

*Is that how we really talk?*

*Speech reporting in Singaporean writing in English*

by

Peter K W Tan

Relaying messages is something that we all know is fraught with complications, and possibly complicities, particularly if the person relaying the message is unsympathetic or even hostile. And of course, the person need not even be that: the content can be innocently changed or refocused. The end result is something that could be very different from what was originally intended. Those of us who have dealings with the press or the media at large are only too aware of being 'misquoted' or 'quoted out of context' or just 'misrepresented'.

Almost all fiction writers assert the importance of a sense of time and place, more so writers of so-called New Literatures including Post-Colonial Literature, or formerly called Commonwealth Literature. The mass marketing strategies of publishers have sometimes forced writers to deliberately represent the experiences of post-colonial writers as 'other', and to exoticise or romanticise themselves, their experiences or their practices as quaint or amusing (see Su). This is what sells, and the logic of the argument is: why should anyone from say Britain or America buy your novel if it doesn't provide interesting and exciting local colour? This kind of a tension is faced especially by post-colonial writing *in English* (see Miller) because of the status of English as a global language. (This label is becoming increasingly popular: see Crystal.) For some post-colonial writers like Ngugi, writers are already compromised whenever they choose to write in the English language. The history of the English language, however, suggests that it is indeed possible to appropriate what was the language of another community to make it your own. Non-Anglo-Saxon communities in the

British Isles, North America and Australia can express their identity through the English language, and there doesn't seem to be a strongly compelling reason to suggest that the English language cannot express Singaporean identity.

Even if the attempt was not to exoticise or romanticise, writing in English immediately sets him or her up against the whole weight of the English tradition, as it were. We will be haunted by the ghosts of Richardson, Austen, Dickens, the Brontës, George Eliot, Hardy, Woolf and the rest. This is Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence', if you like. One obvious way in which one sets oneself up as being distinct and different is the time and place again, so that these features would tend to be foregrounded rather than backgrounded in post-colonial writing.

This sense of time and place, this verisimilitude, could of course be conveyed in a range of ways. What I am concerned about is whether or not linguistic distinctives have been used as a way of conveying this sense of time and place, the provision of 'local flavour'. I want to focus on speech representation of characters in novels, rather than the language of authors or narrators because there tends to be a certain amount of conservativeness when it comes to the language of narrators, perhaps impressed upon by the weight of the tradition. The consensus seems to be to reject large-scale manipulation of the narrator's language. The only exception to this is perhaps Cher's *Spider Boys*; here is a paragraph from the first chapter:

Kwang and Kim grow up like sweethearts in the house with the bamboo deck their fathers built together. Ah Hock's daughter, Kim, like to watch him blew wind at the female to sit still, and thumbs the bum gently on a flat tin box supported by four fingers underneath. Then let out a male from another box to hop in. At the sight of her,

the sex-hungry male will raise its arm in a frenzy to seek entry under Kwang's thumb, which make the female wriggles about, like pleading, 'Help me ...! Help me ...!' to the desperate male under the blinking eyes of Kwang and Kim watching the actions.

(2)

Unusual in this passage is the use of what has been described as 'broken-English street slang' (Hughes) not by the characters but by the narrator. However, the problem with the narrator's language is that it is highly inconsistent in the inflectional markings for verbs. In the real street slang of Singapore (commonly known as Singlish or, in linguistic treatments, colloquial Singapore English), inflectional markings are optional. We see this in *Kwang and Kim grow up* (instead of *grew up* in Standard English), *Ah Hock's daughter, Kim, like to watch* (instead of *liked to watch*), etc. However, we also see inflectional markings where these are not necessary in Standard English. We see this in *watch him blew wind* (instead of *blow wind*) or *make the female wriggles about* (instead of *wriggle about*). This makes the language sound inauthentic to the ears of Singaporeans. The language of the novel therefore strikes the English-speaking Singaporean as highly problematic; for this reason, I will focus on characters' speeches instead.

Authors and (implied or non-implied) narrators have this role of conveying what characters have supposedly said to their readers. The only problem is that these are fictional characters, so that whilst journalists, for example, can be challenged for misreporting someone's speech (see Waugh; Yitzhak & Nir; Semino *et al.*), authors or narrators cannot be so easily challenged for something that has no 'existence' outside of its fictional, textual context of the novel. And yet, what I argued for above was that there was still an attempt at verisimilitude,

so that novelists are faced with this challenge of representing something in a believable fashion, in spite of its lacking prior existence.

If the language of the narrator is not the one to be manipulated, authors can still do two things.

Firstly, they can still manipulate the modes of speech representation (*eg* direct speech, free indirect speech, indirect speech), and seek to diverge from the conventional norms so as to be distinct. This is something I examined elsewhere (Peter K. W. Tan, ‘Speech representation in Singaporean English novels’), to conclude that the modes used by Singaporean authors closely parallel those of British authors as examined by Semino *et al.*, based on their Speech and Thought Presentation Corpus. By and large, they all favour direct speech and free direct speech as the mode of representation. (See also Leech & Short; and Rimmon-Kenan.)

Secondly, writers might also attempt to Singaporeanise the speech of their characters. There are a number of ways in which this could be done. For many, the obvious thing to do is to put in lexical items that pertain to the local scene: place names, local cuisine and costumes, and the like. We can see this, for example, in this extract from a poem by Ee Tiang Hong.

All along the straight road from Tranquerah  
to Pantai Kundor; in the bustle and the squalor  
of Petaling Street and Jalan Thamby Abdullah;  
from Dunearn Road to Tekkah; in the pungent  
maze of Geylang Serai and Serangoon Road –  
they will not cease to haunt, concern.

(Ee, 'For Wong Lin Ken', *Nearing a Horizon*, 4)

There is obviously a strong sense of space here. We can say that the poem is in some sense Singaporean because of the Singaporean place names in it ('Dunearn Road', 'Tekkah' [informal for the Zhujiao Centre], 'Geylang Serai' and 'Serangoon Road'). It does, however, contain the names of districts in Malacca ('Tranquerah' and 'Pantai Kundor') and streets in Kuala Lumpur ('Petaling Street' and 'Jalan Thamby Abdullah') in Malaysia. We could also add that the poet lived in Singapore for a number of years or that the volume was published in Singapore. None of these, however, are sufficient conditions to label a particular work as Singaporean.

What we might notice, however, is that the grammar is still very much that of Standard English. It therefore also follows that another way of Singaporeanising the language is to be innovative with the grammar. Gupta describes colloquial Singaporean English (CSE) or Singlish as being distinct from Standard English (StdE) (including Standard Singaporean English) in its grammar. In particular, CSE can be identified by the following features.

1. The presence of CSE particles, including *lah*, *ah*, *hor* and *what* (as in 'What time ah?')
2. The presence of subjectless verb groups (as in 'Still got fever?')
3. The presence of conditional clauses without subordinating conjunctions (as in 'Disturb him again I call Daddy to come down')
4. The deletion of the verb *to be* (as in 'Where pain?')
5. The lack of inversion or the auxiliary in interrogatives (as in 'Where you go?')
6. The lack of verbal inflections (for tense, etc.) (as in 'Yesterday I go McDonald's')
7. The lack of noun inflections (for the plural and possessive) (as in 'So many car')

8. The lack of complex verb groups ('She go there three years already' rather than 'She has been going there for three years')

(Gupta 124-125)

Gupta adopts a framework based on Ferguson's High and Low distinctions within diglossia. In this case, CSE corresponds to the Low variety, used for informal occasions. Although CSE and StdE are represented as distinct categories, Gupta stresses that these represent tendencies: '[I] use a polar terminology which speaks of movement towards [CSE] or towards StdE' (Gupta 127). I wish to emphasise this because English in Singapore is a rich entity which will vary depending on the speaker's race, education, ethnicity, social class and so on, and this is something English-speaking Singaporeans will be sensitive to. (Talib, however, prefers to use another framework based on lects; the framework does not, in any case, affect my argument.) The question remains, therefore, whether grammatical distinctiveness is something that Singaporean writers might capitalise on to realise 'Singaporeanness'.

I have chosen to examine two highly contrastive Singaporean writers – the old hand Catherine Lim and the new-comer Hwee Hwee Tan. Specifically, I will examine Lim's 1999 collection of short stories entitled *The Howling Silence* and Tan's 1997 novel *Foreign Bodies*.

Tan's *Foreign Bodies* is set mainly in Singapore. The main protagonist, Mei is a young lawyer who agrees to represent Andy, a young Englishman working in Singapore as a schoolteacher, when he gets arrested masterminding a football gambling syndicate. The story is told mainly from the perspectives of Mei and Andy, and occasionally of Eugene, a mutual friend.

What is especially noteworthy of *Foreign Bodies* is that CSE itself is discussed in the novel.

I explained to Andy that though people like me and Eugene could speak perfect English, we reserved our ‘proper’ English for foreigners, job interviews and English oral exams. With friends or family, we always used Singlish, that is, Singapore slang ... we spoke Singlish, because with all its contortions of grammar and pronunciation, its new and localized vocabulary, Singlish expressed our thoughts in a way that the formal, perfectly enunciated, anal BBC World Service English never could. Besides, who wants to talk like some O level textbook, instead of using our own language, our home language, the language of our souls? (Hwee Hwee Tan, 7–8)

Given this kind of a pronouncement, we might therefore expect more CSE to be foregrounded in the novel. We might, however, like to take note at this point that the proclamation about CSE being ‘the language of our souls’ is in Standard English. We therefore get snippets of CSE-like speech, where again, the language gets foregrounded in the first sentence.

Eugene answered the phone with a fancy BBC English accent – ‘Hello, this is the Lee residence, Eugene Lee speaking,’ but once he recognized my voice, he slipped back into Singlish – ‘*Wah leow* woman, you know what time it is now? We’re not living in the same time zone any more. Why you call me so late?’

‘Andy was arrested last night.’

‘Hah, what?’

‘For being the head of a soccer gambling syndicate.’

‘Wha-what? Andy can’t even buy *milk* without getting lost, how can he run a syndicate? No. It can’t be. What about the other punters? Did anyone else get arrested?’ (85)

Eugene, we are told, starts off with StdE before reverting to CSE. This can be seen in the use of the exclamation *Wah leow* (usually spelt *wah lau*), and also the lack of the auxiliary for the interrogative ('you know what time' instead of 'do you know what time'; and 'Why you call me' for 'Why did you call me'). However, this seems to be the extent of the use of CSE. The rest of the passage appears to be in StdE. (Note, for example, the StdE construction for the interrogative at the end of the passage.) We might also note that when Eugene chastises Mei and demands a reason for the late phone call at the beginning of the passage, the tone is that of banter. This is ironic, even self-deprecating and perhaps also self-conscious speech. Once they move into the more serious topic of Andy's arrest, the talk takes place in StdE. If CSE can only be used for non-serious topics, we can rightly be sceptical about Mei's earlier proclamation that this is the 'language of our souls'.

The only characters from whom we hear more CSE are Mei's parents, as in the following interaction between Mei's father and Mei.

'Can't I get you anything? Any book you need, I can buy for you, even if I have to order it from England. Money no problem. I never regret any money I spend on my child.'

'I just don't want anything from you, nothing you can buy will make me feel good about you.'

'Why you learn from your mother to be so petty, so *xiao pi chi*? Sometimes I do a little thing wrong, then a whole week you just sulk, sulk, sulk.'

'Shut up and leave me alone.'



‘You talk to me like that and I’ll punch you. Why you treat me like that, no respect?’

‘It’s because you’re a cancerous polyp on the penis of humanity.’

‘Why? I do everything to help you. Who made you hate me so much? I’ve done nothing bad to you. I don’t know what made you like that.’

‘That’s your problem,’ I said. ‘It’s never your fault. If anything screws me up, it’s because of the church, or TV, or the English education system. I’ve got nothing to say to you if you keep pretending you’ve never done wrong.’ (162)

The encounter is antagonistic, which is fairly typical of child-parent encounters in the novel. Mei uses StdE consistently, in contrast to Mei’s father. Mei’s father’s talk is also punctuated with an instance of codeswitching (*xiao pi chi*, or in standard Mandarin transliteration *xiao piqi*, means ‘short tempered’). We can take note of Mei’s father’s interrogatives which lack the auxiliary verb (‘Why you learn ...’, ‘Why you treat ...’). The CSE style, however, does not seem to have been used consistently (we see a complex verb group: ‘I ve done nothing bad ...’; and a verb inflection: ‘I don’t know what made you like that’). The reader is probably not meant to notice the inner inconsistency in Mei’s father’s speech, but to notice the contrast between Mei’s style and her father’s style. The key to the difference seems to lie on the allusion Mei makes to her father’s suspicion of the English education system – by which she means English-medium education (as opposed to Chinese-medium education). Apparently then, Mei’s father is made to use CSE to signal his having been educated in Chinese and therefore has not fully acquired StdE.

When we move in Lim’s *The Howling Silence*, we seem however to inhabit a different world altogether – both literally and figuratively – as this is a collection of short stories, held

together by the common thread of all of them featuring the visitation of ghosts. The language used does not receive so strong a focus as in *Foreign Bodies*, but we are told about the use of English on a couple of occasions: ‘He speaks some English’ (28) and

I spoke aloud, in English which I hoped they would understand; after all, it is the working language in Singapore and the language of communication among its diverse ethnic groups. (86)

The use of English itself, not just CSE as in *Foreign Bodies*, is targeted for comment and explanation – it is the working language and the inter-ethnic language. All this presupposes that the use of English is unexpected, and that most of the dialogue in the volume would originally have been in some other ‘native’ language, translated into English, and significantly, StdE. There is only one exception is when the non-English language (in this case Hokkien) is given in its original form (in italics, of course), and this is quickly explained by the narrator.

‘*Siow,*’ they complained privately to each other, meaning that he was crazy and not behaving with the decorum and dignity expected of old age. (13)

Only one character, Vellu the gardener, is shown speaking CSE:

Vellu looked puzzled and said, shaking his head, ‘No, no. I see Miss Ooi only just now. Miss Ooi walking there,’ pointing to the spot, near her office, ‘and she say “Good morning, Vellu.” ’ (96-97)

(His speech lacks the past-tense inflection for the verbs *see* and *say*; *is* is omitted in ‘Miss Ooi walking there’.) CSE is used, presumably, to indicate Vellu’s low-status position and his lack of education (like Mei’s father in *Foreign Bodies*).

What we see therefore is a greater use of CSE in *Foreign Bodies* than in *The Howling Silence*. Although it is doubtful that CSE lives up to the language-of-our-souls status in the former, there is greater use of it there, frequently signalling self-deprecation or a non-English educational background. In contrast, there is only one occasion when CSE is used in the latter.

What makes for this contrast? Su, in her survey of Singaporean writing, emphasises generational differences. This is clearly relevant in the case of Lim, born 1942, and Tan, born 1974. It is Lim’s experience of colonial Malaya that made her say in her autobiographical account *Meet me on the Queen Elizabeth 2!*:

Yes, I speak some English. It is not my native language but an imposed colonial language which I suppose I speak well enough to communication with any well-meaning gentleman on the QE2. (103-104)

If it is not your language, then it is clearly not yours to manipulate. If this is anything to go by, it certainly looks as if we will be seeing greater linguistic manipulation in characters’ speech in the new generation of writers, who will begin to see English less and less as a colonial language or even just an ‘official language’ or ‘working language’, but more and more as a native language.

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