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SINGAPORE
By SETH MYDANS

WAH! Government say Singlish no good, must learn how to speak proper English. It a bit difficult. How can?

In their latest initiative to perfect society, Singapore's leaders have begun the Speak Good English Movement - a campaign to eliminate a rough-and-ready patois known as Singlish that has spread through their nation like a linguistic virus.

Their task may be tougher than it sounds. It is a fact of linguistic life that languages change and often splinter. Even as the English language grows more dominant throughout the world, it is spawning offspring linguists call Englishes.

Singlish is one of them. So is Taglish, a mixture of English and Tagalog, the dominant language of the Philippines. There are many more, particularly in former British colonies like India, Jamaica and Nigeria.

"Singlish same for everybody," said Neo Lolaine, who, like other taxi drivers, is a virtuoso of Singlish. "Every Singaporean speak. Me too. It not a dialect or what."

But Ms. Lolaine says she sees the need for reform. "Because we a small country, cannot be not organized," she said. "Strict, lah, is good. That why we have a nice city."

Throughout the world there are more native speakers of Spanish and Chinese than there are of English, but English is the world's dominant second language, by far.

Today, 350 million people are native English speakers, but by some counts more than a billion speak at least some English as a second language. Most of them are in Asia.

And as with Western music, fashion, food and politics, Asians are appropriating the language, remaking it in their own image.

"Now it's not native speakers that are moving English forward," said Larry E. Smith, an expert on international English at the East-West Center in Honolulu. "It's the nonnative speakers, the people in Singapore, the people in Malaysia."

Standard English is the common language of Singapore's multi-ethnic population of four million, one of four official languages that also include Malay, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil.

Singlish combines elements of all of these, as well as several other Chinese dialects. Clipped and direct, it embodies the no-frills essence of Singapore: drop particles, pronouns, niceties. Get to the point.

"Got coffee or not? Got!
You have milk, is it? Also have.
Join me, don't shy!"

Singapore's leaders, constantly remolding their little country in their own image, see danger here.

"We are learning English so we can understand the world and the world can understand us," said Lee Kuan Yew, the senior minister of Singapore. "It is therefore important to speak and write standard English."

Mr Lee said standard English also serves as a neutral common denominator in the multilingual nation. "Unfortunately, if the less educated half of our people end up learning to speak only Singlish, they will suffer economically and socially."

There has never been a time like this when the world was so small, communication so rapid and the need for a common language so fundamental. English is the language of the Internet, of movies and music, of air traffic controllers and captains at sea. It is essential to international business, the means of communication between Japan and Brazil, Germany and Egypt.

In this regard, Singapore's attempt at linguistic engineering is admirable, but probably doomed, said Mr Smith, who is executive director of the International Association for World Englishes and edits the journal World Englishes.

It is the nature of widely spoken languages to fragment into dialects, then into new languages, as Latin did into French, Italian, Spanish and others. Unless the growing interconnection of the world disrupts the pattern,
this could be the future of English, Mr Smith said. As they emerge, the world's various Englishes reflect the needs, personality and linguistic roots of their home ground.

"I need Singlish to express a Singaporean feeling," said Catherine Lim, a prominent novelist.

How better to promote the English classes being offered in Singapore's new campaign than with this advice, in Singlish, from another taxi driver, Loh Peng Hong.

"You must go to study," he said. "Unless, people want to talk you, you not understand. People scold you, also not understand."

Or, as Prince Charles of Britain put it in the best Queen's English, "I think we have to be a bit careful, otherwise the whole thing could get rather a mess."

Already, Mr Smith said, there are millions worldwide who claim English as their first language but who cannot understand each other - an English teacher in India, for example, another in the Philippines and a third in Nigeria. One might even add a fourth, a speaker of cockney English in Great Britain.

But from a linguist's point of view, Mr Smith said, every permutation of the English language - every one of the Englishes - is equally valid.

"One of the things about world English, as a principle, is that English now belongs to everyone who uses it, not just to native speakers," he said. "So a user of Singlish is as correct as you are in the sense that he knows what he wants to say and identifies with his audience."

In the postcolonial years a half century ago, there was a drive in some nations like Malaysia and India to move away from English toward indigenous languages.

Now, more and more, the baggage of history has fallen away, replaced by pragmatism. English classes are one of the boom businesses in Asia, usually taught by nonnative speakers. From Cambodia to Indonesia, no education is complete today without the study of English.

"One English-language newspaper in Thailand has a rule of thumb: If a government official or business executive does not speak English, he is not highly placed enough to bother interviewing."

As the Filipino poet Gemino Abad once said: "The English language is now ours. We have colonized it."

This process has only sped the natural cross-pollination of languages whenever they intersect. All around the world, local languages are raiding English for choice bits of vocabulary, even as English enriches itself with foreign words.

An outsider would need a multilingual dictionary to understand Singlish. Makan, a Malay word, means to eat. Obiang, from the Hokkien Chinese dialect, means ugly or outdated. And from English, "last time" means in the past; "off the light" means turn off the light; and "a bit the" means rather, as in, "English a bit the difficult."

And as with any language, nuances in Singlish can be almost impossible to translate. When used alone, for example, the interrogatory "is it?" conveys a wry skepticism.

Ah Beng: "I got accepted into Harvard."

Ah Seng: "Is it?"

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When leaders of the European and Southeast Asian nations met for a conference in Thailand in 1996, the Europeans insisted on speaking and translating from a babel of their various languages.

Amused, one Asian diplomat told them, "I commend to you the virtues of English."