



## Singapore – A Confused Society

### Description

A few months ago, an amusing conversation appeared in cyberspace. I wish I could attribute this insightful and laughing-at-ourselves creative piece of writing. If you haven't read it, here it goes (after minimal editing):

Foreigner (F): You look Chinese.

Singaporean (S): I am a Singaporean.

F: But you look Chinese.

S: I am a Chinese Singaporean / I am a Singaporean Chinese.

F: So, do you speak Chinese?

S: Yes, but not fluent.

F: But you are Chinese.

S: I am a Singaporean Chinese, not Chinese from China.

F: So, you are not Chinese?

S: I am not Chinese from China.

F: But your great-grandfather is from China?

S: Yes, but I was born in Singapore, so I am a Singaporean Chinese.

F: So, your great-grandfather speaks Chinese?

S: He speaks a dialect.

F: Do you speak dialect?

S: No, I don't.

F: Why not?

S: Because our country has a Speak Mandarin campaign that is so successful that the new generation practically does not speak dialect anymore.

F: So, you should speak fluent Mandarin since it's so successful?

S: No. That campaign was effective before, but not anymore.

F: Why?

S: Because most people speak English nowadays. We have a Speak Good English campaign.

F: So, English is your National Language?

S: No!

F: So, what is the National Language of Singapore?

S: Malay.

F: What?

S: Yes, Malay!

F: Do you speak Malay?

S: No.

F: Why not?

S: Because I am not Malay.

F: Then why is your National Language Malay?

S: That's another long history lesson.

F: So, your National Language is Malay, and nobody speaks it?

S: The Malays speak Malay. That's their mother tongue. We have four races: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian. Each speaks their mother tongue.

F: So, your mother tongue is Chinese?

S: Yes.

F: But you can't speak it fluently?

S: Yes.

F: Does the Malay or Indian speak fluent mother tongue?

S: More fluent than the Chinese-speaking Chinese, I supposed.

F: Why?

S: Because that's their mother tongue.

F: Then why can't the Chinese?

S: Because we speak English mainly in school.

F: I last heard that Singapore has a bilingual policy.

S: Yes, we have. We do learn our mother tongue in school.

F: But you cannot speak Chinese fluently.

S: Yes.

F: Why?

S: Because our country's working language is English, there are few places to use the language, perhaps only with our grandparents and when we buy things in the market.

F: Then how is that bilingual?

S: I don't know.

F: So, you are a Singaporean Chinese who can't speak your National Language, cannot speak your mother tongue fluently and can only communicate in English with a strange accent.

S: What's wrong with my accent?

F: I don't know, it is just weird.

S: Does it sound British or American?

F: Neither; I thought you should sound British since you have been colonised before.

S: No, that was a long, long time ago, dude.

F: How come you try to sound American?

S: Because I watch a lot of Hollywood movies.

F: Your English still needs to be better.

S: Oh, we call it Singlish.

F: So, what are you?

S: I am a Singaporean!

We can look at this amusing article, “A Confused Society”, from at least three angles. Firstly, it is undoubtedly a piece of laughing-at-ourselves essay. Many articles extoll the benefits of self-directed humour and what it reflects. Laughing-at-ourselves humour reminds us of our humanness and helps us gain a clearer perspective of what is and is not important. Humour enables us to shift our windows of perception.



The window frames and where they open to the world shape what we see

By laughing at ourselves, we can improve our relationships with others because laughter releases oxytocin, a hormone that facilitates social bonding, increases trust, and quickens self-disclosure. Disclosing funny things or weaknesses about ourselves reduces tension and anxiety for the speaker and the listener. It makes listeners feel more comfortable because we are self-accepting. Additionally, people are attracted to authenticity — and by revealing our blemishes, we can build bridges so that

others feel comfortable lowering their guard. The social relationships (we build with self-directed humour) can be immensely beneficial – they often support us when life throws us [curveballs](#).

Some of us know we are happiest when we can laugh at our past misfortunes and make them amusing to others. According to psychology researchers, self-mockery assuages our nerves. People who regularly poke fun at themselves exhibit more significant levels of [emotional well-being](#).



Laughing is essential for our well-being

Let us now switch gears. The assumptions we make, in this case, about languages and people form the second angle of analysing the contents of this amusing piece of writing. In many countries, the national language is the people's mother tongue, the most widely spoken language they are most proficient in. It is also assumed that nationality equates to race. (Can our minds accept a black Japanese?) Therefore, the title of the essay "A Confused Society" is probably more accurately called "A Confused Foreigner". It is not the Singaporean who is confused but the foreigner. The Singaporean knows precisely what the case is, while the foreigner could not reconcile what the case is with his/her

assumption of what should be the case.

The foreigner probably came from a relatively homogeneous society. He might be less confused if he (she) came from an immigrant society (for example, the USA or Australia) where nationality does not equate with race or language proficiency. Yes, assumptions are often the mother of all screw-ups (including how we think).

And lastly, some of the best things in life come from anonymous contributors (like this laughing-at-ourselves essay). One of the most popular songs all classical guitarists play is [Romanza](#). To this day, we have yet to determine who composed this masterpiece. I salute all anonymous contributors to our well-being!