lines representing the ratings of the two groups are parallel and both slant upwards, indicating that all participants in both groups rated all the guises (Male/female, SSE/SCE/Basilectal SCE) higher for the Solidarity dimension than the Status dimension.

Figure3. All Guises by Education Level

There was also a significant interaction effect [$F(2,496) = 2.138, p=.119$] between education level and type of guise (SSE, SCE, Basilectal SCE). Although there was no significant difference between university and non-university students' Solidarity ratings for SSE ($p=.727$), university student participants rated SCE ($p<.05$) and Basilectal SCE ($p<.001$) significantly higher for Solidarity than participants without university education. Further analysis of the two groups' separate evaluations of male and female guises revealed that university students did, in fact, rate the male SCE guise higher than the male SSE guise for some Solidarity traits, producing a bit of the Solidarity 'cross-over' typical of MG studies. See Figure 4a below, showing mean ratings for each trait by both university students and participants without university education.

Figure 4a. Mean Ratings of Male Guises by Education Level

While the university students did rate the male SSE guise higher than the male SCE guise for ‘kindness,’ they rated the SCE guise higher for the other Solidarity traits – ‘friendly,’ ‘likeable,’ and ‘honest.’ For ‘honest,’ even the Basilectal SCE guise received a slightly higher mean rating than the SSE guise. While these university student Solidarity ratings for male guises do contrast sharply with those of participants without university education, a paired-samples t-test revealed the difference between male guise SSE and SCE ratings by university students to be statistically insignificant [$t(126) = -.581, p=.000$], indicating no attitudinal difference between SSE and SCE for Solidarity traits. In contrast, the same university student participants did show a clear preference for SSE in their ratings of female guises, where the difference between SSE and SCE guises was indeed found to be significant [$t(128) = 9.758, p<.05$](see figure 4b).

Figure 4b. Mean Ratings of Female Guises by Education Level

This study's findings then do conform to those of Cavallaro and Ng (2009), which featured only female guises and included only university student participants. Like the university student participants in that prior study, this study's participants (both university students and those without university education) rated the female SSE guise significantly higher than the female SCE guise for both Status and Solidarity traits. For our participants without university education, this was also the case for male guises. The fact that male guise Solidarity trait ratings by our university student participants did not quite follow this pattern, however, indicates that SCE does in fact convey some degree of covert prestige in at least one segment of Singaporean society, and that Singaporeans, like the Russians and Americans investigated by Andrews (2003), are less permissive of non-standardised language use by females than males.

Information gleaned from brief interviews

In their responses to the first question asking what reasons influenced their ratings, the vast majority (123) of the 133 interviewed participants told us that language factors did indeed influence their decisions. The detail of the explanations they volunteered, however, varied. 76 explicitly stated that they rated SSE speakers higher for Status traits, such as 'educated' and 'intelligent,' and 51 said that they gave SCE and Basilectal SCE speakers higher scores for Solidarity traits like 'friendly' and 'honest.' Four interviewees mentioned factors that led them to give SSE speakers lower scores for Solidarity traits with comments like 'I found those who spoke very standard English to be a bit standoffish.' 17 (13 university students and four without tertiary education) disparaged Basilectal SCE along both Status and Solidarity dimensions, often citing *ah beng/ah lian*⁶ associations.

The second question asking interviewees to provide additional comments on the way English is spoken in Singapore revealed a wide range of overtly stated attitudes. While very favourable views of SCE were expressed by both the university students and those without university education, they were certainly more prevalent among the university students interviewed. Most of these comments by both groups, as the following examples illustrate, explicitly tied SCE with Singaporean identity:

As a Singaporean, Singlish really plays a large part of our identity (Male university student). It's a part of us and we grow up with it. I think just by changing it, it'll be like getting rid of a part of our identity (Male university student).

I think it's okay for Singaporeans to speak Singlish as I think that it is a part of what makes us Singaporeans (Female without university education).

Singaporeans don't need to speak standard English as in we don't have to speak perfect English 'cause we are Singapore. It's really okay to speak Singlish lah, so that we can have some form of identity (Female without university education).

A few of the interviewed participants went so far as to endorse SCE use beyond Singapore's borders or with non-Singaporeans:

It defines us as Singaporeans...I think we should introduce our culture to the rest of the world (Male university student).

When we are speaking Singlish to them [foreigners], we are showing them our culture. It's part of us. But that is provided they understand Singlish (Male university student).

Such views advocating SCE use internationally or with non-Singaporeans, however, were rare. The vast majority of those voicing pro-SCE sentiments did so with the disclaimer that its use should be restricted to informal situations, and some stipulated use only with friends and family members. The following comments are typical examples of comments from the 53.1% of university student interviewees and 26.1% of interviewees without university education who expressed this opinion:

It's fine if you talk, like, Singlish and everything for socializing at home, with friends...but when you have to do your work, then I think perfect English is the way to go (Male university student).

People need to know when to use Singlish and when not to use Singlish. I think Singlish is fine – just know when to use it...It's like an internal thing (Female university student).

When we use Singlish, it's more of with our friends, with people who we are close to because we are more relaxed with them. So naturally Singlish comes up...I think that would depend on the situation as well, because it's like when we are with our friends, we don't want to sound too formal as well, but when you are talking to a business partner, going for an interview, you definitely would want to sound like 'hire me! I'm professional enough for the job!' – that kind of stuff (Female without university education).

Some interviewees expressed views of SCE that were neither especially positive nor negative. Among this group, 'okay' or 'fine' were the most commonly used descriptors, and even this lukewarm approval was often accompanied by the provision that SCE use be limited to 'a little bit.' Some that we grouped in this middle category also expressed the opinion that SCE use was simply unavoidable in Singapore, so they might as well just accept that fact, whether they liked it or not. The following are examples of a few of these rather ambivalent views, which were far more prevalent among interviewees without university education:

I would say that using Singlish in the way we talk is okay – just that you don't overdo it (Male without university education).

I think there's no need to totally eradicate it. Maybe 80% of us can speak good English. It should be okay...Singlish or English should be okay. Both are fine (Male without university education).

Singlish has been part of my life and everybody around me and I think there is no way out. We can't get out of this style of speaking...It's just part of us – especially when we communicate among ourselves...trying to get out of this Singlish, I think it's not possible in my lifetime (Male without university education).

...it's ingrained in us...so ya, you can't escape from it, so I don't think all speakers can sound like the standard Singapore English speakers (Female without university education).

Finally, while only 1.6% of university student interviewees (just one participant) expressed blatantly anti-SCE views, a substantial 31.9% of those without university education voiced opinions that fell decidedly in this category. Some of these comments, such as the following, disparaged SCE on purely prescriptive grounds:

You are abusing the language and destroying the English language (Male without university education).

They should speak proper English and not Singlish, which I am against...Actually when you speak Singlish, it's not right. It's not the proper English that you speak (Female without university education).

Others chose to highlight the need to speak standardised English in order to set a good example for children and to reflect well on Singapore internationally, as illustrated in these examples:

If you implant all this Singlish since the day [children] were born, it actually gives them the feeling that it's alright for them to speak Singlish. And when they grow up, they may feel that 'Aiya, Singlish is a part of my daily life,' which I don't think so (Female without university education).

We should be speaking in proper English...not English added with dialects. I think we shouldn't encourage that – especially on TV...that is going to affect our younger generations – all the children. It's a very bad encouragement (Female without university education).

In order to put a good image across for our foreign friends, American friends and such, we need to put across in such a way that we can communicate with them effectively because for the Americans, they have never heard Singlish in their life (Male without university education).

Table 4 summarises the distribution of responses from each of the categories just discussed.

Table 4. Comments on the way English is spoken in Singapore					
	Pro-SCE	Pro-SCE only for informal contexts	Not especially positive or negative	Anti-SCE	Responses too vague to categorise
University Student Participants (n = 64)	29.7%	53.1%	9.4%	1.6%	6.2%
Participants without tertiary education (n = 69)	18.8%	26.1%	23.2%	31.9%	0%

DISCUSSION

Clearly, the use of Singlish (in its various incarnations along the SCE continuum) is a polarising issue among Singaporeans. While the majority do seem to view it positively, at least when used in informal contexts, and many are, in fact, quick to proclaim it a distinct representation of Singaporean culture and identity, a substantial portion of the society, which this study's findings suggest could largely be less-educated Singaporeans, hold decidedly anti-Singlish views. This would seem to be the group with which the SGEM's pro-SSE/anti-SCE message has made the biggest impression – those who have had fewer opportunities to acquire proficiency in SSE, and hence, yearn for the upward mobility that this prestige variety promises.

Even when those with hostile feelings toward Singlish are taken into account, however, one would expect SCE to have fared better than it did for MG Solidarity ratings, given the high degree of favourable sentiment that seemed to, in fact, be quite prevalent among our participants. This discrepancy, we believe, can best be explained by the fact that most Singaporeans feel strongly that SCE use should be restricted to the private domain. Those who have such high regard for SCE that they feel it should be used with non-Singaporeans and spread beyond Singapore's borders are definitely few and far between. The vast majority, while identifying strongly with the variety, feel it should only be used with family and close friends. Although the guise topic of 'getting lost' chosen for this study could be considered context neutral, not particularly out of place in the public or private domain, we of course had no control over what contexts our participants were envisioning as they listened to and rated the guise speakers. Some comments made by interviewees indicate that they were, in fact, envisioning public domain use. The most direct evidence of this is the interviewee who, upon being asked why he rated some speakers as kind or unkind, replied:

Okay, for those people who are not so kind, right, is because they are going to speak to foreigners, right, in Singlish. It won't sound kind to them when they speak to them. Like, let's say you're speaking to an American. They will sound quite strange to them – I mean not kind (Male without university education).

This interviewee went on to express a very favorable view of SCE, stating, 'We should have our own language – Singlish...I speak Singlish to my friends to have a closer bond with them.' When listening to the SCE guises, however, he apparently pictured the speakers addressing foreigners in the public domain rather than friends in the private domain and rated the guises accordingly. While no other interviewees explicitly revealed the situations or interlocutors that they envisioned for guise speaker interactions, many were clearly preoccupied with projecting a positive image of Singapore internationally and SCE use with non-Singaporeans was mentioned repeatedly. Of the 133 interviewees, 59 (44%) made statements regarding these issues. Like the interviewee quoted above, quite a few that expressed extremely favourable views toward SCE, added disclaimers about its use with foreigners. The following is another such example:

I also speak Singlish with my friends too, and it really gives us a special identity...but if we are going to speak to foreigner, it would be better to speak in proper English (Female without university education).

The issue of projecting a positive image of Singapore internationally appeared to be a prime consideration for interviewees, for statements such as the following appeared again and again:

A bit of Singlish would be acceptable, but it does not help our country develop in international relations in terms of like showing we are a developed society (Male without university education). When you work outside and people will think that if you speak a poor English, people will think that Singapore doesn't really provide a good education (Female without university education).

Such views reflect the way English has been constructed ideologically in Singapore's language policies. The government's strategy for addressing the inevitable tension between competing internationalisation and

national identity perspectives has always involved the ‘ideological polarisation of language’ (Bokhorst-Heng 2005: 191) in which the ‘mother tongue’⁷ languages, Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, are allocated the functions of intra-ethnic communication and the maintenance of cultural identity, while English is reserved for inter-ethnic and international communication. Within this ideological construction, there is no space for any variety of English to be granted a national identity role, and years of government discourse stressing the role of English for international communication have undoubtedly impacted the views of Singaporeans – even those who do regard SCE as a cherished marker of national identity.

When we have presented the results of our MG study in undergraduate university classes and elicited student feedback, a common response among our Singaporean students has been that if they were able to identify an SCE guise as a friend or family member, they would unquestionably give the speaker high solidarity ratings, whereas this would not necessarily be the case for a stranger’s voice. Being able to identify the guise as a friend or family member would, of course, eliminate any contextual ambiguity, locating the guise interaction squarely in the private domain. In their MG study with Singaporean junior high school participants, Tan and Tan (2008: 475), in contrast, led their participants to envision guise interactions taking place in the public domain through questionnaire items asking questions like, ‘Do you feel it is appropriate for a Maths teacher to speak like this person?’ For future MG studies investigating SCE/SSE attitudes among Singaporeans, researchers should take into account the ideal of rigid private/public domain boundaries being maintained, and design their studies accordingly.

CONCLUSION

Given the very much divided sentiments among Singaporeans and the view, even among many strident SCE supporters, that its use should be restricted to the private domain, what does the future hold for SCE in Singapore? While neither the internationalisation nor the national identity perspective is likely to emerge victorious, rendering SCE a casualty or a universal source of national pride, and debates will surely rage on among the public, the government does appear to have relaxed its anti-SCE position somewhat. In an about face from their previous tactic of pitting Singlish and ‘good English’ against each other, denying any possibility that the two could ever co-exist (Bokhorst-Heng 2005; Lim 2009), the organizers of the SGEM have, in the last two years, made a point of stressing that their goal ‘is not to suppress colloquial English or Singlish...but to equip the young with the basics of good English so that they are able to “code-switch” from one language to another easily’ (CNA 2011: para. 5). During the first four years after its launch in 2000, one of the stated aims of the SGEM was ‘to help Singaporeans move away from the use of Singlish’ (SGEM 2013). The fact that this goal ceased to be explicitly stated in official media releases after 2004 and has now been, in effect, renounced by SGEM organizers suggests a realisation by someone in a position of authority that Singaporeans’ allegiance to their own nativised variety of English might have been underestimated, and that demonizing it could actually backfire, provoking a flood of pro-Singlish sentiment. While this degree of SCE allegiance is not evident in our MG results, the qualitative data from interviews indicate that Singaporeans’ relationship with SCE is indeed a complex one, and the prestige of SCE may, in fact, be entirely too covert for matched-guise detection.

NOTES

1. In cases where it is not practical or impossible to find one speaker who can convincingly speak or imitate all the languages or language varieties under investigation, different speakers are often used to record the guises in studies that otherwise follow the pure MG methodology. Such studies are known as *verbal guise* studies.
2. At the time this study was conducted, most parents had stopped enrolling their children in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil-medium schools, but some did still exist. All Singapore public schools have been English-medium since 1987. For details on how Singapore's education policies have evolved, see Dixon (2005).
3. We do acknowledge, however, that it would be impossible to determine whether variance in the results obtained by the two groups would be due to differing education/socio-economic status or differing sites of study administration (on-campus status-stressing environment versus off-campus non-status-stressing environment).
4. For a detailed discussion this SCE/Singlish continuum and various theoretical conceptualizations of Singapore English, see Alsagoff (2010).
5. Our use of the term *Basilectal* here is simply for the sake of labeling convenience and does not constitute an endorsement of a *lectal continuum* (Platt & Webber, 1980) characterization of Singapore English.
6. *Ah beng* is a local term for a young Chinese man who lacks cultural refinement and is inclined toward participation in criminal activities. An *ah lian* is the female equivalent.
7. In the Singapore context, 'mother tongue' is not used in the usual sense of referring to the language one first learned during childhood, but instead refers to the language Singaporeans are assigned to learn in school, based on their father's ethnicity. This may or may not be one's ancestral family language.

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