

Note: Pauses for audience participation are indicated with ... , expected answers with • bullet points.

I want to make sure we don't forget to thank some people. The Singlish lesson is Charles Bailyn's idea. He "arrowed" me, meaning he "volunteered" me. Qi Han and Anju did all the practical organization. And a lot of people helped me to translate old research into a new lesson, especially Rayner and Kathy.

So here's what will happen. First I'm going to talk about some social background. Then we're going to look at grammar and vocabulary. Then Navin and Rayner will read a couple of extracts from a Singaporean play. And then we will split up for conversation practice.

Background

First, what is Singlish? The academic name for Singlish is Colloquial Singaporean English, because there's also a Standard Singaporean English. But those are very fuzzy categories. People use the whole range of possibilities in between. There are also ethnic differences, mostly vocabulary and intonation. And there is also a lot of age group variation because Singlish is so young — it's still gelling and growing.

Wikipedia says Singlish has low prestige. But linguists would say: it doesn't have OVERT prestige, it has COVERT prestige. Think of African American Vernacular English. Officially, it's bad English. UNOFFICIALLY, it's cool. It's you and your buddies against the man.

Another misconception is that Singlish is the language of the uneducated. But actually, everyone uses elements of Singlish sometimes — for covert prestige or in-group bonding. Men tend to use it more than women. It's also associated with young people. The census says that in 2010, English was the dominant home language for more than half of the 5-9 year olds in Singapore. And I can promise you, the English that they're learning at home usually isn't perfectly Standard English, because people think it's too hard for babies.

Grammar

Lee Kuan Yew thinks Singlish has no rules. Well, I know there are rules because I get it wrong. I'm not a native speaker of Singlish: I didn't really learn any English until I started kindergarten in London.

(1) Omissions

- a. I find find find still cannot find! b. You tell me earlier I can find so many people for you.

I think one reason people think there are no rules in Singlish is that you can omit so many things. Nouns are very much optional. (1a) is a complete sentence. What does it mean? Singaporeans, I know you know the answer, so please wait and give the non-Singaporeans a chance to guess ...) How is this different from standard English? ...

- You can omit objects and subjects.
- Find doesn't mean "find", it means "look for".
- Triplication (excessive action). Would be different if reduplicated (I just find find a bit).

So, how would you say: "I can do it!" in Singlish? ...

- Can!

And now please look at (1b). Can anyone translate it into standard English? ...

- ~~REQUIRES ANNOYED EXPRESSION: You told me that I could do this.~~
- ~~REQUIRES CLAUSE-FINAL RISE, PAUSE: You should tell me earlier so I can do this.~~
- IF you HAD told me earlier, THEN I COULD HAVE found so many people for you.

You can omit “if”. Other words that can be omitted are definite articles (the, a), copula (is, are). So let’s test your comprehension. Imagine I’m teaching you to make fruit juice in a blender. “You put in fruits, after you switch on.” What do you do first?

- Put the fruit in first. There is an omitted word: *You put in fruits, after THAT you switch on.*

Any other comments on these sentences? ...

- Bare form of the verb. Same for nouns. So tense and plurals go out the window.

(2) Prosody

- $\begin{array}{c} _ _ _ \\ _ _ _ \end{array}$
 $\begin{array}{c} _ _ \\ _ _ \end{array}$
 $\begin{array}{c} _ _ _ \\ _ _ _ \end{array}$
 $\begin{array}{c} _ _ _ \\ _ _ _ \end{array}$
- a. Malaysia b. Japan c. Singapore d. North Korea

But in some ways, Singlish grammar is more complicated than English. We are going to read you some country names in standard English and Singlish. Tell me what differences you can hear in the pronunciation.

- Syllable-timing
- Final lengthening
- Word-final high tone (can be rising for emphasis)
- Mid tone on stress (stress placement can be different from standard English)
- Low tone before stress (actually it’s a low falling tone)
- ~~Variation: Foot-final high, you can have HL sequence word-finally, word merger in acronyms, the low is actually a low falling, the high can be rising for emphasis)~~

(3) Discourse particles

Q: *How come you/they never do my assignment?* A: *Your assignment very hard* ____.

- a. Convincing: **leh** $_ _$ ***lah** $_ _ / _ _ _$ ***lor** $_ _$ b. Predicative: one
- c. Contradictory: ***mah** $_ _$ ***what** $_ _$
- d. Yes-no questions: **ah** $_ _$ **hor** $_ _ / _ _ _$ ***meh** $_ _$
- e. Attention-checking: **ah** $_ _ / _ _ _$ **hor** $_ _ / _ _ _$

* Cannot occur out of the blue.
Bold: Cannot combine with each other.

And famously, Singlish has discourse particles: (read them out). As you may have gathered, they’re tonal. The term “discourse particle” means that traditional grammar doesn’t have a good word for you. You’re not a noun, you’re not a verb, you’re not even an adverb. They are “non-truth-conditional”, which means that if you take them away, the sentence remains true. But they can be more or less appropriate for a given situation. We’re going to illustrate the particles with the dialogue under (3). Just be aware, “never” just means “didn’t”.

If you’ll look at the particles in (3a), I’ve called them “convincing” particles, because the most common usage is when you think the other guy might disagree with you. But they have different meanings. *Leh* is REQUESTING that you consider another point of view, *lah* is IMPOSING your point of view.

Now Kathy and I are going to demonstrate how to use *leh*. Please imagine that I'm a teacher and Kathy is my student, and tell me how you would describe her expression and body language. This is high-tone *leh*: ____ (dialogue). And now we are all going to practise saying *leh*. Please repeat after me: Very hard *leh*55.

And now, please imagine that we're both teachers, and I'm complaining to her about my students. And again, please watch her expression and body language. This is low-tone *leh*: ____ (dialogue). What's the difference?

- High-tone *leh* is almost begging, low-tone *leh* is tactful.

And now we are all going to say it. Repeat after me: Very hard *leh*11.

And now *lah*, which is IMPOSING your point of view. We are going to do three tonal variants, and please see if you can identify a trend as we go through them. This is low-tone *lah*: (dialogue). This is rising *lah*: ____ (dialogue). And this is gradually falling *lah*: ____ (dialogue). Is there a trend? ...

- I think they are all imposing your POV, but they are increasingly emphatic (I'm basing this on some initial research on emphatic intonation in Singlish). And that comes across as increasing impatience.

There's a paradox in the literature. People say that *lah* can increase social distance (Loke & Low 1988) and indicate sarcasm (Wong 2004: 770), and that fits in with the most emphatic intonation. But they also say *lah* can signal solidarity and have a softening effect (Loke & Low 1988; Kwan-Terry 1978: 24). I think you get the softening effect when you add *lah* to an imperative like "Make it cheaper." If you say, "Make it cheaper lah," you're trying to convince the other person instead of ordering them around.

And now let's practice saying *lah*. First the least emphatic, low tone: *Very hard lah*11. Now a bit more emphasis, rising tone: *Very hard lah*24. And now you're really emphasising it, so use the gradually falling tone: *Very hard lah*51!

And now *lor*. This is when you don't see any other possibilities. So you can use it when you think someone is being an idiot: ____ (dialogue). But you can also use it when you're resigned. This is Kathy being a student who has really tried very hard: ____ (dialogue). So now let's practice saying it: *Very hard lor*55.

If you're trying to decide which one to use, *lah* is the neutral one. All of them are attempts to convince, but *leh* and *lah* have those extra connotations. That's why *lah* is more common.

Bear in mind that *lah* and *lor* cannot be used in out-of-the-blue contexts, meaning when you walk into a room or pick up a phone. All the particles with an asterisk are banned in out-of-the-blue contexts. If you want to make a statement out of the blue, you can use the particle in (3b), *one*: "Eh, Professor Bailyn, your assignment very hard one." This is a predicative particle, like Mandarin *de*. It just means "very hard" is a description that applies very strongly to "Your assignment". *One* can also be combined with with the particles in bold text: ____ (dialogue). Let's try it: *Very hard one lah*.

Now (3c). The contradictory particles are like "but" or "after all". It's like saying, "But your assignment was really hard. Of course your students couldn't do it." And the literature hasn't identified any difference between *mah* and *what*. So this is *mah*11: _____. Repeat after me: *Very hard mah*11. And this is *what*11: _____. Repeat after me: *Very hard what*11.

In (3d), we have three particles for yes-no questions. *Ah* is a neutral yes-no question. So the following sentence means “Is it hard?” _____. Repeat: *Very hard ah*¹¹. *Hor* means you expect agreement. So this means, “Isn’t it hard?” _____. Repeat: *Very hard hor*²⁴. *Hor* should be nasalised. If you’re not sure, hold your nose. You should feel the air trying to come out of your nose. *Meh* means you’re sceptical. So this means, “Are you sure it’s funny?” _____. Repeat: *Very hard meh*⁵⁵.

(3e) The attention-checking particles are a bit different. They can go in the middle of a sentence, to remind you to keep listening. So this is attention-checking ah: “Your assignment ah, very hard one.” And this is attention-checking hor: Your assignment hor, very hard one.”

So if anyone tells you Singlish has no grammar, you can laugh at them. Those were just the core particles, the core tonal variants, the core functions. There’s a lot more. The research is ongoing, and some of what I’ve said hasn’t been published yet.

But don’t worry. Nobody expects you to speak Singlish. In fact, most people will try to speak standard English with you. And you shouldn’t try too hard to speak Singlish to them. It’s an in-group code, it has low status and covert prestige, and you’re a high-status expatriate. There comes a point when it’s not seen as an honest signal. So this is what I suggest. You can use the pronunciation and grammar IF it’s very clear that you’re code-switching temporarily for effect. Don’t try to talk that way all the time. But you can use the vocabulary, even in the classroom. Your students will find it hilarious. So let’s look at some vocabulary now.

Vocabulary

(4) When ordering at a hawker centre

- Hello, **aunty/uncle!** Chicken rice, two. Eat here. White one. Compare: boy/girl
- = Hi [non-professional term of respect for elder],
two plates of chicken rice. Not takeaway. Steamed (not roasted.)
- Hawker centre: open-air food court.
- **Does it strike you as rude?** ... Order first, chitchat later.
- **AUNTY/UNCLE**
 - social situations (visiting someone's house, asking for directions)
 - blue-collar workers (hawkers, cleaners, cab drivers).
 - NOT your boss, or your students’ parents.
 - (Related: BOY/GIRL. Not rude.)

(5) When insulted

- Orh \wedge ... you think I’m a chao \backslash **ang _ moh** \swarrow , I catch no ball is it?
- = Oh, light dawns. You think I’m a stinking Caucasian (red-hair), so I won’t understand?
- **Question for the Singaporeans: Does angmoh strike you as racist?**
- ORH: Nasalized.
- THINK pronounced like thing
- CHAO is not pronounced like “ch”, but like “ts”. Also a term of endearment.
- **ANG MOH** — it is a little bit racist, but it’s not usually intended as insult.
- IS IT — it’s like a discourse particle, can stick onto anything to form a yes-no question.
- **Question for the Singaporeans: What do you say if you’re complimented?**

- There's variation. "Westernised" people will say "thank you", but traditional behaviour requires some kind of self-deprecating remark, like "No lah, paiseh (that makes me feel bad)." So observe the people around you.
- (6) **When disaster strikes**
- **Alamak!** Die already. How? Also: Jia _ lat \)! Die liao _ .
= **OH NO.** We're dead meat [change of state]. What are we going to do?
 - **ALREADY** does not mean "before expected".
 - **HOW?** does not mean "How should we do it?"
- (7) **When you need help**
- Sorry ah, I very **blur** one. Help me do can or not?
= Sorry, I'm **ignorant/muddle-headed**. Can you do this for me?
 - **BLUR** — Very common. Any questions about how to use it?
 - **HELP** doesn't mean do it together, it means do it for me.
 - **CAN OR NOT** — means "is it okay?" invariant tag.
- (8) **When you encounter Kant**
- Wah \ lau ^ , damn **cheem** ^ sia ^ .
= [Very mild expletive], that's really **deep/profound/confusing** [particle].
 - **WAH LAU, DAMN** — mild expletives. We have to think for a minute to remember the original meanings, even if we know them.
 - **CHEEM** — Again, not pronounced as "ch", but "ts".
 - **SIA** is from Malay sial. Faizah, what does it mean in Malay?
 - Young-person particle. Has been changing very fast.
 - Intensifier when you're commenting. Adjectives, rhetorical questions.
- (9) **I told you so**
- See lah see lah, who ask you pon(teng), now you confirm **kena** arrowed. Also: kana
= See? Who asked you to play truant? Now you'll definitely [**adversative passive**] be assigned an unwelcome task.
 - **PON** — unaspirated [p].
 - **KENA** — You don't have to specify what the adverse consequences are.
- (10) **When stereotyping**
- Eh, PRC or local, you think who is more **kia** — **su** ^ ah ^ ? Compare: (Ah) _ Beng/Lian ^
= Hey, who do you think is more **afraid of losing**, mainland Chinese or Singaporeans?
 - **To the Singaporeans: How many of you find "PRC" to be a racist term?**
 - **PRC** — initialisms are very common.
 - Considered slightly racist now. The neutral term is "Chinese nationals".
 - **To the Singaporeans: Examples of kiasu behaviour?**
 - **kiasu** - nasalized.
 - kiasu parents queue up for primary school registration, engage tuition teachers
 - "a government official, who is rigidly over-cautious and unprepared to take any risk, however unlikely. A distinguishing characteristic of civil servants both within and outside the defence set-up." — *Dictionary of Singlish and Singapore English*

- “The police cannot be everywhere, so I do what I can. Like if I see a bag lying around, I’ll raise an alarm. Kiasu a bit never mind, lah.” — *Dictionary of Singlish and Singapore English, Today*
- Word order
 - Wh-in-situ (the words *who, what, where, when, how* don’t move to the front of the sentence).
 - Topicalisation — the topic (PRC or local) is moved to the front of the sentence.

Monologues

Now you have the building blocks. To give you a better idea of how everything fits together, we’re going to perform two pieces from a Singaporean play, *Cooling-Off Day* by Alfian bin Sa’at. The play is the result of interviewing people about the 2011 election, so it’s a series of monologues by all kinds of people.

The script is part of your handout. Just one thing: normal Singlish is really fast. So they are going to slow down so you can follow.

Conversation practice

And now we have the conversation practice. So let me set an example by using my bad Singlish. Actually hor, speak Singlish to non-Singaporean, very difficult leh. So, we will role-play. Everyone, please imagine your group is a tour bus. Every bus got two Singaporean, four non-Singaporean. Minibus only what. The Singaporeans are your tour guide and bus driver.

We ask them to be very kaypoh (nosy), because Singaporean are like that one. Actually WE ourself very polite one, but older people ah, they don’t know this “personal boundary”, they don’t know this “political correctness.” So you must learn how to cope.

My advice to you, two things: (1) People ask you personal question, the best defence is offence. If you don’t want to answer, then you shoot back the question lor. (2) The Singaporean are role-playing. So you can also role-play what. You can invent a persona, very outrageous one. You pretend it’s a competition. Who can shock who until they have no words to say.

Okay? Everyone have fun ah. Ready, set, go!

Pre-event briefing for volunteers

- **Teaching advice**
 - Use authentic Singlish that they can understand (slower, not too much new vocab).
 - As far as possible, use Singlish to explain Singlish words or grammar.
 - But you should feel free to break character BRIEFLY if you think the Singlish will be unclear.
 - If they don’t use Singlish, tell them “Talk Singlish lah!” Rephrase, make them repeat.
 - If they make mistakes, correct selectively (you don’t have to jump on every single mistake).
 - You can give them several correct Singlish alternatives to choose from.
 - Any other advice?
- **Conversation ideas**
 - Ask where they’re from (Aiyah, I like Japanese), where they’ve worked/travelled, whether they’ve been to Singapore before, what food they like.
 - Personal questions (appearance, married, children, salaries, rent).

- Tell them about landmarks like Orchard Road, the Zoo, Sentosa, the Esplanade.
- Pretend the bus driver is blur and tends to drive you to the wrong place.
- Any other ideas?

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