

The Struggle for a Standard: Evidence From Place Names

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In Singapore several languages and several dialects of English contend for the distinction of “standard.” A brief history of standardization of English is given along with a consideration of the differences between the situations in Britain and the U.S. on the one hand and countries in East and Southeast Asia on the other, in particular the fact that in Britain and the U.S. there has been no official state involvement in developing a standard language or variety but in Singapore there is considerable government intervention through such programs as the Speak Good English Movement. Street names provide a useful source of data which suggest that the Singapore government prefers as “standard” names which echo English over Malay or Chinese, thus demonstrating the more prominent position of English.

Introduction

In accounts of language evolution such as those of Mufwene (2001) and language development such as those of Schneider (2003), changes which have been observed include the transformation from a spoken vernacular to a written form to a standard language, or from a pidgin through a creole to a standard language. Contemporary Standard English can be seen to have begun as spoken vernaculars by Anglo-Saxon groups until they acquired a (non-uniform) written variety. One particular dialect eventually developed into the standard sometime after the 15th century, while other varieties continued to exist as dialects or vernaculars. However, this narrative is an incomplete one because the struggle continues. A similar kind of tussle could be said to be applicable to the non-Anglo (or new) varieties of English such as Singaporean English, where there is a struggle for the place that different English varieties as

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well as non-English languages can have. Press statements, campaign statements (for instance, the Speak Good English Movement in Singapore) and letters to the press are obvious starting points for anyone making a foray into this issue (Bokhorst-Heng 2005; Chng 2003; Rubdy 2001).

I suggest that evidence of this struggle might also be usefully found in the realm of onomastics, specifically by examining place names, street names in particular. If language is a repository of the preoccupations of speakers past and present, then names must be repositories par excellence because they have been specifically chosen for places that speakers want to identify. Indeed, place names (Celtic, Viking and Saxon) have been used as evidence in standard accounts of the history of English in Britain.

I will begin by discussing a characteristic feature of the standardization struggle in East and Southeast Asia, and move to a brief discussion of the most obvious evidence of the standardization struggle which is related to the explicit promotion of Standard English. I will then discuss how onomastic data might be helpful and relevant to a consideration of this issue.

The State and Standardization

The problem of standardization takes on different dynamics in the East and Southeast Asian context. The key processes associated with standardization are selection, elaboration, codification and implementation, which are well established in the literature (see, e.g., Leith and Graddol 2007; Milroy and Milroy 1999) and can be represented as in table 1 below. Standardization is seen to be not only linguistic but also social in nature. The aim, as stated by sociolinguist Einar Haugen is for there to be “*minimal variation in form [and] maximal variation in function*” (1972, 107; emphasis in original). Milroy and Milroy (1999, 29) also suggest that there is a covert aim of establishing an “ideology of standardization,” with the standard being associated with universality, correctness and beauty, which all help in the maintenance of the standard. This leads to strong prescriptive attitudes in favor of the standard.

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Table 1. The Processes of Standardization

	Form	Function
Society	Selection	Acceptance
Language	Codification	Elaboration

Adapted from Haugen 1972, 110

The earlier history of standardization of English (in England) has been characterized by the lack of overt involvement by the state. An English Academy along the lines of the French Academy (*Academie Française*) was never formed despite the urging of Jonathan Swift and others. Notwithstanding the lack of involvement of the state, “the task of Swift’s proposed academy was in fact carried out informally by private persons” (Milroy and Milroy 1999, 28) such as Dr. Johnson who produced his famous dictionary in 1755 or Bishop Robert Lowth who pontificated about grammatical correctness. This is not to imply that members of the British government have not been active in seeking to prescribe forms associated with Standard English or that non-standard forms were not stigmatized; only that there is no centralized agent for Standard British English.

A similar situation exists in the United States; this was made clear by the so-called Ebonics debate of the 1990s when the Oakland, California school board recommended that Ebonics (African American English, formerly Black English Vernacular) speakers be treated as bilingual in order to (among others) have access to federal support for initial education through the mother tongue (see, for example, Wheeler 1999). What ensued was a storm of protest, largely because of a misunderstanding of the school board’s aims; this also highlighted the stigma attached to this particular variety of non-standard English. Equally, though, this shows that there was no central authority for Standard American English.

This situation contrasts sharply with the standardization processes for languages in East Asia such as Chinese or Malay. There is a high degree of state involvement through agencies such as the Central Working Committee on Promotion of Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese as opposed to other varieties such as Cantonese or Shanghainese) (Chen 1999) or the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Institute of Language and Literature) for the promotion of Malay. The high degree of state involvement is often

assumed to result from the need to modernize the languages quickly and that there is not the luxury of time for Chinese and Malay to follow their own courses of development. This is perhaps the model that Singapore has decided to follow in its pursuit of linguistic standardization with the Speak Mandarin Campaign initiated in 1979 and the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) initiated in 2000; both are overseen by the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA), an arm of the government.

The Speak Good English Movement

Schneider (2003) appears to be correct when he claims that Singapore is more developed in its treatment of English than other countries in the region. Whereas nations like Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, and China debate such issues as when English should be introduced in schools and how much of it should be employed and whether it should be used as a medium of instruction, the debate in Singapore has focused on the kind of English that should be employed. This has been ongoing since former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared Singlish (non-standard Singaporean English) to be a handicap he wouldn't wish on anyone (14 August 1999) and the subsequent launch of SGEM on 29 April 2000. The English Language syllabus in schools was made to place further emphasis on grammar, and schools and other institutions of learning were made to promote "Good English." It wasn't always clear what was meant by "good" or "standard" English (see discussion by Hewings and Hewings 2005), but the Ministry of Education and SGEM have gone on to promote "good" English with great verve and gusto. I will not dwell on the SGEM here because it has received extensive coverage elsewhere (Alsagoff 2007; Bokhorst-Heng 2005; Chng 2003; Lee-Wong 2001; Rubdy 2001) but this is an obvious reference point in any discussion of English standardization in Singapore.

Onomastics and Standardization

Onomastics has been an area on the fringes of linguistics and anthropology for some time. One reason for its fringe status is that it is not clear whether names belong to particular language systems in the manner that other words do. There does not appear to be a clear theoretical answer to the question of whether or not names belong to the language in which they are embedded (Geach 1980). Nevertheless,

names, in common with ordinary words, are usually represented phonologically based on the general repertoire of phonemes in a language and orthographically based on the general alphabetic or ideographic symbols of that language. From this point of view, names are linguistic in nature and also subject to the standardizing forces that may pertain at a particular time. (A notable exception is when the musician Prince decided in 1993 to change his name to an unpronounceable symbol, supposedly a composite of the male and female symbols, and he became known as “the artist formerly known as Prince.” In 2000 Prince announced that he was resuming his former name.)

Furthermore, we can talk about onomastic meaning as distinct from lexical meaning (Nicolaisen 1978; 1995), so that even names that are not lexically transparent can be onomastically significant. Personal names have been described as a mirror of the culture of a society (Essien 1986, 40) and a person’s name is “a badge of cultural identity” pointing to religious affiliation and native language (Hanks and Hodges 1990, vii). Given the cultural significance of names, one would therefore imagine that they must be significant as linguistic data.

Onomastics has typically focused on anthroponyms (personal names) and toponyms (place names). Given their linguistic status, it should not be surprising that they, too, should be subject to the forces of standardization. In the history of Western personal names, the church was highly influential in establishing a system of Christian names, and some of these practices were subsequently institutionalized by the state or enacted into law. Legislation also helped to standardize the structure (or “grammar”) of names but surnames became universal in Europe only in the 20th century.

One important difference between personal names and place names is that the former are widely perceived to belong to the private domain whereas the latter are perceived to belong to the public domain. These distinctions can become blurred, so that critical linguists like Fairclough (1995, 138) comment that private domain practices can be appropriated by the public domain in advertisements through conversationalization. Place names therefore reflect a public image that a state, a region or a community may want to appropriate for itself. In Singapore the state maintains a gate-keeping role through the Advisory Committee on Street Names which makes its recommendations to the state. Changes may

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therefore be characterized as being top-down in nature. It is worth noting, however, that it is possible for members of the public to petition for changes and if enough support is mustered the state might agree to a change (see below). Here I will make use of street name data as recorded in Dunlop (2000) and Savage and Yeoh (2003).

Place Names

The facts about street naming are well established (Savage and Yeoh 2003; see also Yawning Bread 2005). Unsurprisingly, given Singapore's multiethnic and multilingual context, the place names show a mix of influences.

Name Retention

Unlike personal names, place names tend to be more conservative as they do not undergo renewal each generation, although of course new streets and new settlements or suburbs (often called "new towns" in Singapore) can be created. Changing existing names also creates legal issues, although this has not prevented widespread postcolonial name changes. In fact, in the light of not uncommon postcolonial practice of renaming streets, Singapore stands out in having left the names of the British (pre-1963) period intact.

In Britain, the High Street is the main thoroughfare of a town, equivalent to Main Street in North America; in Singapore, the High Street remains the High Street (except a section named Parliament Lane to reflect the new site of the Parliament building). Many streets, such as Birch Road and Mountbatten Road in Singapore, retain their names. Birch refers to James Birch, the first British Resident in Perak (just north of Kuala Lumpur), who was murdered in 1875 by Malay chief Maharajalela. Mountbatten of course refers to Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander in Southeast Asia in World War Two. In contrast, the High Street, Birch Road, and Mountbatten Road in Kuala Lumpur have been completely renamed.

Even in Malaysia, there are places such as Cameron Highlands and Port Dickson that have retained their colonial names.

In the retention of Pre-independence names in Singapore, it should also be noted that pre-standardized Chinese or Malay forms have remained intact; examples include Pekin Street (not Peking, much less

Beijing), Nankin Street (not Nanking or Nanjing), Kreta Ayer Road (not Kereta Air), Tampines (not Tempinis). The name Toa Payoh represents a mixture of Chinese and Malay (*toa* from Hokkien Chinese and *payoh* from Malay *paya* 'swamp').

Traditional Patterns

The structure is well established: (a) name + English street type (Bras Basah Road) or (b) Malay street type + name (Jalan Kampong Chantek, Lorong Melayu, from *jalan* 'road' and *lorong* 'lane', respectively). An affix was also available for compass directions and other optional elements, as in West Buona Vista Road.

Emphasis on Malay Names and Structure

During the period when Singapore was part of Malaysia (1963-65) and the period immediately thereafter, new names of the form Malay street type + name were encouraged. Examples include *Jalan Hitam Manis*, and *Jalan Puteh Jerneh* in Chip Bee Gardens (*hitam manis* 'sweet darkness'; *puteh jerneh* 'clear whiteness'). However, there was some resistance, and residents of a housing estate successfully petitioned to have several names changed; the name Jalan Kain Limau was changed to Mount Sinai Drive (Savage and Yeoh 2003, 18-19).

1970s and 1980s

Many suburbs (known as "new towns") were established with a mix of names (*Ang Mo Kio*, *Clementi*) and a new structure was established that included numerical suffixes such as *Clementi Avenue 6*, which can be seen as a kind of avoidance strategy.

In the 1980s the promotion of Mandarin Chinese over other Chinese varieties such as Hokkien, Teochew or Cantonese and the pinyin style of romanization resulted in names such as *Bishan*, *Hougang*, and *Yishun*. Previously, locals had used *Peck San* (Cantonese pronunciation), *Ao Kang* (Teochew pronunciation) and *Nee Soon* (based on the name of plantation owner Lim Nee Soon), respectively. The result was such street names as *Bishan Street 22* and *Hougang Avenue 5*. (The suburb now known as Bukit Panjang was to have been given the Mandarin pinyin name *Zhenghua*, but negative publicity resulted in retention of the Malay name.)

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After 1990

The intense promotion of Malay names and Mandarin Chinese names appears to have receded, even as new suburbs and housing estates continue to develop. Below is a sample of more recent street names:

Anchorvale Road/Drive/Link/Lane (in Sengkang)

Architecture Drive; Arts Link; Business Link; Engineering Drive 1, 2, 3, 4 ; Law Link; Medical Drive; Science Drive 2, 3, 4 (in the National University of Singapore)

Blackmore Drive (leading to the relocated Methodist Girls School)

Compassvale Road/Street/Drive/Bow/Lane/Link (in Sengkang)

Edgefield Plains/Walk (in Punggol)

Fernvale Road/Street/Lane/Link (in Sengkang)

Laurel Wood Avenue (development in Bukit Timah)

Rivervale Street/Drive/Crescent/Link/Walk (in Sengkang)

Of note is that name retention with English street types is now well established. Also of note is that the names themselves are often derived from common English nouns. (An exception is Blackmore, the surname of the founder of the Methodist Girls' School.) Unlike the streets in the National University of Singapore and the street leading to the Methodist Girls' School, many of the names appear not to bear local relevance and seem to have been made up, which corresponds to a trend in the naming of private residential properties where a kind of reverse exoticization seems to be at work, a kind of Oriental exoticization of the Occident.

Conclusion

The pattern that can be observed is that in street naming, the influence of the so-called international or Anglo practice is in evidence; many will be tempted to label this as globalization. The standardization struggle in Singapore seems to involve a balance between elements that emphasize the international and elements that emphasize the local. In more recent naming practices, the Anglo-style standard appears to have emerged victorious. In spite of this, though, names bestowed in earlier periods, whether Pre-independence or Post-independence, whether standard or non-standard, have not in general been rechristened.

How is all this linked to linguistic standardization in Singapore, in its present quest for Standard English? Current street naming practices can be seen to echo the state's preference for a standard that favors

international names over those expressing local identity. It also inscribes Anglo practices over those of Malay or Chinese and so underlines the prominent position of the English language in Singapore. In this particular standardization struggle, the definition of the standard that to some extent bypasses the local is that one that has emerged; the reference point for the standard is external rather than internal. We see that naming practices influence the process of acceptance of the standard (Haugen 1972). Given the point made earlier that street naming represents public practice, this is perhaps not surprising. It should, however, be noted that individuals can petition for changes, but since there has not been any noteworthy upsurge of protest, apart from the comment column by Brown (2004), in the *Today* newspaper, to provide a sufficient groundswell to effect change, the public could be seen as complicit or approving, after balking at some of the Malay-style or Mandarin-influenced names promoted in earlier periods. Naming therefore constitutes clear evidence of the state's promotion of the standard.

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