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Languages of Food Names and Senses of Place: Translingual Practices of Ethnic Heritage Communities in Penang, Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper examines the languages of food and senses of place revealed through traditional food naming by ethnic heritage communities, such as the Hokkiens, in Penang, Malaysia. This study uses ethnographic data, photographic data, geospatial analysis, questionnaire surveys, and interviews to examine (1) how traditional names pertaining to ethnic foods are presented and (2) how traditional Penang Hokkien food names are maintained or standardized toward English/Mandarin. While there is a notable trend of mainstream food narratives emphasizing state-backed national food and the use of main languages in food naming, the present study offers a different glocal understanding of the diversified and small ethnic foods and their translingual naming that highlights the shift in and maintenance of these practices. This study thus extends beyond an account of changing food names to indicate broader linguistic and social changes, possible underlying inequalities, the blurring of ethnic and identity boundaries, the (in)visibility of small ethnic/heritage cultures amid the rise of consumer society and a mainstream national heritage that tends to represent the dominant and majority perspectives.

Keywords: food names, sense of place, translingual practice, ethnic heritage, Hokkien, Malaysia, Penang

Introduction

Is food the lens through which we view language, heritage, and society? This study examines how ethnic heritage language (HL) speakers in Penang (agentively) express their shared linguistic identities and sense of place in everyday interactions through different translingual representations choices of food names . Grounded in the assumption that language is an essential element of social life (Fairclough 2003), the idea that the language of food can provide a lens to view culture and society is based on the notion that what happens "textually" or within any act of communication can tell us something about what happens "socially" (Smith & Waterton 2012, 155).

Malaysia is a multilingual country with "a variety of unrelated languages each with its own literacy tradition" (Rustow 1968, 102). The country has four main languages (i.e., Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil) and several other minority languages, including various Chinese heritage languages. As the first British Strait settlement in Malaya, Penang comprises the Prince of Wales Island (Penang Island) and Wellesley Province (mainland Penang). From the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, Penang offered valuable opportunities for Chinese migrants during political upheaval in China. Consequently, Penang has historically had a substantial ethnic Chinese population (Fell 1960), amongst the majority Malay demographic. Although it was not the most important maritime port for the East India Company, Penang was an important overland trade route for many local communities, reflecting the fluidity of movement in the region and the strength of the economic imperative (Loh 2009; Hussin 2005).

Major European traders began establishing trading houses in Penang in the nineteenth century (Wright & Cartwright 1908). Products from surrounding areas (e.g., Burma, Aceh, Singapore, China, India) were consumed and distributed in Penang and then redistributed and exported by Penang traders to Europe, China, and neighboring destinations (Wong 2015; Daw & Loh 2009). Penang became an important trading center in the northern part of the Malay Peninsula (Hussin 2005). This development strengthened Penang's position as the central region of Malaya. Moreover, the identification of George Town (Penang) as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (together with Malacca city) in 2008 shaped Penang's position as a liberated place, a "borderland" that differed from the remainder of Chinese Malaysian society.

From a linguistic perspective, intense contact with other languages (e.g., Malay, English, Cantonese, Teochew) has significantly altered the vocabulary, tonal system, and syntactic structure of Penang Hokkien, the main lingua franca among Penangites. Penang Hokkien is not mutual intelligibility with Taiwanese and mainland Chinese varieties. It is also generally not understood by other Amoy speakers of Hokkien (Churchman 2017). The uniqueness of the language is a source of pride among the Penangite (Mok 2017).Despite its cherished position, Penang has not been unaffected by global developments. Mandarin, for example, has increasingly replaced Penang Hokkien as a result of longstanding education policies (Ding & Goh 2024). The language has also undergone major shifts in vocabulary due to intense contact and competition with Mandarin in the education, entertainment, and social spheres (Churchman 2021). As a result, many of the distinctive terms of Penang Hokkien may soon be discarded and lost. The traditional Hokkien space is therefore facing serious sociolinguistic threats.

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This paper examines the potential result of these challenges on traditional names used for ethnic foods. On the basis of observational data, surveys, geospatial distribution data, and interviews, this study examines how traditional Penang Hokkien food names have been maintained or standardized to conform more with English and/or Mandarin. As this research shows, the names used not only contribute significantly to verbal resources in communicative practice (Canagarajah 2018; 2013), they also can provide insights into speakers' historical, cultural, and ethnic, and social identity and sense of place.

Background Information

Hokkien-speaking migrants and their descendants were among the earliest migrants to arrive in Penang. They joined a heterogeneous cosmopolitan community that included not only British and Malay people but also Burmese, Javanese, Arab, Sikh, Tamil, and Parsee populations (DeBernardi 2004). Through prolonged contact, the Chinese population adopted many of the cultural norms of these different ethnic communities, including their cuisine.

The food of Penang has strong peasant origins, and eating traditionally occurs in two settings, the home or the local coffee shop which is called "kopitiam" in Hokkien (Anderson & Anderson 1972). A ubiquitous part of the daily national landscape, the kopitiam is a stable part of Malaysians' everyday life (Khoo 2009).Cross-cultural food practices are prevalent in the kopitiam. Along with Indian, Chinese, Malay, and Teochew dishes, there is Peranakan cuisine. Fondly called "Nyonya food", the Peranakan culinary style was brought to the country by the Peranakans who are mainly Hokkien-speakers (Tan 2018, 1993). Throughout the Penang, there is ample evidence that the foods and languages of these sub-groups have blended. For example, the researchers observed a Chinese stall that sold boiled noodles. In its advertising, however, a Malay food name, *mee rebus*, was used. This language choice may have been motivated by the fact that the dish used spices from the Malay Peninsula. This example was no exception. Throughout Penang, it is quite common to find food advertisements with translingual names. Advertisements may simultaneously feature food names in Hokkien (e.g., *Lor Bak*, *Tao You Bak*, *Hong Bak*), along with Malay *Sambal*, *Asam*, *Acar-acar*, *Kerabu*), and English (prawns, rice, lemon grass). These translanguaging practices exemplify how the historical boundaries between different ethnic cuisines and languages have become increasingly blurred, challenging the notion of fixed identities (Duruz 2010).

However, in recent years, with the increasing importance of tourism, major shifts have taken place. As "Susan", a 71 year old interviewee observed, minority ethnic traditions have been eclipsed by Chinese and English languages and cultures. As "Susan" explains: "Our grandmas all wear *sarong*. However, starting from our mothers' generations, they wear Western dresses or *cheongsams*. Maybe the food, especially the *kuih* (Nyonya dessert), still retains the Nyonya heritage [. . .] [but the Peranakan heritage] is slowly phasing out." As the results of this study demonstrate, the respondent's observation is not without credence. Significant changes are indeed taking place. Moreover, as this investigation shows, the languages used for ethnic food names can serve as an effective index for studying these underlying shifts.

Heritage Languages, Senses of Place, and Names of Ethnic Food : A Translingual Landscape Approach

Traditionally, food and food consumption are not only as symbols of power that reveal generational, ethnic, and class positioning as well as differences or boundaries between social groups (Mapes 2018; Counihan 1992; Bourdieu 1984). They are also as symbolically significant representations of cultural heritage, social identity, and distinctive local practices (Reddy & van Dam 2020; Peres 2017; Holtzman 2006). Food practices can therefore play a key role in the preservation of ethnic identities in multicultural societies (D'Sylva & Beagan 2011; Slocum 2011). As intangible elements of heritage, culinary culture (Blake & Lixinski 2020) both represent and express identity, belonging, and a sense of place (Smith et al. 2024).

Stedman (2002, 561) defines "senses of place" as the "meanings and attachment to a setting held by an individual or group" that are individually and socially constructed over time. Blommaert (2005, 222) suggests that "spaces can be filled with all kinds of social, cultural, epistemic, and affective attributes" to become a "place", a particular space in which "senses of belonging can be projected". Lou (2017, 516) further examines how "spaces of consumption" are shaped into "senses of place", where food is a visibly utilized semiotic resource. Notably, research on the linguistic landscape (LL) provides insights into the languages used in a region as well as the choice of languages employed (Spolsky & Cooper 1991). This research is relevant to both the presence and absence of heritage languages (HLs) Few studies have directly explored the relationship between HLs, senses of place, cultural identity, and food names. This research addresses this oversight.

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Methods

This study adopted a mixed-method approach that included ethnographic observations, a geospatial search, surveys, and interviews to gather information on Penang culture through ethnic food names. Data on food names were collected through a geospatial search, which is a process of searching specific locations within a given radius based on the geopoints (latitude/longitude) for those locations using the Google Maps platform. This geospatial search was used to find names used for three ethnic foods: (1.) Hokkien mee, a prawn noodle soup; (2.) laksa, a fish-based broth with thick rice noodles, and (3.) *Koay Kak*, fried radish custard. A systematic search was performed for the menus of restaurants, cafes, stall fronts, and storefronts that advertised these food items within Penang. A geospatial dataset was then created based on the data collected. These collected geospatial data were then placed into three food naming categories: (1) "traditional" HLs ; (2) "shifting" (i.e. names that evidenced a change from the from traditional form towards either standard Mandarin or English; and (3) "standard" Mandarin or English.

A survey was conducted with a total of 1,241 Chinese Malaysians of different ages, genders, HLs, and townships. Two age ranges were chosen: an older generation (67.49%), made up of participants who were born before 1990; and a younger generation (32.51%), comprised of respondents born after 1990. In total, 59.63% of the respondents were male and 40.37% were female. As for the place of residence, 36.62% of the respondents resided in Kuala Lumpur, 8.16% in George Town, 19.89% in Bukit Mertajam, 18.27% in Kota Kinabalu, and 17.06% in Malacca City. These locations were chosen as the populations represent different regions and are composed of the following different ethnic heritage groups: the Cantonese (Kuala Lumpur); the Hokkien (George Town and Malacca); the Hakka (Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu); and the Teochew (Bukit Mertajam). Most of the participants were recruited and surveyed face-to-face by the researchers and their assistants at the respondents' places of residence, shops, schools, and restaurants, as well as on the street. A few of the survey respondents were identified through referrals and were then invited personally through email to complete the online questionnaire. The participants were presented with photos of laksa and Koay Kak. They were then asked what they called each food in their daily life. For example, after being shown a photo of laksa, participants were asked to select from the following four name options :

- Laksa
- Assam laksa
- Penang laksa
- Other: _____

Under the photo of *Koay Kak*, five options were given:

- Chǎo Luóbò Gāo
- Chai Tow Koay
- Chao Lo Bak Gou
- Koay Kak
- Other: _____

To complement the LL research and the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 4 selected participants. The objectives of the interviews were to obtain information about the past and current state of the language(s) of food. To protect the participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were used for all four participants.

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Findings

The Prevalence of the Three Different Name Categories *Hokkien mee* is an exclusively Penang Hokkien food that symbolizes the Hokkien identity of the Penangites. Interestingly, *Hokkien mee* is given a different name outside Penang. In Kuala Lumpur, for example, *Hokkien mee* refers to a type of fried noodle in black soy sauce. In our interview with "Kent" (aged 29), he shared his first experience with ordering *Hokkien mee* in Kuala Lumpur. Much to his frustration, he was served fried noodles instead of the traditional prawn soup noodles he expected from Penang. He learned that in order outside of Penang, the Hokkien dish is called *Prawn Mee*. That is now the name Kent uses when he places his order because, as he explains, he is "**now** in **Kuala Lumpur**", the emphasis signaling his consternation. However, as shown by the LL data we gathered, this change in ethnic food name has not only taken place in Kuala Lumpur. According to this investigation, *Hokkien mee* is frequently called *Hokkien prawn mee* or *Prawn noodles,* even in Penang.

These changes in name may have been motivated by a desire to ensure that the largest number of potential customers are addressed (Spolsky & Cooper 1991). Consequently, in the new name, the most identifying features (i.e., prawns and noodles) of the heritage item that are "maximally understandable" to a broader target audience are selected and presented (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, 13). By comparison, the terms *Hokkien* and *mee*, which may sound unfamiliar to non-HL speaking tourists are omitted. These linguistic changes in the food names transformed the Hokkien noodles from a well-recognized ethnic food among the Hokkien community to a common part of Chinese cuisine and Pan-Chinese heritage. This change demonstrates how the marketing of traditional ethnic food can alter food narratives, impacting cultural identity and heritage (Leeman & Modan 2009).

Table 1 shows the results of the geospatial search in Penang for the three selected ethnic food names *Hokkien mee*, *laksa,* and *Koay Kak*. In total, there were 349 food names found for *Hokkien mee*, 145 for *laksa*, and 83 for *Koay Kak*.

Table 1: Geospatial Distribution by Frequency Count and Percentage of the Category of Food Names used for Hokkien mee, Laksa, and Koay Kak in Penang

	Naming Category		
	Traditional	Shifting	Standard English or Mandarin
Hokkien Mee	247	93	9
Laksa	119	-	26
Koay Kak	83	-	-
Total Freq.	449	93	35
Category Percentage	77.82	16.12	6.06

The results are consistent with the LL and interview data, revealing changes in the names of the three selected ethnic foods. The geospatial distribution results show that the traditional names of *Hokkien mee* and *laksa* in Penang still account for the majority of names (42.81% and 20.62%, respectively). In the case of *Koay Kak* (fried radish custard), 100% of the food stalls/menus continue to use the traditional food name, with slight differences in spelling (e.g. *Koay Kak, Kuey Kak, Kueh Kak*, etc.)

Notably, while 4.51% of instances of *laksa* have shifted to *Penang laksa* or *Assam laksa*, this change was mainly in George Town (Penang Island) and in Butterworth and Bukit Mertajam, two main cities in Wellesley Province. Likewise, although the proportion of "standard Mandarin/English" names of *Hokkien mee* (i.e., prawn noodles) was relatively small (1.56%), the geospatial distribution was primarily located in George Town, the main tourism area of Penang. Interestingly, "shifting" food names were found only for *Hokkien mee* (16.12%); and these names were mainly located in the cities of George Town, Butterworth, and Bukit Mertajam. Hence, while the use of the food names is associated with (or related to) place of residence, with the spread of Mandarin and the increasing importance of tourism, individuals' positioning toward their ethnic heritage and local places are increasingly affected.

Moreover, the results of the survey show that whether fish-based broth is named *laksa* (which has a positive connotation in Penang) varies significantly on one's place of residence (test statistic = 372.77, p value < 0.000). Table 2 shows that *laksa* is used by nearly all residents of the two cities in Penang (i.e., George Town and Bukit Mertajam). This term is also used in other cities, such as Kota Kinabalu and Malacca, but it is not as common there as it is in Penang. *Laksa* is the least commonly used in Kuala Lumpur, where the dish is more commonly known as *assam laksa* (64.2%). A total of 56% of respondents of different ages, HLs and townships chose laksa of Penang as the name for the fish-based broth (i.e.,), indicating the strong association between the food and its geographic origin.

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Table 2: The Prevalence of Different Names for Laksa by Percentage Across 5 Different Locations

Name	Bukit Mertajam, Penang	George Town, Penang	Kota Kinabalu, Sabah	Kuala Lumpur	Malacca City, Malacca	Total
Laksa	96.40	97.00	58.90	30.30	41.20	56.00
Assam laksa	2.00	1.00	33.60	64.20	39.80	36.90
Penang laksa & others	1.60	2.00	7.50	5.50	19.00	7.10
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Similarly, the results of the questionnaire survey for *Kuay Kak* revealed distinctive differences in the naming of this food inside and outside Penang. While *chǎo luóbò gāo* is the standard Mandarin term for this savory dish, this term is not always used even when people speak Mandarin, as there is a significant influence of geographical location (p value < 0.000) on the name of the food (see table 3). In Malacca City, the dish is commonly known as *Chai Tow Koay*, which is a transliteration of "radish custard" in the Hokkien language. In Kuala Lumpur, while 42.40% of the residents surveyed call this dish by its Cantonese name, *chao lo bak gou*, 35.50% of the respondents from Kuala Lumpur chose the Mandarin term *chǎo luóbò gāo*. By comparison, 55.80% of the respondents from Kota Kinabalu used the Mandarin name. Notably, nearly all respondents from the two cities in Penang (96.40% and 92.00%, respectively) used the Penang Hokkien term *Koay Kak*, despite the increasing use of Mandarin names in cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu (table 2).

Table 3: The Prevalence of Different Names for *Koay Kak* by Percentage Across 5 Different Locations

Language	Name	Bukit Mertajam, Penang	George Town, Penang	Kota Kinabalu, Sabah	Kuala Lumpur	Malacca City, Malacca	Total
Mandarin	Chǎo Luóbò Gāo	0.80	4.00	55.80	35.50	18.50	26.80
Hokkien	Chai Tow Koay	2.40	4.00	8.40	13.00	75.80	20.00
Cantonese	Chao Lo Bak Gou	0.40	0.00	24.30	42.40	0.50	20.10
Penang Hokkien	Koay Kak	96.40	92.00	0.40	4.70	1.90	28.90
Other HLs (e.g., Hakka)	various	0.00	0.00	11.10	4.40	3.30	4.20
	Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Discussion and Conclusion

Previous research has shown how food names provide cues to what might be expected from the taste and how people appear to be influenced by these cues (Wansink et al. 2005). Food sales can be improved through descriptive food names (Wansink et al. 2001). The present research echoes these studies, as shown by the changes in traditional/translingual food names, especially in the area of tourism.

In line with changing tourism processes and tastes (Grosglik & Ram 2013), ethnic food names in Penang have changed revealing the commodification of traditional food associated with heritage tourism. While it is useful for a social group to maintain its identity as a collective, the communicative usefulness of a language may be more important for the livelihoods of individuals (de Swaan 2001). Language choices for food names are shaped by global commercial powers and linguistic hierarchies (Tam 2024).

In Penang and beyond, the shift toward majority languages is becoming increasingly significant, reflecting how languages express power (Coffin 2001) and how historical ethnic boundaries can blur. The more outsiders of ethnic heritage communities become "insiders" (Alba 2005, 23), the faster the traditional

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names of ethnic foods may shift to accommodate them. By using the lens of food naming, this study highlights how investigating shifting modes in food naming can facilitate greater knowledge about how people make sense of themselves, their communities, and their interactions with the globalizing world. More importantly, while there is a notable trend of mainstream food narratives emphasizing state-backed national food and the use of main languages in food naming, the present study offers a different understanding of lesser known ethnic foods. It shows how changes in food naming practices can reveal larger cultural shifts. The relevance of this paper thus extends beyond food names and relates to indicate broader linguistic and social changes in society, shedding light on possible underlying inequalities and the challenges minority communities face amid the rise of consumerism and national agendas that tend to privilege dominant, majority perspectives.

This study is not without its limitations. As discussed earlier, we focused primarily on analyzing three ethnic food names used by heritage language communities, especially the Hokkien population in Penang. Therefore, the findings of this study are not meant to be generalized, nor can these discussions encapsulate the totality of ethnic food names and the Hokkien heritage. In fact, the discussion over heritage tourism and underlying social and linguistic inequalities is only just beginning. Future research would benefit from studying a larger sample of ethnic food names beyond the Hokkien population, both inside and outside of Penang and Malaysia.

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