

Building Names in Singapore: Multilingualism of a Different Kind

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Abstract

There has been much discussion about the ideological or political underpinnings of toponyms, e.g., Faraco and Murphy (1997) on Spain, Cohen and Kliot (1992) on the Israeli administered territories, Nash (1999) on the Irish Republic or Yeo (1992, 1996) on Singapore. The Israeli, Irish and Singaporean examples are different from the Spanish one in that the struggle is also expressed linguistically through the form of the names chosen. Yeo (1996) notes the preference for street names based on the Malay language in the 1960s as an expression of Singaporean political independence. In this paper, I examine the names given to residential buildings (condominiums) in Singapore: what kinds of names are used and the reasons for any patterns discerned. While street names are usually tightly controlled by municipal boards, building names are usually given freer rein, although they would still need governmental approval. Building names would therefore reflect the attitudes of the commercially powerful rather than those of the politically powerful. In the context of the Singaporean state ideology of multilingualism (Singapore has four official languages: English, Malay, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil) and multiracialism (and therefore multiculturalism), it might therefore be expected that the multilingual nature of the community might also be expressed in the building names accorded. The official languages are clearly not equal based on their degree of representation. Also of note is the presence of languages such as French and Spanish which do not form a part of the normal linguistic repertoire of a Singaporean.

1. Place Names

The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the first recorded use of *toponymy* in 1876 and defines it as ‘the place-names of a country or district as a subject of study’, usually to be distinguished from *anthroponymy* (dating from 1937). The term has since been extended to include the study of place-names of a town or city, and within it the names of streets. I intend to extend the term even further in this paper in asking us to consider the buildings or groups of buildings in streets. The practice of according house names (as opposed to numbers) is of course not new: ‘In the cities of early modern Europe the houses and shops almost all had names and signs’ (Garrioch 1994: 20), although these ‘did gradually disappear from Western European cities, generally some time during the second half of the nineteenth century’ (p. 39). Although the blame for this has often been put on the introduction of numbering systems, Garrioch asserts that what is more pertinent is that social conditions had changed, so that by that time ‘they no longer served the purposes for which they had developed’ (p. 39). In some places, even in big cities such as London and Britain in general, house names never completely died away, and this has been entertainingly discussed in Joyce Miles’s (2000) book. The issue receives more serious treatment in her thesis (Miles 1990).

It is on building names that I will focus in this paper; these will be buildings in Singapore because I want to examine the names from the perspective of language source as Singapore is an officially multilingual state with four official languages: English, Malay, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil. Like most places, almost all buildings are numbered so that names are technically optional. Some commercial buildings are named; many private residential apartment blocks (often called ‘condominiums’ or ‘condos’) are also named. This is in

contrast to so-called ‘public flats’, where the blocks of flats are usually just numbered. I will examine the names mainly for the kinds of language choices made.

One prominent way of examining place-names is to connect the toponymic choices to the dominant ideology and who holds political dominance at any particular point in time. Therefore, Faraco and Murphy (1997) demonstrate the link between the street names in Almonte in Spain and the different régimes in Spain in the 20th century. In a similar vein, Yeoh (1996) traces the evolution of street names in Singapore, and links particular preferences such as the use of Malay-based or Mandarin-based names to particular episodes in the development of Singapore. Cohen and Kliot (1992: 677) show how place-names can index community struggles; Hebrew names co-exist with Arabic names in the Administered Territories and this “highlights how Jewish and [Palestinian] Arab aspirations directly collide.”

This connection is, however, sometimes less clear cut and more tenuous. Nash (1999: 467), in discussing Irish place-names, resists the temptation of equating the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods with purity, erasure and recovery respectively. Simple models of power, culture or identity need to be resisted “in favour of the notion of language as a dynamic system of making and communicating meaning, and so also of reimagining culture as fluid and constantly in process.” Yeoh (1992) also examines how alternative street names co-existed with official ones in colonial Singapore and in doing so illustrates how names can constitute a dynamic system that is responsive to social needs.

The names of settlements, towns, districts and streets frequently require ratification. Street names, for example, are now tightly controlled in most places by municipal boards or council. This puts a lot of place-names very much in the public domain. Indeed, “One important difference between personal names and place names is that the former are widely perceived to belong to the private domain whereas the latter are perceived to belong to the public domain” (Tan 2007: 391). Building names seem to occupy a space between the public and private domain. In the UK in general, no approval is required for names given to houses provided the house number is displayed. In theory, in Singapore, approval needs to be sought for the naming of residential, commercial, industrial and mixed-use developments from the Street and Building Name Board (SBNB). (See “Explanatory notes on building name application.”) However, it would be fair that no-one would raise a fuss if a house name was displayed at an individual property. More attention would be given to larger buildings.

I propose to consider the data from a number of perspectives:

- (a) Geosemiotics: this is the term coined by Scollon and Scollon (2003) to refer how ‘There is a social world presented in the material world through its discourses – signs, structures, other people – and our actions produce meanings in the light of those discourses’ (p. 1). In other words, names need to be considered also in relation to the material reproduction in the form of signs, and these in interaction with other elements in the material world (including people), and the meaning-making process (semiotics). Particular choices made are therefore significant because they point towards (or are *indexical of*) underlying assumptions.
- (b) Evolution of World Englishes: I also want to use the data as a way into the issues that are of concern to those working on World Englishes; other labels like Non-Anglo Englishes (Tan et al. 2006) or Postcolonial English (Schneider 2007). Pertinent issues would be issues such as language shift or domain shift (towards English) as well as language change (leading to differentiated varieties of English). The data should be indexical of the inroads the English language has made and the extent of the division of labour between English and other languages for the purposes of naming.
- (c) Linguistic commodification: I also want to think in more sociolinguistic terms, but in particular how the data point towards how language is viewed as a commodity.

- (d) This study could marginally be said to be in the well-established area of language attitudes (see Garrett *et al.* 1983) because linguistic choices can be said to reflect attitudes towards particular languages, and perhaps more generally to attitudes towards official policies.

2. Data

The data used for the analysis are taken from the Condo Directory found in the website <http://condo.singaporeexpats.com/> which bills itself as “The No. 1 Property Portal in Singapore.” The data were retrieved on 31 January 2008 and a total of 2,599 names were retrieved. Accompanying the names is information about the street and number; the district; and the year the temporary occupation permit (TOP) was awarded. The names were then divided into five categories according to the TOP information, where P1=2000 onwards, P2=1990–99, P3=1980–89, P4=before 1980 and P0=nil. This will give some measure of periodisation. It must be said, though, that 39% of the items do not contain the TOP information, and we may assume that this would include older buildings.

I also distinguished between names that had their basis on the street name and those that did not. English-based names are significantly represented in street names in Singapore, although there was a period in the 1960s of favouring Malay-based names for new streets (see Yeoh 1996). Names that were based on street names might therefore be steered in a particular linguistic direction.

Each name was then assumed to be of a compound structure consisting of an obligatory main name and optional “sub-names” that could occur before or after the main name, whether or not these were orthographically separate words. Therefore, in *Belmondo View*, the main name is *Belmondo* and the “sub-name” is *View*; in *The Lumos*, the main name is *Lumos* and the “sub-name” is *The*; in *Casabella*, the main name is *bella* and the “sub-name” is *Casa*; and in *Vida*, the main name is *Vida* and there is no “sub-name”. The vast majority of the names contain at least one “sub-name”. There is a small number of cases where analysis is less clear-cut, and I have tried to make as sensible a decision as possible. In general, the “sub-names” belong to the class of determiners (such as *the* or French *la*) or nouns that are descriptive and generic as opposed to distinctive (such as *garden*, *park*, *view*, *casa* [‘house’ in Spanish], *ville*.) Some names have more than one “sub-name” such as *The Lincoln Modern*.

Both the main names and the “sub-names” were then analysed from the point of view of their linguistic source. Items from the general lexicon were generally unproblematic. In *Water Terrace* and *Cosy Lodge* therefore, the main name (*Water*, *Cosy*) as well as the “sub-name” (*Terrace*, *Lodge*) were analysed as having an English source. Place names or personal names associated with a linguistic group were also analysed as having a source in that language. Therefore, the main names of *Clydes Residence* or *Malvern Springs* are also analysed as having an English source (based on the river Clyde in Scotland and Malvern in the English Midland). Two books on street names (Dunlop 2000; Savage and Yeoh 2003) were useful for checking the sources of street names when they formed the basis of building names.

It is not always possible to assign one source: so, the name *Vida* is labelled as either Spanish or Portuguese (meaning ‘life’). On some occasions, particularly with coined names like *The Botanika*, it is not possible to identify the linguistic source. When combinations of letters or when Arabic or roman numerals are used (as in *2RVG*), it is also not possible to assign a linguistic source.

3. Geosemiotics

I will first of all examine building names from the point of view of geosemiotics as a way of contextualising building names in the way they are concretised in the form of signs which interact with other signs; and then considering how the patterns discerned are *indexical* of assumptions in the society.

According to Scollon and Scollon, there is interaction between

- the **social actor** and his or her habitus (this is based on Bourdieu's theory, and refers to the experience and knowledge of the social actor),
- the **interaction order** (this is Goffman's categorisation of how social actors interact with each other, for example, queuing, engaging in a conversation, buying and selling),
- the **visual** (and other discursive semiotics available for appropriation), and
- the **place semiotics** which necessarily includes all of the regulatory, infrastructural, commercial and even transgressive discourses positioned in that place (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 198).

Not all these categories will be referred to in the discussion; indeed the visual and place semiotics will be given further emphasis here. This examination is necessarily a limited one where I examine building names along two streets in close proximity: Arcadia Road and Hillcrest Road. The relevant building names are *The Arcadia*, *Hillcrest Arcadia* and *Hillcrest Villa*; and also a girls' school in the area. Here follows a series of 13 photos.



Fig. 1: Street name sign: Arcadia Road



Fig. 2: Building name of *The Arcadia* on a wall



Fig. 3: Another sign for the building name *The Arcadia*



Fig. 4: Building name of *Hillcrest Arcadia* on a wall



Fig. 5: A shop sign near the entrance to Hillcrest Arcadia



Fig. 6: A restaurant sign near the entrance to Hillcrest Arcadia



Fig. 7: Street name sign: Hillcrest Road



Fig. 8: Main hoarding for Hillcrest Villa



Fig. 9: A subsidiary hoarding at Hillcrest Villa



Fig. 10: A safety sign at Hillcrest Villa



Fig. 11: Multilingual sign on a wall for Raffles Girls' Primary School (RGPS), Hillcrest Road



Fig. 12: Banners at the fence at the entrance of RGPS



Fig. 13: A street sign for RGPS

We can make some observations from these figures.

- (a) Clearly, English is dominant in that it appears on all the signs that appear and will therefore constitute part of the social actor's habitus in Singapore. In many cases, it is the only language that is represented. From the point of view of the linguistic source of building names, English appears to be the only contributing language. English is also the only contributing language to all the official street signs for street names or the sign for the school.
- (b) The other official languages apart from English (Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil) make their appearance on the wall at the entrance of the school as well as on the safety sign, although the languages are ordered differently. However, other signs pertaining to the school (the banner and the street sign) are solely in English. Indexically, languages that appear first are primary languages. The topmost appearance of Malay in Fig. 11 might reflect the status of Malay as the *de jure* national language, whereas the topmost appearance of English in Fig. 10 might reflect its status as the *de facto* national language (see Alsagoff 2008). The topmost appearance of Chinese in the Arcadia Restaurant sign (Fig. 6) is symbolic and signals its status as a *Chinese* restaurant. The topmost appearance of Chinese in the China Construction sign (Fig. 9) might reflect the origin of that company.

4. Tendencies and patterns

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the naming tendencies, where the former provides the raw numbers and the latter the number in terms of percentages. The names are organised in terms of the period, and within that whether the names are based on the street name or not. The main names and the "sub-names" are then analysed according to the linguistic source.

| Period | N | Whether SB | Main name | "Sub-name" |
|----------|-------|---------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Period 0 | 1,013 | SB name: 376 | E: 228 M: 52 C: 50 T: 4 Misc: 42 | E: 347 |
| | | NSB name: 637 | E:444 M:27 C:113 T:2 Misc: 51 | E:590 (French: 26, nil: 10) |
| Period 4 | 47 | SB name: 25 | E: 22 M:1 Semitic:2 | E:25 |
| | | NSB name: 22 | E: 19 C:1 ?:1 E-Latin: 1 | E:20 ?:1 nil:1 |
| Period 3 | 262 | SB name: 105 | E: 71 M:9 C:9 T:1 Misc:15 | E:100 French:3 nil:2 |
| | | NSB name: 157 | E:114 M:6 C:12 Misc:25 | E:136 French:8 Spanish:5 nil:5 other:3 |
| Period 2 | 545 | SB name: 224 | E:155 M:33 C:14 T:2 Misc:20 | E:191 ?:8 French:14 Spanish:6 others:4 nil:1 |

| | | | | |
|----------|-------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | | NSB name: 321 | E:233 M:10 C:17 French:11 Spanish:8 Italian:5 ? :13 others:24 | E:284 French:16 Spanish:12 ? :2 mixed:5 nil:2 |
| Period 1 | 732 | SB name: 236 | E:194 M:12 C:7 T:3 ? :6 Semitic:3 French:2 Spanish:2 Dutch:1 German:1 Burmese:3 mixed:2 | E:181 C:1 M:2 ? :28 mixed:9 French:12 Spanish:2 nil:1 |
| | | NSB name: 496 | E:340 M:14 C:12 ? :36 French:19 Italian:19 Spanish:16 Portuguese:5 Latin:4 Greek:3 other European:8 mixed:17 others:3 | E:383 M:3 ? :9 French:31 Spanish:9 mixed:11 Italian:1 Latin:1 Romance:2 nil:46 |
| TOTALS | 2,599 | SB: 966 NSB: 1,633 | E:1,820 M:164 C:226 T:12 | E:2,416 |

Table 1: Distribution of building names: raw figures.

N=Number of observations; SB=street-based; NSB=non-street-based; E=English; M=Malay; C=Chinese; T=Tamil.

| Period | % of total | % whether SB of period | % main name language of SB/NSB names | % "sub-name" of SB/NSB names |
|----------|------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Period 0 | 39.0 | SB name: 37.1 | E: 60.2 M: 13.8 C: 13.3 T: 1.1 | E: 92.3 |
| | | NSB name: 62.9 | E:69.7 M:4.2 C:17.7 T:0.3 | E:92.6 (French: 4.1, nil: 1.6) |
| Period 4 | 1.8 | SB name: 53.2 | E: 88.0 M:4.0 Semitic:8.0 | E:100.0 |
| | | NSB name: 46.8 | E: 86.4 C:5.4 ? :5.4 E-Latin: 5.4 | E:90.9 ? :5.4 nil:5.4 |
| Period 3 | 10.1 | SB name: 40.1 | E: 67.6 M:8.6 C:8.6 T:1.0 | E:95.2 French:2.9 nil:1.9 |
| | | NSB name: 59.9 | E:72.6 M:3.8 C:7.6 | E:86.6 French:5.1 Spanish:3.2 nil:3.2 other:1.9 |
| Period 2 | 21.0 | SB name: 41.1 | E:69.2 M:14.7 C:6.3 T:0.9 | E:85.3 ? :3.6 French:6.3 Spanish:2.7 others:1.8 nil:0.4 |
| | | NSB name: 58.9 | E:72.6 M:3.1 C:5.3 French:3.4 Spanish:2.5 Italian:1.6 ? :4.0 | E:88.5 French:5.0 Spanish:3.7 ? :0.6 mixed:1.6 nil:0.6 |
| Period 1 | 28.2 | SB name: 32.2 | E:82.2 M:5.1 C:3.0 T:1.3 ? :2.5 Semitic:1.3 French:0.8 Spanish:0.8 Dutch:0.4 German:0.4 Burmese:1.3 mixed:0.8 | E:76.7 C:0.4 M:0.8 ? :11.9 mixed:3.8 French:5.1 Spanish:0.8 nil:0.4 |
| | | NSB name: 67.8 | E:68.6 M:2.8 C:2.4 ? :7.3 French:3.8 Italian:3.8 Spanish:3.2 Portuguese:1.0 Latin:0.8 Greek:0.6 other European:1.6 mixed:3.4 others:0.6 | E:77.2 M:0.6 ? :1.8 French:6.3 Spanish:1.8 mixed:2.2 Italian:0.2 Latin:0.2 Romance:0.4 nil:9.3 |
| TOTALS | 2,599 | SB: 37.2 NSB: 62.8 | E:70.0 M:6.3 C:8.7 T:0.5 | E:93.0 |

Table 2: Distribution of building names: percentages.

We can note some tendencies:

- (a) Main names are predominantly English-based and account for 70% of the main names and 93% of the "sub-names".

- (b) Street-based and non-street-based names are roughly in a ratio of 40:60, and they do not seem to affect the proportion of English-based building names. In general, Malay seems to have a higher representation in street-based names. This might be to do with Malay having a higher representation than Chinese as a result of the ‘Malayanization’ policies of the 1960s (Yeoh 1996).
- (c) The official languages are represented although Tamil names receive meagre representation: e.g.,
- a. Eng Hoon Mansions (Hokkien Chinese: given name of a 19th-century Chinese merchant + English) > Eng Hoon Street
 - b. Mei Hwan View (Mandarin Chinese: beautiful palace garden + English) > Mei Hwan Drive
 - c. Duku Apartment (Malay: local fruit + English) > Duku Road
 - d. Kovan Melody (Tamil: *kovan* > *govan*, herdsman + English) > Kovan Road
- It might also be noted that non-official forms of the official languages might also be used: *Eng Hoon* is the non-official Hokkien Chinese, rather than Mandarin Chinese; and *Mei Hwan* uses a non-official romanization of Mandarin Chinese.
- (d) The vast majority of names contain “sub-names”, although a recent trend is to use “sub-nameless” names. English is even more highly represented in “sub-names” than main names and constitutes the source of 93% of “sub-names”.
- (e) There appears to be a steady increase in foreign names. In the past, there were representative foreign names often as a result of street names based on toponyms in the British empire (e.g., Burma: Mandalay Court > Mandalay Road; Bassein Court > Bassein Road) or prominent denizens (e.g., the Armenian Sarkies brothers who founded Raffles Hotel: Sarkies Mansions > Sarkies Road). Some of the more recent buildings have names based on French, Spanish and Italian, with very little apparent local relevance, although sometimes they are translations of the street name:
- a. Papillon (French: butterfly) > Jalan Rama Rama (Malay: butterfly)
 - b. Montebieu (faux French: mount blue) > Minbu Road (phonological similarity; Burmese toponym). This is slightly more complicated because of the choice of *monte* instead of *mont*. Of course, *monte* could arguably be Italian, Spanish or Portuguese; or is a joke with a play on French *monte* (‘copulation’). It could also be plain ignorance. We shall never know.
 - c. Le Reve (French: The dream – presumably *rêve* is intended) – no apparent local relevance
 - d. Nuovo (Italian: new) – no apparent local relevance
 - e. Alessandra (Italian form of Alexandra) > Alexandra Road
 - f. Ventuno Balmoral (Italian: twenty-one) > building number 21 (Balmoral Road)
 - g. Costa del Sol (Spanish toponym: sun coast)
- (f) Also noteworthy is the fact that consistency is not always aimed for. Apart from the approximations towards a particular language (as in Montebieu, mentioned above), the building names are a mix of a range of sources.
- a. Casa Merah (Spanish: house + Malay: red) > Tanah Merah Kechil Avenue
 - b. Chuan Villas (Mandarin Chinese: river + English) > Chuan Close
 - c. Mutiara Crest (Malay: pearl + English) > Jalan Mutiara (jalan = Malay: road)
 - d. Le Wood (French: the + English)
 - e. Tierra Vue (Spanish: earth + French: view)
- (g) Among the more recent names, a noticeable tendency is to coin new names, constituting 7.3% of main names that are not street based in Period 1:
- a. Viz @ Holland
 - b. Mandale Heights > Mandalay Road [phonological similarity to street name, and *dale* is a possible “sub-name”]

- c. The Beccagayle (probably two given names Becca [>Rebecca] + Gayle)
- d. The Sensora: probably English *sense* with a made-up ending, probably also to look 'Continental'
- e. The Inspira: probably a shortening of English *inspiration* (*inspira* could be conjugated forms of the French verb *inspirer* or Italian *inspirare*, but unlikely as it is used as a noun), probably to look 'Continental'

Some of these could perhaps have private meanings, not accessible to the outsider, and could be described as anti-language, a term coined by linguist Michael Halliday (1978).

5. Comments and discussion

- (a) From the statistical information provided, and the images of name signs in relation to other signs in the vicinity, English-based signs occupy a dominant position. In relation to street names, Yeoh notes that 'people preferred road signage and residential addresses in English, the language of the colonial masters, which they perceived as neutral if not superior' (1996: 302). For the social actor in Singapore, we can say that English-based signs constitute part of the *habitus*, although the presence of Chinese-based signs points towards social and class differentiation within the community. As Bourdieu puts it,

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu 1990: 53)

- (b) The dominance of English also suggests a strengthening of the position of English in its evolution and taking root in Singapore, following Schneider's (2007) Postcolonial English thesis. Names very much form part of the identity construction of social groups.
- (c) On the other hand, the language shift phenomenon can also be seen negatively as the case of major languages causing the 'language death' of minor languages: English is a 'killer language' (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).
- (d) This does not, however, explain the increased predilection for names based on French, Italian or Spanish as these are languages not generally spoken in Singapore. Their use can be related to the reasons for employing what is known as 'decorative English' in places like Japan or Korea. McArthur defines this as the term for

English used as a visual token of modernity or a social accessory on items of clothing, writing paper, shopping bags, pencil boxes, etc., in advertising, and as notices in cafés, etc. The messages conveyed are 'atmospheric' rather than precise or grammatical, as in 'Let's sport violent all day long'. Use of decorative English appears to centre on Japan, but has spread widely in East Asia and elsewhere. (McArthur 1992: 281)

It is of course not impossible that some of the English-based names, as well as the French-, Italian- and Spanish-based ones, are also decorative in nature. Using Bourdieu's notion of capital which should extend beyond the economic, we might consider the notion of *linguistic capital*, where languages may be pitted against each other, some claiming further advantage in the light of globalisation and other social forces. Ultimately then, languages are commodified.

- (e) Finally, the *mélange* of official, non-official languages and anti-language in the names, and even within individual building names can be seen as cocking a snook at the official multilingual policy. (The American term for cocking a snook is 'thumbing one's nose'.) Russian thinker Bakhtin describes this situation of many-

languagelessness as *heteroglossia*. Central to his view is the fact that there are many voices, many Others in what he calls *dialogism*. Established and powerful voices can therefore become subverted, and the principle of the carnival infuses culture.

Bakhtin made it plain that Carnival was not simply to be found in revelry or riots, but also in everyday speech, conceptions of the body, and so on. As the dialogical Other of official culture, Carnival must always be present; it contaminates the supposedly monological utterances of the powerful. Carnival may be a weakened force, but its currents still run through popular culture. In this sense, we should be looking for elements of everyday life which can become 'Carnivalised', just as novelty refers to Carnivalised literature: open to the play of dialogue, resisting the 'last word'. (Hollaway and Kneale, 2000: 81)

The *carnavalesque* spirit can be said therefore to inhabit the linguistic *mélange* of building names.

6. Conclusion

The building names present clear patterns with the establishment of a clear dominance of English as a source language. In an officially multilingual state, the other official languages do get a look in but not very evenly, partly as a result of the different perceived values of these languages. What has begun to emerge too is the establishment of continental languages, particularly French, Italian and Spanish, as source languages for naming which seems to run against the official multilingual policies, and even 'Carnivalise' them.

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