

# Heteroglossia in street names

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## Abstract

The term 'heteroglossia' or *raznorechie* ('different-speech-ness'), coined by Bakhtin to tease out the different voices in a novel, has now been usefully applied to actual speech in terms of the choices of the language register or variety. This approach is seen as being more enlightening than a formal synchronic approach because language is now seen as a social phenomenon where one 'participates in a historical flow of social relationships, struggles, and meanings' (Bailey 2012: 501). It is the historical association of a language or variety with a particular outlook, perspective or culture that makes it possible to talk about the indexicality of the choices made within heteroglossia. In my study, instead of a literary text, I will be considering a city itself as a text; by that, I mean that cities are inscribed with texts in the form of traffic signs, road names and the like - often referred to as the linguistic landscape (Landry & Bourhis 1997). A significant point, however, that the city's texts are multi-authored. In this paper, I focus specifically on street names in Malaysia and concentrate on the linguistic choice of a name having forms based on English or Malay or other languages, or a mix of them. Adding to the complication is that informal forms of street names might be different from official forms; and that some city councils might display multiple forms of street names. I hope to show that choices make sense in the light the associations mentioned above.

**Keywords:** heteroglossia; street names; postcolonialism; Malaysia; city as text; linguistic landscape

## 1. Heteroglossia in social life

The term heteroglossia has come down to us through Emerson and Holquist's translation of Bakhtin's 'Discourse in the novel' (1981); the Russian *разноречие* (*raznorechie*) means 'different-speech-ness' (Roberts 1994:248). Sue Vice glosses it as 'differentiated speech' (Vice 1997:18). Elsewhere in this paper, I might talk about multiple voices as well.

He argues that individual languages are inherently heteroglossic at any particular historical moment, having absorbed words and constructions arising out of various historical contexts. '[T]here are no "neutral" words and forms - words and forms that can belong to "no one"; language has been completely *taken over, shot through with intentions and accents*' (Bakhtin 1981:293). As Bailey puts it, 'actual speech always occurs in a social context, which is never neutral or ahistorical' (Bailey 2007:263).

Within discourse, heteroglossia takes the form of various social languages or voices (including sociolects and registers) as well as different languages and dialects.

At any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word ..., but also - and for us this is the essential point - into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, 'professional' and 'generic' languages, languages of generations and so forth. (Bakhtin 1981: 271-2)

Social voices therefore co-exist and they struggle with each other in the meaning-making process. Society, organisations or composite entities like the city (see below) can be seen as comprising a multiplicity of voices which point towards a multiplicity of social practices simultaneously. It is no wonder then that although Bakhtin focussed his discussion on the novel, heteroglossia has been an approach that has been employed in relation to discussing interactions involving style changes (Rampton 2014) or even changes in language variety or 'translanguaging' (where multilingual speakers make flexible use of their linguistic resources) (Bailey 2016; Blackledge & Creese 2014). The contestation between these voices and the different degrees of power or enforcement also means the concerns normally associated with language planning can also be addressed in some way.

The attraction of the heteroglossic approach is that it moves beyond the synchronic and the referential (or denotational) function of language, but instead focuses on the pragmatic function, and therefore also deals with diachronic elements and connotative functions of language. This immediately contrasts this approach taken in formal linguistics. This would provide a more holistic view of the city text as it will be grounded in the changing fortunes of particular languages in the city.

The other attractive feature of the heteroglossic approach to this study is its focus on social and political tensions. Bakhtin talks about centripetal forces that exert a pull towards the national standard form of language of the time in contrast to centrifugal forces. 'Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification intersect in the utterance' (Bakhtin 1981:272). Apart from the changing fortunes of languages that might be qualified to be the 'national standard', different degrees of pull of those forces might be felt in different parts of the city text. In this respect then, the heteroglossic approach can also be usefully married to discussions about language planning, which involve notions of politics, power and control.

## 2. The city as text

The data and text that I am engaged with is that of a city. I see the city as a text. Roland Barthes highlights some of the difficulties of talking about the city as a text.

The city is a discourse, and this discourse is actually a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak to our city, the city where we are, simply by inhabiting it, by

traversing it, by looking at it. Yet, the problem is to extract an expression like 'language of the city' from the purely metaphorical stage. It is metaphorically very easy to speak of the language of the city as we speak of the language of the cinema or of the language of flowers. The real scientific leap will be achieved when we can speak of the language of the city without metaphor. (Barthes 1988 [1967]: 195)

In other words we can talk use the term language (and therefore also text and discourse) when we think about communication or semiosis in general, rather than specific linguistic semiosis: geographers and architects are apt to use language in this metaphorical fashion as described by Barthes.

In my work, I focus on (non-metaphorical) linguistic semiosis. There is enough language imprinted in the surroundings of a city. Related approaches include Landry and Bourhis's (1997) 'linguistic landscape' and Scollon and Scollon's (2003) 'geosemiotics'. Both of these approaches focus on the written language found around streets and shops around the city, with specific focus on the extent to which individual languages are represented and how placement and size can index greater prominence accorded to particular languages. Therefore whereas the linguistic landscape approach emphasises the 'visibility and salience of languages' (Landry and Bourhis 1997:23), the city as text approach also considers how the various instances of written linguistic communication builds up a composite picture. A city text is therefore analogous to a multi-authored text, increasingly encouraged in platforms like Google documents, where individual authors might have their individual preoccupations and priorities, but the reader needs to contend with the text as a whole.

In this paper, I focus on street names in Malaysia. This is an element that is encountered in almost all cities in the world. A notable exception is Japan and perhaps Korea, with blocks being numbered and many streets unnamed. Apart from that street names are well nigh a universal phenomenon, and one that leaves an impression on resident and visitor alike, whether encountered on the street or in addresses or maps. We can therefore say with confidence that street names contribute a significant strand to the city text.

The element of indexicality is well developed within the framework of linguistic landscape or geosemiotics studies. The historicising perspective afforded by the heteroglossic perspective would afford additional insights to the city text.

### 3. The Malaysian linguistic context

One obvious observation of street names in Malaysia is the fact that there has been a range of linguistic inputs into them, or from a heteroglossic perspective, different voices contributing to them. In order to highlight what these voices index, it will be necessary to trace out the Malaysian linguistic context which is undoubtedly complex. It has certainly been increasingly accepted that a complex linguistic situation is normal: '... the noticeable shake-up of monolingual-normative assumptions in the applied linguistic community has only taken place in the 21st century, which has seen a growing awareness among professionals

that speakers, languages - and indeed nations - are multiplex, heterogeneous and changeable' (Mauranen 2018: 106-7).

It is therefore appropriate for me to sketch out the sociolinguistic profile of Malaysia. Malaysia is a multiethnic nation, with each ethnicity associated with a traditional linguistic repertoire. Figures from a 2010 census indicate a resident population of 28.3 million, with a breakdown of Bumiputera (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Indian (7.3%) and other (0.7%) ethnicities. The category Bumiputera ('sons of the soil') is a composite category, with the Malays being the largest component. 71% of the population reside in urban areas (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2011).

Of all the languages spoken in Malaysia, only the Malay language has official status as national language today. This was not always the case. In West Malaysia, Malay became the sole national language in 1968 after a period when both English and Malay received joint official status during Independence in 1957. Prior to Independence, English was the language of the British colonial government.

The descriptions given in guide books often belie the linguistic complexity within Malaysia. Noticeable is the high degree of codeswitching practice in many domains, including political discourse. There has also been much discussion about *bahasa rojak*, with significant numbers coming to its defence. (*Bahasa* means 'language'. *Rojak* is a fruit-and-vegetable salad - in other words, an allsorts or salmagundi or *mélange*.)

The kind of mixtures and repertoires involved is also linked to ethnicity. Malay, apart from its being the *national* language, is also the language associated with Malay ethnicity in the same way that various Chinese languages are associated with Chinese ethnicity (Cantonese, Hokkien, Mandarin and others) and Indian languages are associated with Indian ethnicity (Tamil, Punjabi, Telugu and others). A case study in the West Malaysian city of Ipoh (Lim 2008) confirms this mixing as well as the repertoire being correlated to ethnicity. Not to be forgotten is that English also features prominently as a language in the *mélange* being mentioned. Dominant languages could also be English or an ethnically related language. Lim notes instances among the ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indian, but not among the ethnic Malay. Elsewhere, Lee *et al* (2010) discuss a language shift situation with Malaysians moving towards English as their dominant language.

The nation has also been embroiled in a long-standing debate and policy vacillations in relation to the issue of the medium of instruction in schools. Prior to independence, schools were segregated according to the medium of instruction, with English-medium schools and vernacular (Malay, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil) schools. English-medium schools were generally in urban settings. English-medium schools were phased out from 1970 and transformed to Malay-medium schools in the interests of nationalism and racial harmony. English was phased in again from 2003 ostensibly in the interest of promoting English as the language of globalisation, and of science and technology (Tan 2005). However, the policy had 'only limited success in delivering policy-mandated outcomes' (Ali *et al* 2011:152) - meaning a significant proportion of pupils did not pass their English exams. The English medium policy was again phased out in 2011. Nonetheless English-medium instruction is

still in place in various tertiary institutions (Ali 2013). All this means that the population of Malaysia has a mixed range of linguistic experiences in the education front. For some, English is their dominant language (as indicated by Lim (2008) and Lee *et al* (2010) above) and an important Malaysian language - perhaps in relation to an urban setting, perhaps in relation to ethnic minorities, perhaps in relation to the middle class. For others, it is a useful second language and important in the context of commerce and globalisation. And for yet others, it is a foreign language.

We are therefore faced with a situation therefore where languages could index positions and attitudes associated with ethnic groups, or of a language (Malay) associated with a nation because of its status as national language. English would have multiple associations: the colonial government, Malaysian urbanites, the Malaysian middle class, Malaysian ethnic minorities, Malaysians with a cosmopolitan outlook, the language of commerce, science and technology and globalisation. And all this will be the case even before going into discussion about the localised version of the language, Malaysian English and Manglish. The fact of linguistic mixing might now cause the heteroglossic analysis to go into overdrive!

## 4. Street name changes in Kuala Lumpur

We now turn to our city text and zero in on street names in Kuala Lumpur. Kuala Lumpur is the national capital as well as the commercial centre of Malaysia, although the administrative centre was relocated to the planned city of Putrajaya in 2001. The city was only founded around 1857 when Chinese prospectors became interested in developing tin mining in the area. The street names here also attracted new interest with the publication of Isa and Kaur's book *Kuala Lumpur Street Names* in 2015.

Street names have been with us since the time of antiquity. The Romans were well-known road builders and the naming pattern established by them have generally stayed with us. One of the first paved roads is the Appian Way, or in Latin *Via Appia*, whose first section was completed in 321 BC (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2016). Through street naming the landscape was marked linguistically. Like the Appian Way, street names today generally come in two parts. The element that individualises a street name is the specific element of the name (*Appia* in the Latin form of the name); the other element is the generic element which indicates the name category of street name and possibly identifies the type of street it is (*Via*). The common generic elements in English street names include *street*, *road*, *avenue*, *drive*, *lane*, *crescent* and *square*.

Romans prefer to honour road builders (eg Appius Claudius Caecus) by employing their names as the specific element. A range of options are available for the specific element, and the categories based on Stewart (1975) are conventionally employed. The Appian Way is a *commemorative* street name because it honours a person or an event. Street names are *descriptive* if they describe the landscape (eg Hill Street, built at a hill). They are *associative* if they are derived from a prominent feature in the location (eg Church Street, where there is a church in the vicinity). Another category that might strictly speaking be a subset of an associative name is the *directional* name; the names often identify where the roads lead to.

Many British cities have streets named London Road. There are also other categories of names, but I shall not go beyond these because these will be the ones relevant in the analysis.

The British colonial government were responsible for introducing street names to much of Malaysia, and certainly in the case of Kuala Lumpur. Kuala Lumpur was originally in the state of Selangor until it was carved out in 1974 to become a Federal Territory. Disputes between Chinese tin miners and the local Malay population in the 19th century resulted in the sultan inviting a British 'Resident' to govern the state in 1874. The 'Resident' was the official title of the British officer who was to be adviser to the ruler (the sultan), but his actual role could extend beyond that, and some might see the Resident as the de-facto governor of the state.

The oldest document in the National Archives pertaining to street names in Kuala Lumpur was the Public Works Department's requisition of enamelled plates for street names together with iron poles brought in from Glasgow in 1889-90 (Isa and Kaur 2015: 6-7). The order was for plates with 34 street names (Figure 1), all in the town centre of Kuala Lumpur. These streets will form the focus of this stage of the analysis, and I will trace their names through time.

Ampang Road ME, dir → Jalan Ampang MM, dir  
Ampang Street ME, dir → Leboh Ampang MM, dir  
Barrack Road EE, ass → Jalan Tangsi MM, unk  
Batu Road ME, dir → Jalan Batu MM, dir → Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman MM, com  
Cecil Street EE, com → Jalan Cecil ME, com → Jalan Hang Lekir MM, com  
Church Street EE, ass → Jalan Gereja MM, ass  
Clarke Street EE, com → Jalan Belanda 1 MM, unk → Jalan Mahkamah Tinggi MM, ass  
Cross Street EE, des → Jalan Silang MM, des → Jalan Tun Tan Siew Sin MM, com  
Damansara Road ME, dir → Jalan Damansara MM, dir  
Dickson Street EE, com → Jalan Tun Tjih MM, com → Jalan Masjid India MM, ass  
Gombak Road ME, ass → Jalan Raja MM, dir  
High Street EE, des → Jalan Bandar MM, des → Jalan Tun H S Lee MC, com  
Hill Street EE, com → *expunged*  
Hokien Street CE, ass → *expunged*  
Holland Road EE, com → Jalan Belanda MM, unk → Jalan Mahkamah Tinggi MM, ass  
Johore Street ME, ass → *expunged*  
Jalan Raja MM, dir  
Java Street ME, ass → Mountbatten Road EE, com → Jalan Mountbatten ME, com →  
Jalan Tun Perak MM, com  
Klyne Street DutchE, com → Jalan Klyne MDutch, com → Jalan Hang Lekiu MM, com  
Macao Street PortE, ass → *expunged*  
Malacca Street ME, ass → Jalan Melaka MM, ass  
Malay Street EE, ass → Jalan Melayu MM, ass  
Market Street EE, ass → Leboh Pasar Besar MM, ass  
Pahang Road ME, dir → Jalan Pahang MM, dir  
Petaling Street ME, dir → Jalan Petaling MM, dir  
Pudu Road ME, dir → Jalan Pudu MM, dir  
Pudu Street ME, dir → Leboh Pudu MM, dir

Rathborne Street EE, com → <i>expunged</i>
Rodger Street EE, com → Jalan Rodger ME, com → Jalan Hang Kasturi MM, com
Station Street EE, ass → Jalan Balai Polis MM, ass
Sultan Street EE, com → Jalan Sultan MM, com
Theatre Street EE, ass → Jalan Panggung MM, ass
Weld Street EE, com → <i>expunged</i>
Yap Ah Loy Street CE, com → Jalan Yap Ah Loy MC, com

Table 1. The 34 street names in the 1889-90 requisition.

Language codes: E - English, M - Malay, C - Chinese, Port - Portuguese

Name type codes: ass - associative, com - commemorative, des - descriptive, dir - directional, unk- unknown

The street names signs that were to be mounted or erected by the colonial government of 1890 betray a definite pattern of naming..

In terms of categories of names, there was a fairly even distribution between associative names (12), commemorative names (11) and directional names (9). I analysed two (High Street and Cross Street) as descriptive.

All the street names have generic and specific elements. The generic element is almost always in English, with the exception of Jalan Raja which has the Malay generic *jalan*. There is a mix of languages for the specific element of the street name. This is fairly straightforward with common nouns (*market, theatre* etc) or adjectives (*high*). However it is sometimes arguable whether proper nouns 'belong' to particular languages. I am going to assume that it is still possible to identify the language of proper nouns because they still conform to particular phonological pertaining to particular languages. If we allow for this, the 1890 names contain a mix of specific elements - 17 English, 13 Malay, 2 Chinese, 1 Dutch and 1 Portuguese. The English specifics are generally associative or commemorative, whereas many of the Malay specifics are directional. The heteroglossic presentation of the city text indexes a space where the Malay language and culture is significant and an awareness of other voices. The dominant English voice indexes the clear British colonial sensibility of the time.

The colonial government generally did not rename streets, although there were occasional name changes. Java Street was renamed Mountbatten Road in 1945/46 (Isa and Kaur 2015: 175) after the last Viceroy of India and the first Governor General of India.

The first set of name changes occurred in the 1960s after Malaysian independence from Britain in 1957. The process was fairly standard: all English generics were replaced with Malay generics. There was no strong distinction made between *street* and *road*, and most of them became *jalan*. English common nouns in associative names were generally translated into Malay (hence *theatre* → *panggung*). Specific elements that were directional were generally unchanged, as were specific elements that were commemorative. There were some exceptions. One notable exception was a mistake: Holland Road was interpreted as an associative name rather than a commemorative name (it was named after architect Hugh

Holland); 'Holland' was interpreted as the name of a country and was replaced with the Malay version *Belanda*.

As a result of the renamings in the 1960s, all the generics were now in Malay; most of the specifics were also in Malay. Only commemorative names employed non-Malay words. The Malay voice though in the street names can be said to *derived* from the original colonial names, and therefore the echoes might be said to be still heard.

At the instigation of the Prime Minister, Mahathir, another round of renamings took place in the early 1980s. This was to be part of the decolonisation process, and commemorative names were the main target. Local personages replaced British and other foreign personages (and therefore Jalan Cecil, named after Sir Cecil Clementi Smith, a governor of the Straits Settlement, became Jalan Hang Lekir, named after a legendary Malay warrior). Two descriptive names (Jalan Bandar < High Street, Jalan Silang < Cross Street) were also replaced with commemorative names: Jalan Tun HS Lee and Jalan Tun Tan Siew Sin. ( I use the symbol < to mean 'derived from'. This symbol is often employed in etymological entries.) HS Lee refers to Henry Lee Hau Sik, the first Finance Minister of independent Malaya (Kaur 2010). The name, however, is styled in the English fashion with initials preceding a surname. The result is that English is apparently eliminated from any element of the set of names examined. All elements were now in Malay with the exception of two Chinese commemorative names.

An analysis based on this set of names would therefore suggest the language policy suggested by the constitution of only giving national status to Malay had been successfully implemented by agents in the local government. The linguistic landscape could be said therefore to index the dominance of the Malay language in Kuala Lumpur.

This is not to say that all English commemorative names have been eliminated. Streets away from the centre might still retain them, such as Jalan Robson and Jalan Eaton. However, an examination of the city centre throws up Persiaran Capsquare and Persiaran Maybank. These are noteworthy names on several counts. Firstly, the specific element is English from the point of view of orthography and phonology. Secondly, the generic element *persiaran* (meaning 'drive') is unusual in a built-up area (where we would expect *jalan* 'road' or *lebu* 'street'). Thirdly, these streets are associated with commercial buildings in the vicinity.

Capsquare is the clipped version of Capital Square, a luxury residential tower and shopping centre. Maybank is similarly the clipped version of Malayan Banking, although it is also an English surname. It would seem therefore one challenge to language policy seen in relation to street naming is from commercial interests.

In standard accounts of the linguistic landscape, the distinction between a top-down (public) and bottom-up (private) signs is often made.

Private signs include commercial signs on storefronts and business institutions (e.g., retail stores and banks), commercial advertising on billboards, and advertising signs

displayed in public transport and on private vehicles. Government signs refer to public signs used by national, regional, or municipal governments in the following domains: road signs, place names, street names, and inscriptions on government buildings including ministries, hospitals, universities, town halls, schools, metro stations and public parks. (Landry and Bourhis 1997: 26-27)

It would appear therefore that street names, though officially government signs, might also be influenced by commercial interests. The use of *persiaran* ('drive') would now also make sense in indexing luxury homes.

The continued presence of English under the aegis of globalisation and neo-liberalism sometimes opens up the charge of English being a hegemonic language which promotes neo-colonialism (Majhanovich 2014) in that it exercises external control.

The Malay voices in the street names clearly index national or ethnic identity. The English voices are more complex, and could index colonialism, neo-colonialism, commerce and globalisation, or perhaps a more cosmopolitan Malaysian outlook.

I have not, at this stage, discussed informal names or names in other urban settings in Malaysia. Koh (2011) discusses how original colonial names in English dominate in informal contexts in Ipoh, another Malaysian city. There are also Chinese informal versions, similar to the ones mentioned by Yeoh (2003) in relation to neighbouring Singapore.

## 5. Conclusion

It seems to me that street names in Kuala Lumpur presents us with a heteroglossic landscape. The analysis only makes sense with a fuller diachronic dimension accorded to the voices as the heteroglossic approach assumes. The changes that have occurred show the domination and the power associated with the Malay voice or perhaps the Malaysian voice. We can discern the voice of the urban planner and the voice of the independent government, supported by the constitutional position of the Malay language. Because the Malay names are ultimately derived from the English structure and ultimately the Western structure of street names, this English voice is not completely silenced.

Apart from the soft echoes of the English voice in the new names, we also hear the English voice in the names of some streets in the away from the centre (Jalan Eaton), and streets for residential and commercial developments.

Even with just limiting ourselves to official names, we see a complexity of voices in the city text.

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