A Study of the Use of English Among Undergraduates in Malaysia and Singapore

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The Development of Malaysian and Singapore English

The English language, transported and transplanted (Moag 234) in Malaysia and Singapore from colonial times, has taken a linguistic shape of its own. As it began to be used by a wider range of speakers and in expanding contexts, distinct linguistic and socio-pragmatic features began to emerge as users in these countries began to adapt English to suit local tongues, norms and nuances. The increasingly wider use of English had also resulted in the birth of overlapping sub-varieties of Englishes in these countries, ranging from pidginised forms to a more acrolectal or standard form of English. The types of English used in typically ex-British (and American) colonies, such as Malaysia and Singapore, are referred to, among others, as *New Englishes*. Each *New English* has developed differently in relation to particular geographical locations and socio-cultural settings. However, because of proximity and shared cultural and historical backgrounds, Malaysian and Singapore English share many linguistic features. Thus earlier studies tended to treat these two varieties of English as one entity (e.g. Brown (a); Brown (b); Platt and Weber; Tongue).

However, the different post-colonial routes taken by Malaysia and Singapore in relation to language policies and language planning have changed the status and use of English in these two countries. English remains as an official language in Singapore and is still the main medium of instruction in schools, following Singapore's bilingual education policy implemented in the 1960s (Low and Brown 46; Pakir 3). In Malaysia, Malay is the national and official language, with Malay being introduced as the medium of instruction in schools in the 1970s (Asmah 229-230). More recently English has been used to teach Science and Maths in schools, and at the tertiary level the government is allowing more subjects to be taught in English ("More Subjects in English at Universities"). These different language policies have affected the linguistic development of English in Malaysia and Singapore. In fact, more than thirty years ago, Tongue predicted that the varieties of English in Malaysia and Singapore "will begin to diverge from each other" (17). By the 1980s, Platt, Weber and Ho observed that:

> whereas in Singapore there are more and more speakers for whom English is something between a first and second language, because it is used daily in natural communication…, in Malaysia, English is becoming more a foreign language as it is being used less and less. (12)
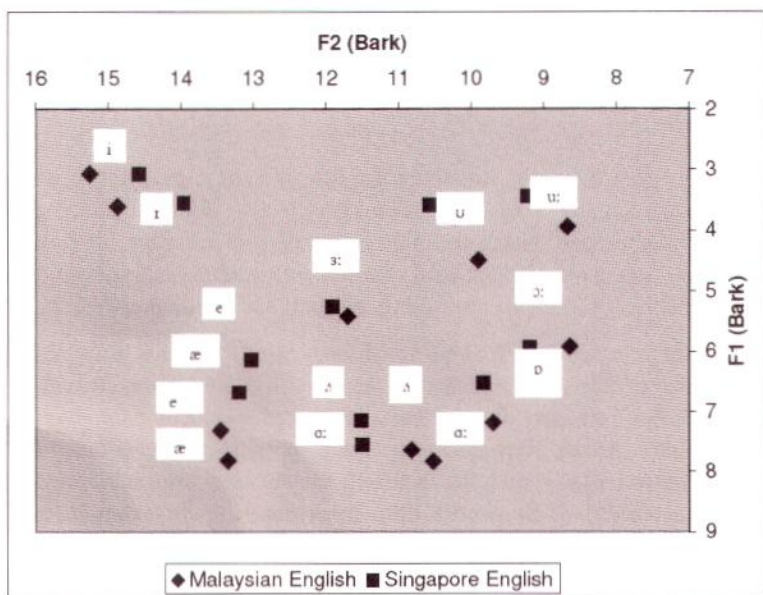
To a certain extent, this pattern is continuing. In Singapore, there is a rise in the use of English as the most dominant home language among the Chinese, Indians and Malays (*General Household Survey 2005*), whereas in Malaysia it is estimated that only 2% of Malaysians use English as a first language (Crystal 58). However, similar to the scenario in Malaysia, there is still a reluctance to accept the possibility that English can be the mother tongue of locals:

> in the Singaporean context, where the officially preferred model is still RP [Received Pronunciation] and the Inner Circle speakers of English continue to be regarded as the true owners of English, one consequence of this ideological construction is that there is no discursive space in Singapore's language ideological formation to label English as a mother tongue. (Rubdy et al 48)

Research on Malaysian and Singapore English

Cognisant of the fact that Malaysian English and Singaporean English are developing different linguistic features, the current trend is to examine both these varieties of English as separate entities. In fact, recent studies show differences in the use of lexical items between these two varieties of English. For instance, Tan's (89) study of sitcoms from Malaysia and Singapore predictably showed there were more borrowings from Malay in Malaysian English and more from Chinese in Singapore English. Similar to other varieties of English, greater lexical differences can be anticipated between the more colloquial sub-varieties of these two varieties of English, where more localised vocabulary tends to be used. However, even in the more acrolectal or standard varieties of Malaysian and Singapore English, differences are emerging. Lim's study of two major newspapers in each country, for example, found evidence of lexical items that were unique to either Singapore or Malaysian English, reflecting particular socio-cultural features and practices. Thus while Singaporeans talk about *void decks* and *neighbourhood schools*, Malaysians refer to *bumiputras* and discuss going *outstation* (Lim 130-133).

Apart from lexical differences, preliminary evidence suggests that the pronunciation of Malaysian and Singapore English may be developing differently (Pillai; Pillai, Knowles and Zuraidah). Figure 1 (Pillai), for example indicates that while both varieties display a lack of vowel contrast between vowel pairs such as in *bit* and *beat* and *bet* and *bat*, the vowels are being realised differently. For instance, the vowels in *bet* and *bat* are realised higher in Singapore English than in Malaysian English.

Figure 1: Vowel plot for Malaysian and Singapore English vowels[1]

F2 (Bark)

| 16 | 15 | 14 | 13 | 12 | 11 | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 |

F1 (Bark)

i
ɪ
u:
u
ʊ
ɜ:
ɔ:
e
ɔ
æ
ɒ
ɛ
ɐ   ʌ
ɑ: ɑ:
æ

◆ Malaysian English ■ Singapore English

Attitudes about Malaysian and Singapore English

Although the linguistic differences between Malaysian and Singapore English are not as distinct compared to other varieties of English, the fact that lexical and phonological differences are emerging can be attributed, to a certain extent, to the diverging socio-political paths of Malaysia and Singapore. This in turn will surely affect the expression of one's identity as a Malaysian or Singaporean given that the expression of identity is inextricably linked to language (Thornborrow 158). Furthermore, as pointed out by Canagarajah, "even the English we speak can reflect our values and interests" (203).

Almost fifty years after independence, there is less fervour equating English with colonialism and western culture. Instead, there are more attempts to establish English as one's own. In Malaysia, for example, there have been calls to "shed [our] colonial baggage" (Hishammuddin Hussein, qtd in Anis) and for Malaysians to "speak English our way" (Lee 13) since Malaysian English provides "a sense of belonging and identity" ("The Case for Manglish" 12). The assertion of Malaysian English as belonging to Malaysians and as a means to express one's 'Malaysianess' is best articulated by Rajendran:

> <u>My</u> English is simply a Malaysian English. Whatever the accent I
> choose to use and whatever the lexical item I choose to incorporate, it is <u>my</u>
> English and it is Malaysian. Because I am Malaysian. And there are several
> brands of Malaysian English on the market where I got mine. <u>My</u> English is
> also a multilingual English–an English of many types, many strands and many
> varieties. (author's emphasis)

Similarly, in Singapore, Singapore English, is seen to give users "a sense of identity as Singaporeans" (Lee-Wong 42). There is also a sense of Singapore and Malaysian Englishes, particularly the more colloquial sub-varieties, providing a tool for the construction of a shared national identity cutting across ethnic boundaries, as well as being a means to express solidarity and intimacy (Boekhorst-Heng 195).

While there are calls to make English our own, to use our 'own' English to construct a sense of belonging and identity, there is still a general sense that Malaysian and Singapore Englishes are 'wrong'. This dissonance is evident in the never-ending debates in letters in local newspapers between 'proper' or the 'correct' or 'best' English and the extent to which the localised variety is appropriate or acceptable. The colloquial variety of Singapore English or *Singlish*, for example, has been derogatorily referred to as "mongrel-lingualism" or a "polluted variety of English" (qtd. in Low and Brown 32). Such views echo the Singapore government's stand on Singlish, which is viewed as "an uncouth and inferior variety" (Rubdy et al 45). Similarly, in Malaysia, the very term *Manglish* carries a negative connotation of a mangled form of English and is regarded as being "improper English" ("Manglish-English Dilemma"; "Why Speak Manglish"). Studies on the perception of attitudes towards local Englishes also reflect this dilemma (see Chin, Ler and Wang, 1993 qtd. in Lee-Wong 43; Crismore, Ngeow and Soo; Soo). This linguistic dilemma may be reflective of the process of identity construction *vis-a-vis* English as expounded by Ho who says that "the negative connotations associated with Singlish suggest a people searching for a language and an identity that is both legitimate and one they can be proud of" (21). A similar view is expressed by Crystal (116), "the need for intelligibility and the need for identity often pull people–and countries in opposing directions." Although Crystal may have been referring to an international language in the first instance, and an ethnic one in the second, the same push and pull factors work on a standard versus a more colloquial variety of English.

Part of the reason for the negative perceptions of home-grown varieties of English is that there is a misconception that the terms *Malaysian* and *Singapore English* are equated with the colloquial varieties. On the other hand, the more acrolectal or standard variety is seen as a distinct variety, notwithstanding the fact that the latter is but a sub-variety of the former. There is even further confusion where accent is concerned because the reality is that the vast majority of Malaysians and Singaporeans do not speak with an RP or General American English accent (and indeed there is no reason that they should). Given that English can and is

spoken in a variety of accents, a local accent should not be condemned as being inferior. Instead as Graddol points out,

> as English becomes more widely used as a global language, it will become expected that speakers will signal their nationality, and other aspects of their identity, through English. Lack of a native-speaker accent will not be seen, therefore, as a sign of poor competence. (117)

The existence of sub-varieties of English also means that it is not uncommon to find speakers of English who are bi-dialectal, who switch from one sub-variety of English to another depending on the context of use. In both Malaysia and Singapore, switching from one sub-variety to another is not unusual (Crismore, Ngeow and Soo; Low and Brown). The level of switching could be from an acrolectal to a more colloquial sub-variety or in terms of accent, and could occur for a variety of reasons, such as to signal shared identity, solidarity and intimacy, to accommodate other speakers and the communicative context at hand. In fact, accent is probably one of the most obvious ways in which speakers can weave in and out of different identities, particularly in a multilingual society.

The Present Study

As was previously mentioned, there is a lack of comparative studies between Malaysian and Singapore Englishes, in particular the way in which the colloquial and standard sub-varieties of English are being used in both countries. The present study aims to fill this research gap and will address the following questions: (1) What is the extent to which English is used among the respondents? (2) What patterns emerge in relation to the use of colloquial and standard English in the two varieties? (3) What are respondents' attitudes towards their local varieties of English?

Method

A survey was conducted among a group of Malaysian and Singaporean students to obtain a general picture of their use of English as a first and dominant language; the extent of their use of English in particular contexts and with particular people; and their attitudes towards their variety of English. The respondents were undergraduate students from two universities, one each from Malaysia and Singapore. Undergraduate students were selected to represent the young adult population of the two countries, who are products of post-independent education and language policies in both countries. This population was also selected to provide information on the current generation's use of and attitudes towards English. With the assistance of subject lecturers at both universities, questionnaires were

distributed to students during lectures (in Malaysia) or via email (in Singapore). The returned questionnaires were examined to ensure that all respondents were Malaysian and Singaporean nationals and those who were not were not included in the analysis.

Respondents

There were 90 respondents from the Malaysian university and 88 from the university in Singapore. A total of 6 respondents from the former were Singaporeans, while 5 respondents from the latter were Malaysians. Thus, there were 89 Malaysians and 89 Singaporeans respondents, resulting in a total of 178 respondents. The majority of the respondents from both universities were of Chinese descent, giving a total sample of 159 Chinese, 18 Malays, 21 Indians, 4 from other ethnic groups (Kadadusun, Punjabi, Peranakan and Arab descent). In terms of gender, there were a total of 145 females and 33 males. The majority of the respondents from both universities were between 20-25 years old ($M = 21.39$, $SD = 1.76$).

Results and Discussion

The following sections present the main findings from the survey in relation to the use of English and the attitudes of respondents towards their variety of Englishes.

Use of English

Approximately 66% of the Singaporeans compared to only 23% of the Malaysians listed English as their first language. More Singaporeans (79%) also indicated that they considered English as their dominant language (c.f. 55% of Malaysians). More that half of the Singaporeans (56%) said they *always* used English at home compared to 37% of the Malaysians. The majority of the Singaporeans (96%) indicated that they spoke English *very well* or *well* compared to 69% Malaysians. This can be attributed to the different language policies in both countries. The emphasis on English in Singapore has led to more widespread use of English at home (see the Ministry of Education's press release dated 9 January, 2004 cited in Wee 354), in education and in other contexts as can be seen in the higher number of Singaporean respondents who used English *always* with family members, friends and officials, on and off campus, compared to their Malaysian peers (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). The results presented in the graphs in Figure 2 and Figure 3 reflect the language policy in Malaysia and Singapore where it can be observed that there is less frequent use of English in the public sector in Malaysia (17% compared to 89% among the Singaporeans in government offices). The less frequent use of English at banks indicated by the Malaysian respondents may also be due to the fact that the banks on campus are all local where Malay is used more.

Figure 2: Percentage Of Respondents Who *Always* Use English With Particular People
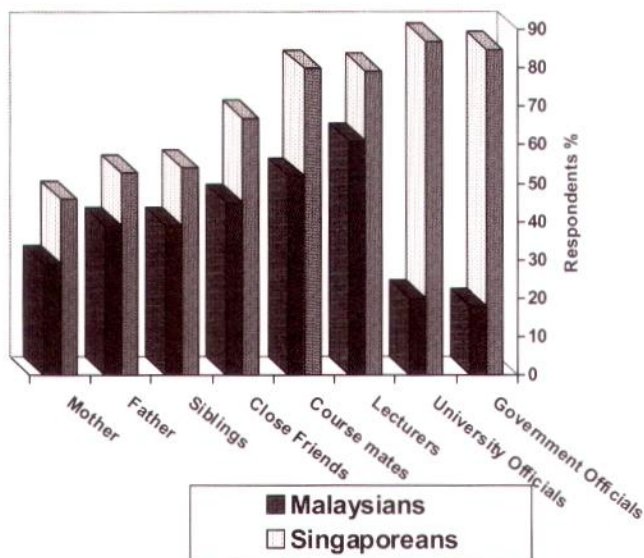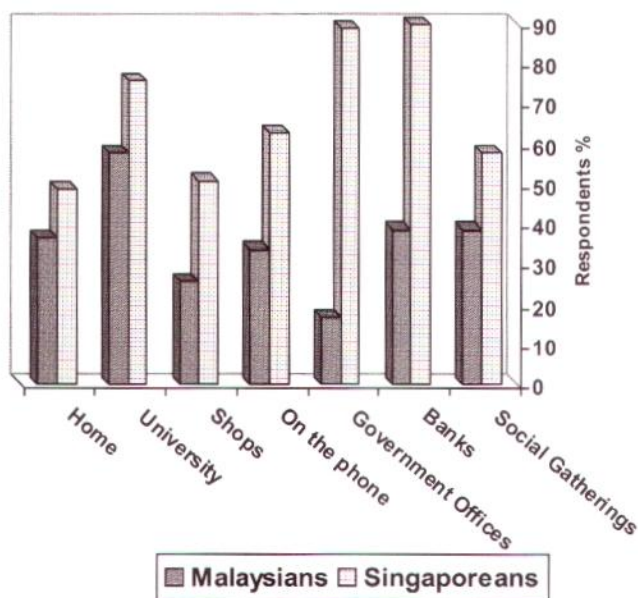

Figure 3: Percentage Of Respondents Who *Always* Use English At Particular Places

As can be seen in Figure 4 and Figure 5 the percentage of Singaporeans who said that they *always* used English to **speak to themselves** and to **count silently** was consistently higher across all ethnic groups in Singapore. This is with the exception of the percentage of Singaporeans of Indian descent who used English when they **were angry**, where two out of three of them indicated that they *sometimes* used English (see Figure 6). The use of English in these three contexts provides some indication regarding the extent to which English is a dominant language among the respondents, the assumption being that the more dominant English is, the more frequently it would be used in these particular contexts.

Figure 4: Percentage Of Respondents Who *Always* Use English To Speak To Themselves (According To Ethnic Group)
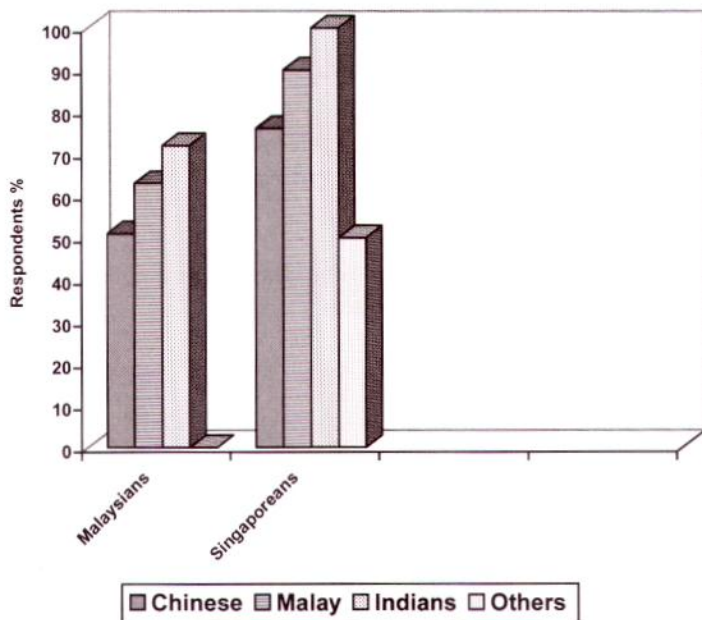
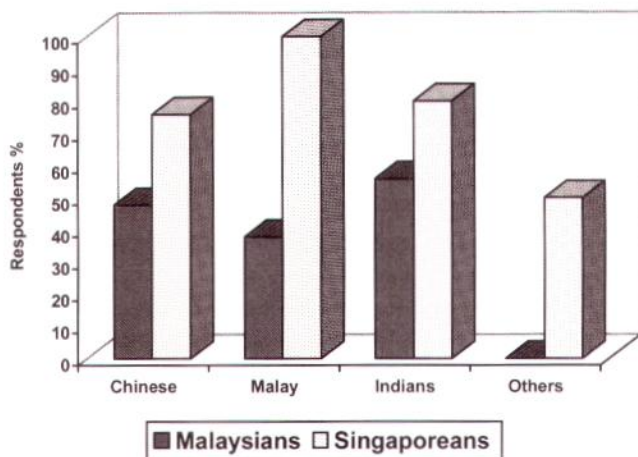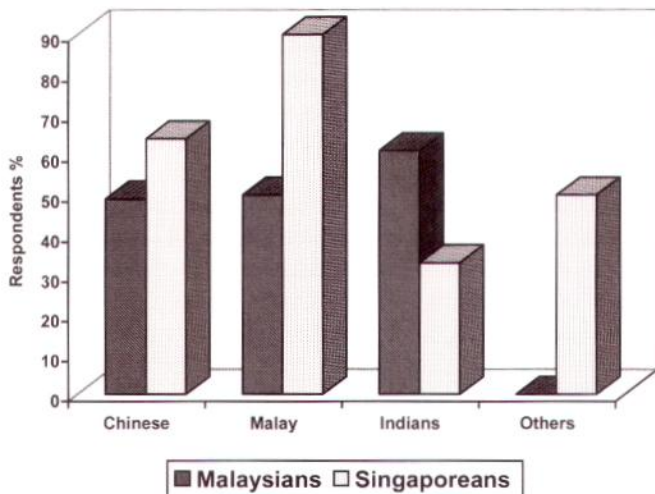**Figure 5: Percentage Of Respondents Who *Always* Use English To Count Silently**

Figure 6: Percentage of Respondents Who *Always* Use English When Angry

The use of Non-Standard English

The findings presented in Figure 7 indicate that the Singaporean respondents do not use non-standard English or Singlish frequently with their lecturers and other staff at the university. In contrast, the frequency of using non-standard English increases with friends and family. It is also more frequently used with people who are less educated and those who are not fluent in English. The findings are almost similar for the Malaysian respondents, except that they appear to use the non-standard variety of Malaysian English more frequently with their lecturers compared to the Singaporean respondents. This could reflect the type of relationship the respondents have with their lecturers. It also suggests that there is a clearer distinction between the use of standard and non-standard English according to context in Singapore since English is used more extensively in contexts where the standard form would be more appropriate, such as with lecturers and in the public sector. In contrast, in Malaysia, Malay is used more frequently in such contexts. This fact also explains the low frequency of English use among the Malaysian respondents with university staff, that is, this is not because the standard form of English is used but because Malay is used more frequently. Hence there is probably a clearer diglossic situation between the use of standard and colloquial Singapore English (see Bao and Hong; Gupta).

The findings pertaining to the use of non-standard English also reveal the way in which language choice is related to solidarity and distance (Brown and Gilman, 1960). The use of the non-standard form tends to be associated with solidarity, that is, it implies intimacy or familiarity and thus tends to be used with family members and friends. Its use with people who do not have the standard form of English in their linguistic repertoire can also be indexed to solidarity. This is because the choice of a more localised form of English suggests that speakers are emphasising solidarity rather than distance among them. Where deference and distance is generally the socio-cultural norm, such as in lecturer-student relationships, the standard form is more likely to be used. This relative[2] relationship between the use of non-standard and standard forms of English, on the one hand, and the realisation of solidarity and distance, on the other, is represented more clearly in Figure 8 and Figure 9.

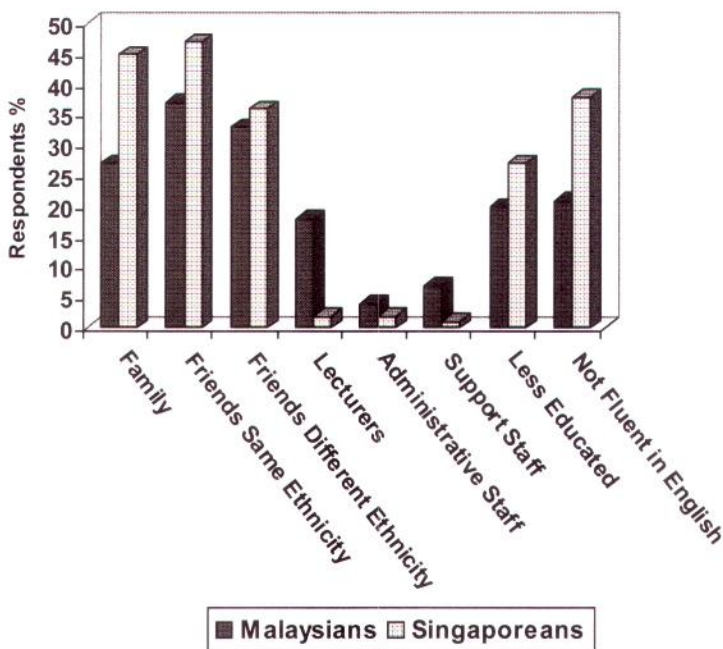**Figure 7: Percentage Of Respondents Who *Always* Use Non-Standard English**

Figure 8: Percentage Of Respondents Who *Always* And *Never* Use Non-Standard English - Singapore
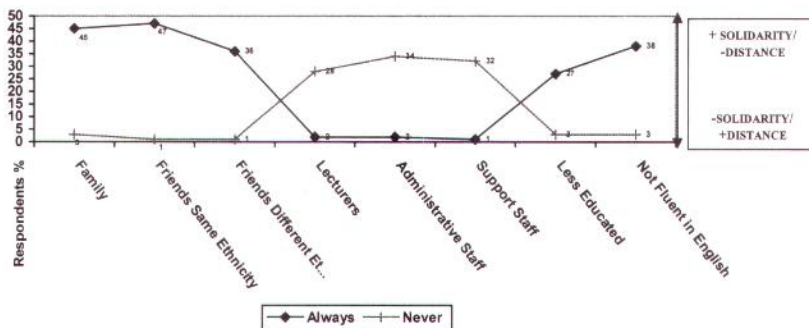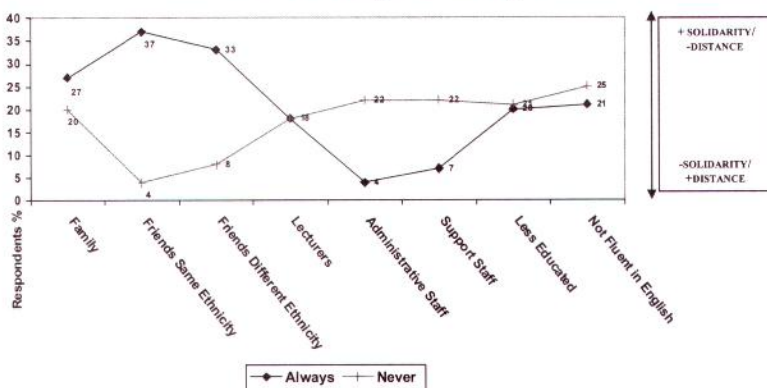
Figure 9: Percentage Of Respondents Who *Always* And *Never* Use Non-Standard English – Malaysia

The respondents were given five statements to choose relating to reasons for using the non-standard form of English. These reasons were as follows:

1. *It reflects who I am.*

2. *It is easier to get my meaning across.*

3. *The people I am talking to are also using it.*

4. *To show people that I am like them.*

5. *People will socially distance themselves from me if I don't.*

More than 80% of the respondents (both from Malaysia and Singapore) chose the second and third statements, suggesting that their language choice is largely determined by who their interlocutors are as well as the need to achieve their communicative goal. The use of the non-standard variety is further motivated by the solidarity factor, that is, through emphasising similarities (statements 4 and 5) through a shared language variety. Surprisingly, only about 21% of the respondents chose statement (1), which assumes a relationship between language and identity. This is an area that needs further investigation, but their attitude towards the use of the non-standard variety may have influenced their choice as the non-standard variety tends to have negative connotations attached to it, such as a lack of education and low socio-economic standing.

Attitudes about Malaysian and Singapore English

The respondents were also asked to indicate their attitudes towards English by selecting an option from a five-point scale (*strongly agree, somewhat agree,*

neutral, somewhat disagree, disagree). The reason attitudes were examined is because attitudes towards language can provide insights into language acceptance (Crismore, Ngeow and Soo 321) and into the way in which people relate languages or varieties of a language to themselves. Following Crismore, Ngeow and Soo, the attitudes of the respondents are reported based on the percentages of general agreement and disagreement.

The responses shown in Table 1, suggest that there might be a stronger awareness of the distinction between colloquial and standard English in Singapore than in Malaysia, with 41.57% of the Singaporean respondents indicating that they agreed with the statement that *colloquial Malaysian or Singapore English is bad English*. This could be due to Singapore's Speak Good English Movement[3] and the fact that there are more contexts in which standard Singapore English is used compared to Malaysian English. The latter reason could explain the high percentage of agreement (82.02%) for the statement that *colloquial Malaysian or Singapore English is appropriate in some contexts of use*.

Table 1: Colloquial Malaysian Or Singapore English Is Bad English

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree Total * %	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree Total * %
Malaysian	13.48	23.60	37.08	5.62	2.25	7.87
Singaporean	8.99	28.09	37.08	31.46	10.11	41.57

Table 2: Colloquial Malaysian Or Singapore English Is Appropriate In Some Contexts Of Use

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree Total * %	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree Total * %
Malaysian	19.10	13.48	32.58	24.72	11.24	35.96
Singaporean	3.37	3.37	6.74	43.82	38.20	82.02

The responses for the next three items (Table 3-5) reveal a possible difference between the Malaysian and Singaporean respondents. The Singaporean respondents seem to have a more negative perception of colloquial Singapore English. Again, this is probably because they alternate between the standard and colloquial form more frequently than the Malaysians, thus indexing both sub-varieties to different traits (e.g. sounding serious and professional). This might also explain why only a small percentage of the Singaporean respondents (7.87%) agreed that they sounded Singaporean compared to almost half (50.56%) of the Malaysian respondents (see Table 6). Indirectly, these responses imply that different identities (e.g. professional) can be constructed through the choice of standard or non-standard English.

Table 3: Other People Cannot Understand Us If We Use Colloquial Malaysian Or Singapore English

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree Total * %	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree Total * %
Malaysian	29.21	31.46	60.67	14.61	3.37	17.98
Singaporean	2.25	34.83	37.08	31.46	14.61	46.07

Table 4: People Will Not Take Us Seriously If We Use Colloquial Malaysian Or Singapore English

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree Total * %	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree Total * %
Malaysian	31.46	25.84	57.30	11.24	5.62	16.85
Singaporean	2.25	2.25	4.49	33.71	14.61	48.31

Table 5: We Do Not Sound Professional When We Use Colloquial Malaysian Or Singapore English

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree Total * %	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree Total * %
Malaysian	33.71	7.87	41.57	14.61	17.98	32.58
Singaporean	5.62	4.49	10.11	41.57	37.08	78.65

Table 6: I Sound Malaysian / Singaporean

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree Total * %	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree Total * %
Malaysian	26.97	2.25	29.21	21.35	29.21	50.56
Singaporean	1.12	2.25	3.37	3.37	4.49	7.87

Accents can be an overt manifestation of identity. Depending on the variety of English, people's geographic, ethnic and social origins can be determined through their accents. Reponses to the items relating to accent indicate that more Singaporeans agreed that they can be identified through their accent (43.82%) and agreed that a local accent was acceptable when speaking in English (64.04%) (see Table 7 and Table 8). More Singaporeans also agreed that their pronunciation changed according to whom they were speaking (see Table 9). This suggests that not only do speakers shift from one variety of English to another, they also accent-shift perhaps to emphasise solidarity or distance, to make themselves better

understood and also to weave in and out of different identities (e.g. personal, ethnic, professional, national etc).

Table 7: People can Identify Where I Am From Through My Accent

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree Total * %	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree Total * %
Malaysian	34.83	13.48	48.31	14.61	3.37	17.98
Singaporean	12.36	13.48	25.84	37.08	6.74	43.82

Table 8: I Think That A Local Accent Is Acceptable When Speaking In English

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree Total * %	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree Total * %
Malaysian	22.47	6.74	29.21	19.10	10.11	29.21
Singaporean	3.37	11.24	14.61	49.44	14.61	64.04

Table 9: My English Pronunciation Changes Depending On To Whom I Am Speaking

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree Total * %	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree Total * %
Malaysian	24.72	12.36	37.08	21.35	10.11	31.46
Singaporean	7.87	8.99	16.85	48.31	15.73	64.04

The responses relating to accent preference suggest that there is no strong preference for native varieties of English such as British and American English (see Tables 10 and 11). However, neither is there clear indication from the responses that there was preference for the local variety (see Table 12).

Table 10: I Would Rather Sound British

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree Total * %	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree Total * %
Malaysian	25.84	14.61	40.45	11.24	11.24	22.47
Singaporean	25.84	24.72	50.56	15.73	7.87	23.60

Table 11: I Would Rather Sound American

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree Total * %	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree Total * %
Malaysian	28.09	15.73	43.82	10.11	5.62	15.73
Singaporean	31.46	24.72	56.18	6.74	3.37	10.11

Table 12: I Would Rather Sound Malaysian/Singaporean

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree Total * %	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree Total * %
Malaysian	20.22	3.37	23.60	13.48	10.11	23.60
Singaporean	3.37	14.61	17.98	31.46	10.11	41.57

Conclusion

The present study is a preliminary attempt at examining the extent to which English is used among young adult Malaysians and Singaporeans and their attitudes towards their varieties of English. The findings indicate that more Singaporean respondents consider English as their dominant language and used English at home compared to the Malaysian respondents. The findings further suggest that there is greater separation of context-bound roles between the standard and non-standard variety of English in Singapore than in Malaysia where English is not used as extensively. There also seems to be greater awareness among the Singaporeans about this distinction and more confidence about their own variety of English. However, there appears to be a trend towards perceiving the colloquial variety of English more negatively, particularly among the Singaporean respondents. Although not overt, the construction of identity can be inferred from the fact that there is an obvious distinction between the standard and non-standard forms of English in Malaysia and Singapore and they are used with different people in different contexts, which in turn suggests that these different sub-varieties are used as tools in the construction of multiple identities. This concept, however, will need to be further explored.

One implication that arises out of the findings is that the Singaporean respondents may be at an advantage as they are more likely to possess and use both the standard and non-standard form of Singapore English. On the other hand, the Malaysian respondents tend to use more colloquial Malaysian English in most contexts probably because other languages (e.g. Malay) may be more appropriate in these situations. The lack of reasons and opportunities to use standard English could be due to them being not as adapt as their Singaporeans counterparts in using this sub-variety of English. This in turn could affect their ability to use standard English in contexts they should (e.g. job interviews) and could affect their chances

of securing appropriate employment or their career development in the future. This is definitely an issue that needs to be further explored in the context of English language teaching in Malaysia.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] Malaysian English vowels from Pillai and Singapore English vowels from Deterding (6)

[2] Relative, because language choice is influenced by many other contextual factors. Language choice is also dependent on the shared linguistic repertoire of the interlocutors and the appropriateness of using particular languages/ varieties of a language.

[3] "… a campaign that promotes the use of standard English, and whose implicit agenda is to stem the spread of Singlish" (Rubdy et al 45)

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