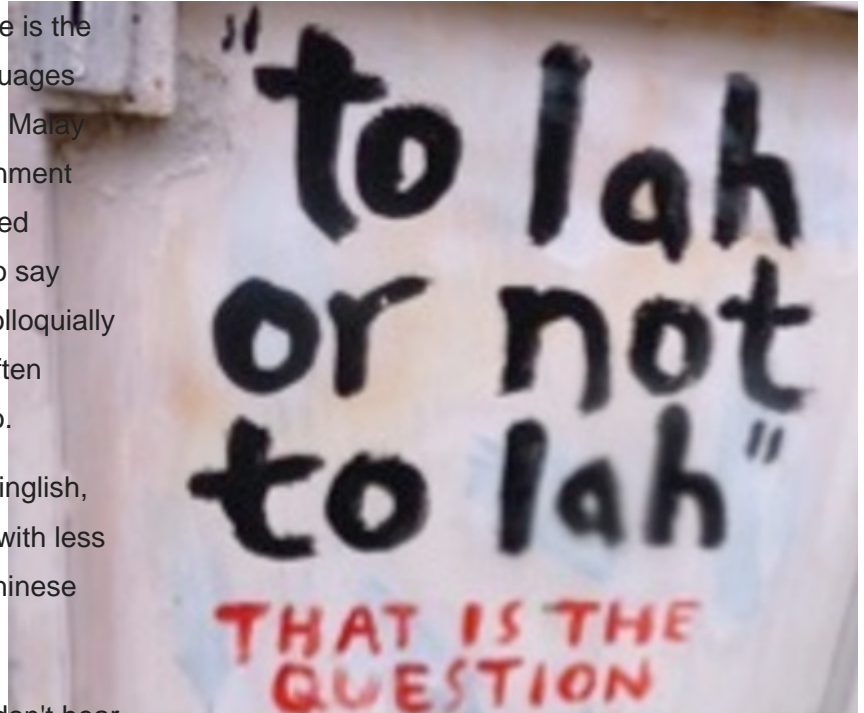


Singlish 101

By [Roger Keays](#), 25 May 2011

One of the great things about Singapore is the expansive range of cultures, food, languages and dialects. They have large Chinese, Malay and Indian populations and their government housing plan ensures that they are mixed relatively evenly. As a result, it's hard to say exactly what language people speak colloquially in Singapore because they switch so often depending on who they are speaking to.

Here are some of my recollections of Singlish, which is pretty similar to Manglish, but with less influence from Malay and more from Chinese (especially WRT pronunciation).



- **Lah** - An emphatic particle. If you don't hear a Singaporean say lah, you've probably been dropped off in the wrong country lah.
- **Syllable-final glottal stops** - My next favourite feature. Apparently a corollary from Chinese which doesn't have syllable-final consonants. Because of this, Singaporeans replace these consonants with glottal stops. My personal favourite is the word 'stuck' which is pronounced /st/ with such an emphasis on the stop it gives you a fright :) A multi-syllable example would be 'Woodlands', pronounced something like /w.ln/.
- **Word-final consonant reduction** - Consonant clusters at the end of words aren't always replaced with glottal stops but seem to be reduced to the sound of the first consonant. I embarrassed myself pretty well discovering this by asking for directions to the nearest /jnt/ (Giant) supermarket when in Singlish it is pronounced more like /jan/. In the end I had to write it down.
- **Short vowels** - AFAICT all the vowels in Singlish are short.
- **No // diphthong** - Another embarrassing moment. I was asking for my friend Kate using the thick slurring Aussie pronunciation /kt/ but in Singlish her name is /k/. We got there eventually.
- **British 'o'** - This was really strange and I'm not sure how widespread it is, but amidst all the short vowels, reduced consonants and glottal stops a clear British 'o' (//) diphthong sometimes emerges. It's freaking hilarious to hear because of the stark contrast with the rest of Singlish. Examples: go /g/; road /rd/.

- **No dental fricatives** - // becomes /t/ and // becomes /d/. Examples: 'three' is pronounced /tr/ and 'this' is pronounced /ds/.
- **Voiced //** - I think this is only mid-word. A simple example is 'pressure' which is pronounced something like /pra/ in Singlish, but /pr/ in Australian.
- **Mass nouns can be pluralised** - The most obvious example of this was at a hawker centre. One shop was selling 'fruit' while the shop immediately opposite it was selling 'fruits'. In my infinite wisdom I didn't take a photo.
- **Semantics** - Lots of words are used differently in Australian and Singlish: take vs send; give vs pass; shopping centre vs shopping mall; mobile vs handphone; straight vodka vs vodka neat etc etc. An Australian might say "take her to the shopping centre and give her my mobile", but a Singaporean would say "send her to the shopping mall and pass her my handphone". Sounds funny lah.
- **eh?! interjection**. When Aussies are confused they pause... think.. and say either *heeeeeiiy?* or *whaaaaat?* Singaporeans, on the other hand, will talk and talk and talk and then suddenly terminate with an abrupt *eh?* accompanied by step or half-step backwards. It's cute :)

That's all for today... your trusty field linguist has exhausted himself ;)

About Roger Keays



Roger Keays is an artist, an engineer, and a student of life. He has no fixed address and has left footprints on 40-something different countries around the world. Roger is addicted to surfing. His other interests are music, psychology, languages, the proper use of semicolons, and finding good food.

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