

Chinese-based lexicon in Singapore English, and Singapore-Chinese culture

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Summary of Paper Proposal

Singapore sits at the crossroads between the East and the West, and its “unofficial” national creole, Singapore English (or “Singlish”), attests to the diverse linguistic and cultural amalgam consisting of primarily English and Chinese and, secondarily, Malay and Tamil. While English grammar serves as the backbone of Singlish, its lexical composition is strongly represented by loanwords or calques which originated from Chinese – not only Standard Mandarin but also Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese and Hakka dialects. These Chinese-based words in Singlish lexicon are worth studying because they demonstrate that the Singapore culture is both uniquely native and historically as well as culturally reflective of the Chinese culture. To further substantiate the case, we have examined a selection of cultural key words from Chinese-based Singlish lexicon using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) model as advanced by Wierzbicka and Goddard over the last 40 years (e.g. Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002; and Wierzbicka 1996). By using a set of 60 or so semantically unanalysable “primes”, this model allows us to decompose the complex meanings of cultural key words into configurations of semantic primes, thus making it possible to “study, compare, and explain” these words.

Detailed Paper Proposal

Singapore English, or “Singlish”, is, without doubt, the end-product of multilingual influences. *Wikipedia* describes it as a “local creole language that is influenced by English and other languages and dialects, such as Chinese, Malay, Tamil”. While Singlish adopts English grammar as its structural backbone, its lexical makeup comprises, primarily, English and Chinese vocabulary and, secondarily, Malay and Tamil vocabulary. This comes as no surprise, for it reflects Singapore’s history and culture. Historically and geographically speaking, Singapore sits at the crossroads between the East and the West, Anglo, Chinese, Malay and Indian cultures have always been part of this young nation. Amidst this, more than 76% of the contemporary Singapore population is ancestrally and racially Chinese and the presence of the Anglo culture goes as far back as the history of the nation itself.

This paper investigated Chinese-based lexicon in Singlish from lexico-semantic and cultural viewpoints. Nowhere is there a more colourful and candid display of Singapore-Chinese culture than this part of the Singlish lexicon which demonstrates a fascinating intersection of language and culture. For this purpose, we surveyed a number of representative Singlish dictionaries, including the online *Coxford Singlish Dictionary and A Dictionary of Singlish and Singapore English*. Formally and etymologically speaking, Chinese-based lexicon in Singlish have their roots not only in Standard Chinese (Mandarin) but also – and in fact, more so – in various Chinese dialects, predominantly

Hokkien, Chinese Teochew, Cantonese and Hakka. This is consistent with the fact that most Chinese Singaporeans are descendents of migrants from the Chinese provinces that speak those dialects. Chinese-based Singlish lexicon are Chinese words represented either in their original phonetic form (loanwords) e.g. *kiasu* ‘afraid of losing’ and *chia lat* ‘to eat strength’, or by a rough English translation of the original meaning (calques) e.g. *can die* (an exclamative interjection expressing despair) and *cheena* ‘a Chinese national’. Irrespective of how Chinese words are represented, it is clear that this part of the Singlish lexicon share much more of an affinity with the Chinese language than English, linguistically and culturally speaking.

We also set out to examine a representative selection of cultural key words in the Chinese-based Singlish lexicon “which reflect the core values” of the Singapore culture (based on Wierzbicka 1991: 333). Through cultural key words (and *kiasu* is one such example), it is possible for the Singapore-Chinese culture to be “revealingly studied, compared, and explained to outsiders”. To do so, the present study adopts the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) model as advanced by Wierzbicka and Goddard over the last 40 years (e.g. Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002; and Wierzbicka 1996). By using a set of 60 or so semantically unanalysable “primes”, this model allows us to decompose the complex meanings of words such as *kiasu* into configurations of semantic primes, thus making it possible to “study, compare, and explain” these words. Initial results of our linguistic and cultural examination of selected key words indicate that the uses and meanings the cultural key words are, at the same time, unique to the Singapore culture as they echo back to their Chinese cultural heritage.

References

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