## Bad news for all English purists 'scared to lose out' to Singlish

Australia's Macquarie Dictionary editors are ready to legitimise Singlish, reports KOH BUCK SONG

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*WAH LAU*, bad news for language purists, man: the inclusion of the word *kiasu* in Australia's Macquarie Dictionary will, in time, legitimise such Singlish words.

So says Ms Susan Butler, the dictionary's executive editor, at a Regional Language Centre seminar here last week.

"Once you have a dictionary, life becomes simpler. You don't have to make mental jumps from one form of language to another," she said.

A recent ST report on the inclusion of *kiasu* in the dictionary's 1997 edition drew two reactions: those who think it is good to focus attention on Singapore, and those who think it will give Singaporeans a bad name.

In 1991, while doing research here on Singapore English, Ms Butler sat in on a debate among Ministry of Education officials on whether *kiasu* (scared to lose out) had moved from being a colloquialism into part of standard Singaporean English. To linguists, Singaporean English is a variety of English with borrowed words and coined phrases and a grammar that is largely standard, as opposed to Singlish, a sub-variety in which the grammar itself is different.

Her own view was that *kiasu*, like *lah* and *aiyah*, were "flags" of Singaporean English, which speakers here sometimes inserted into their speech, to establish rapport with other speakers. Hence, it was entirely valid to include *kiasu* in a dictionary. Even if its usage died out, the word had been used in print so often that people would always want to find out its meaning.

In studying the English of South-east Asia, the Macquarie team focuses on items which have made their way into mainstream usage, such as godown, outstation, *bomoh*, *rojak* and *sarabat* stall in Singapore.

At present, the team has one million words each in the English of Singapore, Malaysia, Hongkong and the Philippines, and it is working to increase this to four million.

Only examples by native writers in fiction, non-fiction and newspapers are accepted, such as *lallang* (long grass) from Michael Chiang's play, Army Daze, and *taugay* (bean sprouts) from Simon Tay's short story collection, Stand Alone.

On whether Asian countries should bring out their own English dictionaries, she noted that publishing, say, a dictionary of Singapore English would be difficult because of the small home market.

She noted that it was natural that conservative speakers would wish to oppose including words like *kiasu* and protect the way things are.

But she said it was important to document real words in use because they provided "one mirror within which it is possible to catch a glimpse of national identity".

So, it looks as if the language purists will just have to accept this seemingly unstoppable development.

*Kiasu* in dictionaries is here to stay. What to do? Like that, *lor*.

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### To have or not to have a dictionary, big question leh
Monday with KOH BUCK SONG

IN THE *kopi tiam* the other day, two Singlish speakers were debating the pros and cons of having a dictionary of Singapore English.

This very secretive project, which has been talked about for some time in academic circles, was mentioned again last week at two language seminars here.

This is how the conversation went, more or less:

**Ah Hock**: *Eh*, what is this man, I heard they are making a Singlish Dictionary?

**Beng**: No *lah*, who told you, it's not only Singlish. I think if there is a dictionary, it will be on Singapore English.

**Ah Hock**: *Aiyah*, what's the difference?

**Beng**: You see *ah*, I have this friend who is a linguistics lecturer. He told me Singapore English is what they call a variety of English, just like Australian English. Singlish is only one sub-variety.

**Ah Hock**: *Wah lau*, *chim* man.

**Beng**: No *lah*. Very simple. You see *ah*, Singlish has words like *kiasu* and phrases like "blur like *sotong*". But the grammar also very special, everything not the same as Queen's English one.

But Singapore English describes the whole way English is used here. So users include those who speak proper English but also use words with special meaning here, such as "void deck" in a block of Housing Board flats and "hall" for living room.

These people speak Singapore English but also throw in many Singlish words and phrases. Something like *rojak*, *lah*.

**Ah Hock**: *Orr*, so Singapore English is bigger and Singlish is just one small part, *lah*.

**Beng**: Something like that. But some people don't like Singlish, *leh*.

**Ah Hock**: Why? Like that got problem, *meh*?

**Beng**: They are worried that if you put Singlish words into a dictionary, people will think it's OK and then they will anyhow *hantam*.

**Ah Hock**: Why like that one?

**Beng**: *Yah lor*, people always like that. Actually, what I think is, if all their friends and parents also speak some Singlish, then people from young already learn Singlish. So later you cannot stop them anyway, no matter how you try.

But never mind one, they also learn good English in school, so when they grow up they will know how to talk properly. When they do business or what, where got problem?

What they can do is teach good English in school, and make sure good English is used on all official and formal occasions. But if characters in a book or even on screen use it, then should be OK.

It's the way we are, we should not be scared to see it. Just because some Singlish is in a dictionary does not mean that Singlish will take over from good English.

**Ah Hock**: Why do the dictionary makers want to include Singlish? Actually, they should not put mistakes into print, right?

**Beng**: You see *ah*, nowadays linguists see language differently. They try to describe how language is used, they don't just tell people how they should use it.

In collecting examples to study, they also go for real samples from books, newspapers, magazines, places like that.

So, over time, what started out as a mistake becomes accepted.

**Ah Hock**: Example?

**Beng**: Well, when people here say "coat", as in "coat and tie", they mean the jacket of a lounge suit, while "jacket" can mean windbreaker or even vest. In Britain, "coat" means an overcoat, like a winter coat.

When it becomes common, such a word takes on a meaning that English speakers from elsewhere do not understand, and becomes special. After some time, all these differences from standard English make up a new variety.

This is more or less how other types of English, like American and Australian English, developed. *Wah*, not bad man, I sound like a professor.

**Ah Hock**: Like real! So that means, if enough people use a word, then they will put it into the dictionary?

**Beng**: *Yah*, something like that. When the Americans and Australians came up with their own dictionary, people there accepted their own kind of language as part of their culture.

**Ah Hock**: But if people outside think Singaporeans cannot speak proper English, isn't it *malu*?

**Beng**: No *lah*, Australian English also has a lot of slang and they had their own Macquarie Dictionary in 1981, but now no problem what. It's OK one, *lah*.

**Ah Hock**: So, is there really going to be a Singapore English dictionary or not?

**Beng**: I am very sure someone somewhere here is working on it, but so far no news, *leh*.

**Ah Hock**: *Wah lau*, if got such a dictionary, damn good, y'know. You read, sure can laugh. *Shiok* man.

**Beng**: *Yah*, *shiok* man.