

English in Asia

Susan Butler
Macquarie Dictionary

Libby Gleeson, an Australian children's writer, has spoken about the difficulties she faced writing for international publishers. She said

"Language is my tool of trade. I make things with words and phrases the way a carpenter builds things from wood or a potter works with clay.

And because I write fiction I am fascinated by the way that the way you talk is a statement of who you are."

"Lots of people fear new technology. Some fear the fact that they can't control its use so you or I can access programs outside the control of the censor.

I fear a different thing.

I fear the danger of the bland, the boring sameness.

Our publishing industry is dominated by overseas interests and the temptation is always to publish for the international market – and that means cautious publishing with an international English tone – no colloquial Australian expression."

Her problem is one routinely faced by Australian publishers who seek to escape our pitifully small market into the larger markets, particularly for us the dream market of America, and who have therefore become experts at translating Australian English into American English or British English.

I remember being told the cautionary tale of the publisher who sent off a children's book to an American editor without doing this kind of translation. The book was about a car and used the Australian word *duco* for the paint on the car. The American editor – with countless people beseeching her to publish their book – took one look at this incomprehensible word *duco* and dismissed the book to the reject pile. The moral of the story is that translation from one variety of English to another is a must for publishing survival. But what is lost in the translation?

One of the problems is that the translation can be of two different kinds. It can be from one variety to another in which the new translation attempts to achieve the same kind of stylistic effect as the original. So *vegemite* goes to *marmite* in British English and *pharmacy* goes to *drugstore* in American English.

Or the translation can move to something generalised and neutral, something that the publisher can get away with in anyone's English even if the work is made more boring as a result. In this kind of translation *vegemite* goes to *paste* or *spread* and *pharmacy* goes to *shop*.

Libby Gleeson certainly maintains that she loses her edge when she has to suffer this kind of translation – and children's writers must feel this even more keenly because children's language is full of the sublimely local.

OHP 1

Sample from *The 101 Dictionary*, Luke Gardiner and Ian Burnard, 1994.

- can** As in "Can I have a go?" – means "Can I have a turn?"
- champion** This is the best person in a game.
- coconut** Part of a song to tease someone with a new and short haircut - "[Name's]...had a haircut, He looks like a coconut."
- cool** Very good. There is also, **double cool**.
- cops** Police who sometimes visit the school, perhaps to see the teachers.
- counted in** Look up **tip** and **dip dip** to see how this is done.
- Crecy** **Crecy** is [located] between "school care" and the "back demountables". Other places in the school grounds are "oval", "quad", and **forest**. [**Crecy** rhymes with "messy". It was the name of an early Hazelbrook property demolished for school space. It was named after a battle.] Look up **forest**.
- dip dip** A way of counting someone in or out for a game. You can do all sorts of things. You can have "silly ones", "naughty ones", and some that are **really bad**. Here is the ordinary one: **Little Miss Piggy fell down in the sink. How many gallons did she drink?** The person on whose finger you finish the beat [here it is on the word "drink"] – the person touched or counted by the counter is out, or "is in" depending on the game. You can also have – **Wibble wobble, wibble wobble, wibble wobble. Out! OR Wibble wobble. You're in trouble!** So the person who is "in trouble", is in. Look up **pick**.

TEXT

This collection of words demonstrates that for this child there is no distinction to be made between words of general currency, words which are part of children's language but which have flowed down to children everywhere from the media,

and words which are quite peculiar to his school community. There are no hesitations, no apologies made for these. They are recorded as items of equal worth with those which have much greater mainstream currency.

OHP 2 (3 pages)

Sample from Macquarie Kids Internet Dictionary (K*I*D) - Australia, South Africa and Singapore.

PAGE 1 AUSTRALIA

Word: to rock someone
 Meaning: to cause embarrassment
 Example: 'Mona really rocked me yesterday when she told everyone what that boy said about me at the station.'
 Contributor: Female, aged 15, NSW

Word: lightning
 Meaning: a type of marble that looks like it has a streak of lightning in it and is the second best marble you can get
 Contributor: Male, aged 8, NSW

Word: sick
 Meaning: cool
 Example: 'I like your new hair style, it looks sick'
 Contributor: Female, aged 16, NSW

Word: tooshie
 Meaning: angry
 Example: 'getting tooshie are we?'
 Contributor: Male, aged 8, NSW

Word: nomate
 Meaning: a person who doesn't have any friends
 Contributor: Male, aged 11, ACT

Word: tripper
 Meaning: a cool person (i.e. someone very popular)
 Contributor: Male, aged 14, VIC

PAGE 2 SOUTH AFRICA

Word: don't pass a stone
 Meaning: relax
 Example: 'look brave, don't pass a stone'

Contributor: Male, aged 15, South Africa

Word: schollie

Meaning: idiotic, stupid

Example: 'you are such a schollie'

Contributor: Female, aged 15, South Africa

Word: beenie

Meaning: a woollen hat

Example: 'why don't you wear your beenie when you come out of the surf?'

Contributor: Male, aged 14, South Africa

Word: homeboy

Meaning: someone who is popular

Example: 'look at that homeboy with all the kids'

Contributor: Male, aged 16, South Africa

PAGE 3 SINGAPORE

Word: sian

Meaning: boring, tiring

Example: 'So sian, tomorrow got History test'

Contributor: Female, 13 years, Singapore

Word: Relack

Meaning: Relax, cool it

Example: 'Hey, relack, ah!'

Contributor: Female, 13 years, Singapore

Word: Beep

Meaning: to censor

Example: 'beep it!'

Contributor: Female, 14 years, Singapore

Word: Ring Ring

Meaning: Indication that your brassiere strap is showing

Example: 'The telephone is ringing "Ring, Ring"'

Contributor: Female, 15 years, Singapore

Word: sabo

Meaning: sabotage

Example: 'Why you sabo me?'

Contributor: Female, 15 years, Singapore

TEXT

Look at the difference between the contributions made by Australian, South Africans and Singaporeans. Here we are at the outer reaches of three different varieties of English - in the realms of slang where localisms abound.

At the centre of these varieties however localisms diminish and we can expect to find greater conformity between the three varieties. This, then, is a workable definition of World English – that it is the overlap of the standard dialects of each variety of English where there is the greatest convergence in terms of shared lexical items and usage.

For many, World English tends to be a stereotypical approximation of the standard dialect of that variety of English which the speaker assumes to be most prestigious. So in Singapore, and until comparatively recently in Australia, World English would equate with an attempted BBC English accent and what is thought to be the Queen's English in terms of lexicon and usage. This vision of World English doesn't entirely match up with the targeted reality. But the assumption is that this is the English which will most successfully get the speaker around the world. In the Philippines, the comparable image would relate to American English.

The worst misunderstanding of the term is the notion that World English is another variety again, lined up alongside British English, American English, and so on. Its synonym here is often International English. It is a kind of bland functional English that is thought will see you through the English-speaking world, of the kind achieved by ESL students anywhere.

World English is, I think, the sum of the standard cores of all varieties of English to which speakers of any variety of English retreat in an attempt to make their English indistinguishable from other varieties and to maximise communication. Although it seems a modest definition it still gives rise to some misunderstandings that need to be sorted out.

There are a few localisms that have to be allowed into this standard core and which, though undoubtedly identified with a particular place, are nevertheless instantly internationalised. A *kangaroo* is a *kangaroo* in anyone's English, although it is impossible to mention a kangaroo without being conscious that it is to be found only in Australia. There are various plants and animals that belong to World English in this way and which usually present no problem.

But not every plant and animal gets sufficient media coverage to make it onto the world stage. For a small child's dictionary that Macquarie was preparing it was

agreed that *kangaroo* and *koala* would be accepted by Americans but *kookaburra* was pushing the limits and *joey* and *wallaby* were definitely unknown. The cut-off point for acceptable localisms is a pragmatic one.

There are other lexical items reflecting local culture which, although perfectly standard items in a particular variety, are not part of World English and these cause the greatest difficulty. Many go unnoticed by the native speaker of the variety who is lulled into a false sense of security by their standardness within the variety. If they are noticed they produce two common responses: one is a denial of their standardness in the local variety; the other is an assistance that they must be part of the Queen's English.

To take the Australian example given above, the first response would be tantamount to saying that because *joey* and *wallaby* were not known in American or British English they were necessarily non-standard Australian English. Words like this are particularly vulnerable in Englishes which as yet do not have a definitive dictionary. It is so easy to say of these items that they are not real words because they are not in the dictionary – that is, all too often, the dictionary of British and American English.

There is a subset of this group which is singled out for this kind of expulsion and that is words which are borrowed from other languages. So in Singapore *buaya*, *samfu*, *bee hoon*, and *kiasuism* would be noticed, to begin with, and then disqualified because they were un-English. However, compounds formed in English – *hawker centre*, *shophouse*, *red packet*, would be assumed to be part of World English because of their Englishness and because they were standard in the Singaporean variety.

Godown is an interesting case to illustrate the second response as it is a borrowing, but one of such long standing in Singaporean English that I found that Singaporeans commonly assumed that it was part of World English. Similarly in the Philippines, I remarked upon *solon* (a local government official) to a surprised book publisher who had just assumed that *solon* was American English. I think by that she meant that it was part of English everywhere, or to put it another way, it was not a Philippines localism.

Another complicating factor is that words which are included in the standard core do not necessarily have the same meaning or the same weighting in terms of currency and register in all the varieties of English.

Take the Singapore English *bath*, which is a 'washing experience'. Whether that is in a bath or under a shower is immaterial. In Australian English, *a bath* is had in a bathtub. This is a different washing experience from a shower. Even *a bathe* (which is oldfashioned in Australian English) would be primarily thought of as in

a bath or pool of water, such as in a river or lagoon. Showers are quite, quite different.

This situation is one in which things which are thought to be the same turn out to be slightly different. Heteronomy gives you the opposite experience – where sets of words which are thought to be clearly different and to be markers of difference between variety, turn out to be not such definitive signposts after all. A preliminary comparison of terms related to dwellings which attempted to pin down a clear set of distinguishable terms in Australian and Singaporean English met with many difficulties.

Where you had a generally shared concept, for example, that a house has in it a room for cooking and preparing food, there was a generally accepted term – in this case, *kitchen*. But each culture had within it not just one version of a house but several versions which had popularity at different times, so that the clear distinction between the room where you prepare food (the kitchen), and the room where you eat it (the dining room), breaks down in the more modern Australian house which dispenses with walls between rooms and in the small Singaporean flat which crams a number of functions into one room. These evolving styles of architecture confuse the picture.

The one clear case where the Singaporean lexicon parted company with the Australian lexicon was the word for the room in which you relax, entertain visitors, etc., which in Singaporean English was *the hall*. This is surprising to an Australian because in Australian English *the hall* is the narrow corridor which gives access to the larger rooms of a house. But what word in Australian English is the equivalent of the Singaporean *hall*? In Sydney it would be the *lounge*. In other parts of Australia *living room* would have greater currency. And then there are alternatives like the *front room* or the *sitting room* which still have currency in some states. It is hard to know which of these to nominate as the Australian English representative at a national level. To make matters worse as we consider our options in Australian English, Singaporean English is already shifting, driven on by fashion which is so powerful in many aspects of language, to adopt *lounge room* and discard *hall*.

When you get to parts of the house where local culture has a definite influence on living arrangements, then any search for correspondence is futile. How do you find equivalences for the Australian *dunny* or the Singaporean *shophouse* or the Philippines *dirty kitchen*.

OHP 3

Australian English *dunny*

Singapore English *shophouse*

Philippines English *dirty kitchen*

dunny

Macquarie Dictionary, Second Edition, 1991. **dunny**, *n. Colloq.* 1. an outside toilet, found in unsewered areas, usually at some distance from the house it serves and consisting of a small shed furnished with a lavatory seat placed over a sanitary can: *all alone like a country dunny.* 2. a toilet. 3. a sanitary can.

Lily on the Dustbin, Nancy Keesing, 1982, page 48. The word 'toilet' used to be considered a dreadful genteelism by Australians with pretensions to plain usage, they preferred lavatory, which is itself a euphemism. 'Toilet' won and became universal, though it is considered very 'in' in some circles to revert to words like 'dunny' and 'sh'ouse' (from 'shit-house') or...

shophouse

Singapore English Mini-Dictionary I, Manee Lugg, 1984. **shophouse** *n.* a terrace house that has living area upstairs and a shop/coffee shop downstairs.

KL Capers, Bunn Nagara, 1990, page 23. Here he studies an old rafter or two, there he examines the fresh paint on a new block of offices, and every now and again he counts the straws in yet another swallow's nest tucked under the eaves of an old **shophouse** that has survived the blight of urban renewal...

dirty kitchen

Filipino English Mini-Dictionary, Myrna G A Tabor, 1984. **dirty kitchen** *n.* an extension of a kitchen where cooking is usually done. *Okey, okey – here, take these to the dirty kitchen.*

Halupi, Corazon S Alvina & Felice Sta. Maria, 1989, page 235. False fronts. A Filipino home has a kitchen, and then it has a **dirty kitchen**. The former is for displaying the latest in cooking appliances (usually imported) and coffee curtains...The latter is where the real action is; flashing blades, crackling fire, finger in the soup...

TEXT

If only the world of English was that neat place where in Australian English you had *tomato sauce* and in American English you had *ketchup*. The market has brought *ketchup* to Australia, so that now we have both and distinguish between them, ketchup being spicier than tomato sauce. We used to talk about biscuits – we knew that the Americans ate *cookies*, but again we now have both, cookies

being rather like small cakes, bigger and more rounded than your average flat biscuit.

Language register is another area which creates unevenness in World English, where words which ought to be the same in anyone's English aren't the same because they don't have the same feel to them. For example, in Philippines English it is not unusual to refer to people as *folk* which in Australian English has a decidedly quaint ring to it.

OHP 4

Citations for *folk* from Philippines English

folk

Flowers from the Rubble, Conrado de Quiros, 1990, page 23. The fact-finding team is soon told to leave by the military. The barrio **folk**, fearing reprisal from the Orapronobis for having spoken out against them, leave as well, turning Sta. Filomena overnight into one desolate wilderness.

View from the Middle, Asuncion David Maramba, 1991, page 25. In my life all it took was a brief Japanese occupation spent in the province, when rudely separated from surrogates, I took to the country in more senses than one, bore roots and bonded with the land, our traditions, customs, our feasts and our **folk**, the true Pinoy – even if after Liberation those roots lay fallow again; and even if now, I get frustrated unto madness by our traits that arrest peace and prosperity.

TEXT

In Singaporean English *brassiere* has not commonly been shortened to *bra*. In Australian English *bra* is the normal word and *brassiere* would be regarded as absurdly old-fashioned.

The problem is that in language nothing stays still and that the varieties of English are borrowing and adapting from each other as much as from languages other than English.

Macquarie Dictionary has established a corpus of English in South-East Asia which clearly sets out to cover the standard core of the emerging varieties of English in the region. The focus is on those lexical items which are considered standard by the language community which speaks the particular variety.

It is clear that many of these items are inextricably linked with local culture and identity. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that much of the culture of the language community cannot be expressed except in these terms.

It is clear from the following sample of words and citations drawn from the Macquarie corpus of English in Asia – Asiacorp – that the culture of each community is reflected in the English they speak.

OHP 5

FOOD

Singaporean and Malaysian English

laksa

Stand Alone, Simon Tay, 1990. She cooked only Peranakan food although she was not Peranakan herself. She learnt from Ah Neo, who was from Penang, my father's home town, and she picked it up well...the hot sour **laksa** of that island.

Singapore and Malaysian English/Philippines English/Hong Kong English

Malaysian Customs & Etiquette, Datin Noor Aini Syed Amir, 1991. Mooncake Festival. This began as a celebration to mark a successful rebellion against the Mongol rulers. **Mooncakes** were used to convey secret messages and the lanterns (which are part of this festival) were used to pass signals.

Philippines English

lechon

Gems in Philippine Literature: Poor give a Feast, Solomon V Arnoldo, 1989. ...no feast in the Philippines is complete without a **lechon**. In fact this national delicacy is the sine qua non of any gathering that has any epicurean pretension at all.

Hong Kong English

field chicken

Insights Guides: Hong Kong, 1992. In autumn, restaurants serve rice birds, those tiny winged creatures which frequent paddy fields at harvest time. These are quite often eaten in concert with succulent Shanghai hairy crabs. Frogs are also found in the rice paddies - and these "**field chickens**" are often served at - banquets in South China.

OHP 6 SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Singaporean and Malaysian English

community centre

Visiting Malaysia: A Guidebook for Women, Hyacinth Gaudart, 1990. One of the better seafood places in Sandakan is a restaurant, behind the **Community Centre** and the long distance Mini bus terminal.

kongsi

The Towkay of Produce Street, Lim Thean Soo, 1991. She remembered kneeling only once as a bride before Sey Kim at a clan **kongsi** and that was the only time that they ever came together.

Moon above Malaya, Yeap Joo Kim, 1991. She could not find domestic work and had to rely on the benevolence of her **kongsi**, or sorority.

mui tsai

Singapore Studies: Early Social Work Resource Literature, Ann Wee, 1986. By the post war period, girls from as young as four or five years, pledged as **mui tsai** or bond servants by their parents or guardians were almost certainly no longer being brought in from China.

Philippines English

dalaga

Gems in Philippine Literature: Poor give a Feast, Solomon V Arnoldo, 1989. It is generally understood that the more difficult it is to invite a **dalaga** to a feast, the higher she is in the estimation of the community. A feast is considered particularly successful if one or more of such well-known **dalagas** are persuaded to attend.

OHP 7 CULTURAL ITEMS

Singaporean and Malaysian English

bomoh

Tales from a Headhunter, Kris Jitab, 1991. A **bomoh** was consulted and from whom all manner of potions and amulets and talismans were obtained. These would be worn by Maria's aunt. From that day, the **bomoh** made sure that Maria's aunt also did not fail to pray five times a day as a good Muslim should, that she was accompanied every minute and everywhere she went.

red packet

Malaysian Customs and Etiquette, Datin Noor Aini Syed Amir, 1991. A gift of the **red packet** is also popular when celebrating a birth or a marriage. This is a most practical gift when you are undecided or do not know what present to buy.

Philippines English**stampita**

View from the Middle, Asuncion David Maramba, 1991. And in these **stampitas** and statues for that matter, saints were always demure, with eyes cast down or looking up in ecstasy.

OHP 8**NATIONAL IDENTITY****Singaporean and Malaysian English****asian values**

Singapore Studies : Sociological Studies, Peter SJ Chen, 1986. Singapore can, on the one hand, import technology and personnel from the West, and, on the other hand, retain the so-called "**Asian values**" or "traditional values".

Malaysian English**merdeka**

The Malay Dilemma, Mahathir bin Mohamad, 1970. An aggressive spirit pervaded Malay society at all levels and this same spirit carried the Malays through to **merdeka**.

Philippines English**utang na loob**

View from the Middle, Asuncion David Maramba, 1991. Is the Filipino self-reliant or indolent? Innovative or imitative? What have operated in our lives - negative values like a never-ending **utang na loob** (debt of gratitude) etc., or positive values like kasipagan, katapatan, (industry, honesty) etc., or are they two sides of the same coin, now up, now down, like cara y cruz?

Hong Kong English**gweilo**

Insights Guides: Hong Kong, 1992. A Chinese in Hong Kong may *kowtow* to a British lord in public (previously literally, now metaphorically), but behind a self-effacing inscrutable Oriental mask he hides a humorous contempt for all "**gweilo**" ("foreign devils") regardless of race, colour, and nationality.

TEXT

This corpus is focussing on those items which are standard to a particular variety but which are not current in all varieties of English, in particular the prestige varieties of American and British English. These are words which are not documented in existing dictionaries – although many of them will appear in the next edition of *Macquarie* – but which should be accepted as part of World English if we are not to write these English-speaking societies and cultures out of existence. It is our hope that just as Australian English is now documented and accepted as a national variety so too will such varieties as Philippines English and Singaporean and Malaysian English be accepted. It is my experience in Australian English that the major battle is to have the language community which speaks the particular variety acknowledge that that is what they are doing and acknowledge their variety as a legitimate one. This can only happen when the community stops hankering after some fictionalised glamorised form of English which they pretend is the norm. It is after all so pointless. Language does what it does and is serenely unstopplable in the doing of it.

In Australia, Professor Alex Mitchell has been doing what might be called campaigning on behalf of Australian English for most of his life. It was his younger colleague, Arthur Delbridge, who had the honour of chairing the editorial committee of the *Macquarie Dictionary* which finally laid to rest the language mythology that Mitchell attacked – that Australians all spoke British English. The debate at that stage raged over the Australian accent but I am sure that Professor Mitchell would be as happy to defend the Australian lexis as he is to defend the Australian accent.

OHP 9

Excerpts from *The ABC Weekly*

The ABC Weekly, 5th September, 1942, page 3

Australian Speech Is Here to Stay [Headline]

By DR. A. G. MITCHELL

Lecturer in the English Language at the University of Sydney and an authority on Speech.

...The Australian pronunciation of English takes its place among the national forms of English, as much entitled to respectful consideration as any other. It has its own history and is not a corrupt derivative of anything. Development does not of necessity imply degeneration...

The ABC Weekly, 12th September, 1942, page 3

"There Is Nothing Wrong With Australian Speech" [Headline]

by Dr. A. G. MITCHELL

Lecturer in the English Language at the University of Sydney and an Authority on Speech.

...We should use an Australian speech, without apology and without any sense of a need for self-justification. There is *nothing* wrong with the Australian voice or speech. It is as acceptable, as pleasant as *good English* as any speech to be heard anywhere in the English-speaking commonwealth.

TEXT

In Singapore recently I attempted to organise a conference on Singaporean English only to find that the powers that be are opposed to the idea, I think in the belief that any encouragement of the notion of Singaporean English would lead Singaporeans into the wilderness of non-standard English.

The fear of being despised by speakers of prestige dialects of English is, I think, the basic motivation for this kind of denial of reality, but there is a related horror story with some popularity which could be called the *Story of the English Tower of Babel*. In this story the speakers of varieties of English stray so far from the standard British model that they can no longer understand each other. There are two areas of concern – pronunciation and, to a lesser extent, lexis. Pronunciation is an immediate concern because the speakers of different varieties are already so different. My response to this anxiety is to point out consolingly that even speakers of Received Pronunciation can with some difficulty make themselves understood and that what is true for them is true for all varieties of English spoken today. Lexis is of lesser concern – the speculation here is more towards some theoretical future – since, as I have pointed out, many language communities do not recognise the current localisms of their lexis anyway. The idea seems to be that we need to blowtorch all localisms in order to preserve core English as a common language. This assumes that core standard English is common to all varieties which as I have pointed out is not exactly true. There is a certain amount of crosscultural work to be done by English speakers even within that overlap of standard varieties.

I come back to Libby Gleeson's remarks – to a writer's plea to be able to express herself and to choose the words that are right for her time and place. Of the words that a writer will choose, some are clear in context, others are unclear but they are in the dictionary, while others that are unclear are not in the dictionary. This is as true of American English writing which is well-documented as it is of Singaporean English which is not.

I have taken some examples from *The Shipping News* because it is such a popular novel worldwide. The first set of words are documented in a general dictionary of American English. For the second set you would have to have more resources at your disposal and be able to consult the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Second Edition of twenty volumes, and the *English Dialect Dictionary*.

OHP 10

The Shipping News, E Annie Proulx, 1993

A great damp loaf of a body. At six he weighed eighty pounds. At sixteen he was buried under a casement of flesh. Head shaped like a **crenshaw**, no neck, reddish hair rucked back.

At the university he took courses he couldn't understand, humped back and forth without speaking to anyone, went home for weekends of excoriation. At last he dropped out of **school** and looked for a job, kept his hand over his chin.

She spoke of the weather with a man in a **watch cap**. They talked awhile. Someone else **reel footing** along, said, Rough today, eh?

This place, she thought, this rock, six thousand miles of coast blind-wrapped in fog. **Sunkers** under wrinkled water, boats threading **tickles** between ice-scabbed cliffs. Tundra and barrens, a land of stunted spruce men cut and drew away.

OHP 11 (2 pages)

Definitions for citations from *The Shipping News*.

PAGE 1

Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Second Edition, 1987.

Crenshaw melon a variety of melon resembling the casaba, having pinkish flesh.

school **1.** an institution where instruction is given, esp. to persons under college age: *The children are at school.* **2.** an institution for instruction in a particular skill or field. **3.** a college or university.

watch cap 1. *U.S. Navy.* a dark-blue, knitted woolen cap with a turned-up cuff worn by enlisted personnel on duty in cold weather. 2. any wool or woollike cap resembling this and sold commercially in various colors. [1885-90]

PAGE 2

English Dialect Dictionary, Joseph Wright (ed.), 1898.

REEL-FOOTED, *adj.* Sc. Irel. Also in form **reel-fitted** Sc. N.I.¹. Having the feet turned inwards so that the legs are crossed in walking; club-footed.

Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition, 1989.

reel foot Sc. [? f. REEL sb.] A club-foot. So **reel-footed** *a.*

Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition, 1989.

sunker. *Newfoundland.* [f. SUNK *ppl. a.* + -ER¹.] A submerged rock. Also *fig.*

Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition, 1989.

tickle, sb.¹. [Generally held to be derived from TICKLE *sb.*² (see quot. 1908); but some would identify it with Eng. dial. *stickle* 'a rapid shallow place in a river. In Nova Scotia also *tittle*.] A name given on the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador to a narrow difficult strait or passage.

TEXT

The fault lies not in the regional variety but in the dictionaries whose function in life is to record varieties of English – so that we can understand the subtleties of each other's language, the inevitable subtleties that arise from a particular community living in a particular place and having a shared culture and history as a common reference. For functional communication we can retreat to common ground but for an expression of what is most dynamic, most central and most local in a particular culture we must use the full resources of each variety. The author of *The Shipping News* probably had little to fear from an editor or publisher in that there is a general tendency to accept American English and all its regionalisms. But the author of a Singaporean novel has a much tougher battle. I wonder what arguments Robert Yeo had with his editor about the following:

OHP 12

Citations from *Adventures of Holden Heng*, Robert Yeo, 1986.

...What's come over you, *hiah*?'

Holden didn't know which stung most. His younger brother addressing him as *hiah*, or his line of questioning which was definitely not respectful.

'You popped the question to a girl on the highest point in Singapore —'

'Not the highest point *lah*, *chea*; the highest point is Bukit Timah, and you don't propose there.'

They're starting early this Sunday, the blasted developers, he thought. They had pulled down the row of **shophouses** off Orchard Road and started piling for the Plaza Singapura shopping complex.

'No *lah*, she had said, almost casually to his proposal. He was flabbergasted.

'What, what do you mean by "No *lah*"?' he had demanded.

'Not tonight, please Holden,' she had said.

'Of course not tonight. I'm not asking you to marry me tonight —'

'Well, like I said, don't go to an expensive place like Troika. A **coffee house** will do.'

Around noon, they both left to join their mother for a Sunday **nonya** lunch at one of the hotels and left the house to Holden.

'I didn't do anything,' protested Holden.

'Don't bluff, *lah*. You can tell me.'

'Swear, I'm not bluffing. She did all the work. I just —'

'Just what?'

'I just *tahan*, what.'

'Not bad *tahan*, Tarzan...'

OHP 13 (2 pages)**Definitions for citations from *Adventures of Holden Heng*****PAGE 1****shophouse**

Singapore English Mini-Dictionary I, Manee Lugg, 1984.

shophouse n. a terrace house that has living area upstairs and a shop/coffee shop downstairs.

coffee house

Singapore English Mini-Dictionary II, Manee Lugg, 1984.

coffee house n.p. an air-conditioned restaurant catering for both local and western food. Tea, coffee and liquor are also served.

nonya

Singapore English Mini-Dictionary II, Manee Lugg, 1984.

nonya adj., n. 1. a dish that is hot and resembles Malay food; adapted to Chinese taste. 2. descendants of early Chinese immigrants to Malaysia and Singapore who have absorbed many features of Malay and Western culture while retaining their own.

PAGE 2**lah/la****70 citations on ASIACORP**

Dictionary Entries for Discourse Particles, in *Words in a Cultural Context* (Lexicography Workshop, 9-11 September 1991), Anne Pakir (ed.), page 146. Functions of *la* that have been identified by Wilma Marie (1987) include the following: 1. The function of conveying the obviousness of something. 2. the function of conveying a sense of suggestion (especially to soften the tone of something which may sound like a direct command or an order). 3. the function of explanation, reducing the tone of harshness, or hardness in giving explanations 4. the function of dismissing some unimportant part of a continuous utterance (playing the role of etc. 'or whatever *la*, 'fiften [sic] sort of thing *la*', and 'all the jazz *la*') 5. the function of deflecting/denying compliments as in 'I was lucky *la*', 'not really *la*'. 6. the function of conveying a lack of enthusiasm as in 'Chinese New Year ah? Okay, *la*.'

tahan
ASIACORP

No dictionary entries

2 citations on

Double on the Rocks, Alex Soh, 1991, page 112. 'I am going at 80 kilometres per hour! I cannot go any faster!' I sniped.

'Ai yo, cannot **tahan** lah!' Both her hands were pressed against her stomach while she grimaced.

Double on the Rocks, Alex Soh, 1991, page 112. 'We're almost there. **Tahan** a bit longer lah.'

hiah No dictionary entry No citations

chea No dictionary entry No citations

TEXT

And yet the American regionalisms are just as obscure to the average reader as the Singaporeanisms. The only difference between the two is that dictionaries attest to the existence of the Americanisms whereas they are totally silent on the Singaporeanisms.

The only way to wipe out different varieties of English is to wipe out different cultures. The alternative is to accept the riches that each language variety has to offer in expressiveness. The Singaporean way of life will, for example, express itself in Singaporean English as surely as the Australian way of life emerges in Australian English. Personally I'm all for it.