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## **Catering to Multiple Audiences: Language Diversity in Singapore's Chinatown Food Stall Displays**

### **ABSTRACT**

The visibility of bilingualism and multilingualism has increased in the urban landscape of major cities, a phenomenon commonly attributed to a globalized world economy, increasingly fluid national boundaries, and the subsequent contact between people, languages, and cultures. This is no truer than in countries such as Singapore, which has a history of cultural multilingualism driven by economic imperatives. Our study employs a mixed methods approach to present the diversity of language variation on signboards in Singapore's Chinatown having resulted from the area's culture and history, which dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Following our examination of display practices, we observed that the dominant languages represented were Chinese and English, while the other official language (in this case, Tamil) was represented. Chinese dialects such as Hokkien and Cantonese, which were transliterated, were also widely represented. Reasons and explanations for the chosen languages on the signboards were elicited through consultations with hawkers. As a result, this study found that the exclusivist use of Chinese together with Chinese dialects is associated with an ethnic affiliation and territoriality commonly encountered in ethnically-marked neighborhoods, while the global language of English is used as a commodity catering to foreign and non-Chinese patrons.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, Singapore, Chinatown, bilingualism, multilingualism

### **Introduction**

Globalization is occurring in major cities around the world. This phenomenon has many effects on languages including: (a) the development of new language

patterns (i.e., internet slang) and practices (i.e., writing on Facebook) resulting from the rise of the Internet as a major virtual social platform; (b) the spread of new varieties of English that are spoken widely by language users; and (c) the occurrence of language diversity due to urban migration and global networking (Kroon, Blommaert, & Jie, 2014). With the frequent migration of various language users and the invention of technologies such as smartphones and tablets, certain languages are becoming *lingua franca* in major cities. Nevertheless, the local languages in those cities are still regularly used by locals, which leads to the increased visibility of bilingualism and multilingualism in the urban landscape and demonstrates the impact of modernity and a globalized lifestyle.

According to the literature in the field of linguistic landscape, most research on such dynamics have concentrated on urbanized Western societies, such as Friesland and the Basque Country (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006), the Netherlands (Edelman, 2014), and Washington DC (Lou, 2016), which reflects the lack of research conducted in Asian societies. To address this gap, the current study examines the issue of globalized and local language representation in a historical area located in a major, contemporary city in Southeast Asia. It aims to understand the diversity of language variation displayed in the landscape of Singapore and show evidence of the maintenance of local languages in this multilingual context. Specifically, we examine the visibility of bilingualism and multilingualism on signboards collected from Singapore's Chinatown, chosen as the survey site due to its cultural and historical significance dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Employing a mixed methods approach, this study aligns with recent linguistic landscape work that has underlined the need for methodologies designed to examine the interplay of languages in the linguistic landscape and the role of sign authors and designers as part of the complex understanding of signage practices (Blommaert, 2013; Malinowski, 2009).

This paper begins by briefly illuminating the sociolinguistic background of Singapore and the history of Chinatown. It then discusses the linguistic landscape framework utilized in this study and research procedures. Focusing on Singapore's multilingual Chinatown, we present an analysis of the signboards and summarize the key findings and reflections on the indexicality of bilingualism and multilingualism in the landscape.

### **Sociolinguistic background of Singapore**

Singapore is a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual city-state that lies off the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia. The city has a population of 5.7 million, consisting of Chinese (74.4%), Malays (13.4%), Indians (9.0%), and other ethnicities (3.2%) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2019). Singapore has four official languages: Malay, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil, and English (Article 153A of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore). English is widely spoken

and is the language of education and administration. Singapore implements a bilingual policy in schools where English is learnt as a first language while mother tongues are taught to different ethnic groups (Mandarin Chinese for the Chinese,<sup>1</sup> Malay for the Malays, and Tamil for the Indians) (Wee, 2014). The aim behind the maintenance of mother tongues is to promote the usage of local languages and thereby enhance ethnolinguistic vitality (Landry & Bourhis, 1997) through the preservation of traditional cultures and values (David, 2008). In addition to the four official languages, about another 20 languages are used by the population although not encouraged by state decree in the official language policy of the country. Due to the varieties of languages found in Singapore, the city's urban landscape is filled with a multitude of signs, consisting of bilingual and multilingual texts. This fast-growing practice of adding bilingual and multilingual signs to the country's urban landscape illustrates the diversity of languages in modern Singapore.

### History of Singapore's Chinatown

Singapore's Chinatown was founded in 1819 with a population of only 150 (Singapore Archives, 1983). By 1829, the population had increased quickly with Chinese as the dominant ethnic group. Six distinctive districts – Kreta Ayer, Ann Siang Hill, Telok Ayer, Bukit Pasoh, Tanjong Pagar, and Boat Quay – made up Chinatown (Tan, 1990). *Niu Che Shui* or Bullock Cart Water was the original name for Chinatown; a Fujian term still used by older Singaporeans today. Chinatown was referred to by this name because fresh water in bullock-drawn carts was used to wash the streets of Chinatown in earlier times.

During the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, an influx of migrants arrived from the Fujian and Guangdong provinces of China to settle in Singapore (Singapore Archives, 1983). These Chinese migrants set up their homes in the region southwest of Singapore River, known as Telok Ayer today. More migrants flooded in, resulting in Sir Stamford Raffles<sup>2</sup> allocation of different areas for each clan group<sup>3</sup> (Chinatown Singapore, 2012). The Hokkiens dominated the area around Telok Ayer, the Teochews settled along the Singapore River, Clarke Quay, while the Cantonese and the Hakkas moved further down to the Kreta Ayer area. These clan groups had their own dialect, which unintentionally segregated them into different occupations: the Hokkiens were among the first to settle down and

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese has two written scripts: traditional Chinese and simplified Chinese. Traditional Chinese were previously taught in the schools in Singapore but since 1969, it was replaced by simplified Chinese, which is now used for official publications (Shang & Guo, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Sir Stamford Raffles is known as the 'Father of Singapore' because he founded the city of Singapore in 1819.

<sup>3</sup> A clan is a group of people, usually with the same dialect or place of origins, who assemble in regular gatherings to socialize during festivals and get aid from the community.

become business owners; the Teochews specialized in agriculture; the Cantonese became miners, goldsmiths, and tailors; and the Hakkas dominated the trade of pawnbroking.

Kreta Ayer is the epicenter of Chinatown with enterprises ranging from large businesses to small hawkers and entertainment for residents (Tan, 1990). The main shopping area at Kreta Ayer is based around Smith Street, Temple Street, and Trengganu Street. The dialect used for communication at Kreta Ayer is mostly Cantonese because the Cantonese lived there under Raffles' allocation. In 1942, during the Second World War, Kreta Ayer suffered badly from heavy and frequent Japanese air raids. Chinatown after the war, including Kreta Ayer, gradually recovered and entered its 'golden age' during the 1950s. Businesses started to recover, modern Chinese fashion was introduced, various festivals were celebrated, and the streets became a profitable earning place for many hawkers.

As Chinatown provided a cheap source of convenience goods and authentic meals, issues such as water and environmental pollution, traffic obstruction, and disease were evident (Yeoh & Kong, 1994). To resolve these issues, a licensing and relocation policy was introduced to keep track of the number and types of hawkers as well as to relocate them. For relocation purposes, Chinatown Complex was built in 1983 along Smith Street. Chinatown Complex is a vast multistorey building where the first level hosts shops selling clothes and antiques, and the second level houses the hawkers who used to crowd the streets during the 1950s. At first, many hawkers refused to relocate as they feared they would lose business in the complex; however, the strict implementation of policy forced the hawkers to move into Chinatown Complex. As most of them had been selling on the streets during the 1950s, the dialects used today in daily communication are those originating from their respective clan groups. Mandarin Chinese is nowadays commonly spoken due to the increasing number of recent migrants from mainland China who primarily communicate in this variety. For mutual communication, Singaporeans also speak Mandarin Chinese with the migrants.

Thus, the diversity of languages spoken in Singapore's Chinatown can be traced back to the past migration history of various Chinese clan groups. Together with the spoken languages of present-day Singapore, this diversity of languages has added color to the cultural characteristics of Singapore's Chinatown.

### **Linguistic Landscape Framework**

A relatively new inquiry in sociolinguistics, linguistic landscape research, has gained much attention in recent years. The term 'linguistic landscape' was first introduced by Landry and Bourhis who defined it as:

The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form

the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25).

Under the umbrella of this definition, the linguistic landscape has two basic functions: it serves to reflect the linguistic characteristics of a geographical region; and it symbolizes the value and status of the in-group language within that sociolinguistic setting (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Shohamy, 2006). Much work has been done in this area, particularly in relation to bilingualism and multilingualism (Ben Said, 2019; Gorter, 2006; Huebner, 2006; Shang & Guo, 2017).

In a foundational quantitative study, Backhaus (2007) examined the linguistic landscape of Tokyo by focusing on urban language contact in the written form; that is the languages on signboards. He found that certain parts of Tokyo were explicitly planned to be multilingual by the Metropolitan Government to serve both the Japanese population and foreigners. Backhaus concluded that this unique perspective of having various competing languages showed how they interact and interfere with one another in a given space. Taylor-Leech (2012) argues that the languages displayed on signs in Dili are an index of identity and reflection of how language practices are usually influenced by language policy (Kasanga, 2010). Portuguese and Tetum are seen on official signs whereas English and Indonesian spread across non-official signs. This display of languages does not suggest the language policy of Dili has failed, but reflects its country's diversity of ethnocultural identity as a product of past colonialism. Lai (2013) analyses three types of signs in the city of Hong Kong: monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual. She notes that almost half the signs are bilingual and multilingual, with Chinese and English as the most common combination of languages. Even though English stands as a language of international communication and local identity, Chinese remains the dominant written language on signs due to Hong Kong's change of sovereignty from Britain to China (Lai, 2013).

These studies demonstrate that the diversity of languages in a particular landscape is a reflection of that landscape's identity. To contribute further to the literature in this area, our study in Singapore's Chinatown will examine how globalized and localized languages are represented in a historical area and include opinions from hawkers in that area. It also addresses the needs to look into the tension between the use of Mandarin Chinese (globalized language) and Chinese dialects (localized languages) in the Chinese community (Rappa & Wee, 2006; Wee, 2014). Employing a mixed methods approach, three research questions have been developed to serve as a framework for the study:

- (i) What languages are displayed on the stall signboards in Singapore's Chinatown?
- (ii) Which combinations of languages can be found on the signs?
- (iii) To what extent did the hawkers influence the content of the signboards in their establishment?

### **Research procedure**

This paper is a synchronic study; hence, the data was collected in Chinatown Complex in one day to maintain consistency. There are several levels in Chinatown Complex as it is a multistorey building, but only the food stalls on level 2 were chosen for the focus of this study because the signboards of these food stalls displayed a variety of languages that reflects the historical and cultural background of the location. Each food stall's main signboard was photographed using a digital camera. In sum, a total of 210 signboards were collected and used for analysis. All the signboards were categorized as non-official type because the stalls were privately owned by the hawkers.

Consultations with three respective hawkers were held after the photographing session to elicit their reasons and explanations for the choice of languages used on the signboards and names for the stalls. The consultations were conducted in either Mandarin Chinese or Cantonese to encourage an authentic conversation in the vernacular used by hawkers. Although assurance to protect confidentiality of the hawkers was provided, others were reluctant to speak as they feared reporters and health authorities. As there were no audio/video recordings during the consultations, fieldnotes were jotted down.

Before analyzing the data collected, a corpus of photos was developed. All Chinese characters found on the signboards were typed in Hanyu pinyin and then translated into English so that both authors could obtain a clear description of the stalls' name. Following the quantitative methodology used by Lai (2013), all signboards were firstly categorized by the number of languages displayed (i.e. monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual), then the different languages written on the signboards were recorded and calculated for language variation. In each category (monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual), the reasons for the hawkers' chosen languages were discussed to elicit a general impression of the linguistic landscape of Singapore's Chinatown in relation to aspects of bilingualism and multilingualism.

### **Survey Results**

The results of the survey of signboards collected at Chinatown Complex are separated into two categories: (1) the number of languages displayed, and (2) language variety.

#### **The number of languages displayed**

Some methodological rules were determined when categorizing the number of languages displayed on the signboards. This study follows Lai's (2013) analysis where the terms 'monolingual', 'bilingual', and 'multilingual' respectively refer to one language for monolingual signboards; two languages, including transliteration<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In this context, transliteration means Chinese dialects, such as Hokkien and Cantonese, are written using Romanised alphabets according to their respective pronunciation. It differs from

for bilingual signboards; and three or more languages, including transliteration, for multilingual signboards. The results of the 210 signboards collected are as follows:

Table 1: Three categories of signboards

| Number of languages displayed | Number of signboards | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|----------------|
| Monolingual                   | 58                   | 27.62          |
| Bilingual                     | 144                  | 68.57          |
| Multilingual                  | 8                    | 3.81           |
| Total                         | 210                  | 100            |

As shown in Table 1, more than half the total collection of signboards photographed are bilingual signboards (68.57%). This figure indexes the bilingual practices of the hawkers in Chinatown Complex. Most hawkers communicate daily in either Mandarin Chinese or Cantonese and speak to foreign customers in basic English. Monolingual signboards (27.62%) are less than half the number of the bilingual signboards, and only 3.81% are multilingual signboards. The multilingual figure is significantly smaller than the other types of signboard displays, which gives the impression that even though four official languages are practiced in Singapore, the language variation displayed on the signboards at Chinatown Complex is rather limited. Rationale for this figure will be explored further in consultations with the respective hawkers at the later section.

### Language variety

Once the results for the types of signboards were obtained, we further classified them according to which languages contributed to each type. The classification results are discussed in the following three sections.

### Monolingual signboards

As shown in Table 2, the majority of monolingual signboards are written using Chinese (traditional/simplified characters) (16.67%). This figure is as expected because many of the hawkers are pioneer migrants who came to Singapore during the early 1950s and became street hawkers. As discussed earlier, these pioneer migrants at Kreta Ayer are of Cantonese origin and their main language of communication is Cantonese, which is usually written in traditional Chinese characters as following the trend in Hong Kong (Zhao & Baldauf, 2008). In addition, the use of traditional Chinese characters may be a representation

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Hanyu pinyin because Hanyu pinyin is the romanization of Chinese, which is read according to Mandarin Chinese pronunciation.

Table 2: Languages represented on monolingual signboards

| <b>Languages</b>   | <b>Number of signboards</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| English  | 10                          | 4.46                  |
| Chinese (traditional/simplified characters)                      | 35                          | 16.67                 |
| Chinese (transliteration)  | 1                           | 0.48                  |
| Chinese (traditional/simplified characters with transliteration) | 10                          | 4.76                  |
| Malay  | 2                           | 0.95                  |
| Total  | 58                          | 27.62                 |

of the Chinese culture, which most pioneer migrants have a strong emotional attachment to their Chinese traditions (Shang & Guo, 2017). This explains the reasons behind written traditional/simplified Chinese characters on the signboards. It also demonstrates how these hawkers maintain their respective language of communication in Singapore's multilingual environment.

There are 10 (4.76%) signboards written only in English and 10 (4.76%) in Chinese (traditional/simplified characters with transliteration). There are also two signboards (0.95%) written in the Malay language, which is rather unusual in Chinatown Complex because the hawkers who historically dominated the complex are Chinese. Inclusion of the Malay language in this predominantly Chinese linguistic landscape most likely targets the second dominant ethnicity of Singapore (i.e. Malays) and/or catering for foreign customers who come from neighboring countries where Indonesian and the Malay language are spoken (i.e., Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia).

### **Bilingual signboards**

Table 3: Languages represented on bilingual signboards

| <b>Languages</b>   | <b>Number of signboards</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| English + Chinese (traditional/simplified characters)                      | 53                          | 25.24                 |
| English + Chinese (transliteration)  | 3                           | 1.43                  |
| English + Chinese (traditional/simplified characters with transliteration) | 82                          | 39.05                 |
| English + Japanese   | 1                           | 0.48                  |
| English + Malay  | 1                           | 0.48                  |
| English + German   | 1                           | 0.48                  |
| English + Arabic   | 1                           | 0.48                  |
| Malay + Chinese (traditional/simplified characters)                        | 1                           | 0.48                  |
| Malay + Chinese (traditional/simplified characters with transliteration)   | 1                           | 0.48                  |
| Total  | 144                         | 68.57                 |

As demonstrated in Table 3, the combination of English and Chinese (traditional/simplified characters with transliteration) is the most common (39.05%) among the bilingual signboards. As transliteration written in pinyin is a notation of the pronunciation of traditional/simplified characters, these signboards are classified as dual languages that tells locals and foreign customers the type of dishes served in the particular stall. The duplication most likely functions as decoration and maybe linked to the *kiasu* syndrome of Singapore, as suggested by Shang and Guo (2017). The *kiasu* syndrome refers to people afraid of losing out when comparing to others (Hwang, Ang, & Francesco, 2002). The second most common combination of languages is English and Chinese (traditional/simplified characters only) (25.24%).

For the remaining bilingual signboards, various languages including Japanese, Malay, German, and Arabic are also displayed together with English or Chinese (traditional/simplified characters with transliteration). These combinations of languages have only one signboard each (0.48%). Japanese, Malay, German, and Arabic are classified under minority languages found at Chinatown Complex as they are rare. This is due to the strong Chinese cultural and historical influences in Singapore's Chinatown, as well as the government promotion of Chinese (i.e. Speak Mandarin Campaign)<sup>5</sup> to maintain a dominantly Chinese ascendancy in Singapore (Lim, 2009; Teo, 2005; Wee, 2003).

### Multilingual signboards

Table 4: Languages represented on multilingual signboards

| Languages  | Number of signboards | Percentage (%) |
|--|----------------------|----------------|
| English + Malay + Chinese (traditional/simplified characters)                      | 3                    | 1.43           |
| English + Malay + Chinese (traditional/simplified characters with transliteration) | 3                    | 1.43           |
| English + Malay + Arabic   | 2                    | 0.95           |
| Total  | 8                    | 3.81           |

Table 4 shows there are only eight multilingual signboards (3.81%). Of these, the most common combination of languages is English, Malay, and Chinese. This figure is rather low for a multilingual country such as Singapore with four official languages. Due to the chosen survey site of Chinatown and its strong Chinese

<sup>5</sup> Speak Mandarin Campaign was first launched in 1979 by ex-Prime Minister, the late Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, to encourage the Singaporean Chinese community to use more Mandarin Chinese and less of other Chinese dialects.

heritage, it is understandable that most of the hawkers are of Chinese origin. The language of communication, both with one another and regular customers is mostly in Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese, while English, a global language, is used with the younger customers and foreign tourists.

During the consultations, the hawkers stated that they inherited their business from their parents or parent-in-law, from the 1950s, and it is therefore preferably to retain the original Chinese names of the stalls when moving from the streets into the complex. This characteristic of loyalty displayed by the hawkers, indexes historical authenticity (Haarmann, 1986). In addition, it becomes a marketing strategy (i.e. a selling incentive or factor), where the name of the stall and its historical reputation helps to generate customer loyalty. Many hawkers claimed customers return regularly to their stalls because of the name and the traditional dishes served.

### **Summary of survey results**

To sum up, the signboards collected on level 2 of Chinatown Complex are categorized according to the number of languages displayed—monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signboards. The most common among them are bilingual signboards positioned at the front of food stalls. In terms of language variety, Chinese and English are the languages most frequently written on the signboards, which align with Shang and Guo's (2017) survey that these languages are the most vibrant languages in Singapore's linguistic landscape. The frequent use of them also reflects Chinatown's historical background. Other languages, such as Japanese and German, are also found in the collection but are rare.

### **Discussion**

As noted in the statistical results above, the dominant language written on the signboards at Chinatown Complex is Chinese, followed by English. Other languages such as Malay, German, Japanese, and Arabic have a low record of appearance. This breakdown reflects the strong Chinese cultural influence that has been maintained in Chinatown to the present day. The language variety for each type of signboard is now discussed through observation of the display of language usage while consultations from the hawkers provided evidence to support their choice of languages.

### **Monolingual signboards**

Based on the collection of monolingual signboards, we observed three common features: language choices and keywords, font (i.e. size and color), and visuals (i.e. images).



Figure 1. A signboard written only in Chinese.

Language choice is limited for monolingual signboards. Keywords are kept to a minimum and are short but ‘catchy’. An example is demonstrated in Figure 1 – the Chinese characters on the signboard are read as *Jiu Ji Zhou Pin* in Mandarin Chinese, which means *Nine Porridge*. The signboard tells us that the stall sells congee, a delicacy. The Chinese characters can also be read in Cantonese as *Kau Kei Juk Ban*. *Jiu/Kau*, the first character, symbolizes the name of this stall, nine (9). *Ji/Kei*, the second character is a common suffix attached to the shop’s name in a Cantonese business and is an important trademark to signify the Cantonese origins. *Zhou/Juk*, the third character means congee and *Pin/Ban*, the last character represents a product (delicacy). *Jiu Ji Zhou Pin / Kau Kei Juk Ban* is written in simplified Chinese characters.

According to the hawker displaying this sign, his family started selling porridge in the street in the 1950s. They originated from Guangzhou, a city in Southern China where Cantonese is spoken as the main language of communication. He is part of the family’s second generation who inherited the business. He kept the same stall name even after moving into Chinatown Complex to ensure regular customers could remember his family’s business from the first generation. As observed at the stall, most of the customers who order food speak either Cantonese or Mandarin Chinese to the hawker. Therefore, the Chinese characters written on the signboard is described as a language of solidarity and power because it interpellates an ethnically Chinese clientele specifically where Cantonese or Mandarin Chinese plays a prominent role in the community. So (1998) posits that such prominent language can be regarded as a language of solidarity to ensure a great appeal for the local community. Figure 1 is evidence of the interplay of language choice with solidarity.

In terms of font as devised by Scollon and Scollon (2003), the font size and color for monolingual signboards are kept minimal and simple. Figure 2 demonstrates

a signboard written only in English. The name of the stall, *Milk Shake Juice House*, is written in red capital letters, slightly slanted against a light blue background, and placed on the left side of the signboard. The minimal keywords of the stall attract locals and foreigners easily because the font size is big and easy to see.



Figure 2. A signboard written only in English.

Another common feature found on monolingual signboards is visuals. Images are usually included as they act as an important icon/symbol for customers to understand the types of food sold at the respective stalls. In Figure 2, although there are no Chinese characters for the name of the stall, customers could easily know it is a beverage stall due to the images of canned drinks and fruits. However, the signboard does not clearly indicate the name of each juice and drink sold, and this may cause speculation for foreign customers unfamiliar with the types of drinks available in Singapore's Chinatown.

Overall, we observed that the language choice for monolingual signboards is usually limited and while the colors are conventional, keywords are kept short and catchy with a large font size that stands out on the signboards. Images are used to symbolize the dishes served.



Figure 3. A signboard written in Chinese and transliteration of Cantonese.



Figure 4. A signboard written in Chinese and transliteration of Hokkien.

When comparing Figures 3 and 4, there are many similarities. First, in bilingual signboards, the hierarchy of which language appears on top of another is important as it reflects the language ideology of the respective stall. Given that Chinatown Complex is a Chinese dominant building, the preferred language appearing at the top of both signboards is Chinese written in either traditional or simplified characters. In Figure 3, *Lin Ji Zhu Chao* is written on top of the English lexis, *Lam Kee Delight*. *Lin*, the first character represents the name of the hawker, which is transliterated in Cantonese as *Lam*. *Ji*, the second character signifies an important trademark in the Cantonese culture (as discussed in Figure 1). *Zhu Chao* is translated as stir-fry. For Figure 4, the Chinese characters read as *An Zhen Shou Gong Bao Bing* are placed on top of the English lexis. *An Zhen* is the name of the hawker that has been transliterated into Hokkien as *Ann Chin*. *Shou Gong* means handmade and *Bao Bing* is the name of the snack sold at the stall. *Bao Bing* is also known as *popiah*<sup>6</sup> in Hokkien, a common local snack sold in Malaysia and Singapore. Both signboards implicitly index the importance and prestige of Chinese in comparison to English, particularly in this space where Chinese has more symbolic power and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). There is also evidence from both signboards that the hawkers harbor Chinese culture with more emphasis and prominence despite being in a country where English is the interethnic language of communication. Such evidence is found in Shang and Guo's (2017) survey that shop owners in Singapore prioritize Chinese to convey important information to customers.

Another similarity observed in the bilingual signboards is the size and color of the font. In Figure 3, *Lin Ji Zhu Chao* is written in red against a white background. The font size of the Chinese characters is bigger than the English lexis. In Figure 4, the Chinese characters of *An Zhen Shou Gong Bao Bing* are written in yellow and are a bigger font size than *Ann Chin*. The color red is used

<sup>6</sup> *Popiah* is a Fujian-style fresh spring roll (steamed turnip, shredded omelet, slices of carrot, bean sprouts, and fresh lettuce are wrapped in a soft, thin paper-like crepe).

extensively in both signboards. In Chinese culture, red is a vital color symbolizing good fortune and joy. Red is usually associated with warmth, energy, salience and foregrounding (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). As Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) emphasize, color is influential in creating the complexity of meanings where the product makers, in this context the hawkers, wish to capture the attention of their customers.

A third similarity found in Figures 3 and 4 is historicity. In Figure 3, below *Lam Kee Delight* is written the year when the stall started its business (*Since 1965*). Consultation with the hawker revealed that the reason that date is used. The first generation of the stall, who originated from Guangzhou, have been operating the culinary business since the 1960s along the streets. The hawker includes *Since 1965* on the signboard to inform customers of the historicity of the business and project its authenticity. As Guangzhou is a Cantonese speaking region in China, the dishes sold at *Lam Kee Delight* is based on Cantonese culture (e.g., *Hong Kong Style Steamed Fish Head*). In Figure 4, the year the hawker started the business (*Since 1958*) is aligning with the English text, *Ann Chin*. According to the hawker, his family originated from Fujian, a Southeast province in China, and started the business in the 1950s in the streets of Chinatown. This explains why the name of the stall is spelt in Hokkien instead of Cantonese, as Fujian is a *Min*<sup>7</sup> speaking province. The snack, *Bao Bing* is also related to the history of the family's origins (Fujian) as it is a Fujian snack.

Overall, the origins and history of how the business started is closely related to the name written on the signboard. Despite Singapore being a multilingual country, the importance of local languages is explicit on the bilingual signboards in Chinatown Complex with the hierarchy of Chinese placed at the top in a larger font size than English.



Figure 5. A multilingual (Chinese-English-Malay) signboard.

<sup>7</sup> *Min* is one of the Chinese dialects spoken in the province of Fujian, China. In Taiwan and Southeast Asia, *Min* is commonly known as Hokkien.



Figure 6. A signboard written in Chinese, English, and Malay.

There are a number of similarities between the signboards in Figures 5 and 6. First, the code preference explicitly shows both signboards display Chinese dominance because Chinese is placed above English/Malay. Such preference is also found in Shang and Guo's (2017) study that shop owners in Singapore tend to reserve the top placing on their signboards for Chinese names. In Figure 5, the name of the stall, *Quan Neng Qiao Ma Ma*, is translated as *Super Mummy*. *Quan Neng*, the first two Chinese characters mean almighty; *Qiao*, the third Chinese character represents smart; and *Ma Ma*, the final two Chinese characters signify mother. *Quan Neng Qiao Ma Ma* is positioned on top of *Super Mummy* and has a larger font size. In Figure 6, the Chinese characters are read as *Da Li Jia Dong Li Sha*. *Da Li* is translated as *Terry*, the name of the hawkker; *Jia Dong* is *Katong*, a suburb in Singapore; and *Li Sha* means *Laksa*, the dish sold at the stall. The Chinese identity in this Chinese dominated complex is seen in the hierarchy of languages with Standard Chinese on top of English/Malay in a larger font. This is evidence that Standard Chinese plays a vital role as an everyday language (Lai, 2013; Shang & Guo, 2017) for the hawkkers and their customers.

Another characteristic worth mentioning is the Malay lexis being treated as an English lexis. *Laksa*, the name of the dish sold in both stalls, is a popular spicy noodle soup dish that originates from the Peranakan<sup>8</sup> culture. There are different varieties of laksa sold in Southeast Asia, but Singapore is popular for its *Katong laksa*<sup>9</sup>. In Figure 5, a picture of laksa is shown on the extension signboard below (the third picture from the left). This is an important visual aid for foreign customers unfamiliar, but wanting to order the signature Singapore dish. This

<sup>8</sup> *Peranakan* is a term used for the descendants of the 15th to 17th century Chinese immigrants to British Malaya and Indonesia archipelago. These Chinese immigrants practice the Nusantara culture.

<sup>9</sup> *Katong laksa* is a dish which the noodles are normally cut into small strands and they are served with bean curbs and slices of fish cake or prawn in rich thick coconut gravy.

example reinforces the significance of images on multilingual signboards and highlights the preponderance of images alongside text on the dataset of signs collected (Kasanga, 2015). In Figure 6, the hawker precisely states *Katong laksa* to indicate the specific variety of laksa served. This evidence shows the importance of providing specific information to avoid confusion among customers.

Our overall observation was that in this Chinese dominated landscape, the exclusive role of local languages is demonstrated through the hierarchy of languages displayed on the signboards and is affiliated with ethnic identity.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize the findings, we refer back to the research questions developed during the survey. In response to the first question, figures from the data analysis have demonstrated a variety of languages used on the signboards at Chinatown Complex. The dominant languages are Chinese and English, which show significantly that Singapore's Chinatown practices bilingualism consistent with the majority in Singapore, favouring these two languages among the four official ones. The study also shows that other Chinese dialects, such as Hokkien and Cantonese, are commonly spoken in Singapore's Chinatown, a locality that represents a 'sanctuary' for languages marginalized by the official language policy of the country. Although minority language combination was found in the collection of signboards, they were scarce when compared to other language combinations.

In terms of language mixes and choices, we conclude that bilingualism is practiced most frequently in Chinatown Complex, which suggests that the landscape of Singapore's Chinatown is more bilingual than multilingual. Many hawkers have their signboards written in two languages to ensure both locals and foreigners can understand the type of dishes served. Chinese is used as a language of solidarity and power – most locals are able to read the signboards in Chinese characters or transliteration (other Chinese dialects). The use of Chinese both in traditional and simplified characters, and in pinyin form serves as an index of group cohesiveness and denotes a close-knit community which is predominantly ethnically Chinese. Historical influences also play an important role in the choice of languages. Due to the heritage of family businesses, the transliteration of Cantonese and Hokkien are frequently observed on the signboards. They are positioned higher than English because they serve as a common language between hawkers and customers. English serves as a marker of internationalism and a form of commodity to advertise businesses to non-local audiences. Pictures of food are included on the signboards as visual aids for foreign and new customers.

The findings of this paper do not reflect the overall impression of the multilingual landscape of Singapore as an international tourist destination and vibrant financial hub. However, the results signify the importance and power of Chinese language and dialects used in Singapore's Chinatown as a symbolic

marker of ethnolinguistic identity (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). This phenomenon aligns with Singapore's past Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong's description of Chinese as "a valuable asset" in the economic market (The Straits Times, as cited in Wee, 2003, p. 216). As this paper uses the mixed methods approach, the results hope to provide a resolution to the complication between 'symbolic' and 'indexical' meanings identified by Scollon and Scollon (2003). The results also constitute a starting point to further explore how bilingualism and multilingualism are practiced in parts of Singapore other than Chinatown.

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