

24 February 2006

The Editor  
Forum Page  
*The Straits Times*

Dear Sir,

I am pleased that Mr Yap Chee Gee ('Singlish Dictionaries Should Include Source of Words', ST Interactive, Feb 14), finds my on-line *Dictionary of Singlish and Singapore English* (<http://www.singlishdictionary.com>) interesting and useful.

He may like to know that in the *Dictionary* I have, indeed, tried to indicate the original languages from which expressions in Singlish and Singapore English have been derived. Through my research, I have been fascinated to discover that a number of such expressions can be traced to ancient languages. For instance, the word 'shiok' comes from the Malay, but ultimately appears to derive from the Persian word 'shokh' meaning, among other things, 'cheerful, joyous; beautiful, pleasing', or from the Arabic word 'shak' or 'shawk' meaning 'filling with desire; love, affection; gaiety, cheerfulness'.

Other examples include 'goondu' which may be from the Telugu 'gundu' meaning 'a round stone; a lump' or the similar Tamil word 'kuntu' meaning 'a ball; anything globular and heavy'; and 'sarong' (as in 'sarong party girl') which may be traced through Malay to the Sanskrit word 'saranga' meaning 'a variegated colour; a garment, cloth'.

As Mr Yap has pointed out, this shows how languages influence each other when used by persons of different cultures living in community.

I did not compile the *Dictionary* with the intention of promoting the use of Singlish, though it may have that effect. Apart from satisfying personal curiosity, I thought it would be useful to make a record of terms that are largely unique to English as it is used in Singapore. The *Dictionary* can be used by those wishing to improve their English to find out the standard English equivalents of Singlish terms. It may, of course, also be useful to both locals and foreigners who are unfamiliar with certain Singlish terms. For instance, I am still not sure of the exact meanings of the terms 'carafare' and 'chapalang', or what goes into a 'devil curry'.

In connection with this, I would like to hear from readers who are able to assist in clarifying the meaning or derivation of terms in the *Dictionary*, or who would like to suggest new words and phrases for inclusion. For a list of terms that I require specific assistance with, there is an 'appeals list' on the website. Another way to help is for readers to look out for examples of Singlish and Singaporean English use when they read books, magazines, newspapers and other materials, particularly those

published before 1990. I would very much like to review local works of literature (novels, plays, poetry, short stories) and old newspapers to locate early examples of Singlish usage, but unfortunately this is just too much work for one person. It is no surprise that most of the quotations in the Dictionary are from recent issues of The Straits Times.

Yours sincerely,  
Jack Tsen-Ta Lee