

Ve-Yin Tee

VE-YIN TEE READS

THE CULTURE OF SINGAPORE ENGLISH

BY JOCK O. WONG

ABSTRACT. The Author examines critically the reflections of Jock O. Wong about Singapore English and its cultural background and gives us his idea of the culture of Singapore and of Singaporean language.

Key Words: Singapore, Culture, English, Singlish.

Despite initial misgivings, Jock O. Wong's *The Culture of Singapore English* (Cambridge UP) proved to be not only an informative read but a surprisingly enjoyable one as well.

I had many reasons to be apprehensive, and a few of my worries were even realized. First of all, I was immediately concerned over what a linguist would consider to be 'culture'. As it so happens, Wong's primary reference point is the use of Singapore English in daily life, and there is very little in his book on the actual products of Singaporean culture. That is to say, there is no treatment whatsoever of Singaporean films, Singaporean drama serials, Singaporean music, or Singaporean poetry. While he does look at one or two novels by Singaporean

writers, they are mined for examples of linguistic usage, rather than for semantic play or ideological resonance as a cultural or literary scholar such as myself normally would. Moreover, in being sympathetic towards postcolonialism and deconstructionism, I am ideologically committed to exposing the politics and unequal power relations underlying the very categories that linguistics (and other positivist sciences) as a discipline might perpetuate.

A particularly worrying category in these respects is the notion of ‘Standard English’, which Wong allows to stand and predictably exerts a negative valence on Singapore English as ‘non-Standard’. As the French social theorist Michel Foucault astutely observed of power, its imposition ‘is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself’ (86). Why English is spoken in Singapore, including the variety of English that is most privileged there, is due to a certain colonial history and geopolitical circumstance. The Singapore government’s notion of ‘Good English’ is the same as second language learners of the language everywhere, to speak a language that conforms to the rules of the dominant cultural, economic and military powers. That the Singapore government should be hostile to ‘Singlish’ is unsurprising considering the general desire among English

language learners everywhere to overcome local features (in linguistic parlance, ‘first language interference’) in order to sound more ‘British’ or ‘American’ (instead of, say, like an Italian speaking English). And what is ‘Standard British English’, or ‘Standard American English’, but the language standardized (through social institutions and the mass media) by the dominant social class of the dominant economic regions of Britain and America?

On the level of linguistic form, I feared that if comparisons were made with ‘Standard English’, ‘Singapore English’ would come off worse in every instance. Indeed, according to Wong, while British and Australian speakers demonstrate respect for individuality and individual freedom, ‘when Singlish speakers want someone to do something, their main concern tends to be whether the person can do it. They do not seem interested in whether the person wants to do it or, at least, not overtly so’ (175). When making such simplifications, extra care should be taken to be even-handed, for example, Anglo-American ideals of freedom and individuality could be balanced against competing Singaporean claims of responsibility and community. It is difficult for me to subscribe to these categories however, believing how unequal British and American societies are as I do; moreover, I very much

doubt that the majority of Singaporeans would long support a government that engages in the intrusive social engineering that it does if they were truly confident in each other's sense of civic responsibility. Another division of Wong's that I had serious issues with is his classification of 'ways of speaking' into 'Scientific vs unscientific' (228). Not only do I fail to understand exactly what is so 'scientific' about the tendency among 'Anglo English' speakers to 'present certainties as uncertainties', but I also had little trouble thinking up of Singaporean equivalents for every single example that Wong gives on that score (219). 'Singlish speakers' can 'present certainties as uncertainties' too, and they frequently do so through the use of particles (whose meanings vary depending on pitch and stress). For instance, the particle *ǎ* can be used to seek affirmation on, to undermine, or even to oppose what might seem otherwise a certainty. The equivalent in 'Singapore English' for '*Do you think I'm fat?*' (in the situation Wong details on page 219) would be: 'You think I'm fat *ǎ*?'. But in Wong's own examination of the particle, this quality is interpreted negatively as 'a tendency to [re]state the obvious ... [that] has its roots in Chinese culture' (253).

Mercifully, Wong is mindful of the sense of entitlement of those scholars among whom the ‘idea that Standard English lacks precision and clarity seems to be shared by few’, and in whose work ‘Standard English continues to be routinely used with impunity to describe other languages and cultures’ (39). He is also conscious of how, as a result of the power differential between English and other languages, ‘many scholars of non-English tongues also use Standard English to *ethnocentrically* describe their own languages and cultures, without expressing any awareness that their own cultures are being distorted by Standard English’ (45). While Wong never formally extrapolates anything negative from ‘Standard English’ itself, the negative evaluations of ‘Singlish’ that I’ve noted above are fortunately few and far between. Given Wong’s cognizance of what he labels as ‘linguistic ethnocentrism’ (I myself prefer Edward W. Said’s ‘orientalism’), these ethnocentric categorizations that he himself has established are no mere lapses in scholarly rigour and consistency but should be understood as the distortions of power (to marginalize, to other the other). The notion of ‘Standard English’, the privilege its users assume and presume, its othering of other languages and cultures, should be rigorously exposed.

For Wong's *The Culture of Singapore English* is, otherwise and in the main, a model of scholarly rigour and consistency. His examination of address forms is careful and sensitive, and I thought his analysis of the use of 'can' in Singapore, as well as the differences he distinguishes between the reduplication of words by Singaporean, British and Australian speakers to be nothing short of masterly. Whatever concerns I had of having to plough through page after page of distancing, jargon-filled science speak were quickly dispelled by the disarming photograph of his nephews, and his selection of authentic language—taken from a time spent in Australia pursuing a PhD, from family and friends, as well as a working environment I immediately recognized as belonging to the National University of Singapore—helped to lighten the tone and hold my interest. Wong's work is my first encounter with the use of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), which to me sounded oddly like Ursula Le Guin's translations from Kesh, the language of a Native American tribe living thousands of years from now in northern California. But it was his chapter on 'The tonal particles of Singlish' that was my favourite, for there was one point I actually stopped myself and thought: 'how beautiful!'

Most of importantly of all, I had thought the language spoken in Singapore a dialect of English. I never thought of Singlish as ‘bad English’, for I always knew Singlish had rules and that I had to follow them if I did not want to be mistakenly outed as a foreigner (I have spent more than two-thirds of my life overseas). But it is Wong’s book that has made me appreciate for the first time just how rule-governed Singlish is. In fact, given the differences in ‘rules and tendencies ... from Anglo English’ (300), given the Chineseness of its grammar, and given the occasions of usage that are neither English or Chinese, Wong raises the radical possibility that Singlish might be a separate language in its own right. ‘A language is a dialect with an army and navy’ is a well-known adage, but conceiving of Singlish as a language has advantages far beyond pandering to nationalistic pride. Singaporeans might stop using the rules of a language shaped by a culture on the other side of the planet to judge the language they use in their daily lives. One day perhaps, Singlish will simply be seen as a language that gives its users an advantage studying English, in the same way as Italians are seen to have an advantage studying Spanish. With this mind, I think it’s time to stop saying ‘Singapore English’, or ‘Singlish’, and simply say ‘Singaporean’.

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