An Analysis of the Linguistic Characteristics of Singlish

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Abstract: Influenced by social contexts and multilingualism, Singlish has developed into its own linguistic features, especially in its pronunciation, lexicon, and syntax. This paper gives an overall analysis of linguistic feature of Singlish followed by examples, presenting how Singlish is different from Standard English.

Keywords: Singlish; Example; Singapore

1 Introduction

English in Singapore, also known as Singapore English, has developed into Singlish as its own English variety influenced by multiple factors. Singapore is a multiethnic country, in which there are four official languages. English as one of the important languages in Singapore has its own linguistic features as it was affected by other varieties. English in Singapore gradually developed into a localized and nativized variety of English. Singlish, also known as Singapore Colloquial English (Pakir&Anna,1991), has its own characteristics according to some descriptive findings. Within Singapore English, both standard and localized varieties exist in social contexts. The status and function of Singlish has been controversial and heatedly debated for many years. Gupta (1994) expressed that linguistic features of Singlish are considered problematic. Leimgruber (2011) analyzed the differences of Singlish from the perspective of grammar and pronunciation.

Gupta (2006) summarized some linguistics feature of Singlish on the web. The linguistic features of Singlish one the web are related to the features of attested and literary Singlish.

Practically, approaches to Singapore English have supportive rationale. Every variety has its own contexts, which cannot be replaced by others. Singlish, as a localized Singaporean form, has been criticized by its problems on affecting people's learning of standard English. It is also acknowledged that Singlish is to be considered as a demonstration of relatively low social status and less educated. However, from the perspective of its social significance and World English awareness. Singlish is unquestionably of great necessity in Singapore society and education, which represents the solidarity of Singaporeans and considered to be a more comfortable variety in daily conversations. Therefore, Singlish cannot be eliminated since these facts cannot be ignored. Singlish, as a variety of English from Outer Circle, should be respected and accepted as other varieties of English, which is the trend of the development of World Englishes.

2 Methods, findings and discussion

The data are collected from relevant research articles. Most examples are sentences from daily conversations, which have been categorized into phonology, lexicon, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. According to the data from research articles, I summarized the linguistic features of Singlish from different linguistic categories. The following data of Singlish are either from other researchers' studies. One of the most common features in Singlish is the

frequent use of obscure metalanguage, also known as particles, such as la, aha, wut, leh. This phenomenon can be analyzed from more than one aspects: lexicon, syntax, semantic and pragmatics. The following part is the categorization of linguistic features of Singlish.

2.1 Phonetics and phonology

From the perspective of pronunciation, Singlish has some unique phonetic and phonological characteristics. First, two vowels tend to merge into a single phoneme. For example, bit and beat are both pronounced as /bit/ without distinguishing the short or long vowels. (Leimgruber, 2011). From the perspective of morphology, there are different interpretation of Singlish according to the descriptive data. For example, Singlish often misuses past tense and present tense. "my brother one went there and he took the budget airline and then he come back with the normal airline". There are different voices of the analysis of this sentence. The verb come in the present, marking a current relevant state (Deterding, 2003). Gupta (1994) thought this sentence contains code-switching from High variety past tense went and took, which is Standard English, to Low variety come, Singlish.

Moreover, Singlish has been found to have specific lexical tones, especially for those particles. Ah, Beng, Kiasu, and the reduplication for Chinese names are all pronounced with lexical tones by Singapore English speakers. Thus, they are pronounced as in the same way in Singlish as they are in their origins. The particle wut can only be pronounced with the low-level pitch. It cannot be pronounced as a high-failing pitch like la can.

2.2 Lexicon

From the perspective of lexicon, Singlish adds particles in their language, especially in daily conversation. Singaporeans pick up some words like "ah" "lah" "leh", etc at the end of their sentences. And these functional words are derived from English, Mandarin, Chinese dialect, and Malay.

For example,
Hey, this does't taste good.
-eh, this one not good leh.
She's decided to stay at home and sleep.
-she stay at home and sleep lof.
Oh no! why was it done that way?

Moreover, there are often some random unfamiliar words in English. For example, "Please liaise with me regarding payment." In this example above, the use 'liaise' is uncommon in International Standard English. Besides, it is also common that third-person singular forms of verb will be omitted. The above sentence can also be considered as an omission of the form of third-person singular present.

2.3 Syntax

From the perspective of syntax, one of the apparent feature in syntactical level is code-switching within sentence. Since there are four official languages spoken in Singapore, it is inevitable that code-switching will be the consequence of Singapore multilingulism. This may be seen as a problem of the education system (Leimgruber, 2012). For example, "Yong tea wash it off lah." In this sentence, Yong 'to use' is Mandarin, and lah is prototypical Singlish. This sentence that mixed Mandarin and English is also seen in Singapore. Second, there is addition of negative word after modal verb must. For example, "and we mustn't forget Mr. Manmatan". This sentence contains both code-switching and its own syntactic feature. Mt. Manmatan means 'good-looking man'. It is Tamil, which is another official language in Singapore.Second, it is often to see a deletion in Singlish. The deletion includes dropping off subjects, objects, prepositions.

Another example is the adding negative word after modal verb, for example mustn't forget, which do not show in prescriptive Standard English. One more syntactic feature of Singlish is that people often omit some prepositions or simplify verb forms. For example, "are you going to school today?" Becomes you going school today not?

2.4 Semantics

The particles in Singlish constitute one of the most distinctive features of this variety. The semantic investigation of these particles reflects the cultural characteristics of the variety. the following examples analyzed the meanings of these three particles. The following three particles are studies to be the high frequency of use and they are motivated by a cultural norm of interaction. The three particles are: the particle la, which come in different lexical tones; wut, which commonly spelt as what; meh, within the Natural Semantic Metalanguage framework.

One of the most common semantic features of Singlish is the use of obscure metalanguage. La, often seen in Singlish at the end of a sentence, can be

considered as a code marker which identifies "rapport, solidarity, familiarity and informality" between participants in the speech event (Richards and Tay, 1997: 146). The version with la suggests a certain 'explanatory nuance', a certain 'softness of attitudes', reflecting that the speaker 'amenable' to discussion (Kwan-Terry, 1978:24).

Another interesting feature is the use of one in Singlish which has cultural and semantic meanings. For example:

You don't know how to go there one.

I very fast one.

I get nothing but rubbish one, you know.

Actually, it can be shown that many Singlish sentences containing one can be directly translated into Singapore Mandarin or other variety. in many of such sentences, Singlish seem to be literal translations from other varieties spoken in Singapore.

2.5 Pragmatics

Such particles also have pragmatic meanings behind their expressions. The pragmatic meaning of la include code-marking, emotive-marking, contrastive marking (Pakir, 1992:149). Among the particles in Singapore English, it has been noted that some are used more frequently than others. these include particle la and particle wut. Meh is also used but not as frequent as the other two. These particles are used to perform mental act,

First, La is to be discussed as the most frequently used particles in Singlish. It is used in a variety of contexts. The following examples are from Wong (2004;2005). For instance: Come on la, nice already la, OK la , etc.

a. Come on la.

In this sentence, supposing A wants B to stop pretending to be someone else.

b. Nice already la.

B grooms himself meticulously before the mirror for quite some time and someone is teasing him.

c. Ok la, ok la. It infers that someone gives in to the other.

In the above contexts, the particles are used to perform a mental act on the addressee. It can be considered as a gentle persuasion to the utterance to make the addressee fell less about being forcing to so something. For example, in the following conversion, B use la to try to persuade A by using such particles but make it sounds gentler.

A: go to gym at 9 am tomorrow?
B: 9:30 la. Don't be so unearthly la.

3 Results and Conclusion

The linguistic features of Singlish involves broad categories phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. One of the most common linguistic feature of Singlish is the use of obscure particles like la, aha, leh, etc. The words come from other varieties spoken in Singapore and appear in sentence in the contexts of either Singapore English or code-switching sentences. The use of them also have multiple functions such as reduce the mood or trying to be polite. All in all, the characteristics of Singlish are largely influenced by its social multilingual contexts and some local expression are frequently used in that they need to work for the bulk of Singaporeans.

On the other hand, the research into Singlish has undergone many shifts in the past decades. Due to the social stereotype and language policy of Singlish, whether Singlish should be used or even taught in the classroom is still in question. There are different voices towards this issue. Many support that teachers are models and are not supposed to speak or teach Singlish in the class. there are also a few voices claiming that by teaching Singlish can make students realize the errors and differences from standard English so that they can avoid. But this kind of idea has been negated by quite a few empirical studies, in which on matter students or people from other fields expressed through questionnaire and interviews that Singlish should not be taught in the classroom.

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