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The Singlish interjection *bojio*

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1. The evolving nature of Singapore English

One of the most important publications by Wierzbicka for me as a Singaporean is the paper entitled ‘Singapore English: A semantic and cultural perspective’ (Wierzbicka 2003). In my opinion, this was the first paper incisively written on the meaning and culture of Singapore English. In the paper, Wierzbicka pioneered the argument that there is a ‘Singapore culture’ (2003: 328) over and above the various cultures (Chinese, Malay and Indian) that thrive in the country. By studying a number of Singaporean cultural keywords, she showed that while Singaporeans are said to speak English, their English is culturally distinct from what was traditionally known as native varieties of English or what some might now call Anglo English (Wong 2008; Goddard 2012). Cultural keywords are ‘special, culture-specific meanings’ that ‘reflect and pass on not only ways of living characteristic of a given society but also ways of thinking’ (Wierzbicka 1997: 5) and studying Singapore English cultural keywords can help us understand and appreciate Singaporean ways of thinking. Regrettably, there seems to be little scholarly interest in the studying of the Singapore English with a view to understanding the ways of thinking it embodies. This chapter tries to fill this gap.

One of the ideas that stood out for me in Wierzbicka's paper is that Singapore culture is 'evolving' (2003: 328) and that is the theme that I want to broach in this chapter. That Singapore culture is evolving is reflected in Singlish, the main variety of Singapore English used among Singaporeans in all but the most formal settings. It may be seen in how Singlish cultural keywords or phrases can emerge or disappear, often in a short period. Examples of Singlish phrases that went out of use or are no longer relevant might be *Marina kids*, *graduate mothers* and *dangerous dogs*, phrases documented in Ho's book chapter (1992: 212). Marina kids were younger teenagers who spent their leisure time socialising in Marina Square, a shopping mall, during the early years of the mall (late '80s/early '90s) when it was not yet popular with shoppers. The Marina kids socialised in groups and were seen as a public nuisance. They disappeared when the mall became popular. Graduate mothers were the beneficiaries of the controversial 'Graduate Mothers Priority Scheme' introduced by the government in 1984, which saw the government using 'financial and social incentives to encourage graduate women to marry and procreate'.¹ The discriminatory scheme understandably antagonised many women, which led to the formation of AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research), whose mission is to 'To remove all gender-based barriers so as to allow individuals in Singapore to develop their potential to the fullest and realise their personal visions and hopes', the following year.² Apparently, the discriminatory nature and unpopularity of the Graduate Mothers Priority Scheme led to its demise less than a year later. Subsequently, the phrase *graduate mothers* began to lose its cultural salience. The phrase *dangerous dogs* was used to refer to kinds of pet dogs that 'must be muzzled when outside their owners' premises' (Ho 1992: 212). However, a search for the phrase on the AVS (Animal & Veterinary Service) homepage now does not yield any result, except for the clause, 'Such potentially dangerous dog breeds are listed under the Second Schedule of the Animals and Birds (Dog Licensing and Control) Rules ("**Specified Dogs**")'.³ Presumably, this is because the owning of such dogs in Singapore is now regulated. This in turn suggests that there have been fewer and fewer 'dangerous dogs' in Singapore, which might explain why the phrase has lost its cultural importance and dropped out of use.

1 Available at: www.aware.org.sg/2010/11/the-birth-of-awarepart-one/.

2 Available at: www.aware.org.sg/about/.

3 Available at: www.nparks.gov.sg/avs/pets/owning-a-pet/licensing-a-pet/dog-licensing.

New words in Singlish have emerged, including those culturally associated with the word *kiasu*, which literally means ‘afraid to lose’ or, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘a selfish, grasping attitude arising from a fear of missing out on something’. Wierzbicka (2003: 333) in 2003 correctly described it as ‘the most salient cultural keyword in Singaporean English’. She proposed that the meaning may be represented in Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) in this way (with added punctuation marks and a more reader-friendly layout for ease of reading):

[A] *kiasu*

- a. Some people often think like this:
 - ‘Many people can do something now.
 - If someone does it, something good will happen to this person.
 - If I do it, this good thing will happen to me.
 - If I don’t do it, this good thing will not happen to me.
 - If it doesn’t happen to me, I will have to think:
 - ‘This good thing happened to other people, it didn’t happen to me.’
 - I don’t want to have to think like this.
 - Because of this I have to do something now.
 - I want to do it.’
- b. Because these people think like this, they do many things.
- c. I think: it is bad if people think like this. (Wierzbicka 2003: 335–336)

As a Singaporean, I think that Wierzbicka’s explication has a high degree of descriptive adequacy. The part ‘If it doesn’t happen to me, I will have to think: This good thing happened to other people, it didn’t happen to me’ seems to capture rather nicely the essence of *kiasu* or the ‘fear of losing out’, so to speak.

While some Singlish words dropped out of use, the word *kiasu* or at least the value it embodies is still relevant in Singapore culture today. The National Values Assessment survey of 2,000 people, conducted by local business consultancy aAdvantage Consulting Group and Barrett Values Centre in 2018, suggests that Singapore citizens perceive the

Singapore society to be first and foremost *kiasu*.⁴ Also, an article written for the *Los Angeles Times* by David Pierson says that ‘Singapore’s “kiasu” culture makes FOMO look like child’s play’ (Pierson 2019). In the same article, Pierson states: ‘Long before Americans discovered FOMO—the fear of missing out—Singaporeans were fixated with its more excessive forbear, *kiasu*.’ At this point, one might ask how *kiasu* is ‘more excessive’ than FOMO. The Cambridge Dictionary defines FOMO in this way, with an example:

a worried feeling that you may miss exciting events that other people are going to, especially caused by things you see on social media: *Don’t get FOMO. Get a ticket now!*⁵

In other words, FOMO is about the ‘fear’ of ‘missing’ ‘exciting events’ in the context of ‘social media’. By contrast, *kiasu* seems to be culturally more primal and contextually far more pervasive. It could be about something from as minor as piling up one’s plate in a buffet (thus maximising the dollar) to as major as enrolling one’s primary school child in a host of extracurricular activities (thus giving the child a good head start in life). The cultural salience and importance of the word *kiasu* in Singapore culture thus cannot be overemphasised. The difference is that, since 2003, a number of Singlish words that reflect values or behaviour associated with the word *kiasu* have emerged or gained cultural salience. If Singaporeans were considered *kiasu* then, they may be even more so now.

2. The Singaporean interjection *bojio*

An example of a Singlish word that reflects the *kiasu* value might be *bojio*, which very roughly means ‘no invite’, literally, or ‘you didn’t invite me’. It is usually used as a response to someone who did not invite the speaker to join them in an activity, which means that the speaker feels that they are missing out on something. While it can be used as a verb, *bojio* is more often used as an interjection. In fact, as we shall see, it may be considered an ‘emotive interjection’, which has in its meaning the component ‘I feel something’ (Wierzbicka 1991: 291; 1992: 165). More specifically, an emotive interjection is one ‘whose primary burden is to express feelings

4 Available at: www.slideshare.net/aAdvantageConsulting/2018-singapore-national-values-assessment.

5 Available at: dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fomo?q=FOMO.

in the emotional sense' (Goddard 2014: 54); an emotion refers to a feeling that follows a thought ('someone X thought something' and 'because of this, this someone X felt something') (Goddard 2018: 72). This means that the meaning of *bojio* has the components 'I think like this ...' and 'because of this, I feel something ...'.

It is difficult to say but the word probably only entered Singlish in the last five or six years; some of my current undergraduate students said that they first used it in high school. It is not documented in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Goh and Woo 2009), which is a dictionary written and produced by laypeople (i.e. not professional lexicographers) published in 2009. This probably implies that *bojio* was not commonly used in Singlish then. Moreover, it is observed that the word is mainly used among younger Singaporeans who are in their teens and early 20s. Limited evidence at this stage thus suggests that it is a relatively new Singlish word. To the best of my knowledge, it has not received much scholarly attention, if any.

Interestingly, although I argue that *bojio* is a culturally important Singlish word, I concede that it may not be a particularly salient one to some people. For example, it is not documented in the tongue-in-cheek *A Companion to How Singaporeans Communicate* (Gwee 2018), published in 2018. Nevertheless, its importance can be seen in the fact that the word or its meaning is discussed in various websites; a Google search yields a number of results. The word is also exploited for commercial purposes in Singapore. There was a 'Bojio Café' (although it did not seem to survive beyond one or two years). The Singapore Zoo used a phrase with the word 'Don't say *bojio*' in a publicity poster for its 45th anniversary in 2018.⁶ In fact, a Google search suggests that the phrase 'Don't say *bojio*' is used by some bloggers exclamationarily as a tagline to tell Singaporeans about eating places that give customers value for money. Additionally, the word *bojio* has a positive counterpart *jio*, a verb which roughly means 'invite' and which is not infrequently used. The Singlish word *bojio* thus deserves attention and the interjection is the object of study in this chapter. The objective of this chapter is thus to study the meaning of *bojio* and what it could possibly tell us about how younger Singaporeans think. For data collection, a survey was administered to my last batch of students (August–November 2018) at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

6 Available at: www.straitstimes.com/singapore/dont-say-bojio-all-are-invited-to-singapore-zoos-45th-birthday-celebrations.

The survey mainly asked students for authentic examples of use and the context for each example. Data were also collected with the help of a student assistant and from internet sources.

I hasten to add that this chapter is particularly important in part because it focuses on an aspect of Singapore English that is regrettably seldom discussed: interjections. Generally speaking, interjections are said to be ‘among the most characteristic peculiarities of individual cultures’ (Wierzbicka 1992: 160) and ‘they express the personal intentions, attitudes, assumptions, and the feelings of the speaker’ (Goddard 2011: 163). Interjections can thus reveal certain ways of thinking associated with a culture. As we shall see, this is exactly what the Singlish interjection *bojio* does; it speaks about intentions, attitudes, assumptions and the feelings of its Singaporean speakers. This study could thus be seen as an attempt to understand an aspect of contemporary Singapore culture, an aspect that has evolved rather recently in the last few years.

The word *bojio* comes from Hokkien, a southern Chinese language from the Min family originally spoken in Fujian province. It is a transliteration of the characters 沒 and 招, which very roughly means ‘(did) not invite’. However, *jio* in Singlish refers to a verbal ‘invitation’. As an exclamation, *bojio* is used by someone to accost, often teasingly, the addressee for not inviting them to participate in an activity or event. Of course, the implication is that the addressee would know that the activity or event was one that the speaker would have wanted to participate in. One might translate the exclamation into something like this in English: ‘you didn’t ask me to join you’. Here are some examples of use:⁷

- (1) A: Yesterday we went out to eat supper.
B: *Bojio!*^(*)
- (2) A: I went to the IT fair last night.
B: You went without telling me? *Bojio!*^(*)
- (3) Someone finds out that their friend went out for a movie, and says to that friend,
‘Why *bojio?* Go watch movie never ask me.’^(*)

⁷ Examples marked with an asterisk in brackets are collected by student assistant Michelle Hoe, to whom I am grateful.

- (4) Someone sees an Instagram story of his friends on an outing together and comments: *Bojio!*^(*)
- (5) Someone A indicates on Facebook that he is in Kuala Lumpur. A friend B comments on the post using a meme with the interjection ‘Boh jio!!!’, a spelling variation of *bojio*. This is followed by a brief exchange as presented below (unedited for spelling and punctuation, but with some information omitted).

A: *Boh jio!!!*

B: Halo, u so busy going gym (...) Jio u will go meh [particle]?

A: you didn’t ask lor [particle], how you know I won’t go????

Usually, such an exchange happens after the outing to which the speaker was not invited. The formula is straightforward. An individual or a group of friends went out somewhere or did something together. A friend who was not invited found out about it afterwards. This friend then says to the individual or one of the group, ‘*Bojio!*’ Examples collected from the survey show that events that are referred to when the speaker says ‘*bojio*’ include a birthday party, a gathering of friends, a movie, a lunch, a dinner, a trip to buy bubble tea, a soccer game, a tempura-making session in the college’s pantry and a mah-jong game. All these activities seem to be fun things that the speaker might like to do with the addressee. Thus, the speaker feels excluded and can think something like someone who feels *kiasu* thinks: ‘Something good happened to other people, it didn’t happen to me.’ It is argued here that this is how *bojio* reflects the Singaporean *kiasu* attitude; its meaning embodies a similar way of thinking.

It is noted that in most of the examples studied, the event has happened at the time of speaking. However, the time of speaking could happen before the event, as example (6) illustrates.

- (6) Several friends are getting ready to go to a club. Someone, upon seeing them dressed up, asks them where they are going. The following exchange ensues.
- A: Wa, dress until so nice! Where are you all going?
- B: We are going to the club tonight.
- A: Wa! *Bojio!*
- B: You can come man!
- A: Nah, just kidding.

This means that the statement of meaning should take into account both situations.

Example (6) is particularly interesting, because it shows that the interjection, when taken literally, can make the addressee feel bad (and immediately issue a verbal ‘invitation’). This seems obvious; if someone approached one to say that they were not invited by one, one would naturally tend to feel bad. The speaker cannot not know it. Thus, it might be said that the speaker has, at least on the surface, the intention to make the addressee feel bad.

As mentioned, *bojio* can also be used as a verb, as the following examples of exchanges between friends show.

(7) A: I went to buy new running shoes last night.

B: Why you *bojio* me?^(*)

(8) A: I had dinner with Lucy yesterday.

B: What? So exclusive? Why *bojio*?^(*)

Speaker comments that the addressee did not invite someone (Jenny) to dinner:

(9) You *bojio* Jenny for today’s dinner.

As mentioned also, *bojio* has a ‘positive’ counterpart, *jio*, which is not infrequently used as a verb, as in *jio someone* (roughly, ‘invite someone [to do something with one]’), but sometimes a noun (roughly, ‘invitation’). A few examples of *jio* might help us appreciate the cultural significance of *bojio*. The verb *jio* suggests that some form of inclusiveness among friends is an important value and the use of *bojio* may be seen as a ‘protest’ when the value is not upheld, as when the speaker is excluded from an activity.

(10) Some friends are talking about their holiday activities.

A: What did y’all do?

B: Mike and myself went to play soccer!

A: Wah! Next time *jio leh* [particle]

(11) A friend asks the speaker why they did not invite someone to an event, saying:

Why you never *jio* her for KBBQ [Korean barbeque].

- (12) Some friends decided to ask someone to join them: Let's *jio* her for dinner.

Although it is tempting to think that *jio* means 'invite' and *bojio* 'didn't invite', one should not make that association. The English counterparts can sound polite and formal. After all, an invitation could come with a card, as in a wedding invitation. As the online Oxforddictionaries.com phrases it, in English, *to invite* is to make 'a polite, formal, or friendly request to (someone) to go somewhere or to do something'.⁸ By contrast, the Singlish *jio* cannot be considered polite or formal, nor can it be considered a request.

Let us now try to state the meaning of the exclamation *bojio* from the inside. In simple English, when someone exclaims *bojio*, they are in a way complaining that the addressee did not tell them about an event and tell them to join in. Similar to swear words (Goddard 2015), its meaning thus embodies a cognitive trigger and a reaction. The cognitive trigger is that the speaker now knows that the addressee has planned to do something without including them. It is something that the speaker would have liked to do with the addressee. As a result, the speaker thinks that they have missed out on something, which is indicative of a *kiasu* attitude, and feels bad, rendering the interjection an emotive one. The speaker wants the addressee to know how they feel (the reaction) and consequently feel bad (if the interjection is taken literally). I propose that the meaning may be stated in NSM in this way:

[B] *Bojio!*

- a. I now know you wanted to do something at some time before now.
- b. You didn't say to me at that time:
 'I will do this something, I want you to do it with me.'
- c. You knew that if you said it to me at that time,
 I would say to you something like 'I will do it with you',
 I would feel something good because of this.
- d. Because you didn't say it to me, I now think like this:
 'Something good happened to other people, it didn't happen to me.'

⁸ Available at: en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/invite.

- e. Because of this, I feel something bad,
like people can feel something bad when they think like this.
- g. I want you to know it.
- h. I want you to feel something bad because of this.

It thus follows that the meaning of the verb *jio* could be stated in this way, which suggests inclusivity:

[C] He *jio*⁹ her

- a. He said something like this to her:
‘I will do something. I want you to do it with me.’
- b. When he said it to her, he thought like this: ‘She will want to do it with me.’
- c. He wanted her to feel something good because of this.
- d. He knew at that time that if he didn’t say it to her,
she could think like this if she knew about what he did afterwards:
‘Something good happened to other people, it didn’t happen to me.’
- e. She would feel something bad because of this.
- f. He didn’t want her to think like this.
- g. He didn’t want her to feel something bad because of this.

The examples also suggest that one would only exclaim *bojio* to someone whom one is familiar with; there is a degree of familiarity between the speaker and the addressee. At this point, one may be reminded of the idea of a *shúrén* (roughly, ‘insider’) in Chinese culture. However, the Chinese word *shúrén*, the meaning of which is described by Ye (2017: 76), is not used in Singlish and the word would thus not be part of any Singlish cultural script. However, some components of the meaning proposed by Ye may seem relevant for the purposes of formulating a script to reflect the attitude of a Singlish speaker who says *bojio* to someone:

9 Singlish verbs are not always inflected for tense.

[D] Cultural script: Who one can say *bojio* to

- a. I think about this someone (i.e. the addressee) like this:
- ‘I said some things to this someone many times before.
This someone said some things to me many times before.
Because of this, this someone is like someone I have known
for some time.’
- b. Because I think about this someone like this, I can say things to this someone
- like I say things to people I know well.
- c. I can say ‘*bojio*’ to this someone.

From an Anglo perspective, the presence of an exclamation like *bojio* might appear odd because such an exclamation does not respect what the addressee wants, and thus a semantically similar exclamation is not found in Anglo English. Studies have shown that Anglo culture values personal autonomy and Anglo people have a deep-rooted respect for what one wants (Wierzbicka 1991). Also, according to an Anglo-British informant, asking someone why one is not invited is ‘demeaning’ because it is like ‘begging to be asked’. Similarly, the speech act associated with *jio* is uncommonly used in Anglo English because it embodies an imperative, and we know that Anglo culture restricts the use of the imperative (Wierzbicka 1991).

By contrast, it seems easy to see why the exclamation is commonly used in Singapore culture, a culture that does not seem to place much emphasis on personal autonomy and space, as my own studies show (Wong 2014). What Wierzbicka noted some years ago is still descriptive of Singapore culture today:

When one watches, for example, the interaction of Singaporeans in the squeeze and the bustle of a hawker centre (with people’s elbows touching, and loud conversations criss-crossing the dense network of tables and food stalls), one can well imagine the functionality of interactive Singaporean particles (as well as expressive interjections); and the contemporary Anglo notions of ‘privacy’, ‘personal space’, ‘autonomy’, and ‘non-imposing on other people’ seem scarcely germane. (Wierzbicka 2003: 346)

However, this does not fully explain the emergence and popularity of *bojio*. As discussed, the *kiasu* attitude is also responsible but, again, it does not fully explain why either. After all, older Singaporeans (perhaps forties and above) tend not to use the exclamation even if many of them may be considered group-oriented and *kiasu*; if they do, it is probably because they picked up the word from the youngsters. Presumably, there is an additional reason which has to do with face or more specifically, *mianzi*, an important value in Chinese culture (Ming and Zhang 2011; Zhou and Zhang 2017). *Mianzi* has to do with one's 'public self-image' (Zhou and Zhang 2017: 165), and accosting a friend for not asking oneself to an event, even in jest, risks embarrassing that friend, causing them to lose face or *mianzi*. This is not what many older Singaporeans are prepared to do. The speaker might also embarrass themselves; the speaker might be seen as trying to inflate their own social importance, and older Singaporeans tend to be careful not to display any sense of self-importance.

3. Changing Singapore values

This leaves us with the question of why younger Singaporeans in their teenage years and early 20s uninhibitedly use the exclamation *bojio* to accost their friends, teasingly or otherwise. I propose here that *bojio* reflects a cultural change happening, in that some values that parents in their 40s and 50s uphold are giving way to competing values. I argue here that *mianzi* has diminished in value in the face of rising *kiasuness* among Singaporeans in general and younger Singaporeans in particular. As Pierson (2019) noted:

It's a survival instinct born out of Singapore's dominant Chinese culture and deep-rooted insecurity as a blip on the map, one that's only slightly bigger than the San Fernando Valley.

Letting opportunity pass is tantamount to failure, the thinking goes. And if you do, you have no one to blame but yourself.

It would appear that many Singaporeans, Chinese or otherwise, have an incessant worry about missing opportunities. This probably comes from how Singaporeans perceive Singapore as a fiercely competitive society, and increasingly so, where every opportunity is to be taken advantage of. This *kiasu* attitude or emotion can be quite overbearing and contagious. As a white American undergraduate studying in NUS noted in a newspaper article:

Most of my classmates are very concerned with academic achievement, success and economic security.

Not long after arriving in Singapore, my own values began to shift.

I constantly heard people talking about elite education institutions and prestigious entry-level jobs, and for the first time in my life, I too decided that those were what I needed. (Linder 2019)

In NUS, where this study was undertaken, many students are unduly concerned about their ‘cumulative average point’ (CAP), which affects a student’s chance of graduating with a good honours degree. Students may thus avoid reading modules in which they are not confident in securing a good grade, which may be considered a *kiasu* behaviour. In response, the university introduced a few years ago the ‘satisfactory/unsatisfactory’ (S/U) option to replace the grades of a given number of modules.¹⁰ The S/U option, if used, means that the grade of the module does not contribute to the CAP. As stated in the NUS website:¹¹

The S/U option is also intended to encourage students to pursue their intellectual interests, without undue concern that exploring a new subject area may adversely affect their CAP.

However, this S/U option has ironically become an advantage to be exploited by some students seeking to maximise their CAP. These students exercise the option for every grade that is below the A range (A-, A and A+), which in turn maximises their CAP. This means that the intended purpose of the S/U option may now be largely irrelevant to students. The *kiasu* attitude prevails and it may thus be said that some members of the younger generation (in NUS at least) carry the *kiasu* attitude to new heights. What was once an attitude has now become a way of life that expresses itself in relation not just to things that matter (e.g. one’s CAP) but the less relevant things as well (e.g. an outing with friends).

Over the years, words have emerged or gained salience (in terms of frequency of use) to reflect what I might call the augmentation of the *kiasu* value across generations. Such words include *bojio*, *chope* (very roughly, ‘putting one’s mark on something to reserve it for later use’) and the NUS cultural keyword *S/U*. In this respect, it might even be

10 Available at: [www.nus.edu.sg/registrar/academic-activities/satisfactory-unsatisfactory-\(s-u\)-option](http://www.nus.edu.sg/registrar/academic-activities/satisfactory-unsatisfactory-(s-u)-option).

11 Available at: www.nus.edu.sg/nusbulletin/yong-siew-toh-conservatory-of-music/undergraduate-education/degree-requirements/satisfactory-unsatisfactory-option/.

tempting to think that Grab, ‘Southeast Asia’s largest ride-hailing app operator’, a ‘Singapore-based company’ (Iwamoto 2018), which entered the Singapore market in 2014 (Lin and Dula 2016), owes its huge success in recent years in Singapore in part to its name. Although it has received little or no scholarly scrutiny, the word *grab* as used in Singlish could be considered a cultural keyword that reflects the value of *kiasu*. The word *grab* and the value it symbolises are things many Singaporeans can identify with; Singlish-speaking Singaporeans are all too familiar with the phrase ‘everything also must grab’, which is not uncommonly used as a tagline or punchline for commercial purposes. The title of a comic book published in Singapore, *Mr Kiasu: Everything Also Must Grab* (Lau and Lim 2018) sums it all up. Wierzbicka (2003) recognised the evolving nature of Singapore culture in 2003 and provided us with a methodology to examine this linguistic evolution.

This present study on the evolving nature of Singlish has allowed me, a native Singaporean, to reach a deeper understanding of my own culture. It has helped me appreciate some of the values and behaviours associated with the younger generation in Singapore, such as my university students. This in turn helps me, an educator, to appreciate their challenges, sympathise with them and connect with them.

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