

Postcolonial Identity through Singlish Phonology through Film Dialogue in Global Media Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Singlish, formally recognised as Singaporean Colloquial English (SCE), represents a distinct variety within the global landscape of World Englishes. This study investigates the segmental and suprasegmental features of Singlish through an Optimality-Theoretic framework (OT), utilising a proposed constraint hierarchy. Data comprising 600 phrases from four (4) high-frequency scenes were extracted from the film *Crazy Rich Asians* and processed via the corpus software AntConc. The OT analysis focuses on specific constraint rankings—including STRESS-INITIAL, FT-BIN, IDENT-STRESS, and NO-CODA—which are subsequently validated through acoustic analysis using Praat to determine if cinematic representations align with authentic phonological patterns. Beyond modelling, this research situates these linguistic systems within a broader framework, linking local patterns to postcolonial identity formation. The findings suggest that these features emerge from the interaction between local identities and global media, advancing the hypothesis that the film reflects a shift from Bhabha's mimicry toward Derrida's perspective on cultural mediation.

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1. Introduction

Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), widely known as Singlish, is one of the distinctive English varieties within the landscape of World Englishes. Emerging from Singapore's multilingual environment, Singlish portrays complex interactions among English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, which feature phonological, lexical, and grammatical elements. The recent studies have suggested that there is indeed a distinction between SCE and SSE (Wee, 2005; Lim, 2007) in terms of pronunciation, rhythm, and discourse particles. Within the perspective of World Englishes, the local linguistic forms are recognised as not deviations from standardised norms but as a legitimate linguistic system that indexes local identity and socio-cultural belonging (Gupta, 1994; Foley, 2001).

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The study uses film dialogue titled *Crazy Rich Asians* as a case of mediated linguistic representation rather than a direct reflection of everyday speech in the Singapore speech community. As a Hollywood production set in Singapore, it has several achievements such as the first major Hollywood movie with an Asian and Asian-American cast in 25 years (Abad-Santos: 2018), a triumphant moment for Asian representation in Hollywood (Yin: 2018), a historic moment in Hollywood's interest in stories starring women and people of color (Wittmer: 2018), and a "cinematic Halley's Comet" carrying a community's hopes for greater representation in mainstream US culture (Wong: 2018). Thus, this film indicates stylised uses of Singlish to index local identity while remaining accessible to a global audience.

The *Crazy Rich Asians* film incorporates Singlish into the dialogue as a linguistic resource used by several Singaporean characters. It portrays a local authenticity and cultural realism (Tan: 2020). The establishment of Singlish in popular media, such as the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, has gained greater recognition and cultural significance associated with Singapore's borders. It defines both linguistic features and their role in representing authentic Singapore, particularly Singlish. Building on this mediated representation, *Crazy Rich Asians* also presents a rich linguistic landscape in which language is close to identity and social meaning. The film's dialogue reflects Singapore's multilingual environment, a former British colony in which Singlish serves as a significant marker of belonging. In this study, Singlish is seen as globally distributed in media production, challenging the dominant norms of English proficiency and prestige. Thus, the present study treats the film's dialogue as a linguistic corpus to analyse the segmental and suprasegmental aspects of Singlish using OT, thereby contributing to broader discussions of World Englishes and sociophonology in a mediated context.

This research studies the special features of Singaporean English, analyzing the distinguished elements from British English in terms of segmental and suprasegmental parts. This study is a phonological analysis based on the suprasegmental and segmental features that explores the elements using Optimality Theory and how the analysis represents the World Englishes identity. The World Englishes perspective is engaged to confirm the identity of postcolonial English, starting from Singaporean English as the former colonized country. By understanding the linguistic patterns of Singlish, it can be expected that the World Englishes identity is shaped.

Some of the previous works have discussed the phonological elements, but have limited them to postcolonial thought, especially when dealing with English variations. Cavallaro et al., for example, merely confirm that Singlish is different from Singaporean Standardized English (SSE) because Singlish belongs to Singaporean Colloquial English (SCE). The SSE tends to follow the standardized British English used by the Government in formal speech; meanwhile, SCE is an ordinary language used in the Singapore speech community, especially for informal use (2014). Siemund et al. add that Singlish represents the identity of a multilingual society; however, they do not further confirm its significance from the World Englishes community. From a more linguistic perspective, one of them is the study about adverbial *confirm* in Singlish that analyses the text message corpus and is influenced by Mandarin adverbial *kending* (Lim et al, 2024). Others study the identity construction based on the influence of L1 and L2 in Hong Kong (Chan: 2024), the Philippines English and language contact (Gonzales: 2017), global Englishes and Japanese English (Ishikawa: 2021), phonological features in Chinese English (Siqi & Sewell: 2012), and postcolonial English varieties in the Arab world (Al-Surmi: 2018). Although neither of these studies directly relates to the segmental and suprasegmental features and Optimality theory, they help to understand the basic concept of Singaporean English.

Furthermore, research on identity and World Englishes can be limited through the pedagogical perspective, especially on how English learners construct and negotiate linguistic identities in a classroom environment. A study on World Englishes and linguistic perspective is combined with the investment in teaching and learning English by encouraging the plural Englishes identity in the classroom (Johnson, 2019). Similar studies on World Englishes identity and pedagogy are conducted by constructing learners' identity (Zhang & Gonzales, 2024 & Yeh, 2013). One of the bridging theories between pedagogical and phonological theories is Ji's study. When it comes to the Optimality Theory, the study also unravels the relation between OT process and teaching learning methods, such as the non-native challenge to be able to be fluent in distributing the sentence stress. By knowing the hierarchy

level, the learning method can be optimized (Ji: 2021). These studies are therefore not convincingly employed the postcolonial theory in the concept of World Englishes.

The recent studies show the growing research interest in non-linguistic and linguistic areas combined with World Englishes and postcolonial studies, using Bhabha's *hybridity* concept. It is a condition when cultures and identities intersect, mostly due to colonial domination and resistance. Bhabha suggests that there is a "third space" rather than calling it a binary opposition. "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination..."(Bhabha, 1994). However, the linguistic perspective is somehow omitted.

Similarly, the works of OT analysis merely discuss the relation between OT itself and its acoustic validation; there is no further discussion relating to the macro linguistics, such as from the perspective of World Englishes. Ali, Omar, et al.(2025) use a contrastive study to examine the classical Arabic and English in the phonetic and phonological systems using OT and Praat software, which is part of acoustic phonetics. Again, this study does not further employ the significance of other perspectives relating to the comparative study as suggested in this paper.

The former and latter studies have quite similar elements of contrastive method, the OT, and its validation through acoustic phonetics using Praat software; however, this study further suggests that there are more comprehensive approaches to complement the study of these micro linguistics. This study, therefore, aims to add another perspective, which is not only micro linguistics, that is already significant, but also the macro linguistics, whether the result of the analysis builds the concept of postcolonial identity, or the Singlish authenticity in the dialogue of the film *Crazy Rich Asians*.

This paper, therefore, studies the film dialogue examined through the Optimality Theory (OT) by employing a constraint hierarchy (Prince & Smolensky, 1993, 2004) rather than a rule-based theory. The dialogue is considered the media representation of data compiled using a software assistant, which is AntConc, to gain 3-Gram phrases, and is further analyzed through the faithfulness and markedness constraints. Therefore, integrating OT and a postcolonial perspective, there are two research questions to be offered in this study:

1. How are constraint hierarchies described in the OT analysis?
2. How do they represent the postcolonial identity?

2. Methods

This study is limited to the use of language representatives instead of examining the Singaporean society. Data are considered as the media representation, where film dialogue was used to match the segmental and suprasegmental features in phonology. To identify these elements, 600 phrases were sorted out from the significant scenes, showing the rich sources of Singlish use, which were the family dinner scene, the party scene, the street food scene, and the family tradition scene. The scenes were chosen as they showed a high frequency of Singlish phrases used.

This mixed qualitative-quantitative approach, represented through the combination of corpus, OT, and acoustic phonetics, employs 600 phrases of 3-Gram, which were accessed through AntConc corpus software by selecting the particular scene's script, which was filtered automatically. At the same time, videos containing scenes were cut according to the phrases being used and converted into the WAV format. Further, the phrases, which were intentionally chosen, suggesting the minimum requirement of a phrase that could match the segmental and suprasegmental units, were transcribed using the OpenL software, based on the audio format. Lastly, Praat software was used to validate the OT analyses by matching them to the audio format, showing which constraints seen in the OT table matched the Praat result.

The constraints used were based on the faithfulness and markedness elements. The OT tables made the faithfulness constraint dominate the rank by prioritizing GEN (Generator), which assigns IDENT-STRESS (Identification Stress) the highest rank, followed by the markedness constraints, such

as MAX-SEGMENT (Maximum Segment). The EVAL (Evaluation) step satisfied the faithfulness constraints and was later validated using Praat software to confirm whether the OT table matches acoustic phonetics. This is how OT operationalised to validate whether Singlish was used authentically in the film dialogue.

3. Results and Discussion

The collaboration between segmental and suprasegmental features in analysing OT constraints enables comprehensive execution of both constraints. While suprasegmental features support the stress and rhythm patterns of Singlish, the segmental features envelop the pattern of articulation.

3.1. Constraint Hierarchy on the OT Tables

3.1.1. Suprasegmental Features in OT Tables

Phrases in the film dialogue exhibit Singlish patterns found in the secondary resources, namely, final rising intonation and a falling-rising tone in tag-like phrases (Chong, A. J., & German, J. S., 2023). The phrase *a little lost*, further transcribed as [ə 'lɪtəl lɒst], shows schwa in 'a', stress on the first syllable in 'little', which corresponds to TROCHEE in the *Markedness Constraints* element, and the phrase 'little lost' ['lɪtəl lɒst] which follows the FT-BIN rule or prosodic foot which has the rule that the first word is stressed and the next word is unstressed. The *faithfulness constraints* criterion is found in IDENT-STRESS, which ensures that there is no schwa so that the result violates the constraints, which can then be ranked according to its constraints by making candidates that are close to either *its faithfulness* or *markedness*, as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. The OT Table of Phrase *a little lost*

No	CANDIDATES	IDENTIN TONATION	TROCHEE	*CLASH	*FINA LI-ISE	RESULT
1	[ə 'lɪtəl lɒst↑]	✓	✓	✓	*	Optimal
2	[ə 'lɪ' təl lɒst↑]	✓	*!	*	*	
3	[ə 'lɪtəl lɒst↓]	*!	✓	✓	✓	
4	[ə 'lɪ' təl lɒst↓]	*!	*	*	✓	

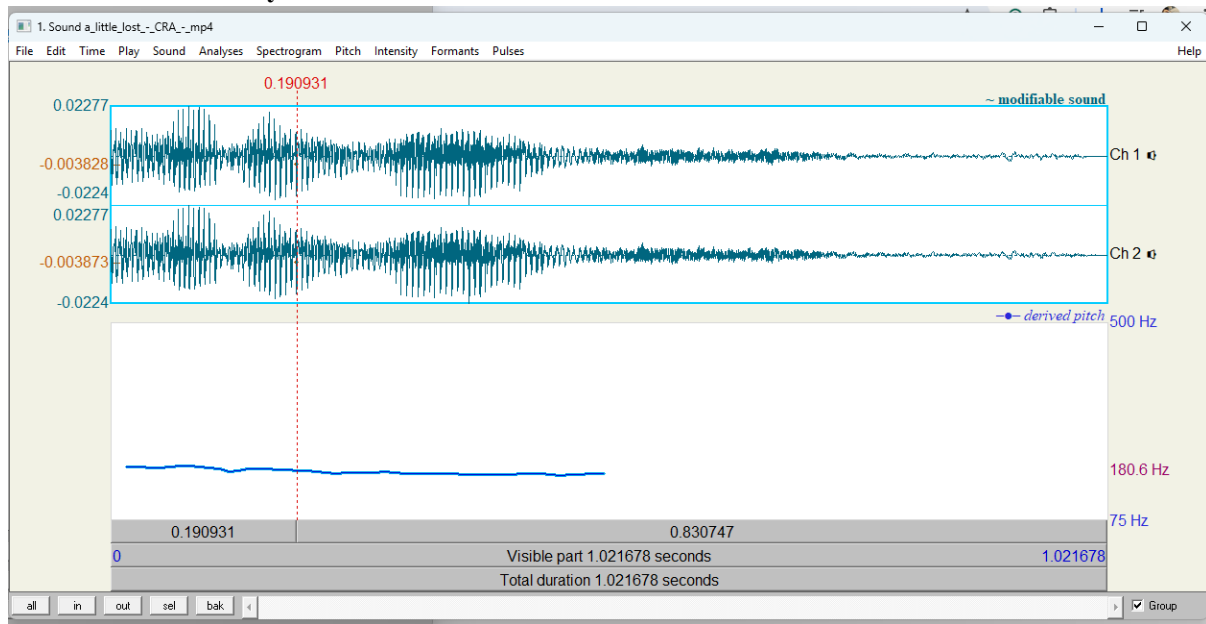
*: showing the violation

!: fatal violation, that violates the higher constraints, rejecting candidate automatically

*!: showing a fatal violation, which decides further elimination to the next constraint

This table defends the Singlish hierarchy which is presented in the UR, in order to have faithfulness constraints as the output. It highlights that the phrase *a little lost* has a rising intonation at the final position. However, the Praat analysis shows the contrast result, showing that the intonation tends to be flat at the end of the phrase, as seen in **Picture 1**.

Picture 1. Praat analysis of Phrase *a little lost*



The waveform suggests two different bursts of energy, followed by a significant decay, that can be assumed from the phrase *a little*. However, the word *lost* has a voiceless vibration, highlighting the lack of pitch movement, indicating flat intonation. Compared to the OT table, this Praat analysis fails to support it, thus can further be resulted in presenting the markedness constraints.

OT tables will always win over the hierarchy constraints, which are the faithfulness constraints. It happens in the phrase *are you pa?* /a:r ju:, pa?/, by acquiring IDENT-INTONATION for the faithful representatives, while ALIGN-R(%), CONTOUR, and SIMPLIFY-PITCH. Through this configuration, faithfulness constraints are positioned to be dominant: IDENT-INTONATION >> ALIGN-R(H%), CONTOUR, SIMPLIFY-PITCH, seen in **Table 2**.

Table 2. OT Table of Phrase *are you pa?*

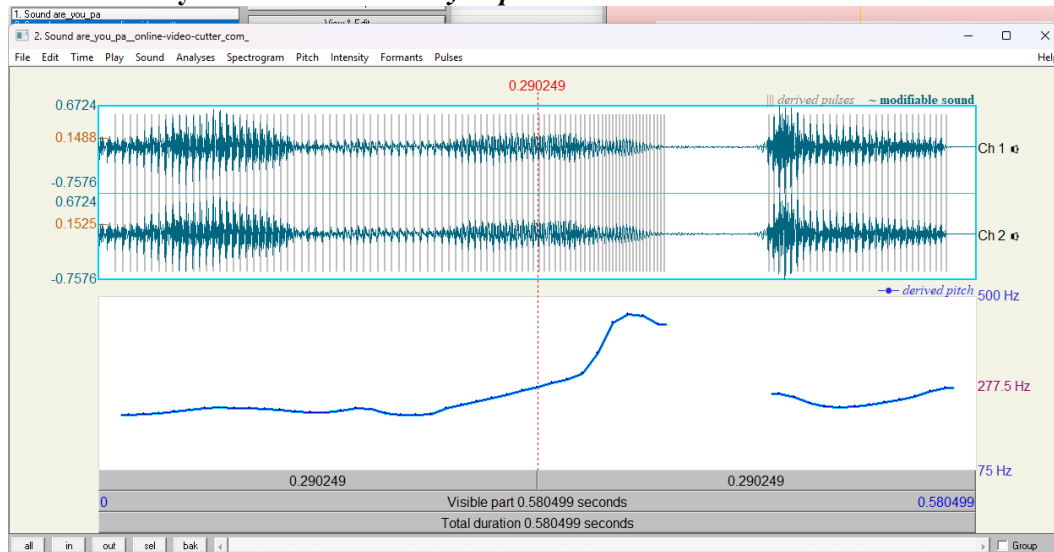
No	CANDIDATES	IDENTIN TONATION	ALIGNR (H%)	CONTOUR	SIMPLIFY-PITCH	RESULT
1	[a:r ju:, pa] →	✓	*!	*	✓	
2	[a:r ju:, pa]↑	✓	✓	✓	*	
3	[a:r ju:, pa]↓	✓	*!	✓	✓	
4	[a:r ju:, pa]↓↑	✓	✓	✓	✓	Optimal

*: showing the violation

!: fatal violation, that violates the higher constraints, rejecting candidate automatically

*!: showing a fatal violation, which decides further elimination to the next constraint

The UR presented in the table is *surface-informed*, allowing Singlish suprasegmental pattern becomes the main reference, which is the pattern of the falling-rising tag-like phrase. Similarly, this OT table analysis results in the faithfulness constraints as the optimal output. In addition, **Picture 2** as the result of Praat analysis supports the findings.

Picture 2. Praat Analysis of the Phrase *are you pa?*

The graphic in the picture shows the condition of the pitch, which is decreasing to the words *are you*, but continue to rise in the word *pa?*. The range of the pitch is in the scale 277.5 Hz, which is considered as middle level to the highest, indicating an expression of informal asking question or suggesting emotional expression in order to check someone's condition. Building this content, OT table integrates affection through the constraints of IDENT-INTONATION and ALIGN-R in the Singlish pattern of falling-rising to the tag-like phrase. Expectedly, the graphic supports the OT table by indicating the same pattern of falling-rising, resulting in the faithful domination.

Suprasegmental features in Singlish highlight the clear distinction of intonation, pitch, stress, and rhythm found in the film dialogue. By considering the OT constraints and its hierarchy, the authentic Singlish pattern can be validated and, further, be matched with the Praat analysis result. To make it comprehensive, the segmental features are also analyzed further.

3.1.2. Segmental Features in OT Tables

To be able to integrate the finding about Singlish authenticity in the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, the segmental features are considered.

The results of this study specify that segmental features in the Singlish phonology, such as voicing, vowel reduction, and stress realization, demonstrates settled patterns that are led by shifting constraint rankings processed through OT. For instance, in *had no idea*, the vowel reduction that happens in *had* [həd] is countered in *idea* [i' diə], where full vowel articulation is preserved. This pattern represents the dominance of markedness constraints REDUCE in unstressed functional words. However, the voicing /d/ in the phrase *did you guys* /dɪd ju gaɪz/ is devoiced to /t/, not becoming /dɪt ju gaɪz/, possibly influenced by code-switching or formal context within scripted dialogue. At this point, one might inquire if there are segmental features in Singlish, demonstrating a degree of faithfulness constraints, suggesting that Singlish patterns are not always straightforward.

The flexible patterns propose that Singlish phonology is not rigid, sticking to a single structural model, but agreeing on various patterns. This did not happen in suprasegmental features, but also in the segmental elements. To further explore the dynamic interplay between segmental and suprasegmental features, other examples can be conducted in the phrase *had no idea*.

The phrase *had no idea* is transcribed as [həd noʊ i' diə] and can be categorized as two elements, which are markedness and faithfulness constraints. In the markedness constraints, there is a REDUCE element, while faithfulness constraints offer IDENT-V, as it is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. OT Table of Phrase *had no idea*

Candidates	REDUCE	IDENT-V	STRESS-TO-WEIGHT	MAX-V	RESULT
[həd nou ɪ 'diə]	V	X	V	V	OPTIMAL
[hæd nou ɪ 'diə]	X	V	X	V	
[hɔ̄ nou ɪ 'diə]	V	X	V	X	

[həd] is considered optimal because it fulfills the REDUCE element, retaining the form as a function word and vowel, although it decreases the quality of the vowel from /æ/ to /ə/. Meanwhile, candidate [hæd] follows the faithfulness constraints but violates REDUCE and does not match with the unstressed position (STRESS-TO-WEIGHT). Moreover, [hɔ̄] as a consonant syllable may emerge in fast speech, but it is not optimal because it violates MAX-V as it deletes the vowel sound.

In addition, the phrase *Ah Ma thought* shows the hybrid words, representing a tendency to maintain non-English stress patterns, breaking English stress rules, such as TROCHEE while honoring IDENT-STRESS. The stress in the second syllables in *Ah Ma* is consistent with Chinese prosodic structures, showing that Singlish phonology embodies substrate language features systematically rather than randomly.

3.2. Constraints Representing Postcolonial Identity

3.2.1. Postcolonial Identity through Sociophonological Concept

More than phonological patterns of Singlish in the segmental and suprasegmental features, they represent a deeper construction of identity-based and cultural negotiation. Referring to Bhabha's hybridity theory, the linguistic patterns of Singlish result in a pattern of third space, which breaks the binary distinction between native and non-native. The choices of phonology patterns represent the sociophonological background, in this case Singlish speech community dealing with the colonialism tracking through stylization, enregisterment, and audience design.

Relating to the stylization, media in the represented data shows a style adjusted to language simplification. The suprasegmental and segmental Singlish in the film dialogue confirm that they tend to share the markedness constraints as the outputs. In addition, enregisterment works in the way OT and Praat processes are related to the social and cultural background of the Singaporean community, that are promoted through the global media. It results in the token of identity that is well-known globally, although back in the real community, the language used might be different. The last aspect is the audience design, which becomes the main goal of how local English in the Singaporean community is accepted by adjusting it to the global audience demand. It is integrated into stylization and enregisterment to validate the audience acceptance of Singlish which should be easy to understand. In other words, the markedness constraints accommodate the concept of audience design.

These three concepts, further, are discussed through the third space element. The in-between concept that Bhabha offers works in the same linguistic patterns, especially in the movie dialogue that recruits the Singlish speech community. Some patterns, such as *did you guys*, which is expected to be voiceless in /dɪt ju gaɪz/, remain faithful toward SSE. Similarly, the tag question *eh?* that uses a declarative phrase at the pitch end reframes the statement into a socially inclusive one compared to an interrogative intonation. Rather than showing that the phrase follows the standards, the third space concept focuses on the in-between position that is between standard and non-standard.

Nonetheless, this third space also implies the hidden power of colonial discourse, such as a legitimizing force in Hollywood's portrayal of multicultural identities in voiced reduction that does not happen in *Did you guys*. In this case, the "third space" is not free but negotiated within a power dynamic where particular English is prestigious and others are marked as the symbols of faithfulness and markedness constraints.

3.2.2. New Concept of Mimicry and Ambivalency in Postcolonial Identity

In this study, the World Englishes concept offers a phonological account of how localized English varieties develop and are secured. This concept, which is in line with Bhabha's hybridity, does not treat inner-circle norms as errors, instead, this study positions them as meaningful constraints. The data from the film *Crazy Rich Asians* can be seen as a representative of Singlish, as the localized English form in the global audience, since this movie belongs to Hollywood.

In addition, the Optimality Theory combined with the hybridity theory contributes to the structural mechanics of variation, and the theory of hybridity explains the sociocultural background. Although OT might be part of the structural paradigm, it becomes flexible rules. Therefore, the concept of "third space" can be matched with OT. Together, they illustrate how Singlish works within legitimate linguistic frameworks that favor both linguistic and cultural forms.

The markedness constraints which indicate the dominant outputs in the result of analysis determine how the shifting identity currently happens as the data representing the media supports the ambivalency concept by Bhabha. According to Bhabha's hybridity theory, the blending between Singapore Standard English (SSE) and Singlish is part of a binary opposition. In further reading, During (1998) states that "...relating to the global media, ambivalence results in many layers, not only between the colonial subject and object". In other words, it is an in-between space called "the third space" in which an identity is renegotiated and rearticulated from the native vs non-native forms. This is represented in *Crazy Rich Asians* as a product of linguistic hybridity and is even visible to a global audience under the Hollywood production that can be a shifting center in which Englishes assert their legitimacy. The patterns win the Singlish (SCE) from the SSE, indicating that the third space already existed.

In the film, some segmental processes favor markedness-driven outputs, which suggests that in certain sociolinguistic contexts, such as scripted media, formal interaction, or SSE influence, remain in the constraint hierarchy. This finding reflects that the hybrid identity to remain native does not mean to be not faithful to World Englishes, but rather it shows the position as the "third space," as Bhabha says that identity is not always in the center, but it is in between. This also offers a strategy to adapt to the global audience so that World Englishes study is flexible and raises awareness of multicultural identity.

The identity is formed through the patterns of OT, showing that most intonation, stress, and *Throchee* have Singlish patterns rather than SSE, which refers to British English. The SSE might be similar to BrE relating to the segmental and suprasegmental features; thus, it does not saliently use many of the Singlish suprasegmental features. To conclude, the Singlish-like segmental and suprasegmental features in *Crazy Rich Asians* demonstrate that the identity of English in a postcolonial context is not binary, but layered, fluid, and negotiated. The perspective of sociophonetic variability also shapes the speaker's identity. The choices are, once again, not random because they reflect familiarity, stance, and class distinction. This is in line with Pennycook's (2010) statement that Englishes in plural show not only linguistic matter but also social practices. This means that the linguistic system contributes to social meaning beyond grammar, such as solidarity, informality, and localness.

Singlish becomes the intentional choice rather than a language default that is seen through fully voiced consonants or lack of final consonant deletion. This reflects the intelligible and locally resonant. In this way, the Singlish representative in the movie titled *Crazy Rich Asians* can be considered as authentic yet strategic. It is authentic in the way Singlish is represented as proud local English, while the movie is promoted globally. This phenomenon also confirms Bhabha's hybridity theory, which is the notion of mimicry, meaning that it is the strategy of negotiating power when the community uses passive imitation. In other words, they do not significantly follow the standardized English.

However, Hollywood, as the film production house, should be considered when dealing with the use of Singlish in this film. The hybridity tends to have more standardized versions rather than the Singlish version. It can be seen from keeping the rhythm and pitch in the Singlish version, while glottal stops and extensive vowel reductions, as in standardized English, feel stronger. As a Hollywood production, this film wants to mix the use of local and standardized English to make the global audience familiar, which is part of the compromise.

Therefore, the accommodation of Singlish brought by the Hollywood background should be acknowledged because it shows how global production shapes the acceptance of local English. The Englishes can be validated when shown to be intelligible and commodifiable, raising questions about who has the authority to represent local English into the global. This also shows how postcolonial mindset works.

The relation between local authenticity and global intelligibility shows the complex negotiation that hybrid Englishes experience in transnational media. The phonological representative should be supported by the ideological claiming that the linguistic traits are suppressed to serve a broader narrative of identity, commodification, and cultural legitimacy. These dynamics highlight the urgency to analyze the framework that represents the structure and sociolinguistics.

By considering the analysis, the implementation of Optimality Theory in Singlish phonology from the perspective of World Englishes provides a multidimensional view on language variation. The segmental and suprasegmental features are assigned to demonstrate that Singlish is not a corrupted form of English, but a functional, identity-rich variety formed by historical, cultural, and linguistic elements.

4. Conclusion

During's extended reading toward Bhabha's ambivalence and hybridity adds global media as the new exposure forming a postcolonial identity. Technically, OT gives flexible prescriptive linguistics, while the theory of hybridity shows the ideological insight when showing the linguistic patterns. Together, these theories demonstrate that Singlish is not dealing with the language deviancy.

In addition, the intersection of language, identity, and postcoloniality in *Crazy Rich Asians* emphasizes how Singlish phonological variation is not just linguistic but indexical. This index means that the representative of suprasegmental features, such as flat pitch and stressed content words, serve as indexical cues that indicate social alignment, informality, and resistance to elite norms.

Still, it is in a third space that is a part of postcolonial identity that is performed, contested, and legitimized. This "third space" is the dynamic site of language negotiation where English serves as both the medium of identity performance and a battle for cultural legitimacy. Rather than forcing the absolute standard, it acknowledges Singlish as a natural and productive linguistic process because it is a contact language and a former British English colony.

It leads to the purpose of global exposure when exposing film dialogue in Singlish, which is to gain more audience globally by doing stylization, enregisterment, and audience global. Singlish is utilized to promote the film, yet the Singlish identity somehow becomes ambivalent since at one side it does not show the authenticity, instead it creates a new concept of Singlish identity performed in the global media.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the existence of Singlish in *Crazy Rich Asians* challenges the dominance of standard English in global media. Even though this film is under Hollywood production, the use of Singlish represents a forefront of Singaporean identity, contesting the ideology of linguistic purity, and returning to the postcolonial assertion of voice and agency.

Further research is highly suggested to gain more data from corpus software relating to phonological units. The 3-Gram phrases can be level up to 4-Gram or more to have comprehensive results in suprasegmental features. Other researchers can also compare the media such as local versus global media to examine the distinctive levels of curation.

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