How to use ‘aiyah’? Look it up online, lah

BY ZAKIR HOSSAIN

POSTGRADUATE law student Jack Lee, 35, speaks impeccable English. He always did.

But when he began his national service 17 years ago, in 1988, it was of little help. Often, he could not understand his platoon mates.

When they were not speaking Hokkien, they were not speaking Singlish. School student, he was from an upper middle-class family and his friends were all from English-speaking homes too.

Recalling his NS mates, he says: “I couldn’t grasp many of their expressions, so I started writing them down and finding out what they meant.”

That is how the book of Singlish phrases has now become the handbook of what is believed to be the first attempt at a formal online dictionary of Singlish in Singapore.

Modelling on the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), it lists meanings and pronunciation, as well as examples of where and how the words are used.

But what is Singlish?

Linguists, such as Professor Anthea Fraser Gupta of Britain’s Leeds University, see it as a dialect of Singapore English, with its grammar influenced largely by such languages as Hokkien and Malay.

Others say it is a language in its own right, with grammar rules that pay scant regard to the English taught in schools here.

For Mr Lee, Singlish can take a couple of forms.

It can be a word like “kiasu” (afraid to lose), that is used even in such formal settings as Parliament. Or it can be a sentence that does not follow the rules of English grammar. For example: “I fight in these fights before I was young that time.”

Back home on holiday from Birmingham, England, where he is doing his PhD in constitutional law, the bachelor said he began his project two years ago when he quit practising law.

So far, he has compiled more than 1,800 words and phrases. This surpasses the 917 words in the first online effort: the Concord Singlish Dictionary, started by writer Colin Goh in 2000 for his satirical site featuring Singlish articles, www.TalkingCock.com.

Laced with humour, Concord also appears in print and some 13,000 copies have been sold. Mr Goh says a revised edition due later this year will feature about 1,100 entries.

Mr Lee has no plans to do a print version. The work is not ready, he says; adding: “I would only feel comfortable putting it into print if people know what it is.”

Mr Lee's online dictionary fills a knowledge gap. Many people seem to need help understanding what is being said or to express consternation, despair, diatribe, exhaustion and so on.

blur n. 1. ignorance, stupid, slow to catch on. 2. Confused.

die-die same: Even if one has to die in the process, certainly, definitely.

eye power n. Use eye power: stand by and watch instead of participating or helping out.

lah bo: Used at the end of words or phrases for emphasis.

shik e. 1. Good, fantastic, superb, wonderful. 2. Comfortable, enjoyable, pleasurable. 3. Delicious

sukau n. & Country hampers, unplanned purchase.

On www.singlishdictionary.com, it appears as:

“Style a. [Eng. style] Stylish, fashionable. They have style机动车, they have style girls’/Phrases style-myle.”

However, lexicographer Vincent Ooi, an associate professor at NUS, wishes Mr Lee “will give more examples of how the words are used and include audio recordings of how they are pronounced.”

Whatever its flaws, the new online dictionary highlights Singaporians’ never-ending love affair with a controversial patois that seems to have received new energy from the blogging phenomenon.

Mr Goh, who is based in New York, also welcomed it, tagging it the “muugler toad” (kiasu Studios' companion) to his dictionary.

“However, I do know the two tacked on, the phrase “style motors”, “style fashionable” and its usage: “What, check out Ah Hing’s Volkswagen James! Since when he so stylo milo one.”

Mr Lee compiled a book of words and phrases, which later became the handbook of his online dictionary.

He said, noting that dialects continued to flourish alongside standard English in Brill’s, Barbados and Bermuda.

Highly-educated English speakers who take up the cause of Singlish can alienate the two, or are the ‘code-switch’. But those who cannot are disadvantaged, as, more jobs demand an adequate command of standard English.

Here are some entries from Mr Lee’s online Singlish dictionary:

rief n. A small amount, especially of something not ready to eat.


souvenir a. [Fr. souvenir] A token, a memento. They must not wish on Singaporeans.

Whatever the experts say, time has shown that Singlish will endure, especially in popular culture.

Because, in short: It’s shik to hear, lah.