Carnegie Mellon University

98072 – Introduction to Singlish

Meeting Day, Time, Location: Monday, 7:30 - 8:20pm, GHC 4101

Semester: Spring **Year:** 2025 **Units:** 3 **Type:** Free Elective

Instructors' information

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Course Description

If you've spent enough time on CMU's campus, chances are you've encountered speakers using a variant of English you couldn't quite place. Perhaps you've heard a teaching assistant using "*can*" as a stand-alone reply, or noticed someone speaking with quasi-British pronunciations minus the slang. Like any curious observer, you might wonder where these speakers are from. If you guessed Singapore (or one of its neighboring countries), you'd likely be right.

So how can one use colloquial Singapore English ("Singlish") particles without making a Singaporean cringe? What's the history behind this linguistic phenomenon — and more fundamentally, is it a dialect, idiolect, pidgin, or creole? Or something else entirely? And do Singaporeans really sound like they're portrayed in "Crazy Rich Asians"? (Short answer: *no!)*

If these questions intrigue you, this course is the Singlish primer you're looking for. Students will be introduced to Singlish, the colloquial form of English spoken in Singapore (distinct from Standard Singapore English). The course covers basic concepts in linguistic analysis to understand how Singlish relates to English and the various languages from which it borrows. Students will learn about Singlish's history and the cultural context that shaped it. We'll focus on developing practical Singlish proficiency for meaningful conversations. By the end, students will have a deep understanding of Singlish's vocabulary, grammar, and cultural significance in Singaporean society.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:
- Understand the fundamental rules of Singlish grammar, including intonation, syntax, and common sentence structures;
- Use Singlish particles such as 'lah,' 'leh,' 'lor,' 'meh,' and 'sia' appropriately in different social contexts;
- Communicate effectively in everyday situations using Singlish, considering tone, cultural nuances, and context;
- Recognize the historical and cultural significance of Singlish by understanding its background and role in shaping the Singaporean identity;
- Compare and contrast Singlish with other forms of English (standard and non-formal/vernacular variants of English), identifying key grammatical and phonetic differences;
- Engage in conversations using Singlish with confidence, demonstrating both informal and formal variations depending on context;
- Appreciate the past and continuing evolution of Singlish in the context of Singapore's multicultural society through understanding its influences from Malay, Chinese dialects, and Tamil, and its impacts on said society; and
- Gain a glimpse into and appreciation for Singaporean culture through unique course constructs that are designed to immerse the student in the Singaporean way of life (e.g., midterms inspired by some aspect of Singaporean national examinations).

Attendance Policies

- Students are expected to attend every class. Students that have **more than 2 unexcused absences** will automatically **fail** the course. This is in line with university guidelines for StuCos.
- Legitimate reasons that constitute grounds for an excusable absence include illness, religious observance, job interviews, university-approved travel, or any other personal extenuating circumstance.
- If you anticipate the need to miss class owing to such reasons, it is your responsibility to inform the course staff as early as reasonably possible in order to work out any appropriate arrangements.
- Class attendance will be taken at the end of each class to ensure students are present during the full duration. There will typically be an activity at the end of each class so students should be expected to stay the full duration unless granted permission to do otherwise.

Assessments

The final course grade will be calculated using the following categories: [some example fields have been filled out for you. All StuCos are required to have some sort of midterm assessment and final assessment. This can take the form of a standard examination, an online quiz, a hands-on project, a presentation, or some reasonable form relevant to the course]

Assessment	Percentage of Final Grade
Attendance and Participation	50%
Homework	20%
Midterm	10%
Final	20%

Homework

Students will be given weekly assignments that cover the basic concepts that are being taught that week. This will include assignments posted on the course website and weekly discussions on the discussion forum.

For assignments that require a document or response submission, they are to be handed in via Canvas, unless otherwise specified.

Midterm Assessment

The midterm will entail an oral assessment (no we aren't looking into your mouth). Students will be given a pictorial setting and be asked to describe the picture in Singlish. This is based on the speaking proficiency assessments (termed "Oral Assessments") employed by the Singaporean Examinations and Assessments Board for language subjects.

Missing the midterm assessment **without an excused absence** will automatically result in a **no pass** grade being applied, even though this component only counts toward 10% of the final grade.

Final Project

Students will form groups of 2-3 people and produce a final deliverable both on a topic and in a format of their choice that involves the use of Singlish. This might take the form of a class presentation, video project, skit, movie script, infographic, or any other approved form. Students will be assessed on their creativity and the correct use of Singlish vocabulary.

Any **nonsubmission** will automatically result in a **no pass** grade. Lackadaisical efforts will also be deemed as a nonsubmission and entail a similar grading outcome.

Grading

Students will be assigned the following final grades, based on calculations coming from the course assessment section.

Grade	Percentage Interval
P	60-100%
R (F)	0-59%

Key notes:
- Non-integer final scores on the cusp of a grade change will be rounded up to the next highest integer.
  - For example, a final score of 59.01% will be rounded up to 60% and be evaluated as a passing grade (P).
- Meeting any one of the following criteria is grounds for a student automatically receiving a **no pass (R) grade**.
  - Any student with **more than two** unexcused absences;
  - Missing the midterm assessment **without an excused absence;**

- ○ **Failure to submit** a final project deliverable, or where the instructors have perceived a lack of effort spent (either as an individual or by the team for the whole project); or
- ○ Academic dishonesty, as outlined by the university's [academic integrity policy](#).

Grading Policies

- **Attendance**: Attendance counts toward a significant part of one's grade in this course. There will be no make-ups for attendance barring any of the excuses delineated in the Attendance section.
- **Late-work**: Late work will be accepted on a case-by-case basis. Extensions may be granted due to deadline conflicts or other reasons that understandably cause unforeseen delay in one's ability to complete work.

Course Schedule

Date	Theme/Topic	Assignments Due
January 13, 2025	**Course Introduction and Overview of Singapore's Linguistic Landscape** We will go through the syllabus and course policies and discuss the history, attributes, and cultural significance of Singlish.	N/A
January 20, 2025	**No class; MLK Jr Day**	N/A
January 27, 2025	**Pronunciation and Intonation in Singlish.** We will learn how to pronounce words in Singlish through reduction (or omission) or consonants and vowels. We also go through the basic intonation of how to speak in Singlish.	Homework 1 released
February 3, 2025	**Grammar in Singlish I: Elementary Rules and Sentence Structure** We will learn elementary rules of singlish grammar, basic sentence structure, and cover edge cases where there can be flexibility applied to these singlish rules.	Homework 1 due; Homework 2 released
February 10, 2025	**Grammar in Singlish II: Singlish Particles** We will explore the particles in Singlish, such as the famous **lah, leh, lor, meh, sia.** We will understand what these particles mean and how to use them accurately in a sentence.	Homework 2 due; Homework 3 released
February 17, 2025	**Vocabulary in SInglish I: Mapping between Singlish and American English** We will discuss the contrast between words and phrases spoken in Singlish with standard American English, both in terms of content, sentence structure, and vocabulary.	Homework 3 due; Midterm Oral Presentation Topics released

February 24, 2025	**Midterm Oral Examination**	N/A
March 3, 2025	**No class, Spring Break**	N/A
March 10, 2025	**Vocabulary in Singlish II: Essential Singaporean Phrases** What are some essential phrases to get through life in Singapore? When should I use these phrases?	Homework 4 released
March 17, 2025	**English Malapropisms and (Mis)use in Singlish** In this class, we discuss some common misuse in Singlish, which makes it different from the standard English language.	Homework 4 due; Homework 5 released
March 24, 2025	**Grammar in Singlish III: Exclamatory Particles and Sentence Negation** We will identify common exclamatory particles in Singlish, understand and use typical singlish negation forms, and spend some time practicing in the form of natural short dialogues.	Homework 5 due; Homework 6 released
March 31, 2025	**Singlish in Media and Pop Culture** How has Singlish been portrayed in Media and Pop Culture? Although not an official language, is there still room for it in movies and television shows?	Homework 6 due
April 7, 2025	**Ordering Food and Drinks in Singapore** There is a unique twist to ordering food and drinks in Singapore. Ironically, ordering in Standard English may cause confusion. In this class, we explore what is the right way to order food in Singapore.	Final Project brief released
April 14, 2025	**The Past, Present, and Beyond for Singlish** What were the origins of Singlish? How is it different today? Would it be different in the future?	N/A (Students continue working on Final Projects)
April 21, 2025	**Final Project Showcase**	N/A

Remote Teaching

- The purpose of this class is to provide an in-person, interactive experience where we can learn Singlish through discussions with our instructors and peers in the class. Remote Instruction will only be offered in extreme cases.

Course Note

Academic Integrity & Collaboration: *From CMU's Policy on Academic Integrity:* In any manner of presentation, it is the responsibility of each student to produce her/his own original academic work. Collaboration or assistance on academic work to be graded is not permitted unless explicitly authorized by the course instructor(s). Students may utilize the assistance provided by Academic Development, the Global Communication Center, and the Academic Resource Center (CMU-Q) unless specifically prohibited by the course instructor(s). Any other sources of collaboration or assistance must be specifically authorized by the course instructor(s).

In all academic work to be graded, the citation of all sources is required. When collaboration or assistance is permitted by the course instructor(s) or when a student utilizes the services provided by Academic Development, the Global Communication Center, and the Academic Resource Center (CMU-Q), the acknowledgement of any collaboration or assistance is likewise required. This citation and acknowledgement must be incorporated into the work submitted and not separately or at a later point in time. Failure to do so is dishonest and is subject to disciplinary action.

Instructors have a duty to communicate their expectations including those specific to collaboration, assistance, citation and acknowledgement within each course. Students likewise have a duty to ensure that they understand and abide by the standards that apply in any course or academic activity. In the absence of such understanding, it is the student's responsibility to seek additional information and clarification.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: If you have a disability and have an accommodations letter from the Disability Resources office, I encourage you to discuss your accommodations and needs with me as early in the semester as possible. I will work with you to ensure that accommodations are provided as appropriate. If you suspect that you may have a disability and would benefit from accommodations but are not yet registered with the Office of Disability Resources, I encourage you to contact them at access@andrew.cmu.edu.

Statement on student wellness: This semester is unlike any other. We are all under a lot of stress and uncertainty at this time. Attending Zoom classes all day can take its toll on our mental health. Make sure to move regularly, eat well, and reach out to your support system or Judy Hallinen [hallinen@cmu.edu] if you need to. We can all benefit from support in times of stress, and this semester is no exception. If you or anyone you know experiences any academic stress, difficult life events, or feelings like anxiety or depression, we strongly encourage you to seek support. Counseling and Psychological Services (CaPS) is here to help: call 412-268-2922 and visit their website athttp://www.cmu.edu/counseling/. Consider reaching out to a friend, faculty or family member you trust for help getting connected to the support that can help.

Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: We must treat every individual with respect. We are diverse in many ways, and this diversity is fundamental to building and maintaining an equitable and inclusive campus community. Diversity can refer to multiple ways that we identify ourselves, including but not limited to race, color, national origin, language, sex, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, creed, ancestry, belief, veteran status, or genetic information. Each of these diverse identities, along with many others not mentioned here, shape the perspectives our students, faculty, and staff bring to our campus. We, at CMU, will work to promote diversity, equity and inclusion not only because diversity fuels excellence and innovation, but because we want to pursue justice. We acknowledge our imperfections while we also fully commit to the work, inside and outside of our classrooms, of building and sustaining a campus community that increasingly embraces these core values.

Each of us is responsible for creating a safer, more inclusive environment.

Unfortunately, incidents of bias or discrimination do occur, whether intentional or unintentional. They contribute to creating an unwelcoming environment for individuals and groups at the university. Therefore, the university

encourages anyone who experiences or observes unfair or hostile treatment on the basis of identity to speak out for justice and support, within the moment of the incident or after the incident has passed. Anyone can share these experiences using the following resources:

● Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion: csdi@andrew.cmu.edu, (412) 268-2150
● Report-It online anonymous reporting platform: reportit.net username: tartans password: plaid

All reports will be documented and deliberated to determine if there should be any following actions. Regardless of incident type, the university will use all shared experiences to transform our campus climate to be more equitable and just.