Singapure English in Bilingual Business Lexicography: A Case Study of Kiasu

Liudmila A. Devel
Saint-Petersburg State University of Culture, DOI: https://doi.org/10.23670/IRJ.2017.60.069, ORCID: 0000-0001-9992-1851, Researcher’s ID H-2899-2017

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ABSTRACT
Bilingual business lexicography is the lexicography of languages for special purposes, which, on the one hand, has moved from explaining exclusively specialized terminology to more general language and, on the other hand, has turned to issuing narrow-focused business lexicography, suggesting localization with particular attention to the lexis of Business World Englishes. This determines special grouping of the lexis in dictionaries, indication of territorial varieties along with the groups of non-equivalent vocabulary, such as some types of borrowings. The article proves that Singapore English can be described as existing in two main forms – Standard, a regional variety of English, and Singlish, a colloquial form of Singapore English – in terms of sociolinguistics, multilingualism, and language contact.

Based on analyzing literary and lexicographic resources, sociolinguistic, statistical, and experimental data, the conclusion covers the gap of territorial varieties of languages and English, in particular.

The topic of languages in Singapore is also significant in the context of international business communication, development of the world economy and business contacts, particularly with Russia.

Identifying Singapore English as a regional variety suggests a recommendation to generate business-related texts in Singapore English as better understandable for Singaporeans. This also means to speak appropriate English depending on the context of communication in Singapore.

A special attention is paid to the criteria for including South-East Asian borrowings into the vocabulary by the example of the word kiasu. The article discusses the dictionary entry structuring along with the presentation of the most common, stereotypical features of Singaporean national character.

1. Introduction

Bilingual business (general) lexicography is a type of lexicography of languages for special purposes (LSP), which explains specialized terminology. Consider the example of the English4real Business English-Russian Dictionary [http://english4real.com/vocabulary-business.html]; refer to Example 1.

Example 1. List of Topics in the English4Real Business English-Russian Dictionary
Контракт (Contract)
Совещания (Meetings)
Закон (Law)
Человеческие ресурсы (Human Resources)
Банковское дело (Banking)
Производство (Production)
Реклама (Advertising)
Работа и трудоустройство (Job and employment)
Переговоры (Negotiations)
Структура организации (Structure of an organization)
Наименования руководящих позиций (Chief Officer abbreviations)
Страхование (Insurance)
Деньги (Money)
Продажи (Sales)
Логистика (Logistics)
Инвестиции (Investments)
Экономика (Economics)
СМИ (Mass media)
Базовые глаголы (Basic verbs)
Базовые существительные (Basic nouns)
BEC Vantage (ed. 4) vocabulary list

Section “Contract” (Контракт)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Русский</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>agreement, contract</td>
<td>договор, контракт</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appendix</td>
<td>приложение</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arbitration</td>
<td>арбитраж</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>article</td>
<td>пункт, параграф</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clause</td>
<td>пункт, условие</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conditions, terms</td>
<td>условия</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>force majeure</td>
<td>форс мажор</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section “Contract” (see the fragment above) has turned to more general language, including more than basic verbs and nouns (Example s1 and 2). Further, consider the description of the Cambridge Business Dictionary (Example 2) which is standard and also used in Cambridge bilingual dictionaries for other language pairs.

Example 2. Cambridge English-Russian Business Dictionary Main Features
[https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/business-english/]

- Short, simple definitions in Business English.
- Thousands of natural example sentences that show how the word is used in context: The entry for the verb protest shows that it is used with the preposition against.
- Specifically aimed at elementary to intermediate learners of English, CEF levels A2-B2.
- Guidewords take you to the exact meaning you are looking for.
- Based on the 1.5 billion word Cambridge English Corpus.

MJLTM, 8 (10), 87-101.
On the other hand, there appears to be a tendency toward dictionary specialization in certain areas of activities and narrow focus of business LSP lexicography. With globalization rapidly ongoing since late 20th century, in early 21st century business has turned attention to localization issues [Devel 2017] and the lexis of Business World Englishes, contributing to international trade and business contacts. An actively growing part of business relations is oriented to the East Asian countries, and in this trend Russian business community reveals interest to Singapore. This turn determines a special grouping of lexis in the dictionaries via their meta-language, such as indications of regional variety, social or professional stratification, pragmatics in terms of politeness, taboos, greetings, salutations and groups of non-equivalent vocabulary, such as borrowings, poetic and winged words, faux amis, and other similar ones in terms of semantically specific word groups.

The article seeks to prove that Singapore English can be described as existing in two main forms – Standard, a regional variety of English, and Singlish, a colloquial form of Singapore English. In view of sociolinguistics, multilingualism, and language contact, the hypothesis is non-trivial, covering the gap of regional varieties of languages and, in particular, the English language because it is made in the given case on analyzing literary sources, sociolinguistic, statistical, and experimental data and surveys [Asian Englishes; Bell 1976; Belyaeva & Potapova; Gerd 2013; DARE dictionary; Devel 2004, 2007; Diakov 2015a, 2015b; Dictionary of Amer. Slang 2010; Australian Oxford; International Assoc for World Englishes; Kachru 1986, Kachru 2015; Kirkpatrick 2012; Labov 2009; McArthur; Myznikov; Oshepkova 2010; Proshina 2001; Proshina & Ustinova 2012; Russian English 2016; Salazar 2013; World Englishes; Vachnadze 2003; Wright; 1998].

Identifying Singapore English as a regional variety of the English language suggests a recommendation to generate business-related texts in Singapore English as better understandable for Singaporeans and use the language appropriately depending on the context of business communications.

Criteria for including South-East Asian borrowings into the word-list are investigated through the case study of the word kiasu and its usage. The dictionary entry structuring is discussed along with the presentation of the most popular stereotypical features of a Singaporean. There exist many varieties of English; however, only few appear to be marked in mono-, bi- or multilingual dictionaries. The Singaporean variety often remains omitted in the dictionary meta-language. Thus, it is worth pointing out that the article addresses quite an uncommon matter of linguistic borrowing. However, some borrowed words, like kiasu, can attract international users’ attention and be marked as belonging to Singapore English, as it is very much a part of its features.

The topicality of the research owes to the general topicality of the varieties of the English language from the point of view of sociolinguistics, multiculturalism, language contact and, specifically, a need for more effective international communication [McArthur, Belyaeva, World Englishes]. The status of Singapore English is a blank spot [8, 11]. This article defines the status of the Singaporean English by analyzing existing sociolinguistic, statistic and experimental data.

The examples of scientific journals, exploring the World Englishes paradigm, are World Englishes and Asian Englishes [3, 4]. There is also the International Association for World Englishes, dealing with such issues [5]. Varieties of world languages and borrowings have been a matter of academic interest in the area of sociolinguistics, multiculturalism and language contact from at least the previous century [for example, Wright,
DARE, Kachru, Myznikov], and the language varieties are studied as they appear, develop or become extinct.

Singapore is important to international business communication due to its role in the world economy, including Russia. It attracts sociolinguists since the late 20th century, especially, during the last decade. Presently, new studies appear regularly [Lee; Low] and since the late 1990s, their linguistic merit has been taken to a higher level [Low]. For example, in 2014, the journal World Englishes published a series of significant articles [Low et. al], and periodicals related in the matter in hand are not limited to those mentioned above. This article also considers the process of introducing borrowings from the South-Asian varieties of English into English-Russian dictionaries by the example of the word *kiasu* from Singapore English.

2. Materials and methods

Methods and approaches to the studied matter include analysis of available literary data; comparison of sociolinguistic, statistic and experimental data; and surveys. The study proceeds from the concepts expressed by bilingual lexicographers Apresian, Berkov, Gerd, Dobrovolsky, Adamask-Salasiak, Atkins, Bogaard; Fontanella, Nielsen and Lev. [Apresian 2000; Gerd 1986; Dobrovolsky 2015; Berkov 1973, 1977; Atkins Bilingual lexicography; Fontanella 2008; Bogaard bilingual Lexicography; Nielsen 1998].

The study of Singlish [Ilyina] was conducted in Singapore in 2005 with participation of Anthea Fraser Gupta, linguist and professor of the National University of Singapore; Colin Goh, the Editor of the Cofxord Singlish Dictionary; Dr. Edwin Thumboo, Head of the Department of English Language and Literature of the National University of Singapore; and linguist Nobuyuki Honna.

The sources of material were lexicographic editions, reference works and works of popular science, fictional and mass-media texts, questionnaires offered to by Singaporeans (100 respondents). In total, there were used 4 lexicographic sources (explanatory dictionaries and reference aids – 928 pages) and 11 texts in Singlish, seven of which are plays by Singaporean authors and four are works of fiction covering specifically Singaporean topics with ample conversational samples. The entire materials total to 1,883 pages with 4,950 samples in Singapore English that were analyzed for the purposes of this study.

The article shows that the language situation have changed compared to year 2005, which can be confirmed by Singaporean statistics from the Ministry of Education and the Constitution [statistics, MOE, Constitution].

Using English as a lingua franca connects different ethnic groups in Singapore. The importance of English manifested itself in the transition to teaching in it at schools. Since the early 1960s to the late 1970s, the number of applicants to primary English-language schools had grown from 50% to 90% while the attendance of Chinese, Malay and Tamil schools had been steadily decreasing. The Nanyang University had also switched to English despite the protests.

The use of the English language has grown sharply in the country. In December 2009, the Minister of Education mentioned the growing trend to use English at home. Majority of pupils – 60% of Chinese and Hindu and 35% of Malay origin – having entered the primary schools in 2009 spoke mostly English at their homes (Table 1).

Since the Singaporean society consists of descendants of immigrants from various Asian regions, their languages spoken at home do not necessarily coincide with a lingua franca (English, for instance) or the languages of their nations. Over many years, they had changed their language under the influence of one of the predominant Singaporean languages or public policy.

In the Asia-Pacific Region that includes Singapore several languages are typically used simultaneously in
addition to English. Singapore is a cosmopolitan city where natives make only a small fraction of the population. The Singaporean population was 5,607,300 in 2016 [statistics]. According to the Constitution, four languages – Malay, Tamil, Mandarin and English – are official. The only national language is Malay [Constitution], but, practically, the country’s principal language is English. [statistics; The Straits Times. Singapore. Can I live in Singapore and only speak English?]. Many Singaporeans are bilingual because the education in Singapore is officially bilingual, English being the principal teaching language and its influence growing.

### Table 1. Languages Used at Home (%) [Household Survey 2015]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Chinese Dialects</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exoticsims in the vocabulary**

Semantically unassimilated words can be of two types: exoticsims and barbarisms. For the purposes of this article exoticsims are defined as adopted words describing specific features of life of different peoples and foreign realities. For example, the words *aul, saklia, dzhigit, arba* are used to describe the life of Caucasian peoples and the words *Talib, dushman, Taliban* to refer to realities of life in Afghanistan. Characteristically, exoticsims have no synonyms in other languages and are used indispensably. It is this kind of words that is considered in this article while barbarisms are foreign words used occasionally and their use can be generally unaccepted. The study is based on the materials by Iljina and Zolotukhin, the dictionaries specified below, and other references [Iljina 2004, 2005; Zolotukhin; Thai portal; Singapore is kiasu; kiasu parents; Lewis and Hu].

In order to study the inclusion of exoticsims in the dictionaries, the article proceeds from the definitions given by the Large Explanatory of the Russian Language and the Collection of Dictionaries of Foreign Words of the Russian Language (Example 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 3. Definition of exoticism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ЭКЗОТИЗМ, linguistics, masculine gender</strong> – a foreign-language word or expression denoting an unknown thing or concept inherent with material or spiritual culture of another people [Large Explanatory of Russian Language].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ЭКЗОТИЗМ {&lt;Greek “exotikos” – alien, foreign} <em>linguistics</em> – an adopted word denoting a reality of another country or cultural community (for example, names of currency units, houses, dishes etc. [Collection of Dictionaries of Foreign Words of the Russian Language]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The surveys, conducted in 2005 and 2012, revealed *kiasu* to be the key element of Singaporean identity [Zolotukhin]. According to the data of aAdvantage Consulting and Barrett Values, 1,154 of 2,000 respondents

*MJLT, 8 (10), 87-101.*
aged 15-65 chose kiasu to describe the modern Singaporeans [https://sg.news.yahoo.com/singapore-is-kiasu-competitive-self-centred-survey.html].

The Perekeriostok Dictionary [Perekeriostok] has a detailed entry structure and defines the word kiasu as given in Example 4 in comparison with the Oxford Living Dictionary and YourDictionary.

**Example 4. Definition of kiasu**

kiasu [ki:ˈa:su] n [chin.] (desp.) 1. Very diligent recruit; 2. a man striving to receive as much as possible as soon as possible.

1996 De Mente, NTC’s Dictionary of China’s Cultural Code Words. P. 216:

Mc Donald’s (Singapore) produced a Kiasu Burger (chicken with extra lettuce, extra sauce, and forty-seven sesame seeds on extra long buns) that resulted in long lines of customers waiting to make like Mr. Kiasu [Perekeriostok Dictionary]

**kiasu**

NOUN
SE Asian
A grasping, selfish attitude.

‘I should have gone two hours earlier: the kiasu in me is growing’

ADJECTIVE
SE Asian
(of a person) very anxious not to miss an opportunity; grasping.

Example sentences
‘Despite the generally negative connotation of kiasu behaviour, there is also a positive side to it, one which surfaces as diligence and hard work in order to be on top of any situation.’

‘I think many of the rural people are complex, too shy, too kind to have this kiasu drive.’

‘The examples that you gave show us that it is not that we have no choice but to be kiasu, but most of us are kiasu just because we are able to.’

‘Alas, we didn’t get to make it in the end because we weren’t kiasu enough.’

Origin
From Chinese, ‘scared to lose’.

Pronunciation
kiasu/ˈkjaːsu/

The Oxford Dictionary includes the borrowed term marking it as ‘SE Asian’; examples are demonstrative. YourDictionary, with its practical motto “clear, clean, uncluttered”, accordingly gives the indication of the place of usage, a more concrete origin, and a brief explanation but fails to provide usage examples and pronunciation.

3. **Discussion**

Today, the Republic of Singapore attracts attention in connection with the development of the multipolar
world. The ‘economic wonder’ is interesting in view of the growing cooperation between Singapore and Russia. The country’s efficient English language policy is one of the drivers of that interest.

English was introduced in Singapore by the British in 1819 after a seaport and then colony were established there. Since then, it has been the prestigious language of government, law and business. It became even more popular due to a wide influence of the English-speaking mass media [Lewis,youtube; kiasu parents]

Later on, as the autonomy and independence had been received, the government decided to leave English as the main language to take all the economic advantages of the global language of commerce, technology and science. It was meant to boost integration of Singapore into the world economy.

Most Singaporeans give their children names that are not typical for their nations – such as Samantha, John or Carmen – looking up to the western countries. Lee Kwan-Yew, who is considered the mastermind of Singapore's economic success, had close contacts with Russia since 2005. He received a honoris causa doctorship from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and the same degree from the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2014. He was a member of the International Supervisory Board of the Moscow School of Management SKOLKOVO and was awarded the Order of Friendship by Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. In 2014, Lee Kwan-Yew was also awarded the Order of Honor for the “great contribution in strengthening of the friendship with the Russian Federation and development of scientific and cultural ties”. Characteristically, he mastered English, Chinese, Malay and the basics of Japanese. After completing his tertiary education in Singapore, he graduated from the London School of Economics and Cambridge University with honors in economics and law.

Singaporean authorities implement their national concept of progressive development consistently, recommending the people to use Standard English. They have established the Speak Good English Movement as a sure way for the country to advance due to its linguistic availability.

Some Singaporeans disagree that Singlish is bad English, considering it rather a version of the language reflecting the linguistic diversity of the Singaporean population.

In Singapore, mainly Standard English and Singlish are used. Educated Singaporeans master both, being aware of their pertinence. Singaporeans would avoid using Singlish in the business or professional environment and would rather use it for common needs such as bargaining at a local market and speaking to common folk, i.e. in all situations where Standard English would sound inappropriate or high-society.

Foreigners should avoid imitating locals with their Singlish expressions as it may be considered offending. Instead, foreigners are advised to speak their habitual English or Mandarin which is taught at local schools.

The success of a business project depends on the study of a couple of Singaporean business ethics manuals (refer to the Resources Section) rather than on fluency in a local language or dialect.

Borrowings from the South-East Asian languages enrich the English vocabulary, for example, karaoke, taekwando, judo, fengshui etc. This is because English is especially cosmopolitan.

At the phase of definition of a stereotypic Singaporean, talks to Singaporeans and foreigners dealing with them, as well as the analysis of the available publications on the matter, allowed to conclude on the ‘identities’ of Singapore as of the early 21st century. The main identity of a Singaporean appears to be kiasu.

The work done by order of the Ministry of Education revels that kiasu is considered over the last few decades as a distinctive feature of the Singaporean identity [Zolotukhin]. The cultural and behavioral aspects of
kiasuism are rooted in the universal nature and specificity to the Singaporean society. In the business manual by [Griffin, and Pustay 2006], kiasuism is defined as a behavioral concept meaning the intention to be the best in everything – to obtain the best results and miss nothing in this transient life.

Characteristically, the Singaporean government incites competition in the people of the island encouraging them to be always ready to take opening opportunities. The results speak for themselves: the gap between the rich and the poor is one of the widest in the world. Nevertheless, there is no minimal wage since the government believes it can bring the competitiveness down. Singapore has the highest share of millionaires in the world. This approach was set out in a rhyme aiming to develop the strive for higher performance (Example 5):

Example 5. An Instructive Rhyme for the Singaporeans

Good, better, best – never let it rest
till your good is better and your better’s best!

The kiasu-style behavior is only the extreme wording of the law by which only the strongest survives.

This word became a symbol of the Singaporean culture defining a Singaporean as a person striving to give all the best as much as one can be very upset if he could not do better or get more, preferably, free of charge. Merry but egotistic, goal-oriented and dreary pragmatic, this image has become as popular as Homer Simpson with Americans. It is noticed, that similar phenomena may be regarded as typical for developed countries: to reach the unreachable in the USA and in Australia. The kiasu phenomenon seems to be present in the Russian culture as well (take for example the literally overnight queues to send the beloved child to a good school), but unlike other places, in Singapore it is representative of the country.

The data above enable us to substantiate introducing kiasu into Russian dictionaries of borrowed words besides Business Russian Dictionaries [Krysin; Collection].

4. Findings

In Singapore, English is influential and widely used, being the language of government, business and learning. Standard English is usually forgotten or unknown in this context. However, it has to be considered as a regional variety of English, and the Singaporean policies shall be held as an example of successful formulation and implementation of a national concept through the consistent application of the language and social policy for the well-being of the people. Finally, Singapore English lexicon has a potential for borrowing along with other South-East Asian English words due to its extensive interaction with many countries.

At the level of business vocabulary entry, the following components are proposed:

- orthographic (Latinized) variant of the word,
- pronunciation and, possibly, international phonetic (IPA) transcription,
- English word as a part of speech,
- language of origin,
- stylistic and grammatical remarks,
- translation,
- explanation in source language (Standard English),
- explanation in translation language (Russian).

5. Conclusion

The article shows, that the literary, sociolinguistic, statistic and experimental data substantiate the existence

*MJLTM, 8 (10), 87-101.*
of the Singaporean version of English.

The existence of the Singaporean English enables to recommend business materials to be formulated especially for the Singaporeans to be understood by them, while they can be spoken to, practically, in the British English.

This article also considers the method of inclusion of borrowings from South-East Asian Englishes in an English-Russian explanatory dictionary as exemplified by the word *kiasu*. The discussion provides recommendations as to structuring of a dictionary entry.

**Acknowledgements**

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**Singaporean Business Ethics Manuals**


Dictionaries


Internet Dictionaries


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