

Publication: Today, p09

Date: 09 Aug 2016

Headline: Curiosity prompts creation of online Singlish dictionary*

He hardly spoke Singlish at home during childhood and was exposed to trickles of it during his schooling years.

But this soon changed when Dr Jack Lee was drafted into National Service, where Singlish was widely used among servicemen and his superiors. Some of the terms that were ricocheting around him had "seemed almost like a foreign language", said Dr Lee, 45, an assistant law professor at Singapore Management University. His curiosity was piqued, and he began jotting down unfamiliar phrases and words.

What began as an effort to grasp the meanings behind these phrases later morphed into A Dictionary of Singlish and Singapore English, an online resource Dr Lee set up in 2004 after returning from the University College London with a Master of Laws.

A voracious reader with a keen interest in language, Dr Lee said he was impressed by the Oxford English Dictionary's attempt to record English usage and inspired by resources on non-standard varieties of English, such as the Australian National Dictionary.

He dived back into his notebooks and decided he would "put these into the form of webpages".

To do this, he read up and formulated definitions and pronunciations for the terms, and even tried to trace their etymology — the origin of words and how their meanings have evolved.

He also went to great lengths to record actual usage of Singlish phrases

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Dr Lee read up and formulated definitions on Singlish terms, tried to trace their etymology and went to great lengths to record actual usage of Singlish phrases. PHOTO: KOH MUIFONG

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Dr Jack Lee
ASSISTANT LAW PROFESSOR AT SMU,
ON THE SINGLISH DICTIONARY

es in published material — words he saw appear in print for the first time or examples of their use — although the limited time on his hands meant most of these came from newspapers.

"If one really wanted to have a comprehensive reading programme that really captures how language is used, you would have to, of course, read books, plays and poetry," Dr Lee said.

"I did some of that, but then, really, you don't have that much time."

Returning to England between 2005 and 2008 to pursue a PhD in law at the University of Birmingham, this became "a nice distraction" when he was not working on his doctoral project.

Dr Lee stressed, however, that the dictionary — which has more than 1,200 entries — was meant to be "a fun project", given that he is not an expert.

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