Naming as styling: 'inauthenticity' in building names in Singapore

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Abstract
This paper considers the styling options available to names and the ways in which they can be characterised as inauthentic. Styling options are available to all manner of linguistic texts and all manner of semiotic modes. I understand choices made from the available options to constitute styling, and these choices are meaningful and interpretable. This broad conception of styling is accepted within sociolinguistics, and often analysed in indexical terms (*eg* Eckert 2008). In other words, choices made by speakers index key features of their communicated identity; even organisations can be investigated from the perspective of styling (Wee 2015). In the tradition of research on the linguistic landscape (Landry and Bourhis 1997), I consider the cityscape as text. In particular, I focus on how residential buildings are named in Singapore. These names are open to styling opportunities from the point of view of their structure; whether they are derived from the lexicon of particular languages; whether they use derived names such as personal names, place names or street names; whether creative coinages are employed; and so on. The names of residential buildings in Singapore have also been the attention of public attention, as evident from discussions in blogs and forums; here some of the names have been held up as being 'inauthentic' because they do not identify place or because they are reliant on exotic languages. Authenticity is now seen as a goal in many areas: the need to be true to oneself and one's identity, and one danger is that of stifling creativity. Using names of more recent buildings, I explore the ways in which styling choices in names might be deemed authentic or inauthentic, and whether these labels are appropriate.

1. City as text

In this paper, I wish to demonstrate how name options can be conceived of as a matter of styling and that this styling can be judged as authentic or not.

One subject that has attracted continued opprobrium and there seems to be no let-up in the subject of 'condo names' in Singapore. 'Condo' refers to a group of private flats, apartments or maisonettes that have shared facilities and common spaces. A recent article (Yap 2016) of names that are 'funny, bizarre or just downright facepalm-worthy' mention D'Zire, Thr3e Thre3 Robin, Jool Suites, 38 iSuites @ Ipoh Lane, Tresalveo, L'viv, Vogx, Cradels @ Balestier and The Levelz.

What are we then to make of these names and the contestations against them, and what does this tell us about Singapore as a city? It seems to me that if we are to answer those

questions, we need to regard the **city as a text**, and the strategies that we need to employ are akin to those used when engaging with other texts. This notion has already been raised by Barthes: 'the city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language' (1986: 92). In this sense, my use of 'text' is more conservative than the use by geographers who might focus more on the physical landscapes (Duncan 2004) or the architecture with the city (Tay and Goh 2003) and perhaps closer to the notion of collaborative fiction or non-fiction, a form gaining popularity with the advent of platforms like Google Docs. Building names, street names and all manner of linguistic signs communicate something about the city.

There are already allied approaches within what have been labelled 'linguistic landscape' (brought to the fore by Landry and Bourhis 1997) and 'geosemiotics' (Scollon and Scollon 2003). Both of these will be allied to what I have called the **'city as text'** approach that I take. It is true that these approaches do not specifically investigate names but instead examine how language is physically represented in the cityscape in the form of signs or hoardings or writings on the wall. However, because the language used on shop fronts are often examined, names come into studies in these traditions not infrequently. The focal point tends to be the space devoted to individual languages, their relative prominence and how they are positioned; initial studies have taken on a strong quantitative approach: all this is seen as indexical of the ethnolinguistic prominence of communities associated with these languages. Later studies have gone on to question whether it is only this that is indexed (as in, for example, Kasanga's (2012) examination of signs in central Phnom Penh); some have abandoned the quantitative methodology altogether (as in, for example, Rubdy's (2014) investigation of signs in India): this again shows the fluidity of the styling options as mentioned earlier. In my approach, this corporate entity – which might be carefully managed and controlled by clear policies, or haphazardly presented without a controlling hand – presents itself as a form of communication.

In a related study on building names in Singapore (Tan 2010), the increased use of Italian, French and Spanish elements were noted and it was suggested that this was a deliberate exercise in exoticism on the part of property developers as opposed to signalling Singaporean identity: this would be in the aid of increasing the attractiveness of their projects. This again shows an attenuated relationship between language choice and ethnolinguistic vitality. This will be something I want to raise again in relation to the issue of authenticity.

I will start therefore by outlining how considerations of style are pertinent to our discussion and how style can be applied to a city.

2. Style and styling

The notion of style has becoming increasingly seen as a useful overarching framework under which one can consider linguistic variation, including elements that are associated with the local or the vernacular.

There has always been a strand of stylistics that has been concerned with all texts, and not necessarily texts that are overtly literary in nature. A key work is Crystal and Davy's *Investigating English Style* in 1969. For them,

> the aim of stylistics is to analyse language habits with the main purpose of identifying from the general mass of linguistic features common to English as used on every conceivable occasion, those features that are restricted to certain kinds of social context: to explain, where possible, why such features have been used, as opposed

> to other alternatives; to classify these features into categories based upon a view of their function in the social context. (p 10)

In other words, style choices are linked closely to the social function of the text. This has been developed most fully within the tradition of systemic functional grammar, where language is seen as a social semiotic (Halliday 1978). For a more recent textbook on systemic functional grammar, see, for instance Halliday and Matthiessen (2013), where the notion of 'alternatives' is conceived as choices which operate as systems. The social context is manifested as different situation types, often discussed in terms of 'registers', which give rise to different genres or text types. Finally, these choices are seen as meaningful and are seen as semiotic in nature.

Within sociolinguistics, the notion of style involving meaningful choices has also been strongly developed within the Labovian tradition of variationist studies (say, Labov 2006). With the incorporation of a statistical methodology, linguistic choices are correlated to and are indexical of affiliations of class, gender, age, ethnicity and so on. Often, particular pronunciation choices are recorded on a large scale, such as the use of rhotic pronunciations or glottal stops. However, the use of linear scales (in other words, variation is examined as two-dimensional along the vernacular-standard continuum) opens up this conception of style to the charge of being reductive, oversimplifying the issue at hand (Coupland 2007).

Giles's (1973) development of the Labovian paradigm into his communication accommodation theory – in terms of convergence or divergence – made for a more dynamic model of style with its emphasis on the relational processes of the interlocutors and the motivations of the speakers. This paved the way for a more complex sociolinguistic conception of style where speakers are social actors harnessing linguistic and non-linguistic resources to make social meaning, which itself is 'a complex phenomenon, not merely referring to simple indexical relationships between language forms and membership of social groups' (Coupland 2007: 177). The emphasis has now moved to local indexical work, sometimes described as 'stance' (*eg* Johnstone 2009), anchored on human activity.

The notion of what is indexed (signalled or pointed at) is now also broadening out; Eckert developed a perspective which incorporates Silverstein's (2003) notion of indexical order, so that 'the meanings of the variables are not precise or fixed but rather constitute a field of potential meanings - an *indexical field*, or constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable' (Eckert 2008: 454).

Style is also seen not only as pertaining to individuals and choices by individuals. Organisations can also be seen to have a particular style (Wee 2015), even beyond elements like corporate culture, branding and taglines. It is surely not too much of a stretch to consider the city making style choices.

3. Style and names

For many, that naming is a significant part of culture seems to be a self-evident truth: after all, names are deliberate choices which reflect the particular preferences of the particular communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). The fact that in modern societies naming frequently involves a process of formal registration and can be accompanied by a ceremony makes the act of naming and the names themselves all the more culturally significant. Names also form a part of language, and language itself is also seen to be linked to culture, whether we are in the realm of social constructivism, linguistic anthropology or anthropological linguistics (Sharifian 2014). Even where naming does not involve a formal

procedure – consider the names of artistic works: books, paintings, plays, films and so on – these are usually perceived as non-frivolous and contain significant clues to the meaning of the work.

Within naming theory though, there is the theory of names known as the 'direct reference' theory, attributed to the philosopher J S Mill. In this view, names are inherently meaningless and merely serve to identify. We can best imagine entities given names composed of random letters or digits (Building C, Prisoner 128759) as the best illustrations of this pure reference function of names. If all names were *merely* referential, we can certainly cast aside any attempt to identify the indexicality of names.

My assumption therefore is that although names clearly have a referential function, the actual name itself is significant. This would be position taken in the descriptivist theory of names (associated with the philosopher Bertrand Russell) and the causal theory (developed by Saul Kripke) which superseded the Millian position.

4. Authenticity and names

I want to start our discussion about authentic names by evoking the notion of the **true name**, a concept that has resonances in religious and mythological contexts. The implication of this label is obvious: names are meaningful and contain sense, and there are names that are untrue or perhaps names that are less true. We can think about Abram (high father) becoming Abraham (father of a multitude): 'No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations' (Genesis 17:5, New International Version).

Or we can consider Jacob (supplanter) becoming Israel (wrestling with God): 'God said to him, "Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel." So he named him Israel' (Genesis 35:10). The new names are 'better' as they describe their destinies more accurately.

This also exercised the minds of philosophers in the 5th century BC. In Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, Socrates is asked by Cratylus and Hermogenes whether names are 'natural' or 'conventional'. The position of Cratylus is that names in literary works represent some essence of the bearer and therefore contain sense; names are descriptive in some way. Cratylus talks about the 'correctness of names', allied to the notion of the 'true name'. The position of Hermogenes is that names are merely conventional and are semantically empty. (See, for example Cavill 2016.) And therefore the discussion about *Cratylic* and *Hermogenean* names (*ie* meaningful and meaningless names respectively) in literature continues. In the discussion about true names, the assumption is that names are Cratylic.

The notion of authenticity has also been picked up by fashion gurus, style gurus, marketing gurus and the like. But it is not *merely* a fashionable term. It is an established term in psychology, philosophy and aesthetics. Being authentic involves showing good faith and being true to one's (internal) identity rather than be shaped by one's environment.

We can summarise the account given by saying that an authentic name is one that reflects stylistic options made that index the true identity of the entity.

Two difficulties immediately arise. The first is that our current postmodern sensibilities do not allow us to luxuriate in the confidence of a single self or identity. Identity is not static. As far as personal naming is concerned the availability of multiple name forms can be said to reflect this multiple identities. We have given names, middle names, surnames,

hypocorisms, diminutive forms of all of those, and so on. London is also the Smoke, Edinburgh is also Auld Reekie. The choice of any of these alternative names must surely be indexical of different parts of the identities of the people or places highlighted.

The staff housing for the National University of Singapore is across the road from the main campus at Kent Ridge. The flats were named Kent Vale, presumably because, they were built on a slightly lower elevation than the university buildings. I have on various occasions heard it being referred to as Kent Jail (in reference to its proximity to the main campus and therefore not being to escape the university environment). Or even the Gulag. The system of unofficial and multiple names is certainly available for building names.

Bauman (2005) also talks about it as 'liquid life':

> Life in a liquid modern society cannot stand still. It must modernize (read: go on stripping itself of attributes that are past their sell-by dates and go on dismantling/shedding the identities currently assembled/put on) – or perish. (p 2)

But then again, identities have been shifting since time immemorial. Again this can be reflected in names, for example, as we transition from Eboracum to Jorvik to York. This example reinforces the point that the choice of language can be part of styling: Latin as we think of the garrison town in Roman times, Norse as the Vikings take control of the north-east of Britain, and English as the nation was unified.

The second difficulty is that in the face of multiple and changing identities, who is it who decides that a name is incorrect or inauthentic? Is there an arbiter? Those who claim that names are inauthentic ('incorrect', 'ridiculous', 'laughable' – all these labels signalling a misalignment to identity) are often those who are not the namers themselves, but come from the community. The issue of challengeability will always be there. In the case of Singapore building names, there is currently an arbiter in the form of the Street and Building Names Board, set up in 2003 under the Urban Redevelopment Authority. Three of their six guidelines highlight the need for names to reflect the (true) identity of the place: a good name should
   1. Fit the location and environment of the development
   2. Fit the size and type of the development
   4. Retain the history of the building or the area
(Urban Redevelopment Authority)

We can assume that the recommendations were in reaction to names used prior to the recommendations being drawn up and this can be seen to hint at the nature of inauthentic names.

5. Building names

In my earlier paper, I surveyed the names of buildings across different periods in Singapore. It might be worth summarising the key points in the paper before concentrating on what might be considered to be inauthentic styling options.

The traditional naming pattern is established by the earlier names of buildings. Two key elements stand out. Among other things the pattern was for the name to consist of a generic element and a specific, similar to street names in English. The generic element can also be called a classifier and describes the kind of entity that the name referred to (Mansions, Apartment, Residences) and the specific element serves to identify the entity more

specifically, and might often be derived from the street name. More recent buildings might have the generic element just reduced to the definite article.

The second key element is that the names reflected the dominance of English as the linguistic source of the names, but with other official and non-official languages represented. The official languages in Singapore are English, Malay, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil: these languages are mentioned in the constitution. Non-official languages that still bear a local flavour include other varieties of Chinese such as Hokkien and Cantonese. The dominance of English is not surprising as the post-independence government has always maintained the position of English as the 'working language' of the nation and therefore unites the various ethnic groups within the country. An example is Eng Hoon Mansions (Hokkien specific element, derived from the street name Eng Hoon Street, itself derived from the name of a 19th-century Chinese merchant; and English generic element). From a certain point of view the use of Hokkien in the names are more authentic because the original Chinese immigrants to Singapore were mainly Hokkien speakers; Mandarin Chinese was learnt only by subsequent generations of Singaporeans.

In newer buildings, the generic element might be abandoned. English-based names are on the increase and Romance languages (French, Italian and Spanish) are represented more; made-up or altered names are also appearing more often.

Examples include:
- Papillon (French: 'butterfly') < street name Jalan Rama Rama (Malay: Butterfly Road)
- Alessandrea (Italian form of Alexandra) < street name Alexandra Road
- Ventuno Balmoral (Italian: 'twenty-one') < address: 21 Balmoral Road
- Tierra Vue (Spanish: 'earth' + French: 'view')
- The Inspira (probably a shortening of 'inspiration', and perhaps made to look 'Continental')

The photos below illustrates the names of the so-called authentic name Eng Hoon Mansions (Figure 1) and the so-called inauthentic name Papillon (Figure 2) as seen at the entrance to these buildings. These two have been chosen as representative samples.
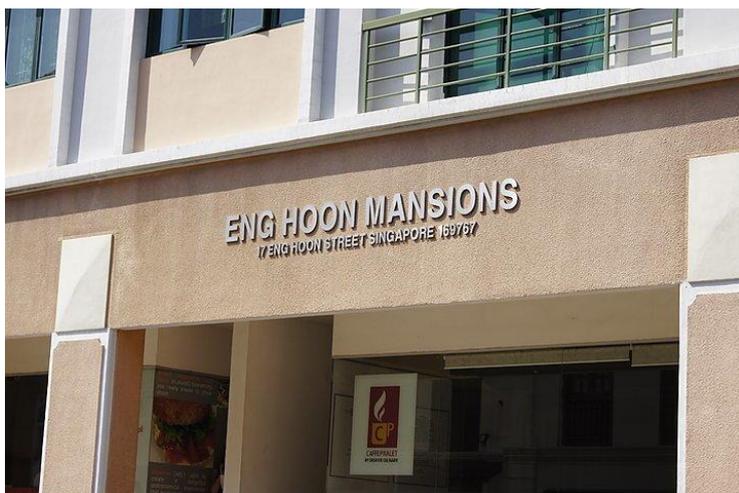

Figure 1: Eng Hoon Mansions

Figure 2: Papillon

What might be noticed is the employment of different typefaces for these two buildings. Typefaces can be considered part of the styling option in presenting the names to the public. The traditional typeface in capitals for Eng Hoon Mansions presents a no-nonsense character. Papillon employs a typeface that imitates hand-written script that looks more fashionable and less four-square.

Wrong language
What is interesting is that the transgressive or inauthentic nature of the name styling is often linguistic in nature. In the earlier paper, I highlighted the increased use of European languages excluding English as part of the building names, and characterised this feature as being 'subversive' and 'carnivalesque'. This was seen in the light of the nation's official languages and of the active languages in use in Singapore. Developers were deliberately choosing to christen buildings using names derived from foreign languages and therefore carving out a different narrative in the city text. The divergent narrative derived from the names could therefore lay open the names to being charged as being inauthentic.

Developers might in fact argue that the homes that they build represent an escape from the workaday world, and going home to Jardin or Costa del Sol is an inviting prospect. In other words, there might be valid commercial reasons for wanting to index foreignness.

Also not to be ignored is the fact that breaking out of the traditional mould is also seen as being fashionable, and it gives the name a 'cool' quotient.

Illiteracy
Developers have also been charged with showing illiteracy, for example in using apparently French elements in ways that are not possible in French. Examples include:
- D'Leedon < street name Leedon Heights
- D'Weave (mysterious name)
- D'Hillside Loft (it is on a hill: Pasir Panjang Hill)

Again, is it 'cool' to disregard French rules?

Orthographic manipulation
This refers to how traditional spelling is deliberately altered. Examples include:
- Thr3e Thre3 Robin < street address, 33 Robin Road
- Cradels
- The Levelz

- D'Zire

This phenomenon of course finds support in personal naming, where in the quest for the unique name has resulted in Jaclyn (for Jacqueline) or Johnathon (for Jonathan).

Invented names
Finally, there are invented names, including the following:
- Vogx
- Tresalveo

This also appears to mirror the growing phenomenon of invented personal names. This is not a new phenomenon, and Wilson notes a strong tradition in the black American community of deliberately favouring unconventional names:

> A study of Rockingham County, North Carolina in 1930 provided Agenora, Audrivalus, Earvila, Eldeese, Katel, Limmer, Margorilla, Roanza and Venton Orlaydo. (Wilson 1998: 314)

What is perhaps interesting is the extent to which these name options judged not to be inauthentic from a *linguistic* standpoint.

There are not many instances where the SBNB rejected a name on non-linguistic groups; one name that was required to be changed not for linguistic reasons was Trinity Towers because it was judged to be too 'religious' by the SBNB. The development was eventually named Trillium, after a flowering plant.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that it is possible to study the city as a multi-authored text, although it brings with it the kinds of difficulties that multi-authored texts bring: inconsistencies and mixed messages. Names are as much open to stylistic choice as other linguistic elements. From the choices that have been made, a particular narrative of the city appears to be presented. There are names that clearly index the standard narrative of Singapore as a multi-ethnic community with associated linguistic repertoires. It is these names that are generally judged to be authentic in that they are seen to be true to the history and the location and environment of Singapore. Of interest is the fact that the indexical work is largely linguistic in nature, involving the choice of language and the form of the language (the structure and orthography).

There are, however, other names that index a more cosmopolitan and outward-looking outlook. They appear to celebrate transgressiveness with regard to linguistic rules. The flip side to the 'authentic name' does not seem to be necessarily the 'inauthentic name'. It could be argued that the focus is not on the traditional narrative, but on the presentation of a more aesthetic sensibility which includes playfulness. The stylistic choice is for stylishness, as it were. In such a sensibility, cast aside might be the four-square font faces, the traditional narrative, the use of authentic languages and sticking to standard usage. The British sociolinguist Maher (2005) proposes the notion of metroethnicity that rejects an essentialised notion of culture in favour of one that celebrates hybridity that might be employed for aesthetic effect: the principle of the 'cool' as opposed to the 'authentic'. I suggest that some of these 'inauthentic' names might be better seen as this culture of the 'cool' and the metroethnic sensibility having cast its shadow on the naming of residential buildings in Singapore.

It could be said that there is a contestation between these two perspectives of names for residential buildings. If there wasn't, there would not have been articles in the vein of Yap's (2016). After all, one man's cool is another man's inauthentic.

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