Exploring cultural conceptualisations in two online Singlish dictionaries

by Martina Guzzetti

ABSTRACT: The global spread of English has resulted in new varieties and cultures being associated with it; Cultural Linguistics studies these by emphasising the relationship between language and culturally-constructed conceptualisations. English is often seen as negative for local languages, especially in post-colonial contexts; however, speech communities can develop new varieties by localising it through 'glocalisation' or 'nativisation'. The purpose of this paper is to investigate these notions by considering Singlish, the colloquial variety of Singapore English. Here, the adoption of English words has contributed to the creation of a localised variety, though this hybridisation is often seen as a corruption. The long-lasting debate around it has seen direct intervention of the Government and reactions of linguistic resistance or "chutzpah" coming from Singlish speakers, in an attempt to reclaim Singlish as the true expression of Singaporean identity. The analysis examines English words in two online Singlish dictionaries (*A Dictionary of Singlish and Singapore English* and *The Coxford Singlish Dictionary*), in order to understand the cultural conceptualisations they represent. A cross-checking with the *Oxford English Dictionary* further highlights differences with the standard: this helps demonstrate that English expressions can become the keywords of a culture of non-native speakers and contribute to a redefinition of its linguistic identity, rather than cancelling it.

KEY WORDS: Singlish; world Englishes; cultural conceptualisations; online dictionaries; linguistic chutzpah

INTRODUCTION

When studying new varieties of a language, researchers have paid attention mainly to their codification (phonology, grammar, vocabulary and so on); however, every language also needs to be contextualised and the cultural and social element must not be neglected. Indeed, "research on language must be based in *socially-realistic linguistics*" (Hilgendorf 57): language is, first and foremost, a social phenomenon, a tool for communication which requires users to engage in continuous processes of expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning.

Admittedly, there has been limited research on world Englishes conducted from this perspective: the only varieties studied in this way are African Englishes, Aboriginal Englishes and Persian English (Sharifian, "Cultural linguistics" 520). This reticence might have to do with at least two concepts: firstly, the status of the so-called colonial Englishes, which in the past were hardly ever considered as legitimate varieties worthy of any description or valuation, given their 'imperfect' nature (in contrast with native varieties of English; Dhillon 536); secondly, the fact that most linguistic research on these varieties has been conducted in a socio-political vacuum that did not take into consideration issues relating to linguistic practices and policies in a broader social background (Migge and Léglise 4-5). We should add to that the general assumption that has seen English as a "killer language" (Sharifian, "Glocalisation" 2), guilty of language genocide or "linguicide" (Wee, "Intra-language" 61): this view has failed to recognise the ability of English to create new varieties with new norms, developed through countless acts of linguistic accommodation by single individuals in the speech community (Kerswill 245-47, McLellan 235).

This paper analyses the specific situation of Singlish, the colloquial variety of Singapore English, which has been at the centre of a huge debate for at least a couple of decades. The analysis focuses primarily on such phenomena of language contact as borrowings, lexical innovations and changes of meaning (Hickey 22, Onysko 191). The aim is to investigate how certain English words have been 'glocalised', that is to say, how Singaporean culture has transformed the meaning of these words in order to make them more 'local'.[1] These aspects are highlighted by Cultural Linguistics, "an interdisciplinary branch of linguistics that explores the relationship between language and cultural conceptualisations" (Sharifian, "Cultural linguistics" 515). Though the key terms of Cultural Linguistics include cultural schemas, cultural categories and cultural-conceptual metaphors, this analysis will focus primarily on cultural conceptualisations. Sharifian describes these as "templates for people's thought and behaviour […] used to make sense and structure new experiences" and to negotiate ways in which people "conceptualise" aspects of their lives, especially shared and common ones (Sharifian,

---

[1] The neologism *glocalisation* (a combination of the words *globalisation* and *localisation*) was originally used to refer to the modification of a product sold globally to meet local needs and to make it more marketable locally. This happens with languages as well, although we must remember that language is a process, rather than a product: the phenomenon of globalisation has brought many languages and cultures in contact, and this has often led to the creation of new blends that include elements which did not originally belong to the same language or culture.
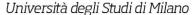
"Glocalisation" 3). These cultural conceptualisations are "heterogeneously distributed" across the cultural group and human communication becomes the perfect locus for their negotiation and renegotiation. In other words, "the underlying conceptualisation provides a frame of thought and is based on what the speakers of the language or language variety consider to be real" (Sharifian, "Cultural linguistics" 524); the resulting cultural-specific meanings thus reflect ways of living and thinking of a given society (Wong 462).

To understand the value of cultural conceptualisations, three different online dictionaries have been taken into consideration and compared: the *Coxford Singlish Dictionary* and the *Dictionary of Singlish and Singapore English* (for Singlish), and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which represents standard British English. Through the comparison of those English words which have been 'glocalised' in Singlish, it has been possible to shed light on the way culture is encoded in new language varieties (Canagarajah 10); among other things, results show how the English language in particular cannot always be considered as a "killer" language which erases every trace of local knowledge: rather, its adoption and adaptation to local needs is a key element in the formation of new varieties of world Englishes.

THE SINGLISH DEBATE IN SINGAPORE

Singapore has always been a hub of intense commercial activity and therefore a place where cultural and linguistic diversity thrive. Two forms of English entered it: the variety spoken by traders, soldiers, and sailors, and the language of education, as the aim was to cultivate an "English-speaking elite among the natives" (Ansaldo 15). Schools were particularly efficient in introducing English in Singapore and preparing the ground for its future as a hub of academic excellence. We should also remember that especially (but not only) in the case of Asian colonies, British mother tongue education geared towards British colonial interests: "Colonial educators generally felt that colonial subjects required moral and cultural grounding to make them better, i.e. well-ordered, docile and cooperative subjects and ultimately to facilitate colonial rule" (Migge and Léglise 12).

Though Singapore became independent in 1957, English (along with its prestigious socio-economic potential) was not discarded: it actually became one of the four (out of thirty) languages with official status, along with Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. English has at least two key functions in Singapore: first, it serves both as a global and as a local language, thus reflecting, in Alsagoff's words (336-43), "Singapore's dependence on being competitive in an increasingly internationalised economy and market", while at the same time increasingly voicing Singaporeans' allegiance to a variety which can represent their culture and identity, namely, Singlish. Secondly, at a local level, English represents the "cultureless" language which can go beyond issues of ethnicity or religion: in such a multicultural context, it is seen as the perfect candidate for a neutral, local, inter-ethnic lingua franca (Harada 69 and Alsagoff 342). However, such processes as the "glocalisation" of English lead to an "enculturation" (to use

Alsagoff's terminology, 342), which can realise different cultural ways of thinking and behaving, typical of Singaporean experience.

These globalist and localist tensions are best summarised in the debate surrounding the status of Singlish. If we imagine the English situation in Singapore as a sociolinguistic lectal continuum,[2] we will find three sociolects along the imaginary line: while the acrolect and mesolect can both refer to SSE, the basilect is regarded as Singlish (Harada 70). Because of the coexistence of English and the other languages spoken in Singapore, and because of the gradual acquisition of English through education, we can refer to "edulects" (Bautista and Gonzales 149) and to a situation of English-knowing bilingualism (Bokhorst-Heng 190) or pragmatic multilingualism, where "English is the language of international trade, science and technology, while the official mother tongues serve to provide a cultural pivot of Asian values among the different ethnic groups" (Ling 231).

Like SSE, Singlish is influenced by the principal substrate, Baba Malay and Bazaar Malay, and the secondary substrate, which includes southern Chinese languages such as Cantonese and Hokkien. It is the colloquial variety of SSE, which incorporates lexical items from Malay and Chinese dialects (as well as from English, as we will see), some grammatical structures from these same languages, and has its own pattern of intonation. Precisely, vocabulary is what mainly differentiates Singlish from SSE (see Ansaldo 2010 and Jenkins 2015 for a comprehensive description): indeed, as Bautista and Gonzales explain (134), these varieties are characterised by loanwords, loan translations, changes in meaning for some lexical items, lexical innovations, and new collocations.

It is precisely because of these 'deviations' from the linguistic norm that Singlish has been perceived not only as a minor variety, but actually as a true "handicap that could stifle the nation's economic development" (Bokhorst-Heng 185). This colloquial variety does not seem to fit into Singapore's mother-tongue policy, which, since 2000, has been supported by the Government itself with the launch of the so-called *Speak Good English Movement* (SGEM): this programme aims to encourage Singaporeans to speak 'correct' English that can be internationally understood, and it does so by targeting a different category of speakers each year (for example, teachers, youths and parents; Ling 232). Though this policy has been going on now for more than twenty years, Singlish is anything but eradicated; on the contrary, a parallel organisation, the *Speak Good Singlish Movement* (SGSM), was started in 2002 by Colin Goh, who has been running a satirical humour website (TalkingCock.com), where the *Coxford Singlish Dictionary* can be found. As Wee explains ("Intra-language" 58-59 and "Linguistic chutzpah" 85-86), supporters of this movement see no incompatibility between speaking Singlish and 'good' English; rather, the two varieties should be complementary: the promotion of the nativized variety, therefore, does not happen at the exclusion of standard English, and it represents a linguistically sophisticated response to SGEM.

---

[2] While today the lectal continuum model is generally accepted by scholars, two other proposals made to describe these varieties are the diglossia model and the expanding triangles model.

Some of the strategies adopted by the SGSM include, among other things, the publication of glossaries or dictionaries and the promotion of Singlish through the movement's Facebook page, whose posts are filled with humour (as we will see, the use of Singlish tends to be marked by playfulness). This type of response to linguistic policies and ideologies has been defined by Wee as a case of "linguistic chutzpah" ("Linguistic chutzpah" 85-86): the Yiddish term refers to having such attributes as self-confidence, nerve and audacity, and, therefore, when we talk of "linguistic chutzpah" we are referring to "a speaker's confidence in his/her language choices and usage […] backed up by metalinguistic awareness and linguistic sophistication, giving the speaker the ability to articulate, where necessary, rationales for his/her language decisions". The projects described here perfectly meet the criteria for being considered a linguistic chutzpah, and the focus on this phenomenon of resilience is especially relevant for the study of world Englishes, whose speakers often cannot rely on traditional sources of authority for their linguistic decisions and still need to be confident about them while knowing that they might be met with significant criticism.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The research took into consideration examples of World English lexicography: whenever studying these types of dictionaries, we should remember that their compilation always proves to be a complex undertaking, and that literary, cultural, and political issues are always brought to the fore. Indeed, if it is true that a dictionary confers legitimacy to a language, then this is even more important for the plurality of world Englishes: "any dictionary of an Outer Circle English must always contend, culturally, commercially, and ideologically, with the long-standing lexicographic traditions of the two recognized global standards, British and American English" (Dolezal 700). The lexicography of world Englishes thus creates a challenge to redefine commonly held attitudes and beliefs.[3]

Specifically, the analysis considered two online dictionaries of Singlish and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The *Coxford Singlish Dictionary* (*CSD*) is directly linked to the *Speak Good Singlish Movement*, and it can be found on Singapore's premier satirical humour website (www.talkingcock.com). It includes 817 headwords, but it can be considered more a glossary than a dictionary, as it lacks most typical features such as the IPA transcription, information on usage, and citations to provide examples of use—those which are present might have been invented by the compiler, who very likely was not supported by a corpus. The focus is on the more colloquial words used in Singlish, and there a no warnings or labels to indicate taboo words. *A Dictionary of Singlish and Singapore English* (*DSSE*) proves to be a more complex project (found at

---

[3] Examples of significant lexicographical projects of World Englishes include dictionaries of Canadian English, South African English, Caribbean English, Australian English, New Zealand English and Jamaican English, whereas West African varieties or Singaporean English have been less documented to date.

www.singlishdictionary.com); launched in 2004, it contains 1241 headwords, though it was last updated on May 19th 2016 and now the project seems to have been abandoned. Though this dictionary, too, lacks some salient features of lexicography, it includes more detailed information than the *CSD*: for example, it provides an IPA translation, spelling variations and etymology, and it uses newspapers[4] and literary works to provide citations and context for its definitions. Moreover, the (unknown) authors provide details regarding the compilation of the dictionary; for instance, when commenting upon choice of entries, they explain that the dictionary contains words and phrases of non-standard English found in Singapore (i.e. in Singlish), whose meanings differ from standard English. Lastly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) has been chosen as it is arguably the principal record for the English language (with its meanings listed in historical order, the use of quotations, etc.), whose status has been acquired over more than a century of development. To be even more precise, the analysis was conducted by using *OED3*, that is, the latest edition of the dictionary (www.oed.com); thus, unless otherwise specified, the definitions reported here are among those which have been revised in recent years.

As mentioned, all these dictionaries were retrieved online; as Nesi states (357), the e-dictionaries which are usually analysed in lexicographical research "tend to be the prestigious varieties emanating from university centres or established publishing houses", such as in the case of the *OED*; however, less prestigious e-dictionaries prove to be far more popular with the general user, especially in Asia. Given the peculiarities of the two Singlish dictionaries described here, we can place these works into the category that Nesi labels as "alternative e-dictionaries" (357), which have usually received not much metalexicographical attention, probably due to their lack of prestige and not always well-documented information. Though these types of dictionaries are notably difficult to describe conventionally, and quality control always remains a key issue, they are still worthy of lexicographic interest, and they prove to be fundamental for studying cultural conceptualisations in varieties of World Englishes.

Dictionaries need to be seen as more than mere vessels of linguistic categories, in the same way that words need to be perceived as symbols of human experience and social labels. Lozowsky analyses the role of culture in lexicography and the place that should be destined to it in definitions; precisely, he speaks of the "cultural function" of dictionaries, which corresponds to "one over-arching need of all users in all situations […] to understand fellow humans in their conceptualizing the world" (Lozowsky 172). Taking this into account, the analysis of cultural conceptualisations in the dictionaries presented in this study started from the examination of a given lexeme as reported in the three different dictionaries. Given the limited number of the entries in the Singlish dictionaries, it was possible to browse through them and check each entry manually: the cross-checking with the *OED* revealed those lemmas that presented clear differences in terms of cultural conceptualisations between the standard British English variety and the Singlish colloquial variety. These lemmas then formed part of the lexical

---

[4] The newspapers used are *The Straits Times, Today* and *The Sunday Times,* which are among the most important and popular broadsheets in Singapore.

set to be further analysed; the comparison, as reported in the next section, provided a careful study of the cultural grounding of the lexemes in question and it aimed at highlighting ways in which English can blend into the new societies that use it, without necessarily 'killing' the native languages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the two Singlish dictionaries revealed a first significant similarity: out of the total number of headwords, only a minority of lemmas proved to be cultural conceptualisations. Table 1 reports numbers and percentages:

	COXFORD SINGLISH DICTIONARY	DICTIONRAY OF SINGLISH AND SINGAPORE ENGLISH
Number of headwords	817	1241
Number of glocalised words	35	41
Percentage	4,2%	3,3%

Table 1. Glocalised words in CSD and DSSE.

Results thus suggest that glocalised words only make up a small percentage of the Singlish lexicon, and that lexemes that retain a standard meaning seem to be preferred. However, we should bear in mind that these lexicographical projects were carried out not so much by language experts as by Singlish enthusiasts whose main aim was to 'legitimise' their language, in spite of governmental planning; the lack of an institution (be it a publisher or a university) that provided support probably hindered the potential and accuracy of such projects. In any case, these words still shed light on Singaporean culture and how it has tried to adapt English to suit its own needs. Specifically, they reinforce the idea of Singlish as a case of linguistic chutzpah: rather than disappearing under the pressure of the Government's policies, it is still surviving as a true badge of Singaporean identity.

Given the lack of space, it is not possible to analyse here all the words found; Table 2 reports a selection of lexemes which have been grouped into categories and whose extended meanings and cultural conceptualisations will be presented in the next sections.

CATEGORIES	WORDS
Kinship terms	Aunty, uncle, grandfather
Humour	Cartoon, champion, hero
Derogatory social labels	(Chinese) helicopter, heartlander
Military slang	Arrow, clown, cowboy, crab, drop, elephant, (ROD) mood

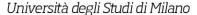Table 2. Categories of analysed words.

KINSHIP TERMS

Among the English words that are glocalised in Singlish, kinship terms certainly represent an interesting group. As shown in Table 2, lexemes such as *aunty*, *uncle* and *grandfather* acquire a new, extended cultural meaning in Singlish: indeed, they become "cultural categories" (Wong, "Aunty" 452), which are charged either positively or negatively with cultural attitudes and biases. The fact of creating such categories and social labels is common in every speech community, even in Inner Circle Englishes, which, according to Wong ("Aunty" 452), reflect "a cultural tradition that is said to be 'tolerant of individual idiosyncrasies and peculiarities'".

The most significant example is the word *aunty*, which, apart from the familiar meaning of one's mother's or father's sister, is defined in the *DSSE* as "a child's form of address for any woman of its mother's generation" and "a polite term of address for a middle-aged or elderly woman who may or may not be a relative". Thus, *aunty* is glocalised in Singlish by extending its use from a simple term signaling kinship to a polite social honorific which seems to be culturally more important in Singaporean culture than in other Inner Circle societies, as the quotation taken from *The Straits Times* of 9 August 2004 exemplifies: "I had occasion to visit a Singapore hospital a month ago. I heard nurses call older patients 'uncles' and 'aunties' and I felt instantly at home". Indeed, Wong ("Aunty" 456) explains that, although *aunty* is not used in Singlish alone, this concept is ingrained in Singaporean society, and it is linked to a deference for seniority typical of these Asian cultures which represents a clear division between older and younger generations. The fact that there are no semantic equivalents in standard English is demonstrated by the definition reported in the *OED*, which, as revised in 2017, highlights the informal tone of the word ("a more or less informal term for a relative") and recognises the social label by clearly assigning it to other varieties of English ("now used as a general term of respect for (usually older) women in various contexts in many varieties of English").

However, what the dictionary fails to tell us is another important piece of information, provided separately by Wong's sociolinguistic study of the word *aunty*. The scholar explains that, apart from referring to a matronly figure (thus confirming at first the use connected to deference for age), an *aunty* is usually also a person who is not well-informed, old-fashioned in thoughts and views of the world: therefore, though it is true that the term is glocalised in Singlish and that it becomes a totally different social label, its actual use seems to oscillate between honorific and a not so flattering cultural category (see Wong, "Aunty" 457-59).

The lexeme *uncle* is, quite obviously, associated with *aunty*: again, it is defined in the *DSSE* as "a polite term of address for a middle-aged or elderly man who may or may not be a relative", while the *OED* defines it as "a man who is regarded with respect or affection similar to that often accorded to an uncle despite not being linked by this specific kinship" and "frequently as a title or a form of address, and now used in many varieties of English" (2017 revised definition). Though the two terms are used in the same way, Wong explains that *aunty* is culturally more salient, and that *uncle*, too, is sometimes used to refer to somebody who did not go to school and therefore lacks

basic education, or to someone who is subdued to their wives; the quotation taken from *The Strait Times* of 8 March 2009 is a perfect example of this: "The word 'auntie' conjures up an image of a nagging old woman with a bad perm while 'uncle' is more likely to be a fuddy-duddy balding old man in a singlet and shorts hanging out at the void deck" (see Wong, "Aunty" 2006 and "Culture" 2014).

Finally, the word *grandfather* deserves attention: rather than being used to refer to "the father of one's father or mother" (as reported in the 2015 revision by the *OED*), it is used in Singlish in its possessive form, and it has acquired a rather negative connotation. Thus, *grandfather* is "used with a noun to criticize a person regarded as behaving in an arrogant or overbearing manner", as the *DSSE* suggests. The dictionary cites an example taken from the Singaporean newspaper *The Straits Times* to provide a further explanation: "He is said to have acted as a lookout while Lo spray-painted the words 'My Grandfather's Road' on Maxwell Road and Robinson Road, using a can of white spray paint and a metal stencil on the night of May 16 last year". Just as in the cases of *aunty* and *uncle*, then, we can see how, in Singlish, kinship words that commonly suggest respect for seniority and experience are glocalised and acquire new, often pejorative meanings, deeply entrenched in Singaporean culture.

HUMOUR

Singlish is often associated with character comedy and used to offer a caricature of Singaporean society; its humorous trait becomes even more evident when it tries to break all the rules of standard English and to specify what Singaporean should try *not* to be.[5]

The words *cartoon, champion* and *hero* have been chosen for this study exactly because they represent the ability of Singlish to glocalise terms in ironical ways. In the *OED*, *cartoon* is defined as "a drawing on stout paper" and, more specifically, "a full-page illustration in a paper or periodical […] Now, a humorous or topical drawing (of any size) in a newspaper, etc."[6] In the Singlish dictionaries, on the other hand, *cartoon* acquires an extended meaning: the *CSD* defines it as "Used to describe someone or something as funny or silly", whereas the *DSSE* simply glosses it as "idiotic, ridiculous", though there are no quotations to support evidence of this new meaning. Thus, Singlish retains the part of the standard meaning which recalls the commonly humorous tones of cartoons and extends it to create an adjective that describes not just objects and drawings, but, most importantly, people, too.

The lexemes *champion* and *hero* share the same characteristic: they are used in Singlish with ironical tones and, though they are normally associated with positive

---

[5] In Singapore and other Asian societies, the concept of 'face' is extremely important: the *DSSE* defines it as "reputation, prestige", thus highlighting that it is fundamental for people not to lose one's face by doing or saying silly things and to adhere to social norms.

[6] This definition has not been revised by *OED3* yet, and therefore it reflects the same meanings reported in 1888 in *OED1* and later included in 1989 in *OED2*.

connotations, they acquire a pejorative meaning and they are used in a derogatory manner. Indeed, *champion* is defined in the *CSD* as "a term describing the unbelievable actions of a person", whereas the *OED* explains that a champion is "a fighting man, a combatant; a stout fighter, a man of valour" and, more precisely, as "[o]ne who fights on behalf of another, or on behalf of any cause" (as modified, but not yet fully revised, in 2020). Therefore, in Singlish the word *champion* appears to lose its association with somebody who must be respected and highly regarded for their actions and, in turn, it represents somebody who should be chided for their "unbelievable" deeds, i.e. for anything that goes against standard social rules.[7]
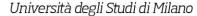
The same happens with the word *hero*; again, the *OED* reports it as having its origins in classical mythology and ancient Greek history: the revised 2014 entry states that is "a man (or occasionally a woman) of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods; *esp.* one regarded as semi-divine and immortal", which has in time become "a man (or occasionally a woman) distinguished by the performance of courageous or noble actions, esp. in battle" and "generally admired or acclaimed for great qualities or achievements in any field". The evident positive qualities associated with this lexeme are completely lost in Singlish; the *CSD* says that it "often connotes either a foolhardy person or someone out to grab attention". The use of irony for the glocalisation of *champion* and *hero* thus seems to put more emphasis on the importance of reputation in such societies, since the meanings and cultural conceptualisations that emerge describe the words as being almost the opposite, compared to standard English, as reported in the *OED*.

DEROGATORY SOCIAL LABELS

As explained, Singapore is a complex multicultural society where several different cultures (and languages) have learnt to live together; however, there have always been internal and external tensions, especially towards foreigners. Two English words that have become part of Singlish vocabulary and that can be defined as derogatory social labels are *(Chinese) helicopter* and *heartlander*.

The term *(Chinese) helicopter*, in particular, has been at the centre of harsh criticism. The *CSD* defines it as "an adjective used to describe a Chinese-educated person", whereas the *DSSE* says it is a mispronunciation of the English word *educated* and it further explains that it is "a person (*esp.* a soldier) who, as a result of being raised in a Chinese-speaking family or being educated in a Chinese-language medium, cannot speak English well and is perceived to be overly Chinese or oriental". The entry is further supported by a quotation taken from *The Sunday Times* of 22 February 2004: "The self-professed Ah Beng and Chinese helicopter (local slang for a Chinese-educated person who speaks poor English)". These definitions emphasise at least two aspects of

---

[7] It is also interesting to notice how the *OED* uses a gendered definition for the word *champion*, which (wrongly) seems to be used only when talking about men; on the other hand, the *CSD* uses a more neutral definition and chooses the word "person" instead.

Singaporean society: the difficult diplomatic relationships with China and the insistence on speaking 'good, proper' English as a key part of Singapore. The term is now used as a clear insult to anyone who has a Chinese education and background.

The *OED* defines *helicopter* simply as "an aircraft which derives its lift and propulsive power principally from the action of one or more lifting screws or rotor-blades, usually engine-driven, revolving horizontally"; however, in 2016 the dictionary chose to include *Chinese helicopter* among the new entries and to define it as "a Singaporean whose schooling was conducted in Mandarin Chinese and who has limited knowledge of English". Quite naturally, this caused a great upheaval, and petitions were signed in order for this entry to be eliminated or at least changed, because of the evident derogatory connotation which reminded Chinese people who live in Singapore of their difficult struggle to find their place in Singaporean society.

If *(Chinese) helicopter* recalls external tensions between Singapore and other nearby countries, the word *heartlander* is linked to other types of internal friction. First of all, it should be made clear that the word does not exist in standard English; indeed, the *OED* only reports the term *heartland*, defined in 2013 as "a place where love resides; the heart", "the inner part of a country, region, or area" and "in extended use: a region which is especially important to or associated with a particular activity, organization, or ideology". When it entered the Singlish language, it was glocalised and transformed into a noun denoting a person, rather than a place; the *DSSE* defines *heartlander* as "a person, typically regarded as less sophisticated, conservative and down-to-earth, who lives in a public housing estate built by the Housing and Development Board considered as part of the heartland of Singapore; an ordinary Singaporean". The word was first used in 1999 by former Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong in his National Day Rally speech, in which he talked of *heartlanders* as making their living in the country, having local, rather than international interests, speaking Singlish (and not standard English) and as not having skills which are marketable beyond Singapore. Though he also spoke of how these *heartlanders* represent Singapore's core values, the term then officially entered Singlish by retaining the negative connotations expressed in the *DSSE* definition.

MILITARY SLANG

Finally, the last category analysed in this paper is that of military slang, which abounds in the Singlish lexicon. Singapore has got equipped armed forces at the moment, and two and a half years of military service are compulsory (for men only), so it is natural for soldiers to acquire a new jargon which is then transmitted to 'civilians' once they return home. In this way, this slang does not remain confined to the military area, but its usage is spread across the whole of the population that speaks Singlish.

Glocalisation of English words in this field abound: between the *CSD* and the *DSSE*, the analysis revealed seven words which have been glocalised in Singlish: two verbs (*to arrow* and *to drop*) one adjective (*ROD mood;* see below for the explanation of the acronym) and four nouns (*clown, elephant, crab* and *cowboy*).

The verb *to drop* simply undergoes a change of (cultural) meaning in Singlish: indeed, the *OED* still defines it (with the original 1887 entry) as "to fall vertically, like a single drop, under the simple influence of gravity; to descend". Instead, the *DSSE* defines *drop* as "do a push-up", preceded by the label "mil. slang". On the other hand, *arrow* acquires a new, complex cultural conceptualisation in Singlish, which this time is better reported and explained in both dictionaries. The *CSD* actually reports two correlated headwords and meanings for this verb: it means both "to delegate somebody to perform a task", or, when used in the passive voice, "to be tasked with something, usually unpleasant or troublesome". It is then explained that the use "derives from the Army or civil service practice of stamping a tiny arrow next to the name of the person in official documents"; the same meaning and information are then retrieved in the *DSSE*, too, which explains that the use of *to arrow* in this way refers to "the practice of drawing or stamping an arrow on a document against a name to direct the document to that person for his or her attention", and, unlike the *CSD*, it specifies the military origin of the term with the appropriate label "mil. slang". In contrast, the *OED* defines the same verb simply as "to pierce, wound, or kill with an arrow" (revised 2017 entry); thus, Singlish has glocalised *arrow* to suit its use first for military needs, and then it has extended its new meaning for a common use in everyday language.

Another lexeme which presents an interesting and well-documented cultural conceptualisation in the dictionaries analysed is *mood*. The *OED* reports it (with the updated 2002 version) as a noun denoting "a prevailing but temporary state of mind or feeling; a person's humour, temper, or disposition at a particular time"; on the other hand, the *CSD* says that *mood* is "used as an adjective, to describe feeling carefree", while the *DSSE* describes it as "a feeling of cheerfulness and disinclination to work, supposed to set in once a soldier's ROD approaches". The term ROD, as both dictionaries explain, refers to "one's run-out date for leaving national service", that is, the date in which soldiers finish their obligatory two years and a half of military service. Thus, though *ROD mood* originated in military slang, it has now been extended to any other working field.

Lastly, it is worth considering four nouns which deserve special attention: *crab*, *elephant*, *clown* and *cowboy*.[8] Two of these nouns (*crab* and *elephant*) are normally associated simply with animals in Inner Circle Englishes. Indeed, the *OED* defines *crab* as "the common name for decapod crustaceous animals of the tribe Brachyura", while an *elephant* is "a huge quadruped of the Pachydermate order, having long curving ivory tusks, and a prehensile trunk or proboscis". Once again, Singlish has glocalised these words and created new cultural conceptualisations for its military slang. Thus, a *crab* has become "a representation of the national crest of Singapore embroidered on to epaulettes worn by majors, lieutenant-colonels and colonels in the armed services", while an *elephant* is "a speck of dirt in the barrel of a rifle", as reported in the *DSSE*.

The last two words to be analysed are *clown* and *cowboy*, which use the same type of irony and humour referred to in par. 4.2 to talk about soldiers who do not behave as

---

[8] None of these examples have been fully revised in *OED3*; therefore, the entries presented here are the original ones included in *OED1* and *OED2* (*crab* and *clown* were first added in the dictionary in 1891, while *cowboy* and *elephant* were both included in 1893).
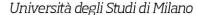
expected in the army or military service. The lexeme *clown* is reported in the *DSSE* as "a soldier in a section, unit, *etc.*, whose performance is the worst" and as "a soldier who fools around or behaves in a strange manner"; the *OED,* on the other hand, defines it as "a countryman, rustic, or peasant. Implying ignorance, crassness, or rude manners" and, more specifically, as "a fool or jester, as a stage-character (originally representing a rustic buffoon), or (in Shakespeare) a retainer of a court or great house". Therefore, Singlish has retained the meaning of *clown* as someone who fools around, but it has then narrowed it down to refer only to soldiers behaving in unconventional ways. A similar process takes place with *cowboy*, which the *OED* conventionally defines as "a boy who tends cows", with a reference to the specific use of the word in the U.S.A.: "a man employed to take care of grazing cattle on a ranch" or, more generally, "a boisterous or wild young man". In Singlish, this 'boisterousness' is retained to refer to "a soldier whose belt is loose and hanging too low": after giving this definition, the *DSSE* then further explains it by stating that it is "a term often uttered by officers at a muster parade to a soldier whose belt is loose".

If military slang is the last category to be taken into consideration in this analysis, it is also worth noticing a final, significant element: out of all the words analysed here, only *clown, cowboy, crab* and *elephant* appear to be still restricted to their use as soldiers' jargon; all the other lexemes which have been glocalised and which have acquired new cultural conceptualisations in Singlish are now used commonly in informal everyday language, even in the case of such words (as *arrow, drop* and *ROD mood*) whose use was originally limited to a specific category or field.

CONCLUSION

In Singapore, English has gained a solid social status, confirmed even after the waning of the British Empire. Even though it began as an elitist language acquired by the affluent that were able to receive better language tuition, its competence is increasing across wider sections of Singaporean society (Bautista and Gonzales 138-39). As we have seen, Singapore's language policies are openly pro-English (to be more precise, they are in favour of *standard* English), but, at the same time, there is growing support for the colloquial variety defined as Singlish, which is perceived as the true badge of national (linguistic) identity by many. As more and more people in Singapore have access to greater levels of education, Singlish is not discarded: actually, this has resulted in increasing numbers of speakers being able to switch more easily and with greater confidence between Standard Singapore English and Singlish (Cavallaro and Chin 156). To put it in Alsagoff's words (346), Singlish is thus presented as "a lingua-cultural resource that is used to vary style in relation to macro-cultural constructions of identity and communicative purpose".

This, in turn, is linked to the always-present tensions between overt and covert belief about the prestige (or lack of it) of Standard English and Singlish and to the duality of the forces of the global and the local that shape the use of English in Singapore: this duality is, according to Alsagoff (337), based on the cultural perspectives and

orientations of the citizens themselves, and this tension accounts for the fluidity between the standard and the vernacular variety. The cultural tensions between "being/doing global" and "being/doing local" (Alsagoff 340), of which we have talked about, are embedded in Singaporean identity and they have now reached a stage of normalisation (Bokhorst-Heng 188).

By analysing how cultural conceptualisations are represented in two online Singlish dictionaries, this paper supports the idea of Singlish (and the creation of its own lexicography) as a perfect case of linguistic chutzpah and resilience: indeed, as we have seen, even though cases of glocalised English words represent just a small percentage of the whole lexicon included in these projects, they still are significant in terms of the survival of Singaporean culture against the coming of the so often defined 'killer' English. If it is true that Singapore is a multilanguage society (also because of education), it is also worth remembering that, as in any type of society, parents and grandparents still want to pass on typical and traditional values, that is to say, non-English values that still need to be expressed. Considering that there is no common first language, one way to do so is to use English to communicate: though culturally different, English words are glocalised for this purpose, and they are used to fulfil (at least partially) the role of unifying language for Singapore. The glocalisation of the English language has, in this case, not only carried with it Anglo-English conceptualisations, but, probably even more interestingly, it has also become associated with cultural conceptualisations that are entirely new to English and that have resulted in the nativisation of this new variety. The resulting blend known as Singlish thus represents Singaporean identity much more than the Government would like it to be.

WORKS CITED

A Dictionary of Singlish and Singapore English. www.singlishdictionary.com. Accessed 28 Jun. 2021.
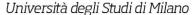
Alsagoff, Lubna. "English in Singapore: Culture, capital and identity in linguistic variation." *World Englishes*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2010, pp. 336-48. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2010.01658.x. Accessed 20 Jan. 2022.

Ansaldo, Umberto. "Contact and Asian varieties of English." *The Handbook of Language Contact*, edited by Raymond Hickey, Blackwell, 2010, pp. 498-517.

Bautista, Maria Lourdes, and Andrew Gonzales. "Southeast Asian Englishes." *The Handbook of World Englishes*, edited by Braj B. Kachru, *et al.*, Blackwell, 2006, pp. 130-44.

Bokhorst-Heng, Wendy D. "Debating Singlish." *Multilingua*, vol. 24, 2005, pp. 185-209. https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/mult.2005.24.3.185/html. Accessed 6 Dec. 2020.

Canagarajah, Suresh. "Reconstructing local knowledge, reconfiguring language studies." *Reclaiming the Local in Language Policy and Practice*, edited by Suresh Canagarajah, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2009, pp. 3-24.

Cavallaro, Francesco, and Ng Bee Chin. "Between status and solidarity in Singapore." *World Englishes,* vol. 28, no. 2, 2009, pp. 143-59. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2009.01580.x. Accessed 20 Jan. 2021.

Coxford Singlish Dictionary. www.talkingcock.com. Accessed 28 Jun. 2022.

Dhillon, Pradeep A. "Colonial and post-colonial critique: The challenge from world Englishes." *The Handbook of World Englishes*, edited by Braj B. Kachru, *et al.*, Blackwell, 2006, pp. 529-44.

Dolezal, Fredric. "World Englishes and lexicography." *The Handbook of World Englishes*, edited by Braj B. Kachru, *et al.*, Blackwell, 2006, pp. 694-708.

Harada Shinichi. "The roles of Singapore Standard English and Singlish." *情報研*, vol. 40, 2009, pp. 69-81.

Hickey, Raymond. "Language contact: Reconsideration and reassessment." *The Handbook of Language Contact*, edited by Raymond Hickey, Blackwell, 2010, pp. 1-28.

Hilgendorf, Suzanne K. "Plurality and world Englishes: The social realities of language use." *World Englishes*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2015, pp. 55-67. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/weng.12117. Accessed 5 Dec. 2020.

Jenkins, Jennifer. *Global Englishes. A Resource Book for Students*. Routledge, 2015.

Kerswill, Paul. "Contact and new varieties." *The Handbook of Language Contact*, edited by Raymond Hickey, Blackwell, 2010, pp. 230-51.

Ling, Low Ee. "English in Singapore and Malaysia: Differences and similarities." *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes*, edited by Andy Kirkpatrick, Routledge, 2010, pp. 229-46.

Lozowsky, Przemysław. "Dictionaries and culture." *The Routledge Handbook of Lexicography*, edited by Pedro A. Fuertes-Olivera, Routledge, 2018, pp. 166-78.

McLellan, James. "Mix-codes or varieties of English?" *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes*, edited by Andy Kirkpatrick, Routledge, 2010, pp. 425-41.

Migge, Bettina, and Isabelle Léglise. "Language and colonialism. Applied linguistics in the context of creole communities." *Language and Communication: Diversity and Change. Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, edited by Marlis Hallinger and Anne Pawuels, Mouton de Gruyter, 2007, pp. 297-338.

Nesi, Hilary. "Alternative e-dictionaries. Uncovering dark practices." *Electronic Lexicography*, edited by Sylviane Granger and Magali Paquot, Oxford UP, 2012, pp. 357-372.

Onysko, Alexander. "Language contact and world Englishes." *World Englishes,* vol. 35, no. 2, 2016, pp. 191-95. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/weng.12190. Accessed 5 Dec. 2020.

Oxford English Dictionary. www.oed.com. Accessed 28 Jun. 2022.

Sharifian, Farzad. "Cultural linguistics and world Englishes." *World Englishes*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2015, pp. 515-32. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/weng.12156. Accessed 5 Dec. 2020.

---. "'Glocalisation' of the English language: a cultural linguistics perspective." *KEMANUSIAAN. The Asian Journal of Humanities,* vol. 23, supp. 2, 2016, pp. 1-17. http://web.usm.my/kajh/vol23_s2_2016.html. Accessed 6 Dec. 2020.

Wee, Lionel. "Intra-language discrimination and linguistic human rights: The case of Singlish." *Applied Linguistics*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2005, pp. 48-69. https://academic.oup.com/applij/article-abstract/26/1/48/169743?redirectedFrom=fulltext. Accessed 5 Dec. 2020.

---. "Linguistic chutzpah and the Speak Good Singlish Movement." *World Englishes*, vol. 33, No. 1, 2014, pp. 85-99. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/weng.12055. Accessed 5 Dec. 2020.

Wong, Jock. "Contextualizing *aunty* in Singaporean English." *World Englishes*, vol. 25, no. 3/4, 2006, pp. 451-66. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2006.00481.x. Accessed 20 Jan. 2021.

---. *The Culture of Singapore English*. Cambridge UP, 2014.

Martina Guzzetti is a PhD student at Milan State University; her research interests include world Englishes, lexicography and gender studies. Her current project investigates the language of British feminist periodicals at the beginning of the twentieth century, with a specific focus on suffrage periodicals. She has also written about recent evolutions in the British sociolinguistic landscape ("Aspects of Sociolinguistics: The Case of 'Mockney' and Standard English", *Expressio*, 4/2020, pp. 291-308).

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6659-509X

martina.guzzetti@unimi.it