

## Between status and solidarity in Singapore

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**ABSTRACT:** Language attitude studies have shown that the majority language and its speakers tend to be rated positively along status, intelligence, and power dimensions ('Educated', 'Successful', 'Intelligent'), while the minority variety and its speakers elicit positive responses in the solidarity semantic category ('Friendly', 'Honest', 'Responsible'). This study examines subjective reaction to Singapore Standard English (SSE) and Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), widely known as 'Singlish', using the matched guise technique. Though SCE has been widely reported to be a strong solidarity marker for Singaporeans, no systematic study has been carried out to attest this observation. In this study, 75 Singaporeans and 19 non-Singaporeans listened to a recorded speech sample in SCE and another in SSE and were asked to rate the 'speakers' on a series of semantic traits. The results conformed to widely reported trends of other matched guise studies showing clustering of responses along dimensions of status and solidarity. However, unlike previous studies in other contexts, which tend to show increased solidarity ratings with non-standard varieties, the data from this present study points to a different trend. Contrary to expectations, SCE was rated lower in solidarity traits compared to SSE. This raises questions about the widely perceived role of SCE as a high solidarity language. The discussion evaluates the attitudes of world Englishes in other contexts and seeks to explain the discrepancy in the findings by drawing on the unique and intense language awareness campaigns Singaporeans have been subjected to since independence.

### INTRODUCTION

Like it or not, we all judge others by how they speak, and at the same time are judged by them. The way we speak, the words we choose, and the way we sound all carry information that tells our listeners a lot about us and our background. For this reason, linguists and sociologists have long been interested in the way people are able to make judgements about people simply from the way they speak.

Research into language attitudes has accumulated a significant amount of data on listeners' evaluation of speakers of different language varieties (for example, standard languages versus dialects) and of speakers with non-native accents (for example, the study by Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, and Fillenbaum (1960) of French and English accents and Ryan and Carranza's (1975) study of American English and Hispanic accented English, to name just two seminal studies on language attitudes).

This study aimed to determine the attitudes toward two varieties of Singapore English by adult Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans studying in Singapore.

### LANGUAGE ATTITUDE STUDIES

Studies on language attitudes have been carried out using direct or indirect methods. The direct methods can be classified into two categories.

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(1) Content analysis of the public treatment of the languages spoken. In Singapore, these have concentrated on government policies (Shepherd 2005; Schiffman 1995; Pennycook 1994; Bokhorst-Heng 2005; Wee and Bokhorst-Heng 2005; Wee 2005), the language used in the newspapers (Chng 2003; Bokhorst-Heng 2002) and language debates in the newspapers (Rubdy 2001; Bokhorst-Heng 2005). These studies generally harness public sentiments and evaluate them in the light of prevailing official educational policies. In the context of Singapore, language use has always been a topical issue that is widely debated and discussed at all levels, and politicians with vested interest will use all avenues of the media to put their views across. Hence, it is not surprising that this public 'debate' has been most productive in terms of supplying linguists with data about attitudes toward a range of language-related issues including attitudes.

(2) Collection of attitudinal data by directly asking participants their opinions on different languages. Garret, Williams, and Evans (2005) asked their participants in the USA, New Zealand, and Australia to name eight English-speaking countries, apart from their own. The participants then had to 'tell us how the English spoken there strikes you when you hear it spoken' (p. 217). In Singapore a number of researchers have adopted similar methods in their studies (Crewe 1979; Poedjosoedarmo 1995; 2002; Xu, Chew, and Chen 1998). Xu et al. (1998) found that the Singaporean Chinese community had a high regard for English/Mandarin bilingualism, and that the majority of the participants in their study felt closer to Mandarin than English. Xu et al. (1998) indicated that for Singaporeans, English and Mandarin are polarized in the dimension of instrumentality and affectivity (p. 144). Their study showed that Singaporean Chinese rated Mandarin higher in solidarity, but lower in prestige and power; they rated English higher in prestige and power, but lower in solidarity.

A more indirect methodological approach to investigating language attitudes is the measurement of more subjective reactions to variations in languages through the use of the matched guise (MG) test. In these studies, listeners rate speakers recorded once using a prestige accent or language variety, another time using a low-prestige accent or language variety. The speakers are rated on a battery of semantic scales such as 'intelligent', 'educated', 'honest'. Lambert et al. (1960), Lambert, Anisfeld, and Yeni-Komshian (1965), and Labov (1966) were among the first linguists to measure subjective reactions to language variation. Lambert et al.'s (1960) classic work paved the way for language attitudes being used as a sociolinguistic variable. In their study they used the MG technique to indirectly evaluate the attitudes towards French and English in Quebec. Their studies found that speakers are consistently rated highest on all the scales relating to status and attractiveness when using prestige accents, even though what they actually said was unchanged. At the same time, most studies show that speakers are rated more highly in solidarity traits when using lower-prestige accents.

This pattern is illustrated in other studies (Giles 1970; 1971; Hiraga 2005) in which subjective reaction tests were carried out in the UK, with groups of people being played speech samples using different accents and being asked them to rate them according to a number of semantic traits. These studies have found that, in terms of status generally, British people rate RP top, then the national accents (standard Scottish, Welsh, and Irish) and then the rural accents (Yorkshire, Devon, Lancashire). Urban accents (Scouse, Brummie, and Cockney) are rated lowest of all. This signals a clear message about the social value and power of certain accents.

This method of measuring attitudes was particularly popular with social psychologists, as it was considered to be less sensitive to 'reflection and social desirability biases' (Cargile, Giles, Ryan, and Bradac 1994: 213) than those studies which elicit responses in a questionnaire.

### **MATCHED GUISE TEST AND LANGUAGE VARIATION**

Generally, whether language attitude can be objectively measured is controversial, and the various methods have been comprehensively reviewed and critiqued in the last two decades (e.g. Agheyisi and Fishman 1970; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Cargile et al. 1994). Regardless of the methodological flaws identified, there is no denying that language is not a neutral entity: it is a very potent form of self-identification (Ingram 1980). The use of the MG technique to measure attitude has also attracted some discussion about the nature of the data generated. In particular, various researchers have criticized the validity of the MG test in investigating attitudes on dialects. A main criticism of MG is that it is only reliable when attitudes towards accents are being investigated (see e.g. Hiraga 2005). This is because the MG test uses one speaker to produce the desired number of speech samples. While it is normally possible to find a speaker who can successfully mimic a small number of different accents, this is not possible in the case of larger studies when larger numbers of dialects are being tested. The belief is that it is difficult (or impossible) to find one speaker who can speak or mimic all the dialectal varieties being investigated. This is true of Giles's (1970) study, where he tested 13 varieties, and of Hiraga's (2005) study, investigating six varieties. In these cases a variation of the MG is adopted. This variation is sometimes referred to as a 'verbal guise test', and different speakers are used for the different varieties tested. The use of verbal guise instead of the matched guise technique does dilute the strength of the MG technique, as the introduction of multiple speakers inevitably introduces other speaker-related variables.

However, despite criticisms, it is now commonly accepted that the MG technique is one way of eliciting information about attitudes to language without explicitly drawing attention to the language itself. Just how powerful the effect of accent or dialectal variation on listeners' perceptions is, is shown in the long tradition of MG studies.

### **LANGUAGE ATTITUDE STUDIES IN SINGAPORE**

In the Singapore contexts, while various writers have extracted information about language attitudes from questionnaires (e.g. Li et al. 1997; Kamwangamalu 1992), more indirect studies of language attitudes have not been widely used. Little research has been carried out on non-native accents and non-standard varieties in Asia and Singapore in particular, except for a study by Chia and Brown (2002), who used the recordings of six speakers to investigate the usefulness of Estuary English as a teaching medium in Singapore. They evaluated the attitudes of Singaporeans to Estuary English (EE), RP, and Singapore English (SgE), and found that RP was rated as significantly more intelligible than SgE and EE as significantly less so. RP was also rated as significantly more refined and more standard than SgE and EE. In two other studies, Ooi (1986) and Seah (1987) compared the attitudes of Singaporeans towards the more educated varieties of English spoken in Singapore, but not SCE. These studies found that Singaporeans were generally positive about educated varieties of English spoken in Singapore.

## SINGAPORE ENGLISH

It is widely accepted that SCE and SSE are the two main varieties of English spoken in Singapore (Platt 1977; Richards and Tay 1977; Gupta 1994; Bao and Hong 2006), though in reality, the variation is more continuous than discrete. Most researchers now agree largely on the diglossic nature of these two varieties within the Singaporean community (Gupta 1989; 1994; Richards 1983; Pakir 1991). Wee (2004a; 2004b) presents identifiable phonological, morphological, and syntactic features of SSE. This is indicative of a stable variety, and while it was once customary to compare or associate SSE with an external variety such as British English, Deterding (2005) and Schneider (2007) have provided strong evidence to support the argument that SSE is developing its own standard which is distinct from other external standards.

Though SSE is not significantly different from other international standard varieties of English in terms of intelligibility, SCE has undergone substantial influence at the substrate level which has led to considerable restructuring at all levels. These features have been exhaustively documented in the literature (Brown 1999; Chen 2004; Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo 1998; Wee 2002; 2003). It is this very variety which attracts the most opprobrium from official quarters and is considered to be a stumbling block to Singapore's ability to blend seamlessly into the first world.

Though SSE is the desired and officially prescribed norm for the community, there is no doubt that for the great majority of Singaporeans, SCE is the language which is closer to home. That is, it is the language of chat, banter, informal gatherings, and definitely the language of day-to-day interaction. Though several researchers (Gupta 1994; Ho 2006; Simpson 2007; Wong 2005) have directly or indirectly argued that SCE is a variety that indicates high solidarity and is perceived by speakers to express solidarity, this seems to have largely been based on anecdotal or impressionistic evidence. One exception is the study by Kamwangamalu (1992), who found that Singaporeans are generally ambivalent about the 'Singapore accent' in a survey. On the one hand, they are positive about their own accent, but on the other, they accord more prestige to exonormative varieties. Most of the studies which reported attitudinal features to Singapore English adopted a direct method of enquiry, and the participants were left to imagine what constitutes a 'Singapore accent' or 'Singapore English'. Given the difficulty of separating individual perceptions of what constitutes 'Singapore English', a more indirect method of enquiry such as the MG technique, which employs pre-recorded speech stimuli, may present a more neutral context for the study.

This study adopted the MG test to investigate adult Singaporeans' attitudes to Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) and Singapore Standard English (SSE), as it still remains the most unobtrusive way to elicit impressions about accents without having to grapple with other intervening variables such as voice quality, personality, or context.

## THE STUDY

A total of 75 Singaporeans (Table 1) and 19 non-Singaporeans (Table 2) took part in the study. All participants were students at a tertiary institution in Singapore. They were aged 19–23.

Table 1. Singaporean participants

Gender	No.	%
Males	29	38.7
Females	46	61.3
Total	75	100.0

Table 2. Non-Singaporean participants

Nationality	No.
China	7
Indonesia	5
Malaysia	7
Total	19

Table 3. Stimulus speaker

Gender	Nationality	Age	Occupation	Educational background
Female	Singaporean	35	Academic	Postgraduate

## Participants

### *Stimulus speech samples*

The study used the standard matched guise. One female speaker was used to provide the stimulus for the study (Table 3).

The perceived nationality and ethnicity of the stimulus speaker can influence the listeners' attitudes (Cargile et al. 1994; Gallois and Callan 1989). Therefore, a native speaker of both SCE and SSE was chosen as the stimulus speaker for this study. The speaker has lived and studied in Singapore for most of her life. Because perceived age can also influence the participants' evaluations (Gallois, Callan, and Johnstone 1984) the stimulus speaker was chosen for her relatively young age. It was thought that since she was comparatively close in age to the participants, age would not influence the results.

The stimulus speaker was asked to make two recordings in Windows (PC) sound file format (.wav): one recording in Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) and the other in Singapore Standard English (SSE). It was important to keep the topic neutral in content so that the topic itself would not elicit any strong opinions from the participants. In the end the chosen topic of the stimulus passage was the routine for a weekend morning. This was thought to be neutral enough for the topic itself to have no effect on the evaluations.

The first recording was the SSE speech sample (see Appendix). To create more spontaneity, the speaker did not read from a passage but provided her thoughts about how she spends her Saturday mornings. The SCE speech sample was the same as the SSE speech sample in content, but it differed not only in terms of the accent but also in the lexis and syntax. For example, the SCE speech sample included the appropriate sentence-final pragmatic particles typical of SCE, lexical items specific to SCE such as *chiong* meaning

‘a wild night out’, and speech characteristics of SCE (intonation and stress patterns). The stimulus speaker ended up making 12 recordings in all, 6 in SSE and 6 in SCE. The recordings were then played to 10 Singaporeans who were asked to rank them using a 7-point Likert scale according to:

- how ‘Singaporean’ they all sounded;
- how representative of ‘Singlish’ the SCE recordings were;
- how natural and spontaneous they sounded.

The two top-ranked recordings were chosen for the study. The following are excerpts from the first 10–15 seconds of the records (see the Appendix for the full SSE transcript).

*Excerpt 1. SSE*

Saturday morning I tend to get up later than usual. When I wake up I generally like to lie in bed and listen to the radio for a while. I listen for about half an hour or so. Then I get up and it’s time for my first cup of coffee. After the coffee I make my breakfast.

*Excerpt 2. SCE*

Okay, what I do on Saturday morning ah. Saturday morning hor, can sleep until very late lor. If the night before go and chiong ah, wah, of course sleep until shiok already then wake up men. Wake up already go and eat breakfast lor, the normal thing lah.

The MG test was administered online through the university’s intranet. All the participants were enrolled in a semester-long course run by the authors. The course was an introductory course in Linguistics, and the test was uploaded to the course site in the first two weeks, before the students acquired any in-depth knowledge of linguistic principles. The students were simply told that there was a survey on the course site and that they were encouraged to do it. It was not compulsory; around 75 per cent of the students completed it.

*Traits*

The participants listened to Speaker A (SCE) first and then rated the speaker using a 7-point Likert scale with verbal anchors as follows, where (1) represented the lower end (e.g. Not intelligent) and (7) represented the higher end (e.g. Intelligent):

- Intelligent—Not intelligent
- Confident—Not confident
- Hardworking—Not hardworking
- Ambitious—Not ambitious
- Honest—Not honest
- Sincere—Not sincere
- Trustworthy—Not trustworthy
- Likeable—Unlikeable
- Kind—Not kind
- Friendly—Not friendly
- Fluent—Not fluent

The participants then listened to Speaker B (SSE) and rated her on the basis of the same traits and 7-point Likert scale as Speaker A.

Table 4. Varimax rotation of two factors

	Component 1 Status	Component 2 Solidarity
Fluent English	.861	
Hardworking	.856	
Intelligent	.849	
Ambitious	.840	
Confident	.733	
Trustworthy	.640	.520
Friendly		.808
Kind		.713
Honest		.700
Sincere	.538	.645
Likeable	.587	.622
% of variance explained	41.5	26.1

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Only loadings above .3 are displayed.

One Singaporean participant submitted an unusable response for Speaker A. This left 74 usable responses for the SCE speaker and 75 for the SSE speaker. One non-Singaporean participant submitted an unusable response, so that left 18 useable responses for the SCE speaker and 19 for the SSE speaker.

To tap into the participants' perceptions of SCE and SSE of the two guises, we relied on the 11 semantic traits listed above. To assess how and to what extent the 11 traits correspond with SCE and SSE, we performed a principal component analysis (PCA). Using Varimax rotation, two components explaining 68 per cent of the total variance, all with eigenvalues greater than one, were extracted. The Bartlett Test of Sphericity ( $P=0.000$ ) and Kaiser's measure of sampling adequacy (0.878) indicated that the exploratory factor analysis was within acceptable levels (Tabachnick and Fidell 1989). These two factors were labelled 'Status' and 'Solidarity', and their loadings are shown in Table 4.

From the table it can be seen that both components show a number of strong loadings. The variables 'Fluent English', 'Hardworking', 'Ambitious', 'Intelligent', and 'Confident' are clearly marked in the Status component, while 'Friendly', 'Kind', and 'Honest' belong in the Solidarity variables. The three variables 'Trustworthy', 'Sincere', and 'Likeable' seem to be evenly loaded for the two components. Overall, the results of the principal component analysis support the use of the Status and Solidarity factors.

Following Hair, Tatham, Anderson, and Black (1998) on suppressing loadings, the traits 'Trustworthy', 'Sincere', and 'Likeable' were suppressed because they did not make enough distinctions between the two factors.

## RESULTS

The overall results for the Singaporean group are presented in Figure 1, which shows the mean ratings of each speech sample. The SSE speech has the highest mean rating across all the traits except for the 'Honesty' trait. This is the only point where the two lines meet.

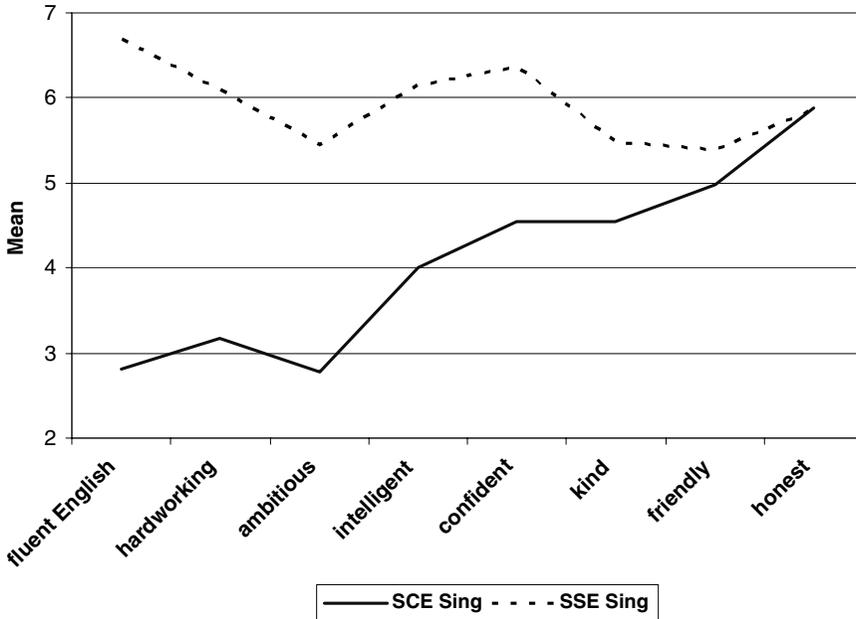


Figure 1. Mean rating of the two recordings by trait

A t-test performed on the data (Table 5) shows that nearly all the differences are statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). The t-test for the 'Friendly' trait is marginally significant ( $p = 0.063$ ), while the 'Honesty' trait is not significant. Generally though, the data appears to indicate a trend in that the mean ratings for the SSE group are greater than the SCE group.

Figure 1 shows that Singaporeans rate SSE well in all traits and assess the local variety (SCE) low on all qualities. This is a rather surprising result. In many similar studies the speaker with the same regional accent as the audience was considered to be more humorous, friendly, reliable, generous, good-natured, and talkative than the spokesperson with the standard (in these cases RP) accent (Cheyne 1970; Giles 1971). Other studies

Table 5. Group statistics and t-test results

	SCE Mean	Std. Deviation	SSE Mean	Std. Deviation	t
Intelligent	4.01	1.298	6.15	1.036	-11.096***
Confident	4.55	1.729	6.37	0.941	-7.991***
Hardworking	3.18	1.793	6.09	1.080	-12.049***
Ambitious	2.78	1.474	5.45	1.255	-11.909***
Honest	5.88	1.404	5.87	0.991	0.059
Kind	4.55	1.386	5.48	0.964	-4.739***
Friendly	4.97	1.424	5.40	1.356	-1.875*
Fluent English	2.82	1.616	6.69	0.753	-18.769***

\*\*\*= $p < 0.01$  Sig. (2-tailed). \*= $p < 0.10$  Sig. (2-tailed).

(Edwards 1977; Edwards and Jacobsen 1987; Giles 1973; Lambert et al. 1960) have found that while speakers with standard accents or dialects were rated more favourably along the dimensions of competence and status/prestige (the equivalent of our Status), speakers with non-standard accents received higher evaluations on the dimensions of personal integrity and social attractiveness. The higher evaluations in these latter traits have been attributed to in-group solidarity (Edwards 1982: 25).

As stated earlier, other studies show that people rate standard varieties of English (RP and North American) higher in intelligence and work categories, but lower in solidarity and friendship (Hiraga 2005; Giles 1970; 1971). Our results seem to show that Singaporeans do not make such a distinction between SSE and SCE. That is, as expected, the variables in the Status component scored much higher for SSE (Figure 1) than for SCE. There is also a convergence of scores in the two variables that factor analysis clearly indicated belong in the Solidarity component (Friendly and Honest). The expectations were that the two lines would cross. Instead, the ratings for SSE remained fairly constant along all traits, ranging from a low of 5.4 to a high of 6.69. The ratings for SCE only showed a slight increase for the Solidarity traits over the Status ones. Clearly, in Singapore the attitudes towards these two varieties do not follow the established trend.

## GENDER

The speaker's gender has also been found to affect the attitudes of the listeners. In their studies, Wilson and Bayard (1992) in New Zealand and Street, Brady, and Lee (1984) reported that female speakers were rated lower on all traits; although Van-Trieste (1990) found that among Puerto Rican university students the highest ratings were given by female participants to male speakers and the lowest by male participants to male speakers. He also found that there was no significant difference in ratings given to female speakers by either the male or female participants. Hence, there is an interaction effect for gender and rater.

In a study comparing Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese in Hong Kong, Lung (1997) found that males tend to demonstrate solidarity with Cantonese while ascribing higher status to Mandarin. Females, on the other hand, showed significantly greater solidarity toward Mandarin. Lung concluded that women reacted more favourably towards the standard language and were more actively responsible for its adoption in post-British Hong Kong.

In our study, the SSE speaker was rated similarly by both males and females. Though the finding was not statistically significant for all traits in terms of gender differences in the raters, there is an indication that female raters tended to rate the SCE guise lower than the male raters. However, marked gender effects are not evident in this study. There are many possible reasons for this. The first could simply be the limitation of the current sample size. The other reason could be the fact that gender effects are not as pronounced for university undergraduates. A follow-up study using a larger sample is needed to test this observation more rigorously.

Figure 2 shows the mean ratings of each speech by gender. It shows no significant difference according to gender in the SSE speech sample. However, in the SCE sample (see also Table 6) we can see that females rated the speaker more negatively in all traits. While males consistently gave higher ratings than females across all traits, a mean difference test (*t* test) (Table 6) reveals significant differences between the males' and females' scores for SCE in the 'Confident' ( $p=0.027$ ) and 'Friendly' ( $p=0.048$ ) traits. The lack of statistical

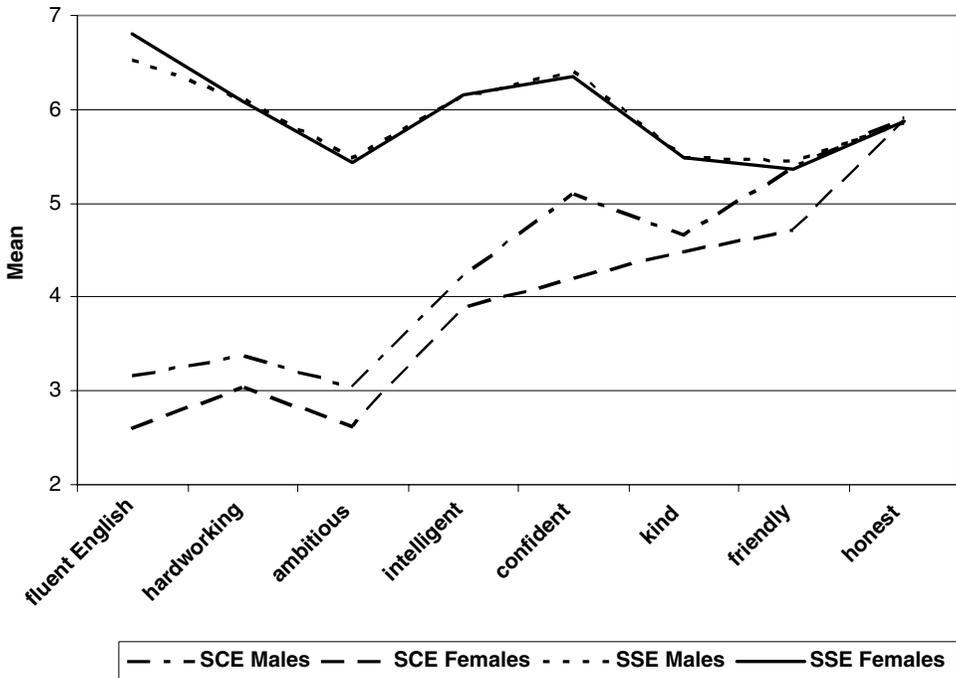


Figure 2. Mean ratings according to gender

significance on the remaining traits is attributed to the relatively small sample size. A larger sample would probably have greater chances of detecting significant differences. These findings appear consistent with Lung's study reported above. That is, as in Hong Kong, in Singapore women tend to ascribe to the standard and rate the colloquial variety lower.

These findings, which support Lung's study reported above, are perhaps not surprising, as there is a robust body of literature in gender and language studies which indicate that women are more sensitive to prestige differences in language varieties. Perhaps it might

Table 6. Group statistics and *t*-test results for SCE

	Male Mean	Std. Deviation	Female Mean	Std. Deviation	<i>t</i>
Intelligent	4.21	1.264	3.89	1.318	1.029
Confident	5.10	1.543	4.20	1.766	2.255**
Hardworking	3.38	1.916	3.04	1.718	0.782
Ambitious	3.03	1.569	2.62	1.403	1.178
Honest	5.90	1.345	5.87	1.455	0.089
Kind	4.66	1.471	4.49	1.342	0.501
Friendly	5.38	1.399	4.71	1.392	2.012**
Fluent English	3.17	1.513	2.60	1.657	1.500

\*\*= $p < 0.05$  Sig. (2-tailed)

be more accurate to say that the educated women in this sample are more likely to 'prefer' standard varieties, and this may not generalize to the entire female population. The precise nature of gender effects can only be explained when we take into account other identities within the wider community such as class, mobility, and ethnic background (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999).

### NON-SINGAPOREANS

The mean scores of the non-Singaporean participants are plotted against those of the Singaporean group in Figure 3. These participants are not native speakers of any of the Singaporean varieties of English, and most of them have been in Singapore for only two years or less. However, the figure shows some interesting results.

The figure shows that the non-Singaporeans rated both varieties higher than the Singaporeans. They rated the SSE speaker higher on most traits than the Singaporeans except for fluency, kindness, and friendliness, where they rated her the same as the Singaporeans. It also shows that non-Singaporeans rated the SCE speaker about the same as the Singaporeans in most of the Status traits. However, they rated SCE higher in all the solidarity traits than the Singaporeans except for honesty. There is a slight crossover between their evaluations of the two speakers along some of the solidarity traits. Though the sample size is small, it is interesting to note that, contrary to anecdotal reports which tend to focus on foreign students' disapproval of the 'Singaporean accent', the very tentative data here

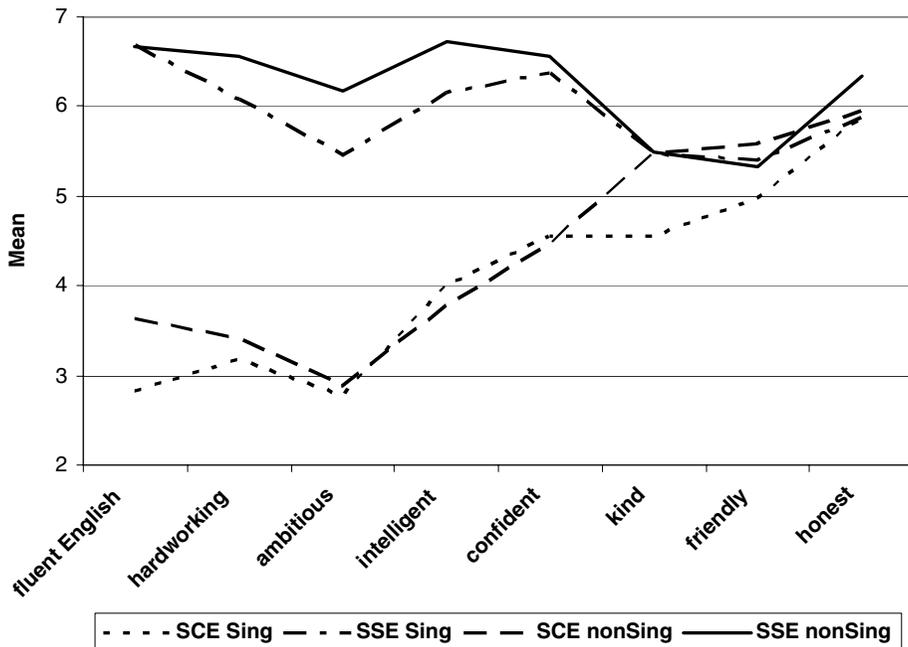


Figure 3. Mean rating of the two recordings by trait (Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans)  
(Note: As the number of participants was very small it could not be proven whether these results were statistically significant.)

seem to indicate that the foreign students do not stigmatize SCE more in comparison to the Singaporean students themselves.

## DISCUSSION

The variety of English that most people associate with the everyday dealings of Singaporeans is SCE (Rubdy 2001). And as Ho (2006) pointed out, a variety like SCE is badly needed to fill the vacuum left by the local vernaculars which have been eradicated by the many different campaigns. However, while it is still very much the spoken language of most Singaporeans, its image (at least its public one) seems to have suffered in the last decade. One possible explanation for this could be the pressure applied by the government-organized 'Speak Good English Movement' (SGEM) campaign that is now in its sixth year (Rubdy 2001; Shepherd 2005). The campaign's aims are to improve the level of English in Singapore. Critics (e.g. Wee 2005) pointed out the more sinister objective of the SGEM in Singapore is to eliminate SCE altogether.

While evidence shows that SCE is still widely used in the community, the attitudes towards it shown by the participants in this study suggest that the 'ambivalence' expressed by Kamwangamalu (1992) and Chng (2003) may have been amplified in recent times. How then do we reconcile this finding with the widespread anecdotal belief and experience that SCE is the 'glue' that binds Singaporeans together? There is nothing that undergraduate Singaporeans like more than lecturers who can crack the occasional Singlish joke or break out in fluent Singlish. Certainly, the anecdotal evidence widely reported in the literature is still borne out by personal experience of many in Singapore.

In the light of the above observation, the absence of high solidarity rating for SCE appears to be a surprise. Indeed, researchers on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) have been similarly flummoxed by failure to find evidence to support their claim that AAVE is viewed positively by ingroup members (see e.g. Doss and Gross 1994). At the very best, research on whether African Americans view AAVE positively has been mixed. The situation with AAVE parallels that of SCE: informally, the feedback one receives about the variety is overwhelmingly positive, presenting the variety as high in solidarity features and also linked very closely to personal and group identity. However, the results obtained from matched guise studies fail to corroborate this observation. Similarly, varieties such as Birmingham English have been anecdotally known to have high ingroup prestige despite being rated low both on status and solidarity features in MG tasks (Hiraga 2005). Though such patterns are not the norm, they do exist and require an explanation.

Similarly, Kristiansen (2003) found that when asked directly about their attitudes Danish people reproduced the traditional hierarchical nature of Danish varieties, with *rigsdansk* occupying the top position, the 'low' Copenhagen variety the bottom position, and the many different regional accents in between. However, he also reported that Danish linguists have repeatedly commented on the simultaneous downgrading and spread of 'low' Copenhagen speech as a bewildering paradox.

the reported hierarchy of Danish varieties should be seen as an expression of 'overt' attitudes, sustained by the discourse of standard ideology and generally supported by the Danes when directly asked – but possibly contradicted by more 'covert' representations and values that research has not managed to bring to light. Even though the speaker evaluation approach can be said to be 'indirect' in the sense that there is no direct asking about attitudes toward language, experiments are rarely constructed to prevent judges

from becoming aware of what it is all about. Once listener-judges have recognized the purpose of the speaker evaluation experiment that is administered to them, it is not surprising that they reproduce the 'overt' hierarchy of varieties. (Christiansen 2003: 66)

While we do not have clear answers to this conundrum, we propose two possible explanations. One possible explanation is that the MG technique in fact measures overt prestige, while anecdotal observations measure covert prestige. Singaporeans are in effect bidialectal in SSE and SCE. Labov (1972) pointed out that the choice of which dialect to speak is made following two major concepts: overt and covert prestige. While the common use of SCE in the wider community points to it having covert prestige in Singapore, the attitudes reflected in this study point to the general public perception of SCE. In an abstract sense, the attitude can be separated into two domains – the public and the personal. In responding to the MG surveys, participants could be evaluating the role of the language in the public domain – that is, how others may feel about it, how it is generally perceived. However, in using the variety and expressing positive orientation to the variety, they are evaluating their own personal beliefs. This discrepancy between overt and covert beliefs has also been reported by Lawson and Sachdev (2000) in their study of attitudes to codeswitching in Tunisia. Though their participants denigrated codeswitching, this negative attitude is not congruent with the amount of codeswitching they reported in their journals.

This strange dichotomy can be explained by Baker's seminal work on language attitude. Baker (1992: 13) defined attitude as comprising the three major components of cognition, affect, and readiness for action. Baker states that language attitudes reflect the distinction between the cognitive and affective components, and this distinction parallels what individuals say about the language compared to what they feel about the language. This distinction is based on the belief that overtly stated attitudes may hide covert beliefs. The 'readiness for action' component evaluates whether feelings or thoughts in the cognitive and affective components translate into action. If we use Baker's framework as a guide, we can posit that the MG methodology perhaps is more sensitive to the cognitive component of attitudes and not the rest. Hence, what it successfully captures is the cognitive component which correlates with overt beliefs.

Another plausible explanation is that the Speak Good English Movement has been very successful in shaping public attitude towards SCE. This may well be possible as, since its inception in 2000, the campaign has been relentless and consistent. The message driven home ad nauseam is how SCE will cripple the international image of Singapore as an advanced, economically competitive, and sophisticated nation. The impact of the SGEM has been comprehensively reviewed in Rubdy (2001) and Bokhorst-Heng (2005). Both writers have pointed out the wide-ranging impact that this campaign has on language choices, the media, and education. Given this background, it is conceivable that the participants in this study may have internalized some of the official rhetoric in their responses. The language situation in Singapore is a highly politicized one. This is reflected in the government's open admission that English–mother tongue bilingualism is the desired outcome of their language policies. English is blatantly pushed as the language of progress and commerce, while the mother tongue is the language of traditions and culture. In this plan there is no place for a variety of English that does not fulfil some sort of socioeconomic potential.

A possible limitation of this study could lie in the fact that the data was collected in the university – a status-stressing environment that may in some way have contributed to

amplification of negative responses, as one can argue that SCE sits uncomfortably in such a formal environment. The participants in this study do use Singlish on campus, but may have been affected by the location when assessing the speaker in the MG test. Further studies are needed to assess the attitudes of Singaporeans in non status-stressing contexts. As pointed out above, one possible avenue of further research is the use of multiple stimulus speakers – that is, investigating whether age or gender differences play important roles in forming language attitudes in Singapore.

A second limitation we acknowledge is that while our sample size is comparable with prior studies, a larger sample would enable more rigorous statistical analyses and yield better statistical power. Our initial results suggest the need for further study in the area. Another limitation might be that, since we examined a small sample from a university campus in Singapore, we treated all Singaporean respondents as a homogeneous group. This may not necessarily be so, but is an issue for future research because our relatively small sample restricts the performance of stratification tests. Variables such as the linguistic repertoire and proficiency of the raters may influence their perception of other speakers in the community. Other social correlates such as ethnic background,<sup>1</sup> educational level, socioeconomic status, or age differences might also have an influence on the findings. The small sample size limits the possibility of such detailed analysis, but these variables should be addressed in future studies.

### CONCLUSION: IS THERE A FUTURE FOR SINGLISH?

It is too early yet to predict the future of Singlish. Indeed, as the level of education rises within the population in Singapore, increasing numbers of people are able to switch between SCE and SSE. The tension between overt and covert beliefs may just be symptomatic of the ‘identity flux’ discussed in Ho (2006) and Simpson (2007). Perhaps most Singaporeans are still at the stage of defining and forming their core identity. This process is complicated by official directives, and by other processes which are anchored more in their tangible day-to-day experience of the language. In many ways, the survival of Singlish will depend very much on how integral it is as a function of the wider question ‘What is Singaporean identity?’. Studies (e.g. Sachdev and Hanlon 2000/2001) have demonstrated the reciprocity of the relationship between language and identity: language use can lead to the formation of a group identity, while group identity can foster and reinforce the use of a language. In the absence of other cultural bonds across ethnic groups, Singlish remains a unique vehicle for intra- as well as inter-ethnic identification.

### NOTE

1. Though the respondents in this study are predominantly of Chinese ethnic background, a few (<10%) are from a non-Chinese background. Clearly, this is a variable that may have a bearing on the results, as the MG stimuli in this study used a Singaporean speaker of Chinese ethnic origin. The issue of ethnic variation is an intriguing one. If ethnic identities are discernible through speech, as indicated by several studies (see e.g. Platt and Weber 1980; Lim 1996; 2000; Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo 2000), then it would be a very important variable. However, a much more recent study by Tan (2008), using a substantially larger sample size (203 listeners in comparison to studies using 5–20 listeners), found that ‘ethnicity’ is less pronounced in Singapore English. Her respondents were not able to distinguish the speech patterns of 10 Singaporean males from Chinese, Indian, and Malay backgrounds. She argues that ethnic distinctions are converging rather than diverging in the Singapore context. This observation, if true, will have implications for research which uses speech samples as stimuli in Singapore.

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### APPENDIX: SSE TRANSCRIPT

Saturday morning I tend to get up later than usual. When I wake up I generally like to lie in bed and listen to the radio for a while. I listen for about half an hour or so. Then I get up and it's time for my first cup of coffee. After the coffee I make my breakfast. I usually have cereals or toast and, of course, another cup of coffee. Then I sit down and have my breakfast and read the newspaper. Starting the day in such a relaxed way really puts me in good mood for the rest of the day. After breakfast, I go out and do the shopping for the week. I think this is a great way to spend your Saturday morning. I usually go to the local market and I get to meet many people that I know. I really enjoy this. I spend a couple of hours walking around, buying fresh fruits and vegetables and catching with friends. Then it's time to come home, put the shopping away and do some housework, which is not the best way to spend a Saturday, but I never get the time to do it during the week.