

Book Review

Singapore English: Structure, Variation, and Usage. (Series: Studies in English Language). Jacob R. E. Leimgruber. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xvi + 150 pp. ISBN 978-1-107-102730-5 (hbk).

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This book provides a comprehensive discussion of the different aspects of Singapore English (henceforth SgE), with the support of, wherever possible, data collected from interviews with informants from post-secondary institutions in Singapore. It begins with a detailed and accurate historical account that led to the emergence of Singapore English. There is an adequate section on the impact of the British during the colonial period, and thus the influence of English in this tiny island republic, and there is an interesting account of the linguistic diversity of the island state that makes up the linguistic landscape of the country. English is considered a main language in Singapore, and the author claims that there is a hierarchical ranking of the four official languages in Singapore. English is ranked the highest, followed by Mandarin, and then Malay with Tamil as the lowest ranked language.

As a researcher on language varieties, I found the chapters on the different models used to describe SgE to be illuminating. Of particular interest to me was the offer of a potentially powerful approach to describing SgE which has yet to be fully explored, and that is the indexical approach, particularly non-referential indexicality, where usage may not just add to semantics but have social meanings as well. This approach is well discussed in the book, and the attention paid to describing the social meanings of language usage is of particular interest to sociolinguistic research. The author shows how indexicality could be used to describe Singlish, with emphasis on its cultural orientation. Also, the approach has the potential to explain the seemingly random variation observed in SgE in a way that may not be clearly expressed in the other approaches such as the continuum and diglossia models found in the literature.

Another way this book is different from others on SgE is in its appreciation of the differences between Colloquial Singapore English (CSE) and Standard Singapore English (SSE). Thus, rather than focusing on the phonology or lexicogrammar of SgE, it examines these aspects separately under CSE and SSE. In discussing the lexicon, for example, while the item *blur* (meaning ‘confused’) may be restricted to CSE, *ang pow* (‘red envelope’) is accepted in SSE. In grammar, the use of *got* is claimed to be CSE and not SSE, where *got* is used to indicate temporal location, aspect, emphasis and occasionally to express disagreement. There is no mention however of the differences between CSE and SSE in phonology. Although the assumption is that there are no inflections (e.g. verbal inflections such as auxiliaries and the copula) in SgE, the data from the author shows that inflections do occur variably in a seemingly haphazard way. Discourse markers warrant a detailed discussion under the semantics and pragmatics section of the book, particularly the discourse particles such as *lah*, *ah*, *hor*, and *meh?* which are found only in CSE.

The book also outlines government policies that have directed the use of the English language in Singapore. The *Speak Good English Movement*, the promotion of Standard English

and the demotion of the vernacular Singlish have all contributed to making English the highest ranked language in Singapore. The author also proposes the possibility of an ‘ASEAN’ English, although there appears to be a considerable amount of internal variation among Englishes in Southeast Asia against which he compares and contrasts Singapore English.

This book is simply written and comprehensive in its description and discussion of one of the more well-documented varieties of English in Southeast Asia. Singlish has been written about in terms of its distinct phonology, grammar and lexicon. What this book does is it provides an additional perspective into Singlish that is less explored: its social meaning. It is not only a good reference book for the student doing World Englishes, but it is also relevant to the researcher in linguistics because of the new research directions it generates for this well-documented variety of English.