(De)coupling Positional Whiteness and White Identities through "Good English" in Singapore

Joshua Babcock, *School of the Art Institute of Chicago, USA*

ABSTRACT

English in Singapore occupies an ambivalent status as both global bridge and threat to local "cultural values" (Tan 2017). English is also constructed as threatened by Singlish, or Singaporean Colloquial English (Wee 2018). This article first elaborates the historical-institutional production of a covert raciolinguistic community—"Caucasian" English speakers—whose speech ideologically contrasts with Singaporeans' "non-native" English. It then analyzes a crowdsourced self-help column, "English as It Is Broken," and participant observation at a Singlish awareness class. I argue that the figure of the native-English-speaking foreigner (by default white and, increasingly, American) continues to anchor what counts as "Good English" and rescales intersectional self- and other evaluations of Singaporeans' linguistic deficiency. Good English thus invites aspirational investments in whiteness-as-position (a superordinate position in global, racializing hierarchies) but remains a target that Singaporeans are cast as forever failing to meet due to their nonwhite identities (not "being" white).

English in Singapore occupies an ambivalent ideological position. On the one hand, it is variously constructed as a necessity: necessary for connecting to the global economy, for laying claim to modernity, for personal and collective

Contact Joshua Babcock at 36 S. Wabash Ave., Chicago, IL 60603, USA (jbabco@saic.edu).

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economic advancement, for interracial harmony (Wee 2018). On the other hand, it is variously constructed as a threat: threatening because, as a "foreign" code, Singaporeans are constantly in danger of misusing it; threatening because, as the patrimony of foreign, raciolinguistic others outside Singapore, it is incapable of conveying "Asian Values" and risks disconnecting Singaporeans from their local culture(s) (Tan 2017; Barr 2000). Further troubling this already troubled terrain is Singaporean Colloquial English, or Singlish. Unlike English—that is, standardized registers of English, often indexed exonormatively to the United States or United Kingdom—many proponents argue that Singlish is a uniquely Singaporean phenomenon, if not *the only* uniquely Singaporean phenomenon (Wee 2018, chaps. 2 and 5; Hiramoto 2019, 459). As reflexively local linguistic patrimony, it is available as both a source of pride and source of national(ist) self-identification, but it is also available as a source of embarrassment or disgust toward oneself or others. For both its proponents and opponents, Singlish is gradiently constructed as a threat: as "bad" or "broken English" that is liable to be unintelligible outside Singapore, it threatens English's status as a necessary bridge to the world, to modernity, to advancement.

This article is about the shifty whiteness of Good English in Singapore. It explores the troubled semiotic terrain across which differentiating axes of local and global, local and foreign, good and bad, correct and incorrect, Asian and "Caucasian" get coupled and decoupled, scaled and rescaled as models for comparison (Gal 2016a) by which individuals and groups produce connections constructed not only as internal to Singapore but also as connections that are made to extend globally. Linguists, anthropologists, and other critical scholars of language have productively shown the workings of global white supremacy and anti-Blackness at play in linguistic profiling routines (Baugh 2003) through which ideologies about "sounding white" (Spears 2021, 169–71; Alim and Smitherman 2012)—or more broadly, sounding like a race (Rosa 2019)—get linked to speech forms via institutions, policies, and interactional norms in settler-colonial, especially North Atlantic, contexts. Building on this work, as well as work on English in Singapore, I show how concerns over "sounding white"—whether affirmative or disavowing, explicit or tacit—come to structure interactions in a range of settings in Singapore through overt meta-typifications, implicit norms, and images of raciolinguistic personhood linked to registers of English use. I explore how anglophone encounters mediate both homogenizing and heterogenizing processes that differentially scale English use, either as a racialized, intra-Singaporean matter of concern, or as a locus for navigating local/foreign divides and hierarchies.

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For both Singaporeans and scholars of Singapore, the suggestion that whiteness has anything to do with Singapore will likely come across as surprising. This is because, when it is reflected on at all, whiteness in Singapore is often treated as an ontological status or possession of groups of others located outside (e.g., Goh 2008, 233–34). I seek instead to show how, contra such hegemonic typifications (or even, in many instances, because of them), whiteness is materialized and made salient in Singapore via two distinct, yet co-constituting structures: first, *positional whiteness*, and second, *white identities*. Following a long-standing insight by scholars working in genealogies of Black studies, critical ethnic studies, gender studies, and decolonial studies, this article seeks to disentangle positional whiteness from white identities, and to understand positional whiteness as an imagined, superordinate, structural position that gets articulated in and through projects aimed at hierarchically ordering raciolinguistic being, as elaborated by linguistic anthropologist Krystal A. Smalls (2018, 2020). The attribution of white identities, meanwhile, indexes the processes and strategies through which groups and individuals variously claim to be, get taken by others to be, and/or get institutionalized as white. White identities, of course, are endlessly malleable and get linked to embodied, biographical individuals through shifty appeals to ancestry, consanguinity, phenotype, skin color, socioeconomic or consumption class, geographic location, sartorial accompaniment—and of course, language use. Crucially, drawing on this interdisciplinary scholarship, I emphasize that whiteness is not something that anyone *has* or *is*: whiteness-as-identity is always an asymmetrically available ascription of racialized being that gets articulated raciosemiotically, both about and from white supremacist, colonialist logics (Smalls 2020). While both positional whiteness and white identities might afford the disavowal of their context specificity or positionality as such, whiteness has a complex semiotics that manifests in locatable encounters, even if it gets (re)constructed as context independent.

In Singapore, whiteness gets personified via roundabout process that takes recourse to a hegemonic, state-backed raciolinguistic model called CMIO. CMIO is an acronym that indexes the four official "races" of Singapore, each of which is assigned a Mother Tongue: Chinese-Singaporeans, whose Mother Tongue is Mandarin; Malay-Singaporeans, whose Mother Tongue is Malay; Indian-Singaporeans, whose Mother Tongue is Tamil (though Indian Singaporeans claim a range of other Mother Tongue codes, some of which have been institutionalized as official "Non-Tamil Indian Languages"; Cavallaro and Ng 2014, 40–41); and Other, a racially and linguistically heterogenous catchall category that retains the previous categories' race-plus-Mother Tongue structure, often to the chagrin of officially

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Other groups and individuals (for more, see Pereira 2006; Rocha and Yeoh 2020). Importantly, members of all groups also speak varieties of English to varying degrees of proficiency.

Far from a rarefied administrative technology, CMIO serves as an authoritative, multiply institutionalized model for conaturalizing race and language (Rosa and Flores 2017, 622) across both formal-institutionalized and informal sites in Singapore, a dynamic that has been well documented by social scientists and other scholars of Singapore. My aim here is different. I seek to show how the CMIO model of race-plus-Mother Tongue is rendered detachable from particular CMIO content to stand as a generalized template for imagining raciolinguistic community in Singapore. Even though "Caucasian" and "white" are not explicitly named via the institutionalized racial order, I argue that it nevertheless animates the contrastive, spatiotemporal projection of a Caucasian raciolinguistic community that is imagined to "possess" standardized registers of English, or "Good English," in the same way that the CMIO "races" are imagined to "possess" their "Mother Tongues." I trace this figure across three kinds of data: historical developments; submissions in a reader-generated advice column, "English as It Is Broken"; and participant observation at a Singlish awareness class.

I focus on Good English to explore its fraught status as both a Singapore-internal differentiating model—one that cuts across classed, racialized, and other stratifying vectors—and as a Singapore-external, global differentiating model that indexes Caucasian, native speakers as a figure via which to evaluate Singaporeans' linguistic deficits. I trace out the strategies and resources through which individuals interpret and navigate their encounters with difference (Agha 1998) and show how their strategies and resources get troubled when distinct, if not overtly contradictory, models for constructing whiteness meet head-on—especially in locations at which embodied, copresent interactional encounters with Caucasian speakers are unexpected. In the wake of these collisions, individuals are faced with open-ended yet structured possibilities for selectively coupling and decoupling positional whiteness from white identities, and vice versa. I argue that, although the project of Good English invites Singaporeans to adopt white listening subject positions—that is, to adopt racially hegemonic perceiving subject positions (Rosa and Flores 2017, 627–28; see also Inoue 2006)—in policing their own and others' English use, "the Singaporean" is nevertheless reproduced as a non-native speaker, thereby as a figure who needs to always remain on guard against "breaking" English. This entails an unstable moral imperative and twinned set of anxieties: Good English invites "the Singaporean" into aspirational investments in malleable whiteness as they address and are

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addressed by global audiences, but it also saddles speakers with the blame for potential failures to be understood.

The remainder of this article elaborates my argument across four parts. The first section elaborates Singapore's raciolinguistic situation, a situation that is anchored by but extends beyond CMIO as a model for conaturalizing raciolinguistic community. The second section gives an overview of the present-day Singaporean relationships to British colonial legacies and global encounters through which (de)couplings of positional whiteness and white identities get gradiently naturalized. This section articulates what I mean by aspirational investments in malleable whiteness (Christian 2019), as speakers target prestige raciolinguistic assemblages linked to global structures of whiteness without believing themselves to *be* white. The third section analyzes features of "English as It Is Broken," a self-help column created in 1999 as part of the Singapore Government's "Speak Good English Movement," in which readers submit queries about and critiques of "broken English." The fourth section analyzes interactions at an adult continuing education class, "Singlish to English," designed to raise awareness about the differences between and appropriate contexts of use for Singlish and standard-register English. In the class, I was interpellated as a token of the Caucasian raciolinguistic community, bringing positional whiteness and white identities together to lend weight to attendees' coming-to-awareness of their English "errors."

Making and Bridging Raciolinguistic Difference through CMIO and Singlish

The CMIO model of Singaporean multicultural multiracialism has its origins in the census of British Malaya during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but it has persisted into the present through policies enacted by the People's Action Party, Singapore's ruling political party since 1959, as part of broader efforts at ensuring "racial harmony" among Singapore's races (PuruShotam 1998). Though these groups are rendered formally equivalent in and through their institutionalization, CMIO also serves to index the groups' essentialized differences. According to hegemonic discourses articulated by the state, its media outlets, and apologists, essential racial differences are always antagonistic and always in danger of erupting into overt violence (Babcock 2022, 331–32; see also Kathiravelu 2017). Regimented via CMIO, Singaporean raciolinguistic categories are a pervasive feature of life in Singapore beyond explicit talk about racialized difference or the precariousness of interracial harmony. Official race categories are listed on Singaporeans' and residents' identification cards; this determines

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where one can buy a home (Haila 2016) and how one can access social security benefits (Yeoh 2004, 2437–38). Students are required to study their "Mother Tongues" as a subject in school (though Malay and Indian students can opt to study Mandarin; Rahim 2010, 39). Public signage and other state-produced textual materials are often (but not always) printed in four languages. Though race is generally presumed as transparently interpretable from individuals' appearances (Babcock forthcoming), in situations where race is not taken as self-evident (even if the attribution does not match an individual's official or personal racial identification), race can also be explicitly inquired after in interaction through questions like "What is your race?"; "What are you?"; or "Where are you [*really*] from?"

Alongside these dynamics, since the 1960s (and with a resurgence during the late 1990s and early 2000s), concerns over English were recruited to projects aimed at managing "racial faultlines" (Kathiravelu 2017, 160–62). English became the double to CMIO "Mother Tongues," the latter serving as "anchors" to preserve the cultures of the official races against the effects of English-mediated, intergroup contact as well as anxieties over Westernization and the loss of "Asian Values" (Barr 2000). At the same time, the English language was projected as doubly necessary, at once a "neutral medium" for interracial communication, since it did not privilege any race's "Mother Tongue," and a medium for achieving global connectivity (Babcock 2022, 332; see also Wee 2018). This manifested as a diverse set of concerns over Singaporeans' English standards, which drove extensive, ongoing language-policy initiatives and language-planning campaigns designed to encourage Singaporeans to invest in Good English rather than Singlish. Crucially, in these projects, Good English remains non-native.

Yet if English is a bridge, Singlish poses an ideological threat to that bridge. Singlish—a portmanteau of *Singapore(an)* and *English*—might seem like a straightforward lexical label for describing a particular sociolect, but as I have suggested elsewhere, it indexes a "shifty category . . . sometimes used for Singaporean Englishes broadly, other times for a particular basilectal variety in a Singaporean lectal continuum" (Babcock 2022, 326). As I have further described elsewhere (332–33), I follow linguistic anthropologists who write about stigmatized, ethnoracialized registers of language (Lo and Reyes 2009; Park 2015, 2021; Chun and Lo 2016) and treat Singlish not as an "objective 'thing' to be studied for its exciting linguistic features [but] as a series of value judgments and citations that produce a 'language' in the sphere of public discourse" (Newell 2009, 179). My continued use of singular nouns and pronouns follows the habits of my Singaporean interlocutors and the conventions of Singlish scholars; it should not be taken to index the singularity of Singlish as a variety or idea.

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Celebratory discourses since 2015 have argued that, as a "uniquely Singaporean phenomenon" (Hiramoto 2019), Singlish brings the races of Singapore together in a way that Good English never could. And yet, widespread, hegemonic positions still construct Singlish as the opposite of "Good English," hence equivalent to "bad" or "broken English." As Singaporean political and civil society leaders worked at the turn of the twenty-first century to link English standards to both economic-political development and "racial harmony" in Singapore, overt language policy and language-ideological debate gradually repositioned English—indexed exonormatively to American and British standard registers (Wee 2018, 33)—as a moral imperative.

Existing scholarship on Singlish has built on and complemented studies of other outer-circle Englishes (Kachru 1992) by examining Singlish's class stratification, which gets made through discourses about class that are themselves classed (Wee 2018, 104–6). Other analyses consider culture-internal stratifications—often dealt with individually or in isolation—along lines of educational attainment, gender, age cohort, migration temporalities, or membership in Singapore's official CMIO races. I examine how attributions of "foreign," "global," and "Caucasian" (as an image of personhood embodying identitarian whiteness) are not outside Singapore—at least not in the ways that ideological discourses about them would insist. This is literally true, in that individuals taken to be white and foreign live as "privileged expatriates" in Singapore (Goh 2008, 249; see also Yeoh 2004; Ong 2006), and since Singaporeans with European ancestry also exist. But it is also true because, as I will show, signs taken as "foreign," "global," "Caucasian," and/or "originating outside" get scaled at sites that are themselves constructed as local—like a Singaporean news outlet or language classroom. In the next section, I further explore the historical development and consequences of these dynamics in and as a covert, Caucasian raciolinguistic community.

History, Malleable Whiteness, and Covert Raciolinguistic Community

Dominant narratives of Singapore's history posit Singapore's present success as indebted to, but radically breaking with, its colonial legacies. These narratives get voiced via strategies that insist that "the process of colonialism—traumatic and displacive—is . . . politically neutral" (Joraimi 2021, 129); that the year 1819, when Temenggong Abdur Rahman and Sultan Hussein Shah of Johor signed a treaty with Sir Stamford Thomas Raffles of the British East India Company to establish a trading post in Singapore, is a "neutral" starting point for narrating the birth of the modern Singaporean nation, as was the figure of Raffles himself

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(Hong 2021, 87–88); and that Singapore is thus a nation of "arrivals" with equivalent territorial claims to the independent city-state, thereby erasing centuries of Singapore's histories as a node in the Malay world (Rahim 2010; Joraimi 2021). As a crucial result of this, it was Raffles's Englishness that came to stand as emblematic of his "neutrality" and serve as a periodizing device for the new nation. By choosing Raffles's arrival as a narrative starting point, it was argued, independent Singapore thus avoided the interracial conflict that would necessarily have ensued if a member of one of the CMIO raciolinguistic communities had been elevated as a "founder" (Hong 2021, 87).

Ironically, in addition to rendering colonialism and histories of colonization as neutral and thus largely off-limits for critique in reflexively public settings, such historical narratives also erase the supremacist projects that motivated, and were motivated by, colonization—projects that were materialized locally but linked to sites across the British Empire (as well as other empires). British colonial administrators explicitly mobilized categories and classificatory technologies developed in British India to enact local projects of racial ordering in Singapore (PuruShotam 1998, 65, 75–80). Census administrators presumed that classifying the population of Singapore was a necessary and natural part of governance, just as they presumed the necessity and naturalness of a world in which the "English race" ruled.[1] Yet while the European/non-European, white/nonwhite binary was treated as absolute, the ability to access the privileges that accrued to positional whiteness was always gradient. The "English race" and "white man" were to rule, but others could by degrees aspire toward whiteness: mixed-race individuals often occupied a provisional status as mediators between locals and colonizers, closer to white if never white. Eurasian Singaporeans—descendants of marriages between European colonizers and residents of the Malay Archipelago from the sixteenth to the twentieth century (Wee 2002, 288–89)—could access socioeconomic advantages because of their blood quantum, which, it was imagined, resulted in their superior English ability and understandings of European customs.

1. Writing in the late 1800s, Sir Frederick Weld, governor of the Straits Settlement (1880–87), voiced a common perspective among members of the Malayan Civil Service and broader empire: "I think that capacity for governing is a characteristic of our race, and it is wonderful to see in a country like the Straits, a handful of Englishmen and Europeans, a large and rich Chinese community, tens of thousands of Chinese of the lowest coolie class, Arab and Parsee merchants, Malays of all ranks, and a sprinkling of all nationalities, living together in wonderful peace and contentment. It always seems to me that the common Chinese feeling is that we—an eccentric race—were created to govern and look after them, as a groom looks after a horse" (quoted in Lee 1989, 6). Governor Weld's statement indexes a range of ideological positions that were institutionalized and widely invested in during this period as a burgeoning Social-Darwinism-as-white-superiority converged with the "white man's burden" (Stockwell 1982) as twin bases for a British "will and legitimacy to rule" (ibid.).

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Via such colonial discourse strategies and their postcolonial afterlives, individuals in Singapore often find themselves forced to construct and semiotically inhabit an ideological double bind. On the one hand, English belongs to Caucasian speakers, and yet, Singaporeans need not—indeed, often should not—"sound white." As I show in the article's final section, this can materialize as an explicit matter of concern, but as should already be clear, whiteness and its linguistic indices—whether aspirationally striven-toward or disavowed—are not just relevant to places like the United States that exist in the wake of gendered racial capitalism built through indigenous genocide, chattel slavery, and the continued enmeshment of Black death, racial violence, and American citizenship (Sharpe 2016). Unlike in the United States (and, in distinct yet interconnected ways, Great Britain, Brazil, Australia, and South Africa), where "sounding white" is an ideological counterpart to "sounding Black" (and to "sounding like a race," broadly),[2] in Singapore, this necessitates a series of coupling and decoupling strategies, as individuals selectively connect and sever the link—elsewhere constructed as necessary—between phenotypically white, Caucasian speakers and "(Good) English." This can take the form of overt metapragmatic and metasemantic discourses—discourses that respectively (re)typify language use and the meanings of linguistic forms or expressions (Silverstein 1993)—but it might also manifest through nonexplicit routines for evaluating English use.

In the United States and other settler-colonial contexts, whiteness is generally taken to be something that some people *are* or *possess*, and "sounding white" emanates from a racialized ontological status. In Singapore, meanwhile, whiteness is also treated as something that individuals or groups *have* or *are*, but it is something that exists "out there." In this way, it is specified and marked via pragmatic equivalents, like "sounding American," "sounding British," "sounding Australian," "sounding *ang moh* [white person/foreigner],"[3] and the like. National statuses and denotational code are thus specified and marked. From a speaker taken as phenotypically white, the linguistic indices of white identity co-occur with attributions of national origin, linguistic biography, education, class, gender, and so on. Here, positional whiteness is imaginable as isomorphic with white identities. When emanating from a body that is not interpretable as phenotypically white, "sounding white" entails a different range of semiotic markedness relations. When produced by a Singaporean, the performance may be interpreted

2. Baugh (2003); Alim and Smitherman (2012); Rosa (2019); Spears (2021).

3. This expression is attributed to Hokkien 红毛 (Mandarin *hóng máo* 'red hair'). Understood locally as a shibboleth of Singlish, the term is routinely used to playfully or surreptitiously refer to or predicate about the individuals so labeled.

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as putting on airs, being embarrassed by one's identity/accent/race/nationality, or being a foreigner.

Together, the two dynamics described over the prior and current section—the repositioning of English as a necessity for harmony among Singapore's CMIO races, together with the "neutral" status of British colonization and concomitant authority of "native," Caucasian English speakers over linguistic standards—serve to coconstruct and conaturalize Good English as embodied Caucasian raciolinguistic patrimony by default. Investments in Good English thus come to contend with divergent orientations toward Singlish, a category rendered parallel to "bad English" emblematic of Singaporeans' non-native speaker status, albeit not without contestation by scholars, advocates, and activists (Wee 2018, chap. 3). Following sociologist Michelle Christian, I describe these performances of desire for Good English as *aspirational investments in malleable whiteness*. These are *aspirational* investments, as opposed to *possessive* investments, in that individuals recruited to the project of Good English do not claim in the process to *be* white but rather seek to gain access to the social, cultural, and economic privileges linked to whiteness as an imagined, superordinate, structural position in projects aimed at hierarchically ordering raciolinguistic being (Smalls 2018).

My emphasis on the *malleability* of whiteness, meanwhile, emphasizes the shifty, context-specific character of whiteness as an attributed, embodied condition. It also emphasizes the scalability of whiteness across global raciolinguistic geographies. In this sense, aspirational investments in whiteness are at once "deep and malleable," linked through interpersonal, interactional, and global-institutional extensions of racial capitalism (Christian 2019, 170). Following Christian (and others), this means acknowledging the intertwinement of racial order, linguistic hierarchies, and global divisions of labor across racialized groups and the locations to which they are imagined to "naturally" belong. It means further acknowledging that the idea of whiteness as something that one *is* or *has* is a crucial aspect of the ways that links between positional whiteness and white identities get ideologically naturalized, even as they rarely—if ever—actually coincide in moments of encounter or interaction.

Anticipating the Foreign Listener in "English as It Is Broken"

This section analyzes the weekly advice column "English as It Is Broken," which participated in the public construction of Singlish as (a) language during a crucial period of public awareness building and debate over the category's status from the late 1990s onward. As I show, the column constructed a series of contrasts organized around the dyad of "broken English" and Good English: between expert,

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prescriptivist judgments of correctness and incorrectness; between the figure of "the Singaporean" and "the foreigner," the former raciolinguistically unspecified and the latter presumably a Caucasian, native English speaker; and between the subject who invests in Good English and the subject who does not.

Though the contributors and column editors almost never explicitly link "English as It Is Broken" to Singlish, the connection manifests in institutional relationships rather than in overt metadiscourses. The column was launched as a collaboration between the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), an ongoing language-planning campaign initiated in 1999, the Singapore Ministry of Education, and the *Straits Times*, Singapore's state-run newspaper of record. As numerous scholars have described (Babcock 2022, 332–33; see also Wee 2018), the SGEM was launched to target Singlish. The SGEM's cosponsorship of "English as It Is Broken" thus signals an important institutional link between Singlish and "broken" English. "English as It Is Broken" appeared in print as a weekly column in the *Sunday Times* from 1999 until the early 2000s. In 2006, it moved to the STOMP "citizen journalism" platform.[4] The column comprises reader-submitted inquiries and harangues about "everyday errors" made either by themselves or by others, real and imagined.

The column's contributions were compiled and republished in two volumes (*Straits Times* 2007, 2008). In the foreword to the published volumes, the editors note that, in the years since launching the column, the *Straits Times*' "panel of language experts" received thousands of submissions, only a subset of which were published (approximately one thousand submissions ended up in print). For them, this was "gratifying" evidence of "the desire of Singaporeans to want to speak good English" (*Straits Times* 2007). The first book was reprinted seven times and was on various Singaporean bestseller lists throughout 2007.

The column featured both photo and written content, though it predominantly comprised written content. Column entries were short, under 100 words, and each entry was titled by the *Straits Times* editorial team. After reading each of the entries and noting their genre conventions (Q&A format, short length, titling), I carried out an inductive coding process to identify patterns in both the questioners' and answerers' presuppositions, and in the ways of asking questions. Questions were generally posed in one of three ways: (1) asking the "language experts" to decide between two (or occasionally more) options;

4. STOMP is an acronym for "*Straits Times* Online Mobile Print," a platform where "citizen journalists" could document others' misdeeds—whether illegal, inconsiderate, or merely outside perceived norms. STOMPers (the name given to contributors) have been criticized for their xenophobic, sexist, racist, and even fabricated content, as well as for harassment tactics (Han 2014).

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(2) inquiring after "rules" of use; or (3) suggesting a correction to a found usage (on public signage or elsewhere in written or verbal sources). Most inquiries in the column were framed with relatively little overt metacommentary, with underspecified framings that suggest that readers should interpret the answers' corresponding "rules" to apply in any setting.

Despite the frequency of this sort of underspecified form, many entries do specify contexts of use; more particularly, over a third of the entries ($n = 342$) identify the native English-speaking "foreigner-who-does-not-understand" as the source of contributors' awareness about their own (or others') errors or a source of embarrassment, shame, or other forms of coming-to-awareness about "errors," as in the following:

> Have You Taken Your Lunch?
>
> Q: We love to say "Have you taken your lunch/dinner?" as some sort of greeting. My friend from abroad somewhat amused with the use of the word "taken." Is there something wrong with the sentence?
>
> A: [. . .] This unusual greeting is likely to draw a blank look from a foreigner. You might want to try a "How are you?" until the visitor is a bit more familiar with Singapore culture. . . . The word "taken" seems to suggest physically taking—and not eating—someone's lunch. Asking "Have you had lunch?" is clearer. (*Straits Times* 2007, 35)

This open-ended question framed the inquiry through an encounter with an unnamed but specified biographical individual, a "friend from abroad," retypified in the answer as a more generic "foreigner." Both the question and answer ultimately framed the inquiry acontextually: the question by inquiring whether the amusement of the "friend from abroad" indexed something generally "wrong with the sentence"; the answer by presenting an unqualified retypification of the sentence "Have you had your lunch?" as being "clearer"—not clearer to foreigners, but clearer in general.

It should be noted that "take [a meal]" would not necessarily draw a blank look or come across as amusing to all English speakers, even those who routinely claim native status: corpus studies have shown the phrase to be relatively common in British English, especially, for instance, in the context of "take tea" but also for other meals (Andor 2014). Sociolinguists and other scholars of language have noted the rise of American English as a privileged exonormative standard in Singapore, which has driven change in both metalinguistic evaluations and speech practices—for instance, an increase in /r/ postvocalic rhoticity (Starr

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2021) and various vowel shifts. The focalization of American speakers has thus reshaped anxieties over and local stigmatizations of Singlish (Park and Wee 2009) by positioning it in contrast to a specific American-English imaginary, even if it is not leading to a wholesale "Americanization" of Singaporeans' Englishes (Starr 2019; cf. Poedjosoedarmo 2000). I am not merely pointing out an ostensible empirical error or misjudgment by the questioner or expert in the entry above. Rather, I seek to draw attention to the ways that a specifically American English speaker often comes to stand as a salient figure across the column in entries like this, even if this figure is not the only kind of foreigner who might find themselves confused (or amused).

Together, the coanimation of different characterological figures across "English as It Is Broken" gives the sense of a chorus of disparate views, interests, and investments. Yet despite this multivocality, the column is nonetheless crafted to give a sense of a unitary Singaporean public that is, at base, united against and ever vigilant against "breakage" being done to English. Voicing prescriptive and proscriptive "rules" in anticipating foreign (often American) listening subjects thus becomes an opportunity for contributors' and readers' self-fashioning *as Singaporeans*, rescaled to the level of the nation-state via the encompassment of the CMIO races. Taken together, the column also serves, collectively, to position the confusion of the native English-speaking foreigner as a default measure for the adequacy of English-mediated communication. I trace the interactional entailments of these figural contrasts across a series of face-to-face classroom encounters in the next section.

Raciolinguistic Whiteness and "Know[ing] the Difference"

In this final section, I describe interactions I observed and participated in during a one-day training hosted by the Singapore British Council, titled "Singlish to English." While official course materials did not overtly frame the class's intervention as "correction" or "remediation" of attendees' English, the course was nevertheless organized around an axis of differentiation (Gal 2016b) between "Singlish" and "Standard English." The goal of the class was to teach attendees not to stop speaking Singlish but to "know the difference." As I will show, in the class, I was recruited to the project of (re)constructing a Singlish/standard English divide, which was laminated in turn onto a local/foreign divide, via two moves: the first, a move that rescaled speech by Singaporeans as "Singlish" when it differs from American usage; the second, a move that repositioned "difference" as "deviation," "deviation" as "error." I elaborate these two moves across the remainder of this section.

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At eight hours in duration, with a registration fee of S$668.75 (approximately US$500), "Singlish to English" demanded a significant investment of time and money. For this reason, it was marketed primarily to Singaporean working professionals, most of them employed in government ministries and statutory boards, and most of them eligible for full or partial tuition assistance via the state-run lifelong-learning scheme SkillsFuture. In speaking to current and prior trainers for the course, I was told that, in the past, the course had been offered more frequently, but in recent years it had been experiencing lower demand and was therefore offered less often. One trainer ascribed this to the fact that Singlish was "on its way up in the world," measured not only through the addition of Singlish items to the *Oxford English Dictionary* but also by the fact that many Singaporeans—especially young people—could now "code-switch," speaking both "fluent Singlish" and "fluent English." Another trainer voiced the opposite worry, speculating that declining enrolment indexed unconcern for "effective communication" and a view that Singlish was "good enough." Though my research methods and data did not allow me to compare these claims against, say, enrollment numbers or prior catalog listings, the assertions themselves are significant as speculative, psychologized explanations. Such explanations are not claims that can be judged true or false or compared against what is "really" happening in individuals' heads. Rather, they serve as a site for vicariously voicing and ranking the kinds of (im)moral persons who do (or do not) engage in linguistic self-improvement.

On the day that I attended, I was one of 24 students and the only non-Singaporean. Most of the students were mid- to late-career, Chinese-Singaporean professionals, 30–55 years old. The trainer had been warned of my attendance by the registrar but took it in stride, announcing to the class that they had a "special guest" joining them. Unlike the Singaporean students, the trainer said, I was there to improve my Singlish. This was met with light laughter, though throughout the day, I was also an object of reactions that ranged from confusion to mild suspicion. From my informal conversations with other attendees that day, it became clear that attendees had registered mostly to take a day off from work. Many voiced, albeit tenuously, that they did not expect to learn much during the class.

The trainer opened the class by introducing themselves as an ethnically Chinese person who was born outside Singapore, but who was still a "native Singlish speaker" after having lived in Singapore during 14 of their most formative years. The trainer went on to invite the class to guess which other languages they spoke (the answer: Bhasa Indonesia and Mandarin) and why they had an "American accent" (answer: because they had worked for an American-owned cruise line).

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The trainer then moved into a module that introduced the overarching aim of the course: "to know the difference" between Singlish and standard English and thus to "use Standard English in situations that require it" and "communicate more effectively in a global environment."

As the instructor was at pains to emphasize, Singlish is one among many World Englishes: "not wrong, just different." During an introductory activity in this segment, students were asked to name examples of World Englishes. Ratified items included Philippine English and Indian English, but the instructor gently rejected one student's answer of "American English." "American English," the instructor explained, "when spoken well, is standardized, and it's many people's Mother Tongue, so it's not World English." This introduction to World Englishes segued into a role-playing exercise, in which students practiced introducing themselves to different kinds of people on a premade list, ranging from "a friend's mother" to a "potential employer" to a "friend's friend (Singaporean)." My groupmates at the table were quick to identify the passkey in the last prompt's contrastive framing: only one interlocutor contained a parenthetical "Singaporean," so that was "the only one where Singlish was acceptable."

After this activity, the instructor addressed the full group, saying that the point of the exercise was not to show that Singlish is wrong but rather to make students "aware" of how they "habitually speak"—with emphasis on "habitually." They elaborated: "When I speak with my colleagues here at the British Council, it's a professional setting, so I use Standard English, even to the Singaporeans. But when I speak to the uncle who cleans the office, I speak Singlish. I'll say, 'Hey uncle, *zǎo, chīfànle ma* [早, 吃饭了吗]?'" (good morning, have you eaten?).[5] Having spent almost a year conducting fieldwork research at this point, the utterance caught my attention. Comprising a string of standard-register, etymologically Mandarin lexical material following the initial salutation ("uncle" is a common fictive kin term for addressing an elder man, whether known or unknown to the speaker), I was surprised to hear this labeled Singlish. This was particularly noteworthy in light of growing critiques of racialized majoritarian privilege in Singapore, also called Chinese privilege (Pak and Hiramoto 2023, this issue), through which individuals critique the enforced isomorphism between Singaporeanness and Chineseness, regardless of whether the critics are themselves members of raciolinguistically minoritized groups. When I asked a Malay-Singaporean classmate

5. The particle *le* 了 indicates completion or state change, which was not represented lexically in the gloss provided by the instructor. Many Mandarin speakers in Singapore would include "already"—for example, "Have you eaten already?"—as a gloss on *le* 了.

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whether this sentence was Singlish during our first break shortly after, she responded as if the question had been about the denotational code and replied that the sentence was "Chinese only." She did not recall the trainer calling the utterance "Singlish" at all. When I asked another Chinese-Singaporean classmate about the sentence, meanwhile, he proceeded to attempt to explain the use of the fictive kin term *uncle* and gave a metatypification of Singlish as a "mix of all the languages of Singapore." I share this not only to point out the divergence across interlocutors' typifications but also to emphasize that Singlish, as a series of value judgments, is not solely about code, even if metadiscourses about it tend to focus on its status as code—a dynamic that recurs in other stratified anglophone contexts, as well (Lo and Reyes 2009; Park 2015, 2021). In the trainer's initial utterance, the sentence's status as Singlish was not a function of its form or etymology, but a contrastive function of its participation frames: in other words, both the trainer and participants accepted the utterance as Singlish because it was *not* Standard English, *not* addressed to a foreigner (i.e., was addressed to a fellow Singaporean), and *not* uttered in a setting typified as formal.

As the day progressed, some of the trainer's claims came under overt contestation from participants. In the latter half of the class's third section, on vocabulary, one participant challenged a set of sentences provided in a handout—the day's first public contestation. The exercise comprised six sentences, framed by a question, "What words would you delete? Why?" Each sentence in the section contained a classifier (indicated by my underlining), for example: "He smokes 10 sticks of cigarettes every day"; "Please give me twelve stems of roses." The underlined items were to be crossed out by participants. After the class had collectively completed the exercise, one participant raised her hand to object: "For me, the sentences are grammatically correct. Students taking exams should get no marks [i.e., would receive zero examination points] if they left these words out. These are not Singlish." The trainer replied: "I see your point, but remember that outside Singapore, these words are not used."

The participant continued to push back: "But Singapore is not a white country. If *they* come here, they should try to understand. Correct or not?" Carefully measuring their words, the trainer nodded for a moment before again replying: "Singapore is *not* a white country, and we do not need to speak like Americans or Brits." I watched as, around the room, attendees nodded emphatically and murmured in agreement. "But we are very small, and very few. So, we must make sure that we speak well and can be understood when we communicate with the world."

As should be clear, the class attendee's initial objection linked two scales of justification: the first, an abstract grammaticality judgment; the second, an appeal

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to the evaluative practices of normative educational institutions. The final turn, "These are not Singlish," discursively constructed a negative parallel: because the sentences were grammatical, and because (in the speaker's estimation) they would be required by gatekeepers in educational institutions, they could not be Singlish. Even in this act of contestation, the ascription of "not Singlish" framed it in opposition to "grammatically correct," thus aligning Singlish with "grammatically incorrect." The response from the trainer, meanwhile, discursively bypassed the matter of educational institutions and assessments and reasserted the exercise's legitimacy on the grounds of an exogenous standard: how words are used "outside Singapore." This was not about sounding American or British, or forgetting that Singapore is "not a white country," and yet, the final turns nevertheless reasserted the figure of the foreigner-who-does-not-understand as both the aspirational target for and anticipated addressee of proper verbal conduct when communicating with the world.

Until this point in the class (including this contestation), attendees generally voiced their answers confidently, and their elicited responses were often interspersed with jokes about how easy the exercises were. This changed during a module titled "Recognising Singlish Vocabulary," which closed the "Vocabulary" section of the course. The exercise comprised a single page with a table in two columns, labeled "Singlish" on the left and "Standard English" on the right. The list began with sentences containing items that are commonly focalized as Singlish in public discourse, but the items decreased in familiarity as the exercise continued. When presented with the sentence, "I will revert to you soon," class participants responded confidently that *revert* is Singlish. In Standard English, attendees averred, the sentence would be "I will reply to you soon," or "I will return [something] to you soon." This dynamic continued for the first four items in the list of 12, until we collectively reached the fifth sentence, "My TV is spoilt, I can't watch the football match." Here there was a long, collective pause. Finally, one attendee at a table opposite mine ventured that this sentence was "correct, nothing wrong with it." After all, this was possible: item three—"I'll bring my book home after we finish here"—had already been confidently deemed Standard English.

The trainer asked, rhetorically: "Do you all agree?" The question was met by silence, though by a few affirmatively nodding heads. Here, the trainer gently disaffirmed: this was, in fact, Singlish. Following this retypification, class participants began peppering the trainer with alternatives without waiting to be called on: "My TV *got* spoilt?" "My *television* is spoilt?" "My *television* is spoilt, I *can no longer* watch the football match?" Each was met by silence from the trainer. After a few interminable seconds, the trainer turned to my table: "Josh?"

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Interpellated in this way, I floundered. After a pause, I weakly protested, "I understand the meaning of this sentence."

"Of course. But how would *you* say it?"

After another long pause, seeing no way out, I ceded: "I think Americans would say 'My TV is *broken*.'"

My hedging notwithstanding, this was followed by another collective silence, after which one participant at my table muttered breathlessly, almost inaudibly: "Oh."

The collective mood for the remainder of the day was decidedly subdued. Participants became more tentative in their replies and engagement in activities, especially activities to be performed before the entire group. Granted, the course was also moving away from more familiar subjects like words and vocabulary, but subsequent encounters with classmates also made it clear to me that the experience of discovering Singlish lurking in the crevices of their own unawareness—and moreover, of thinking it was Standard English—had been jarring, if not existentially so. During our lunch break, one of my groupmates approached me and asked, with an air of borderline disbelief, "You really say 'broken,' not 'spoilt'?" Again trying desperately to hedge my response, I replied, "I think many Americans would say 'broken,' but I think they would still understand the meaning of the sentence." Yet my hedging seemed once more to go unregistered. Nodding, my groupmate replied: "I never knew this was wrong."

Though I immediately tried to repeat that it was not wrong, my groupmate (and the others who had joined us at the lunch table) had already turned their attention elsewhere. In one of the wrap-up modules, where we were prompted to formulate an action plan, this same groupmate wrote, under a header in the student workbook titled "Something you are going to *stop* doing": "I will stop saying spoilt." Under "Something you are going to *start* doing," they wrote: "I will speak Good English."

Conclusion

Across the cases that I have examined, producers of written texts and participants in face-to-face interactions can be seen to variously deploy axes of differentiation anchored by binaries of "native" versus "non-native," "correct" versus "incorrect," "Singlish" versus "Good English," and the like. In the case of *spoilt/broken*, it should be clear that the felt incorrectness of the usage was projected not by the abstract existence of an exonormative English standard nor through a generic act of finding oneself subjected to linguistic policing projects carried out by representatives of standardizing institutions, whether officialized or not.

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Rather, my point is that exonormative standardization and linguistic policing are manifested raciolinguistically and, in instances like these, are given further weight through the experience of encountering an interactionally copresent member of the Caucasian raciolinguistic community—a covertly manifested group that is by default granted native gatekeeper status over Good English.

Of course, the attribution of white identity to me was itself both complexly multimodal and manifested locally. Whereas in the United States and other white, settler-colonial situations, I am generally racialized as "ambiguous" due to stereotypes about what it means to "look mixed-race," in Singapore this is often different. There, my American English, surname, and phenotypic signs are interpreted together in ways that couple positional whiteness to white identity. Despite the "Singlish to English" course's relativist early framings of Singlish ("not wrong, just different"), and despite the fact that the trainer almost never referred to Singlish sentences as "incorrect," the hegemonic status of these widespread axes of differentiation nevertheless led to their ready redeployment in participants' interpretations of their own speech when confronted with their own putative error vis-à-vis my use.

Of course, as the analysis of "English as It Is Broken" shows, white bodies need not be interactionally copresent for these effects to materialize. Indeed, even when they are, they often fall short of the ideological bar set by positional whiteness: I have been both the firsthand addressee and overhearer of talk about Americans', Australians', or Europeans' "bad English" and have observed myriad interactions online or offline in which individuals lambaste inner-circle speakers (whether copresent, reported, or imagined) for their unintelligibility. And yet, even as the category of Good English continues to fractally stigmatize a range of groups—including people interpreted by default as white—this does not durably undermine the naturalized link between Good English and the Caucasian speaker. Discourses of Good English thus invite "the Singaporean" to align by degrees to the position of the white listening subject and to aspire to and invest in whiteness qua position. But at the same time, this naturalization still figures "the Singaporean" as belonging to a nonwhite identity, as a non-native speaker, and therefore as hamstrung in their Good English aspirations.

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