

***THE ENGLISH
OF
SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA***

ESM

R. K. Tongue

A NOTE TO THE READER

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A NOTE TO THE READER

<i>Chapter One</i>	INTRODUCTION	1
<i>Chapter Two</i>	PRONUNCIATION (ACCENT)	13
<i>Chapter Three</i>	GRAMMAR (STRUCTURE)	33
<i>Chapter Four</i>	VOCABULARY (LEXIS)	61
<i>Chapter Five</i>	COMMON PHRASES, EXPRESSIONS, IDIOMS AND SLANG	79
<i>Chapter Six</i>	STYLE	95
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FEATURES	103
<i>Chapter Eight</i>	ENGLISH IN PUBLIC NOTICES	107
<i>Chapter Nine</i>	SOME FREQUENT SUB-STANDARD FORMS	111
<i>Chapter Ten</i>	CONCLUSION	122
	INDEX OF WORDS USED IN EXAMPLES	127

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

ALL LANGUAGES CHANGE

All languages are continuously changing. Some elements in a language change very rapidly, slang for example. Other parts of the language such as the pronunciation of vowels and consonants change much more slowly. Nevertheless, all elements in language are susceptible of change: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, usage, idiom and style.

Many attempts have been made to halt language change or at least to slow it down; none of them has succeeded. The Academie Francaise, which has been trying since its incorporation in 1635 at least to control the rate of change of French, has failed in its efforts to outlaw such Anglicisms and Americanisms as 'le weekend' and 'le drugstore'.

Many factors will influence the speed of linguistic change. If a society is passing through a period of rapid social and political change, this will be reflected in the language of the society. British English changed very quickly at the time of Shakespeare for example — indeed the poet himself was responsible for significant linguistic innovations. During the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an enormous number of new words were coined in response to the need for words to describe the new industrial processes, techniques and machinery. At the present time, the relative stability of British society is reflected in an unhurried rate of change in British English, except perhaps among young people, especially those living in the cities. American

English is changing much more rapidly, as might be expected from the pace of change in such a socially mobile and dynamic society. It has been calculated, for instance, that for every word which crosses the Atlantic from east to west, at least ten words make the journey in the opposite direction. It is not only a question of words however; there is evidence that the grammar of American English is changing too, and faster than in the language's original home.

LANGUAGE CHANGE IS NOT RANDOM

Language contains a powerfully systematic element; it would not be language if it did not. Though not a hundred percent systematic, as mathematics and symbolic logic (and artificially constructed languages) are, natural languages possess manifold systematic features, often called the rules or the grammar of the language. The deviations from systematicness, the exceptions, we all remember as having presented the greatest obstacles to our learning of foreign languages at school. It is precisely the task of linguistic scholars, 'linguists' in the current terminology, to describe language in the most systematically comprehensive manner possible. When we come to examine linguistic change, we find that systematic patterns emerge here too — change is rarely random. The systematic nature of language change was so firmly established in the eyes of the nineteenth century linguists, then called philologists, that they referred to their discoveries of consistency of patterning as 'laws': Grimm's Law, Verner's Law, and so on.

LANGUAGE AS THE SUM TOTAL OF ALL ITS VARIETIES

Linguists continue to debate at great length the question "What is a language?". One way of describing a language is to say that it is the sum total of all its varieties (or even of what all its individual speakers say or write). Thus, the 'English Language' includes North American English, British English, South African English, Australian English and so on; this would be generally agreed. All the above varieties of English are those of

native speakers* of the language for whom it is the mother-tongue. But there are also varieties of English spoken and written by people for whom it is not the mother-tongue, non-native varieties we may term them, and it is to this group that the English of Singapore and Malaysia belongs. Though English is not the mother-tongue in Singapore and Malaysia, except for comparatively small numbers of people usually of mixed ethnic or linguistic background or origins, neither is it a foreign language, as French is in Britain for example. English has been widely used in these two countries for well over a hundred years and is still used today in a great variety of ways. In Singapore, it is the main medium of instruction for more than half of the school-going population; in Malaysia, though English is being gradually phased out as a language of instruction, it is still extensively used as a language of wider communication among educated adults. In Singapore today, English occupies an important role as a language of government, administration and commerce, as it did in Malaysia until recently. Furthermore, the English of Singapore and Malaysia is immediately comprehensible to native speakers of English. The English of Singapore and Malaysia then, must also be considered as forming part of the 'English language' as a significant non-native variety.

NON-NATIVE VARIETIES ARE PRONE TO RAPID CHANGE

The rate of change of the English language where it is the native language, namely in England, was much faster in the past than it is today. Certain factors operate in favour of the slowing-down of the process of change in language. Among these is the existence of a standard form of the language used by speakers of high social prestige; in England the establishment of a standard form is a comparatively recent event. The advent of recorded speech in its various forms is another stabilising

*The term 'native speaker of English' is not always clearly understood. It describes persons whose mother-tongue or native language is English, such as British people, Americans, Australians and so on.