



## Switching from British to American English in Singapore – Issues and Implications

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Following Mr Lee Kuan Yew's comments on American English at the official opening of the English Language Institute of Singapore (ELIS),<sup>1</sup> there have been different opinions on whether Singaporeans should make the switch from British English to American English, and whether schools should encourage students to learn and speak American English. According to Mr Lee, "the growing prominence of American English due to the dominant American media would mean that Singaporean teachers may have to teach students not only to recognise it, but to eventually speak it, accent aside, in order for them to be understood by the rest of the English-speaking world." While it is clearly a good idea for Singaporean students to learn to recognise both forms of the English language, it may not be as important for them to choose one over the other, regardless of spelling, vocabulary or pronunciation. This article discusses the issues and implications arising from a potential switch in Singapore from British English to American English in the areas of language acquisition, teaching and use, as well as the social effects that may accompany such a change.

### **'Color' or 'Colour'?**

Written forms of British and American English differ, but only slightly. Besides several spelling and punctuation differences, the writing of the standard varieties of both types of English does not consist of major differences. An average Singaporean would probably not be well-versed with these differences. In fact, the biggest and most noticeable difference between British and American English, to the average Singaporean, is probably pronunciation.

Hence, it would be wise for English teachers to point out spelling differences to students to enhance their awareness of the two varieties of English. However, it may not be necessary to make it mandatory for students to switch to the American way of spelling. Instead, both forms should be acceptable, as these differences are unlikely to result in miscommunication. In Singapore, there has not been any debate over which form of English to use in schools. In the same Straits Times article on Mr Lee's comments on the increasing prevalence of American English, Dr Elizabeth Pang, Programme Director for literacy development in the

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<sup>1</sup> "American English 'likely to prevail' ", 7 September 2011, *The Straits Times*

Ministry of Education, notes that schools accept American spellings as long as students spell consistently in one form.

To maintain consistency, according to Mr Lee, he has been making a “conscious switch” between American and British English at the computer. Likewise, students who prefer to use British English can easily switch the spell check on their word processor to British English, as the default auto-correct function on word processors like Microsoft Word corrects all other spellings to American spellings.

***“To-may-to, to-mah-to! Let’s call the whole thing off!”***

In contrast with its written form, spoken American English differs greatly from British English. Even within American and British English, there is considerable phonological variation among their various varieties. For example, the phonology of Received Pronunciation (RP – commonly known as Queen’s English) differs considerably from Cockney English (popular among historical working class enclaves in London), and both varieties of British English can be heard within London. Likewise, English is not spoken in a uniform way in all parts of the United States. For example, people from the South speak differently from people in New York, and African American speech is distinguishable from Latino American speech. While it may be essential for Singaporean students to learn to identify and understand spoken American English, it may be a potentially challenging task for them to learn to speak it, due to its significantly different set of pronunciation rules from British English. The variations within American English also add to the challenge.

Given the widespread consumption of American media and pop culture in Singapore today, most Singaporeans are already exposed to hearing many varieties of spoken American English, though many may not be consciously realising it. Most of the English language movies showing at local theatres are from Hollywood. Drama series airing on local television channels are also mostly American. On the other hand, British English, which schools in Singapore have been using as the teaching model for English, ironically sounds more foreign and unfamiliar to most Singaporeans because its use is not so well-represented in the media.

### ***In the English Language Classrooms***

Although the English taught in Singaporean schools is largely based on British English, our spoken English is nowhere near the standard Received Pronunciation (RP). If learning to speak standard RP did not work out over the many decades of adopting British English as the ‘standard’ in schools, it may not be feasible to try to learn to speak American English. We should nevertheless aim to be readily understood, and this can be achieved by speaking with a neutral accent that does not show any regional characteristics, and can be understood by people from all geographical locations. The aim is to speak clear and comprehensible English, without intonations and rhythms that emulate speakers with an accent. Speaking in this neutral accent will ensure that Singaporeans are understood when speaking to people who are unfamiliar with the Singaporean accent.

In schools here, English Language teachers are trained to teach English with British spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary. If retraining takes place, spelling can be revised relatively easily - A simple task of switching ‘s’ to ‘z’ in words like ‘realise’, or in slightly trickier

situations, spelling 'manoeuvre' as 'maneuver'. Vocabulary may be a little more difficult to get used to - A 'pavement' would be more accurately a 'sidewalk' in American English; we would fill up our cars with 'gas' instead of 'petrol'; and we would dispose of 'garbage' into the 'trashcan' instead of disposing 'rubbish' into the 'rubbish bin'. Even Mathematics teachers would have to switch to saying 'forty-four hundred' from 'four thousand and four hundred'! However, pronunciation would prove to be the most challenging to change. The rhotic pronunciation of American English would most probably be not just difficult, but highly unnatural to Singaporeans who are used to dropping their 'r's (even though most of us are guilty of dropping more than our 'r's in everyday casual speech).<sup>2</sup> Vowel sounds that are different in American English may also confuse students, and result in miscommunication in the classrooms – A common example would be 'can't' ([cah-unt] in British English versus [caen-t] in American English). So can you or *can't* you differentiate the two?

### **World Englishes**

According to Braj Kachru's concept of World Englishes, there exists three separate 'circles' of English speakers. The Inner Circle consists of native speakers of English from countries like United Kingdom, United States, Australia and New Zealand. Countries that do not have English as a mother tongue, but use English as an official language are classified under the Outer Circle. This includes examples of countries where English has had a long history of official usage and status, like India, the Philippines and Singapore. The Expanding Circle consists of speakers from countries where English is spoken as a foreign language, including China and Japan. As an increasing number of people from around the world learn to speak English, the number of English speakers from the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle has far exceeded the number of native speakers in the Inner Circle. This means that the majority of English speakers around the globe will be speaking various forms of World Englishes, and native speakers may be gradually outnumbered, making native English speakers a minority. Will it then remain relevant or important to speak British or American English in a few decades, when they have become a minority? Singapore is very much a cosmopolitan Asian society, where Singaporeans come into frequent contact with foreigners from both within and outside Asia. It is beneficial for us to have the ability to understand the many different forms of English that we come into contact with, but it is a whole different issue to switch to speaking it, and American English is just one of these many varieties.

### **Language Prestige**

Another pertinent issue is language prestige. In Singapore, speaking with a British or American accent is usually associated with qualities like intelligence, and a higher level of social standing and education. The colloquial Singlish, although ensuring comprehension and familiarity amongst native speakers, can be incomprehensible to foreigners. This local variety is also frowned upon by some local proponents of using standard English. Over the decades, speakers with an American accent have also been seen by Singaporeans as being of higher socio-economic class, or even trendy. It is not surprising therefore that most radio DJs in Singapore speak with an American accent, with one popular station's tongue-in-cheek advertisement proudly proclaiming, "Our DJs speak with a 'quirky' American accent". This

<sup>2</sup> In rhotic accents, the /r/ is pronounced when it is not before a vowel sound, as opposed to non-rhotic accents, where /r/ is not pronounced when it is not followed by a vowel sound. Compare: 'WORD' word and word.

supports the hip, trendy image that most Singaporeans assume of speakers of American English, in the same way that people (particularly youth) who are fashionable and have good taste in music are deemed trendy and glamorous. Some Singaporeans even take it one step further by speaking with a faux 'foreign' accent in an attempt to appear to belong to a higher class.

Making the switch to American English in schools may reinforce the false belief in the community that American English has a higher status than British English and other World Englishes. From a macro point of view, this may not only perpetuate our colonial mentality, but also inadvertently contradict the government's aim to foster a strong Singaporean identity, as young impressionable children may be more inclined to believe that American English and identity is superior, thereby diluting their own local identity. Introducing a switch to American English may leave even less space for Singaporeans to be proud of their own linguistic heritage.

### ***English Use in Technology***

With regard to the application of an accent outside of classrooms, English speakers in Japan and Scotland are having problems using a voice recognition personal assistant application on Apple's iPhone - Siri, which was not developed to understand all kinds of accents in the English-speaking world. For example, when a Japanese user tells Siri to access his 'work email', Siri cannot understand his pronunciation of the word 'work', instead confusing it with the word 'walk'. Therefore Siri is unable to carry out instructions from the user. Here in Singapore, iPhone users are facing the same problems getting Siri to understand their instructions, leading to the development of a local version of the application (DeF!ND) that understands how local speakers speak English. Singaporeans, who are becoming increasingly IT-savvy these days, and are depending more on computers for everything, would possibly save some trouble by learning to speak standard American English in this instance. However, what is more important for Singaporeans, is not to choose *either* American or British English, but rather, to learn to pronounce words clearly and accurately. This is in line with Mr Lee's goal of getting Singaporeans understood, not just by foreigners, but by computers too.

### ***Towards Common English***

In an ideal world, all speakers of the English language would speak in the same accent, spell the same way, and use the same vocabulary. Siri would not be having such a hard time deciphering the myriad of local variants of English, or giving these users a frustrating time. In the real world, people from all corners of the globe are coming into contact with the English language, and the number of English speakers continues to increase, bringing with them many different variations of the same language. English evolves with each new variation of the language, making the term 'standard native English' irrelevant eventually. New words from non-native regions have been added to the English vocabulary, while old native words continue to be dropped from everyday usage. Sentence structures that were once considered ungrammatical have now become acceptable. While Mr Lee's vision of having Singaporeans switch to American English in the long term does indeed seem beneficial, more studies and discussions can be carried out to determine if we should introduce a policy change for this purpose. For now, Singaporeans can continue to speak

Standard English with a neutral accent, yet still retain the ability to code-switch into our unique Singlish while conversing amongst locals in non-formal settings. It is not so much how we use British or American English; rather, the key is to remain comprehensible and conscious of the many increasing differences in the variants of English language in the decades to come.

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*The views expressed are the author's and do not represent those of the Institute.*

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