# Investigating Social Status of Singaporean English

**Anselmus Inharjanto**[1]*
[1]English Language Education Study Program, Musi Charitas Catholic University
* anselmus@ukmc.ac.id

**Abstract.** This research aims to investigate the social status of Singaporean English, within the framework of Singapore's multilingual societies. The context of World Englishes, especially the model crafted by Kachru, underlined the dynamic evolution of the language. This descriptive qualitative study explores empirically and theoretically the topic based on the secondary sources. The involvement of a related-literature review from previous researchers and experts, written in some journal articles and scientific books, has been considered. The result of the study demonstrates that the indigenization's process of Singaporean English is linked to the roles and functions of the language in multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural contexts. Next, the management of multilingualism is achieved by the recognition of ethnic and linguistic diversity. Lastly, Singapore has been successful in language policy which equates ethnic identity and political role with one of four official languages.

Keywords: Singaporean English, indigenization, multilingualism, language policy

## 1. Introduction

A study has been conducted to obtain a comprehensive overview of Singaporean English, focusing on efforts to examine its social status in the sovereign island-state of Singapore, known for its multilingual communities. Despite its modest size, Singapore has achieved prosperity and modernity in Southeast Asia. The rise of Singaporean English as an international variant of English has captured the attention of many researchers. Consequently, the research explores the social perception of Singaporean English, a recently emerged national variety, within the multilingual landscape of Singapore. Therefore, it is necessary, in this section, to consider some aspects, such as Singaporean English in the context of World Englishes and its external history.

First of all, the position of Singaporean English in the context of World Englishes should be considered. In this introductory section, the focus is exclusively on defining Singaporean English, which is also referred to as Singapore English by certain researchers such as [1][2] or English in Singapore [3]. The definition of Singaporean English in this study relies on Mian-Lian & Platt's interpretation [4], specifically "English as used by Singaporeans" (p.1). They argue that Singaporean English is a "particularly interesting indigenized, or nativized, speech variety because it is so widely used and fills so many functions" (p.1). The term "Singaporean English" is favored over "Singapore English" because the latter is occasionally employed in a somewhat derogatory manner to describe a 'substandard' form of English, especially the local English spoken by individuals with lower levels of education. Therefore, it seems fitting to use "Singaporean English" in the same manner as one would refer to other varieties such as American English, Australian English, etc.

The examination of this topic occurs within the context of Singapore's multilingual societies. Furthermore, because the social status of Singaporean English is integral to its development as a national variant of English, this aspect is integrated into the topic discussion. Therefore,

moving on to the consideration of Singaporean English in Kachru's model, it is advantageous to place the topic within the broader tradition of studies on World Englishes, which recognize international variations of English [5]. The increasing research into English varieties globally, especially those beyond the conventional English-speaking nations in the British Isles, North America, and Australia, has largely been stimulated by Braj B. Kachru [2]. Kachru is frequently cited for his contributions, particularly the formulation of a model of World Englishes represented by three concentric circles (see Figure 1), illustrating the global spread, uses, and status of English. Figure 1 is an adaptation from [2][6][7] in order to facilitate comprehension.
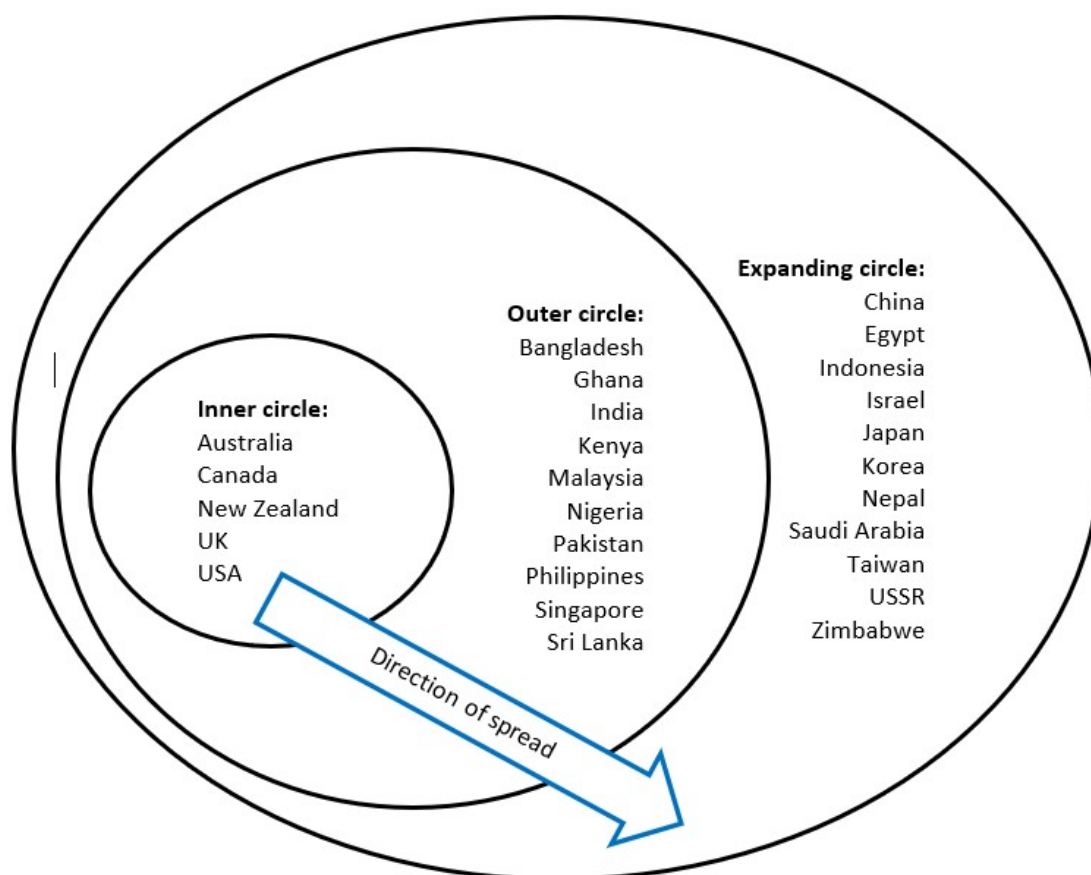


**Figure 1.** Kachru's concentric circles of World Englishes

Furthermore, several scholars explore Kachru's circles [2][7][8], and a general summary of these circles is as follows. Firstly, the inner circle pertains to countries and regions where English is traditionally spoken as a native language by a substantial population. Secondly, the outer circle encompasses countries and territories where English functions as a 'second language'; these are typically former British colonies where English has been retained post-decolonization for various purposes (e.g., in politics, public administration, and education). Thirdly, the expanding circle includes countries where English is primarily taught as a foreign language. These nations recognize the importance of English in global affairs but lack a history of British or American colonization. It is worth noting that the number of countries mentioned in Figure 1 can be expanded, especially in the expanding circle, as English as a foreign language is increasingly taught worldwide.

Kachru's model, as articulated by Kachru himself [2], is primarily intended to highlight the global spread of English, challenge "traditional notions of codification, standardization, models, and methods," and question the inner circle's "prerogative to control its standardization" (p.14). Consequently, Kachru's model allows researchers to concentrate on specific forms of English, such as Singaporean English, without the constant need to compare it with British or American English. Thus, following Kachru's typology, Singaporean English can be defined [2] "in their own right, not simply as weaker versions of an exonormative inner circle standard, but as fully fledged systems of their own" (p.15). It is important to note that while Kachru's model is not the sole framework for describing World Englishes and is not without limitations, it serves as a useful tool for understanding the context of Singaporean English within the broader landscape of World Englishes [9], which emphasizes "the autonomy and plurality of the world varieties of the English language" (p.4).

Next, the external history of Singapore should be discussed here to provide some backgrounds. Singapore, covering an area of approximately 710 square kilometers, is situated at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. According to [2], the island-state has been known by various names, including *Pu Luo Zhong*, which is derived from Malay *Pulau Ujong*, meaning 'island at the end (of the Malay Peninsula)', *Temasek* (from Javanese *Tumasik*, meaning 'sea town'), and *Singapura* (from Sanskrit *simha*, meaning 'lion,' and *puram*, meaning 'city'). The Portuguese conquered Singapore in 1613, following its history under the Srivijaya thalassocracy, the Javanese Majapahit Empire, the Thai Kingdom, and the Malacca Sultanate. Notably, some writers such as [2][10][11] underline that contact with the English language became significant when Sir Stamford Raffles anchored near Singapore on 28 January 1819 in order to find a trading post of the East India Company. After the signing of the treaty with the Sultan of Johor on 6 February, Singapore was handed over to the Company, marking the beginning of modern Singapore. The island subsequently became a permanent British settlement under Calcutta's administration.

The initial official census in 1824 reported 11,000 inhabitants, with Malays being the majority; however, the Chinese surpassed them three years later [2]. The report indicates a doubling of the population between 1827 and 1836, reaching 81,000 in 1860, with the Chinese forming 65% of the population in 1867. Singapore became a Crown Colony in April 1867. The Chinese, including groups like Hokkien (Fujian), Teochew (Chaozhou), Cantonese, and Hakka (Kejia), arrived as traders, laborers, and craftsmen, forming the largest ethnic group. Indians, mainly from southern India and Punjab, constituted the second-largest group, followed by Malays and a small European minority with significant roles in civil service and business.

Immigration continued, and by 1911, Singapore had over 185,000 inhabitants, with nearly 75% being Chinese. The number of Europeans increased slightly but the Indians seemed to have declined. Apart from that, in terms of education, Singapore's education system developed gradually under colonial rule. Teaching in Malay was at first regarded by the authorities as the feasible option of communicating in the region because Chinese had numerous dialects and the Indians spoke different languages as well. At that time, the Europeans had important roles because they monopolized leading positions in politics and few Chinese were involved in the legislative assembly. Despite World War I not directly impacting Singapore, education became a priority. By 1939, with a population of 550,000, 72,000 children were enrolled in schools, with Chinese, English, Malay, and Tamil schools accommodating different linguistic communities [2].

World War II altered Singapore's landscape; the Japanese invaded in 1942, occupying the island for three years, resulting in significant casualties [12]. After Commonwealth forces

retook Singapore and Malaya in 1945, the island's devastation prompted restoration in April 1946. Singapore became a Crown Colony again, and in 1948, Peninsular Malaysia transitioned into the Malay Union. By this point, Singapore's population comprised 78% Chinese, 12% Malays, and 7% Indians, a demographic mix that has persisted. Despite the challenges of post-war reconstruction, Singapore's government prioritized education. By 1954, English-medium primary school enrollment exceeded Chinese-medium, reflecting the importance placed on English education [2].

In 1955, during the first elections, the People's Action Party (PAP) led by Lee Kuan Yew formed a coalition government, addressing strikes and internal unrest. After four years of agitation and negotiation, self-government became effective in 1959. Although a 1962 referendum favored merging with the Federation of Malaya, Singapore was expelled in 1965, regaining independence. Despite initial hardships, Singapore's government policies attracted foreign investors, leading to gradual prosperity. The education system evolved, emphasizing practical disciplines over humanities.

In 2010, based on Singapore Department of Statistics, Singapore's population was 5,076,700, making it one of the most densely populated countries in the world [12]. Of the resident population, 74.1% having a Chinese background, 13.4% Malay, and 9.2% of Indian descent. Chinese (usually Mandarin) is the most common domestic language, used by approximately half of the population; Bazaar Malay was, historically, the lingua franca, but English then took over and is today the language of education, government and business. Therefore, this research focuses on the attempts of examining the social status of Singaporean English in the country which is known for its multilingual communities, modernity, prosperity in the región of Southeast Asia.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Design and data collecting technique

This study is considered to be qualitative research because it employed exploration and descriptive explanation [13]. Data of this research was obtained from secondary sources, that is, some related-literature review from previous researchers and experts, written in some journal articles and scientific books. Therefore, the secondary data collection involved using existing data collected by some authors, then the researcher analysed and interpreted them to extract relevant information. This is the process of gathering and evaluating information or data from various sources to find answers to the research questions, trends, probabilities and so on to evaluate posible outcomes.

### 2.2. Data analysis

After collecting some data from secondary sources linked to the discussed topic, the researcher then analyzed and interpreted it. The data were analyzed and interpreted by using a thematic analysis. According to [14], this thematic analysis aiming to identify patterns or themes within qualitative data mainly involved six steps. First, the researcher was required to be familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the data. Secondly, it was necessary to generate initial codes in order to organize the data in a meaningful and systematic way. The next step was to search for themes which aimed for capturing something significant or interesting about the data. The fourth step involved reviewing themes with the aims of reviewing, modifiying, and developing the preliminary themes generated in the previous step. Next, the researcher was required to define and name themes for identifying the core idea of each theme. Finally, each theme must be elaborated in the research report within the process of

producing the report. However, those phases were modified and simplified to serve the purpose of this current study.

## 3. Result and Discussion

This section is concerned with the findings and discussion based on the secondary sources. There are two sub-sections presented here, that is, Singaporean English in its multilingual societies and the social functions of Singaporean English in various domains.

*3.1. Singaporean English in its multilingual societies*

The impact of Singapore's historical interactions on its languages is evident, shaping the linguistic landscape of a nation characterized by multilingual societies. The constitutional framework established in 1963 effectively addressed the sensitive matter of linguistic diversity, as asserted by Leimgruber [2]. Section 153A of the constitution designates Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English as the official languages of Singapore, each holding equal constitutional status. While Section 53 allows the use of all four languages in parliamentary debates, English predominates due to its recognition as the government's working language [15]. Notably, all government websites are in English without any translation, with the exception of some important information leaflets. Singapore's legislation is also entirely in English, which is not the case for other states with more than one official language.

Now, there arises a question regarding the remaining three official languages. As emphasized in [2], each ethnic group is assigned an official language, commonly referred to as their mother tongue, and it is taught as a second language in schools. However, since 1987, English has become the exclusive medium of instruction for all ethnic groups. For instance, Chinese students are instructed in Mandarin through English. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the indigenous language of Singapore is Malay, as it is widely spoken in the region. Malay holds the status of the sole official language in Malaysia, and its dialectally related and mutually intelligible counterpart, Indonesian, serves as the official language in Indonesia. As stated in [2], the names assigned to various Malay varieties reflect socio-political distinctions rather than linguistic ones: "Bahasa Malaysia" in Malaysia, "Bahasa Indonesia" in Indonesia, and "Bahasa Melayu" or simply "Melayu" in Singapore and Brunei Darussalam.

Regarding the multilingual nature of Singaporean societies, Table 1 presented below provides evidence of several shifts in the primary language spoken at home. The table, which is adopted from [2], illustrates a noticeable trend towards the increased use of English and Mandarin in domestic conversations. A noteworthy number of Singaporean citizens claim proficiency in both languages. The inclination towards using English, as explained in preceding paragraphs, can be attributed to its widespread integration into Singapore's educational system. The rise in popularity of Mandarin, as indicated by [2], may be linked to the successful implementation of the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' initiated in 1979, which attracted a majority of the Chinese population to adopt Mandarin. Additionally, Table 1 highlights that despite its regional prevalence, with over thirty million speakers in neighboring countries, Malay is spoken less frequently by Singaporeans.

**Tabel 1.** Language most frequently spoken at home

|  | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| English | 11.6 % | 18.8 % | 23.0 % | 32.3 % |
| Mandarin | 10.2 % | 23.7 % | 35.0 % | 35.6 % |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese dialects | 59.5 % | 39.6 % | 23.8 % | 14.3 % |
| Malay | 13.9 % | 14.3 % | 14.1 % | 12.2 % |
| Tamil | 3.1 % | 2.9 % | 3.2 % | 3.3 % |
| Others | 1.7 % | 0.8 % | 0.9 % | 1.1 % |

Concerning Malay, the Singaporean Constitution section 152 recognizes Malay as special, attributing this status to the Malays being considered 'the indigenous people of Singapore.' Consequently, their language is deemed deserving of particular support and encouragement. Additionally, Malay holds the official designation of the "national language", (Constitution §153A), besides its oficial language status, as mentioned in [2][12]. This national language status means that Malay is the language of the national anthem and is used for drill commands in the army and other marching bodies. Furthermore, Malay is integral to the national coat of arms, featuring the motto *Majulah Singapura* 'Onwards Singapore,' and is associated with the President's residence, known as *Istana* 'the palace.'

Moreover, what is the role of Singaporean English? The historical trajectory of Singapore underscores that since Raffles' arrival, English has held a privileged position in the country. Initially serving as the language of the colonial rulers, it remained somewhat isolated from the general population, as argued by [2] corroborated by [16]. However, a shift occurred after the Japanese occupation, with the annual enrollment in English-medium schools steadily increasing, reaching 50.4 percent in 1962. In 1987, English was exclusively adopted as the medium of education, with the three mother tongues essentially taught as secondary languages. Consequently, English can be regarded as a primary language in Singapore, holding pivotal roles in politics, the judicial system, and education. Its significance is such that individuals lacking proficiency in English face notable disadvantages [2]. It is further pointed out that English's dominance extends beyond these spheres, manifesting in less overt areas; for instance, the Singapore Post expects addresses to be written in English.

Leimgruber [2] also delineates the conspicuous language hierarchy prevailing in Singapore. At the forefront is the language of international business, namely English, closely trailed by Chinese, which serves as the mother tongue for a majority of Singaporeans and is pivotal in economic trade. In the third position is Malay, designated as the national language but, as [2] notes, it "enjoys a united speech community but few real advantages from its exceptional legal status" (p.11). Malay's united speech community indicates widespread usage among most Malays as their primary language, and notably, the considerable homogeneity in their religious affiliation as Muslims. This contrasts with the Chinese and Tamil communities, which are more fragmented due to diverse religious affiliations.

### 3.2. Social functions of Singaporean English in various domain

To perceive Singaporean English's social functions, it is worth considering some major spheres in which everyday communication occurs. A number of spheres, or domains, [15] suggest, in a multilingual society like Singapore, means "a class of related speech situations in which a certain combination of speech varieties is used" (p.116). Therefore, this sub-section will describe some domains, such as: the family domain, the friendship domain, the business domain, the employment domain, the education domain, the domain of the media, the domains of government and law, and the religion domain.

First of all, the family will be discussed. This particular communication domain is deemed "generally considered the most private and informal of all domains of communication" (p.116),

according to [15]. According to these authors, proficiency in English tends to be higher among the younger generation, especially for those whose parents can afford to enroll them in English-medium schools. However, this was not the case for many girls in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, as they were often not sent to school. Due to limited access to education, many women had little opportunity to acquire proficiency in English. Additionally, it is crucial to highlight that English may be just one of several languages or dialects used by a speaker when communicating, such as with their father or mother.

Secondly, it is necessary to consider the function of Singaporean English in the domain of business. This domain encompasses all instances of daily communication involving verbal exchanges related to activities such as shopping, public transport, banking, and other transactions involving the exchange of money and/or goods, as discussed by [15]. As for these writers, English appears to be commonly employed by many bank tellers, insurance clerks, and customers. Additionally, numerous department stores, including smaller shops in tourist areas or major shopping complexes, are more inclined to use English. Another prevalent context where English is predominantly used includes airline offices, larger travel agencies, taxis, and similar settings.

Thirdly, [15] posit three primary components associated with the domain of employment. The three main parts are: (1) sectors where little to no English is spoken, (2) sectors employing English as their official language, particularly in management and offices but not in areas like factories, workshops, storerooms, etc., and (3) sectors utilizing English as their sole official language. As argued by [15], there is a noticeable decline in sector (1). Conclusively, the use of Singaporean English is increasing across the country.

The fourth domain is the domain of education. It is asserted that Singapore's four official languages may be selected as the medium of instruction, and the study of a second official language is compulsory [15]. Further, it is underlined by [15] that "the second language would be English if English is not taken as the medium of instruction" (p.126). So, the position of English language is important in this context. These authors also highlight that primary education is freely accessible to all Singaporeans, while secondary schools typically entail a nominal fee, although numerous free slots, bursaries, and scholarships are available. Additionally, there has been a significant surge in enrollment in predominantly English-medium education, as most parents recognize that proficiency in English leads to enhanced job opportunities and opens doors to a diverse array of universities, both in Singapore and abroad. This perspective aligns with the observations made by [11].

Next, the fifth domain is the media domain. In Singapore, the media landscape is characterized by representation in all official languages, with notable English-language newspapers such as *The Straits Times* and the *New Nation*. Additionally, there is a variety of other English-language publications, including magazines and journals. The Broadcasting Division of the Ministry of Culture oversees radio and television services, which are offered in all four official languages. According to [15], Chinese and English television programs have seen a growing viewership. This trend has gained increased significance in the contemporary era of global media and popular culture, as highlighted by [16].

As well as that, in the realm of government and law, [15] assert that the governmental sphere is among the most formal and public of all domains, encompassing sub-domains such as the legislature (involving debates, government ordinances, and ministerial speeches). As discussed in Section 3.1, a significant portion of communication within this domain, including correspondence, is conducted in English. Similarly, the domain of law is inherently public and formal. According to [15], the official legal code is in English, and the legal procedures are

modeled after those of England. Furthermore, English is the language employed in courtrooms by judges and barristers, with interpreter services being provided when necessary.

Lastly, the domain of religion should be considered. Singapore's multi-ethnic and multi-cultural composition also suggests there are various religious denominations. As mentioned by [15], there is no restriction on religious practices in Singapore and there are many small religious groups and sects. Moreover, the main use of English is within the Christian denominations, although English is also fairly well used in other religions. So, the function of Singaporean English is noticeable in the area of religion.

It should be highlighted here the unique fact of Singaporean English in its multilingual societies and the social functions of Singaporean English in various domains. It is also significant the value placed on English in Singapore, given its status as one of the country's four official languages. External historical influences and widespread English-medium education have played significant roles in the indigenization of Singaporean English. Ongoing government support further amplifies the prevalence of English among Singaporeans, as discussed previously, which explores the social functions of the language. The process of indigenization is closely tied to the roles and functions of Singaporean English in multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multicultural contexts. Thus, Singaporean English has become an integral part of the country's identity, with colloquial Singaporean English or Singlish often referred to as the 'glue' that binds the diverse population together [17].

In the global context of English varieties, this study recognizes the continued significance of British and American English in world politics, economics, and media. However, it emphasizes the equal importance of numerous other varieties of English, particularly those associated with Singapore's connections to countries across Asia, the Pacific, Europe, and beyond [16]. Finally, this research aligns with [3] perspective on the management of multilingualism. It acknowledges Singapore's explicit recognition of ethnic and linguistic diversity, resulting in the country being officially multilingual. Unlike Britain, where the devaluation of specific linguistic varieties is often implicit, Singapore employs state-initiated campaigns that explicitly encourage certain behaviors, including linguistic practices, reflecting a tradition of proactive language policies tied to ethnic identity and political roles.

## 4. Conclusion

This research has been conducted to explore the emergence of a distinct national variant of English, known as Singaporean English, within the framework of Singapore's multilingual societies. The discussion has situated Singaporean English within the broader context of World Englishes, drawing on Kachru's model, which illustrates the dynamic evolution of the English language as it has spread globally from its origin in Britain. It has also been discussed the historical backdrop of Singaporean English, observing its growth in tandem with the political and socioeconomic development of Singapore since its founding. Further, the indigenization's process is related to the roles and functions of Singaporean English in multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multicultural contexts. Finally, it is evident that the management of multilingualism is accomplished by the state's explicit recognition of the country's ethnic and linguistic diversity. The result is, Singapore is an officially multilingual country with a language policy equating ethnic identity (and political role) with one of four official languages. Singapore has a tradition of state-initiated campaigns, which attempts to encourage particular kinds of behaviour over others, including linguistic behaviour.

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