

An Analysis of the Use of Colloquial Singapore English in the Dialogue of *Crazy Rich*

Asians (2013)

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Colloquial Singapore English (CSE), also known as Singlish, has become almost synonymous with Singapore herself. The mixture of dialects from the various groups of immigrants arriving in Singapore has blended into a variation of English spoken throughout the country. Singlish is utilised in everyday dialogue as well as many works of local literature, yet remains largely unknown to the rest of the world. Standard (British) English (Std[Br]E) is the recognised working language recognised by the Singaporean government.

In this study, we will be looking at the dialogue used in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*, the bestselling book which has been credited with putting Asian culture in the spotlight across the world, especially after it was adapted into a Hollywood blockbuster film under the same title. The book is primarily set in Singapore with a set of primarily Singaporean characters, portraying the lavish lifestyles of the crazy rich in the country. The protagonists are Nicholas (Nick) Young, and his girlfriend, Rachel Chu, with the plot centering around how their relationship faces numerous obstacles after Nick decides to bring Rachel to Singapore, where his family resides and enjoys a lavish lifestyle.

Kevin Kwan was born in Singapore, and moved to the United States when he was 11. He claimed to have had a "very fortunate upbringing" and that upbringing in part "inspired" the novel (Christensen, 2013).

Singlish is a fundamental component of Singapore and her people, and this study aims to analyse how Kwan portrays the linguistic habits of the ultra elite in Singapore to a global audience.

1.2 Rationale

We have observed regular attempts in *Crazy Rich Asians* to illustrate use of CSE between characters. This begs the question of how CSE is presented to an international audience not well versed in this variation of Singlish by an author who left Singapore at age 12, which we are keen to explore in our research.

The book also portrays a group of Singaporeans, the (highly-educated) “ultra-elite” class, who are not commonly associated with the usage of Singlish, which has long been branded the unprofessional form of English spoken by the less educated or those of lower social classes (this will be explained in greater detail later). Hence, we seek to investigate how the characters use Singlish, whether it is tokenistic to connect with those of lower class or in fact a genuine form of communication within their bubble of wealth, which would then challenge the construct of Singlish being spoken religiously exclusively within the lower classes.

1.3 Research Questions

1. To what extent do characters speak Standard English compared to Singlish?
2. Which features of Singlish are present in their speech?
3. Which features of their speech are ungrammatical but not identified as features of Singlish?
 - a. What are the implications?
4. Which characters tend to use more or less Singlish?
 - a. Why is there such a discrepancy?

b. Hence, what are the implications?

1.4 Thesis Statement

In its dialogue, *Crazy Rich Asians* utilises features of CSE, and its characters mirror the tendencies of people that use CSE and the context in which CSE is normally used. Hence, this novel parallels the existing research on Singlish features; as well as the variations and tendencies of the use of English in Singapore, yet Kwan still adds his own interpretation of Singlish via the dialogue of his characters.

1.5 Scope of Research

The dialogue of the characters in the book *Crazy Rich Asians* alone (2013), **excluding the movie** (2018), will be used to identify features of Singlish pointed out by existing research. Social status, context and other relevant factors will also be taken into account when analysing the use of Singlish in the book.

1.6 Significance of Research

To investigate how the use of Singlish among the upper classes is portrayed by Kwan and hence how this affects our perceptions of Singlish, possibly in terms of the contexts it is used in or which groups of Singaporeans utilise this form of English regularly.

1.7 Limitations

There are no clear indicators of tone, thus we are unable to analyse the intonation pattern (rising/falling) of the characters' speech and compare it with that of CSE. There are also few indicators of pronunciation, so we are largely unable to analyse the pronunciation of certain types of words/phrases or where the emphasis was placed on certain words and compare it with that of CSE. We can only analyse the instances in which Singlish was used, but we cannot evaluate how important/significant the particular feature of Singlish is, as certain features (e.g. the mere addition of discourse particles such as "lah") could be seen as more tokenistic compared to others.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Features of CSE

These are the features of CSE that will be picked out in the analysis section. The examples provided are non-exhaustive.

Pro-Drop: Pro-Drop is short for pronoun dropping. In StdE, the subject and object of a finite clause (a clause which has a verb to show tense) cannot be omitted. However, in Singlish it is possible to have finite clauses without a subject and/or object (Alsagoff, 1998; Lim, 2004).

This leads to the low prevalence of the word "I", e.g.:

(1) CSE: __ Shall go to the washroom

(2) StdE: I shall go to the washroom

Omission of the verb *Be*: In Singlish, attributive or equative clauses, i.e. clauses that

describe states, do not require verbal predicates. However, clauses that describe actions still retain verbal predicates (Lim, 2004). In StdE, verbal predicates are required for all clauses, as shown below:

(3) CSE: James __ very handsome (state)

(4) StdE: James is very handsome

(5) CSE & StdE: James is swimming (action)

Dropping of the indefinite article: Research suggests that there is a lack of use of indefinite articles (a/an) with what are considered as singular count nouns in StdE¹ (Alsagoff, 1998), as seen below:

(6) CSE: She got __ car or not?

(7) StdE: Does she have a car?

Phrase-final lengthening: The lengthening of the phrase-final syllable is a common occurrence in CSE. As seen from (9), syllables which are lexically unstressed are not excluded from this phenomenon either (Lim, 2004). In (8) and (9), the lengthened syllables are bolded.

(8) oh my **God**

(9) that's the **problem**

NP deletion: Noun phrases are also commonly dropped in CSE, and NPs dropped can be both the subject (10) or the object (11) (Leimgruber, 2011):

(10) (That car) very expensive, you know.

¹CSE tends to take non-count nouns as count nouns, so forms such as *furnitures* and *luggages* are possible in CSE (Alsagoff, 1998). Hence, it is important to note “considered as ... in *StdE*” (italics ours).

(11) I don't know why, but I like (it/swimming).

Discourse Particles: CSE has various clause-final discourse particles, presumably originating from Mandarin dialects such as Hokkien and Cantonese. As Leimgruber (2011, emphasis ours) pointed out, scholars sometimes disagree with their **exact**² meaning, but he has managed to provide an overview as seen in Table 1 below:

Particle	Meaning
<i>ah</i>	tentative marker, continuation marker
<i>hah</i>	question marker
<i>hor</i>	attempts to garner support for a proposition
<i>lah</i>	mood marker, appeals for accommodation
<i>leh</i>	marks a tentative suggestion/request
<i>lor</i>	indicates obviousness or resignation
<i>mah</i>	marks information as obvious
<i>what/wot</i>	marks obviousness and contradiction
<i>meh</i>	indicates scepticism
<i>ya</i>	conveys (weak) emphasis and uncontroversiality ³

²Scholars agree on the general/broad meaning of the discourse particles, and Leimgruber's table reflects that agreement. Where they disagree on are the nuances of the meaning of the particles (e.g. differing contexts). For more in-depth information on the particles, refer to the papers that Leimgruber (2011) cited, some of which solely focus on a single particle.

³The word *uncontroversiality* does not exist. Here, Leimgruber is referring to the opposite of controversiality, as implied from his addition of the negative prefix "un".

Table 1: Overview of discourse particles in CSE (Leimgruber, 2011)

2.2 Singapore English (SE) Frameworks

There are 2 frameworks/approaches to view and analyse SE, the lectal continuum framework (Platt, 1975) and the diglossia framework (Gupta, 1998). The lectal continuum framework uses StdBrE as a yardstick for comparison against CSE. It also views CSE as an inferior, non-native variety of English, as opposed to the diglossia framework, which sees CSE as a native variety of English. The diglossia framework also treats CSE as having an autonomous grammar, i.e. one which can be described without reference to StdBrE, and which varies according to the context and the communicative intent of the speaker (Alsagoff, 1998).

In this research, the framework used to draw out features of CSE is impertinent. The point of this research is to see if the dialogue in *Crazy Rich Asians* mirror features of CSE based on existing research, where we can then derive implications, so only the accuracy/acceptability of the features matter to provide a credible yardstick of comparison. Thus, **how** the features are derived is unimportant, so long as the features are peer-reviewed and accepted, not controversial or hotly disputed.

2.3 Trends and Classifications of CSE

CSE coexists with Standard Singapore English (SSE) in a relationship in which “SSE is restricted in use to situations that are characterised by a high level of formality, whereas Singlish is used in all other instances” (Leimgruber, 2011). This implies that CSE is mostly used

in informal situations.

On the varieties of English, Ho (1995) mentions:

Generally, the one spoken by the socially dominant (the **rich** and powerful, the **educated elite**) has the most prestige and is institutionalized as the standard: It is used for administration and on **all formal occasions**, taught in schools, used on television, radio, and in the press; it **serves as the model** for those who wish to master the language. In contrast, the varieties used by people of lower social status, especially by those at the “bottom” of society (the **poor** and **uneducated**), are tagged as nonstandard, sometimes **derogatorily** as substandard synonymous with “**bad**”, “corrupt”, “offensive”, etc.” (emphasis ours)

This is especially true for SE and its varieties, with the use of Std(Br)E/SSE being heavily advocated and the use of Singlish being simultaneously shunned by the Singapore government via the *Speak Good English Movement* (SGEM), which will be covered in greater detail in the next section. Essentially, as Alsagoff (1998) puts it, “in Singapore, many of the elite in society still use and believe in the superiority of British English (StdBrE)”, using it as a marker of their “education level and hence their right to abide in Singapore” (Smith, 2015).

2.4 The *Speak Good English Movement* and the state’s narrative/view towards Singlish

The Singapore government promotes the speaking and writing of Standard English via the SGEM. The evidence for this is overwhelming, with an example being a resource page on their website being titled “Asking Your Child Questions in Standard English” (Speak Good

English Movement, n.d.). One of their oft-repeated taglines is advocating Singaporeans to be “universally understood”, and this exact phrase can be found on the SGEM’s homepage (Speak Good English Movement, n.d.).

Notice that it’s the *Speak **Good** English Movement* and not the *Speak **Standard** English Movement*. By naming the SGEM as such, the state (falsely) equates StdE to “Good” English (Wong, 2014). This false equivalence appears to be already ingrained in Singaporeans, as “the term *Standard English* is not commonly used in public discourse or, at least, not as commonly as the term *Good English*.” (Wong, 2014).

Furthermore, according to Wong (2014), in one of the SGEM committee’s publications in 2000, Singlish was contrasted against “good English” (the publication made it clear that “good English” = StdE). Since we’ve established that StdE = “Good” English, by implication, Singlish = “Bad” English. Remember Ho’s quote in the previous section (1995)? This is further evidence that the variety associated with the lower class and less-educated will be “tagged derogatorily” as “bad”. This creates a false dichotomy for Singaporeans, as the state’s narrative leads them to believe that Singlish is “bad” and StdE is “good”. By solely pushing the usage of StdE and not suggesting instances where it is appropriate to use Singlish, the SGEM insists that Singaporeans use StdE all the time, regardless of the context or the nature of the conversation, be it formal or informal, despite the use of StdE between Singaporeans in informal situations being unnecessary (it has no real benefits — Singaporeans understand CSE perfectly).

Furthermore, the state’s (implied) assertions are unsound. There is no research to suggest that there are objectively “Good” and “Bad” types of English, and no evidence that StdE = “Good” and CSE = “Bad”. There is also no evidence that CSE, or any other English dialects are

not “universally understood”, let alone understood in only “Singapore, Malaysia and Batam” (Sim, 2015).

2.5 Linguistic Creativity

Works of literature written in English but meant to reveal the cultures of certain unique groups of people tend to come in the form of ‘contact literatures’, referring to the literary functions of world Englishes in parts of the world where institutionalized variations of English are used in outer circle contexts, such as Africa, India, the Philippines or Singapore (Kachru, 1995). In such works, the use of English tends to be changed to fit culturally specific contexts instead of the American or European experience. The use of English often helps bring in cultural elements while simultaneously exposing cultural differences. (Zhang, 2003).

Such styles of writing would be common in English medium works using Singlish, but it is also worthwhile to search for signs of linguistic creativity in the book. Linguistic creativity is loosely defined as “an expression of the author’s immersion in the English language overseas, instead of the immersion in an institutionalized variety within Asia” (Zhang, 2003). Such creativity, specifically in the form Singlish, could be expected here given the duality of Kwan’s roots and experiences. Kachru describes the various strands of linguistic creativity as follows:

The first strand is that of cultural identity of a variety. It has an ideological and metaphysical context that goes beyond a mere translation. The second strand brings in culture-specific personal interactions in the news media, in matrimonial advertisements, in obituaries, and in letters of invitation. The third strand relates to discourse strategies

and speech acts. These are transcreated into English to approximate the Asian and African backgrounds. (Kachru, 1995, p. 9, as cited in Zhang, 2003)

3 Methodology

The dialogue in *Crazy Rich Asians* will be compared to features of Singlish identified by existing research papers, primarily Alsagoff (1998), Tan (2004) and Leimgruber (2011), with the intention to identify congruence between the two. Context and the identity of different characters involved in the dialogue will also be analysed to deduce how Singlish is used and presented within the book.

Ungrammatical uses of language within dialogues not pinpointed as traditional features of Singlish will also be analysed, as these could be Kwan's personal take on how Singlish is used/what Singlish is. Such features could be seen as linguistic creativity, as they are likely a result of Kwan's "immersion of the language in the English language overseas" (from the quote cited earlier in Zhang, 2003), thus leading him to having a creative imagining of the variety CSE.

The selection of extracts for analysis will be based on a set of criteria, targeting extracts which display a contrast in use of English (ie. StdE vs CSE), content of the conversation (formal vs light topics) as well as social status or power dynamics, be it how wealthy or cosmopolitan different characters are. In the event that these contrasts cannot be achieved in a single extract, then there must be these contrasts across the extracts chosen so that comparisons across extracts are possible.

4 Discussion and Analysis

4.1 Part One, Chapter 16: *The Gohs*

In this extract, Rachel, who is American, arrives at her friend Peik Lin's family home in Singapore to have lunch with her family, who are all Singaporean, with the topics of conversation ranging from university and business to the wedding Rachel is in town for.

Upon meeting Rachel, Peik Lin's mother, Neena, remarks, "So long I haven't seen you!". Within this quote, inversion is observed, whereby Neena places the modifier "so long" to start her sentence instead of to end it. This type of inversion, although ungrammatical, is not a feature of CSE⁴, hence it can be seen as Kwan's linguistic creativity at play. As a result of this feature, the preposition "in" is also omitted in her speech.

Neena proceeds to exclaim later on, "This is like *royal weddeeng!*" Here, she omits the use of the indefinite article "a" in her sentence. Neena also places the wrong stress when pronouncing the word "wedding", stressing the second syllable instead of the first, as evidenced by "*deeng*" (emphasis ours), which is an instance of phrase-final lengthening.

On the other hand, while speaking to Rachel, Wye Mun, Peik Lin's father, tells her, "Rachel Chu, long time no see!". This sentence does not match academic features identified within Singlish yet the phrase "long time no see" is ungrammatical and immediately stands out as some form of non-standard variety of English. This again could be seen as Kwan crafting dialogue based around his own set of linguistic habits and vocabulary he has come to associate

⁴ Certain inversions are features of CSE. However, the type of inversion in CSE is subject-auxiliary in WH-interrogatives, where the subject and verb are left in the same order in WH- questions as in statements (Alsagoff, 2008; Leimgruber, 2011; Lim, 2004)

with Singlish, diverging from the traditional rules or particles one would typically expect to see in Singlish. *Long time no see* originates from American English and seems to be an imitation of broken English. The phrase is akin to other widely accepted fixed expressions like “no can do” and “chop chop” (Partridge, 2002, p. 1386). Hence, there is clear influence from American English (linguistic creativity at play), and it’s ungrammaticality and the fact that it’s ‘broken’ English may have played a part in Kwan’s selection of this phrase.

Looking into the content of the conversation in this extract, serious issues such as university or the family business are discussed strictly in Standard English yet once the topic of conversation moves into gossiping about the wedding, many characters code switch to begin to speak Singlish. This corresponds to the narrative that Standard English is meant to be spoken in formal contexts to discuss formal issues, yet is at odds with the reasoning for this, given that Rachel, who is American and speaks Standard English, understands the conversation perfectly well, disputing the notion that Singlish cannot be understood by non Singaporeans and therefore should not be used when speaking to them.

The identity of the characters frequently portrayed as users of Singlish are also extremely familiar. One of the most regular users of Singlish is Neena, who immigrated to Singapore from China. This very much upholds the concept that Singlish is spoken by foreign immigrants who may not have a full grasp of Standard English and incorporate features of grammar and vocabulary from their own first languages into their speech. Neena’s use of Singlish is in stark contrast to that of successful businessman Wye Mun’s, whose use of Singlish hardly extends beyond light hearted greetings and into actual conversation. This may be representative of this class of Singaporeans indeed using Singlish, but simply to appear more relaxed and open to

initiate conversation, rather than sticking to Singlish as their medium of communication at all times.

4.2 Part One, Chapter 2: *Eleanor Young*

In this extract, Eleanor (Nick's mother) attends bible study with her friends, all women hailing from similarly wealthy families. Over the course of the meeting, the women gossip over their children's girlfriends and the stock market over dessert.

Nadine, one of the women attending the bible study session, tells the group, "Hey, so strange Elle, how come there's no picture of your pretty niece Astrid?" Pro-drop is observed within her speech, when she chooses to omit the subject "it" or "this" in front of the clause "so strange Elle" (Pro-drop). In the same clause, she also omits a linking verb, possibly "is". These two features are hallmarks of Singlish, primarily influenced by the Chinese language, in which the omission of these features are grammatically correct. It is also interesting to note her use of the phrase "how come", which while is in fact grammatically correct, is largely used in informal situations in place of "why", due to its origins in American slang. This again could be seen as linguistic creativity, as Kwan meshes some features in varieties of American English together with CSE in his reimagining of Singlish.

Eleanor, upon hearing that her son might be in a relationship, exclaims, "No such thing! No way Nicky has a girlfriend!" Similar to Nadine, she drops the subjects (Pro-drop) and linking verbs (e.g. **There** (subject) **is** (linking verb)/**There's** *no such thing*) in the two sentences above. She also drops the subject from her first sentence, not indicating what "thing" she is referring to.

Later on, upon hearing the imminent crash in the stock price of a certain company, Lorena remarks, “But Sina Land is blue-chip!”, dropping the indefinite article “a” when referring to Sina Land. She also drops the object after “blue-chip” (e.g. stock/company), which is an instance of NP deletion.

From the quotes above, it is evident that all the women do incorporate various features of Singlish, not just grammatically, but in terms of the use of discourse particles such as “lah” or “hor”, as well as sporadic inserting of various dialect phrases. However, there is a difference in the frequency of the use of Singlish between the women, despite little obvious class difference between the women, all either born or married into the elite class of Singapore. In spite of this, there is still a marked difference between the women in attendance. The characters who tend to speak Singlish with more consistency, beyond including a couple of common particles at the end of sentences but sticking to the grammar of Singlish throughout their speech, are Nadine and Lorena, who indulge in informal conversations with topics such as gossip and tabloids, reinforcing the notion that CSE is used in informal conversations, such as fussing over one’s public appearance or gossiping over the relationship status of their children. Comparatively, Carol and Eleanor, who appear to carry themselves with more class via their disinterest in the tabloids (which was viewed as a trivial interest) or them (mostly Carol) taking a Bible study session seriously, as a practice of religion, rather than as an excuse for a social gathering and gossip, speak almost perfect StdE most of the time. Their tokenistic additions of “lah” and other discourse particles were likely used to connect with the other women in conversation, who were using quite a bit of CSE.

4.3 Part One, Chapter 13:

In this extract, Eleanor discusses Nick's potential relationship with Rachel and how she can tear it down over the phone with her husband, Philip, who is evidently uninterested in the subject, thinking it to be much ado about nothing. Eleanor then discusses her plan to expose Rachel with her friends from bible study.

As Eleanor brings up Rachel's family history, she laments, "*Alamak*, a child from some *no-name ulu* family! I'm going to *tiao lau*!" Here, Eleanor directly utilises phrases from Hokkien and Malay, such as "*alamak*", "*ulu*" and "*tiao lau*". This echoes the characterisation of Singlish being a hybrid of various languages, rather than a standalone language with its own set of rules, as aside from the various imported phrases, Eleanor's sentence is grammatically correct. It also showcases Kwan portraying the various strings of dialect/language spoken in Singlish, rather than getting the majority Chinese cast of characters to speak in dialect or Chinese to pass as Singlish, even though such a difference is unlikely to have been picked up by most readers.

However, few features of Singlish regarding sentence structure or grammar can be identified in the conversation between Eleanor and Philip, outside of the frequent use of particles such as "*lah*" or "*alamak*", and even then these are often added into sentences by Eleanor alone. It is then significant to note that Philip is presented as more level-headed and positive, willing to crack jokes and trust his son's judgement, while Eleanor is made out to be hot-headed and overbearing as she looks to break off her son's relationship, because it again, perhaps inadvertently, suggests that the use of Singlish makes one appear blunt or improper, yet speaking Standard English projects the image of reasonability and respectable, characteristics conveyed by

Philip during their conversation as he attempts to assure Eleanor of her son's independence.

Later on, as Eleanor joins her fellow bible study friends, Lorena complained: "That Ivy League-degreed ex-wife of his purposely introduced him to the girl who would become his mistress, and then used that silly excuse to get a huge divorce settlement. The Hsus had to sell so many properties just to pay her off! So *sayang!*" She comments that the Hsus are "so sayang", using the Malay word "sayang" and no indication of any subject or object she is referring to in this clause alone. The rest of the conversation is expectedly peppered with the usual discourse particles and various strings of dialect which we have not considered Singlish due to the lack of elements of English, Malay or other dialects.

Nonetheless, Kwan's varied use of sentence structure and mixing of a variety of dialect and phrases shows a real attempt to produce an authentic impression of Singlish in his dialogue rather than simply throwing in a series of particles at the end of sentences, which could be expected from a book not primarily targeted at Singaporean readers. It is also impossible to overlook the fact that the characters who urge Eleanor and the others to reconsider their actions and give Rachel a chance, Philip and Carol, are also the most infrequent users of Singlish, perpetuating the negative connotations of bluntness or being embarrassing behind Singlish as mentioned earlier.

5 Conclusions

We have observed Kevin Kwan utilising many features of Singlish in his dialogues within the book, as well as frequently defaulting to characters and contexts the use of Singlish

tends to be associated with (ie. the less well-educated, informal contexts such as gossiping etc.), despite portraying a group of individuals rarely looked at regarding the use of Singlish, either in terms of in depth research or works of literature, in spite of his lack of obligation to conform to some of these academic norms surrounding Singlish and his long period of absence from the country.

His novel also has some aspects of linguistic creativity, meshing certain features of varieties of American English with that of CSE, while excluding some prominent features of CSE, such as, but not limited to: subject-auxiliary inversion when *wh-* interrogatives are used (Alsagoff, 2008; Leimgruber 2011; Lim, 2004), *or not* questions (Alsagoff, 2008), etc. This could be seen as his creative imagining of the variety of SE that is Singlish.

However, despite the regular use of Singlish, congruent to much research already done of the features of this variety of English, there is little indication in the book that non-Singlish speaking characters could not comprehend the content of conversation clearly when Singlish was spoken. The regular use of Singlish was also clearly not a marker of social class or education level as is commonly seen, given almost all the characters in the book belong to the uppermost strata of both of those categories. The international success of the book also points to Singlish not really getting in the way of the global understanding or impression of the book, even if it may not have explicitly enhanced the reading experience due to some of the nuances present in Singlish. These various factors then challenge our perception of the country's stance on Singlish, employed through various tenets of policy such as the aforementioned Speak Good English movement which aimed to eradicate the use of Singlish. Much of the reasoning behind this centred around framing binaries of Singlish being "bad English" and embarrassing or ineffective

to be used on a formal/global platform as compared to Standard English which is classified as “good English” and the only way to be understood on the world stage. The late former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stressed the importance of speaking good English to function effectively in a global setting while his successor Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong stressed that young Singaporeans must learn and speak standard English, not Singlish, so as to communicate with people globally and develop Singapore into a first-world economy. Yet, *Crazy Rich Asians* provides a counternarrative to this, displaying that the two variations are very much related and can neither be presented in such a binary nor should Singlish prove to be anymore ineffective in communication, not least in the instances of perhaps the most cosmopolitan and economically sound people still understanding and speaking Singlish regularly, but also in its success on an international stage as a book.

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