Creative Language Forms on Signboards in Singapore and Malaysia

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Abstract

The development of technology has created multilingual environments where digital communication and electronic devices have become an essential component in most people's daily life. The omnipresence of hypertext and digitised interfaces have created new affordances for the combination of communicative and linguistic resources and the production of creative writing forms. This study presents a multimodal examination of 'creative writing forms' on signboards collected in Singapore and Malaysia. These creative forms are categorised into (1) objects stylised to represent letters, and (2) creative word play. The results reveal that creative language forms feature simplified and visually concise communicative conventions (often prevalent in electronic communication; e.g., chat, SMS, etc.), which are becoming more visible in the physical landscape of our everyday life. Through the results presented in this study, one can gain a deeper understanding of the contemporary linguistic landscape, the creative language forms witnessed—particularly in Asian countries—and the fast changes engendered by economic globalisation that are impacting literacy and language practices in modern urban environments.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, creative language forms, multimodality, Singapore, Malaysia

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With the advent of globalisation and the fast development of modern technology and the internet, language has become more malleable, digitised, creative (Gorter & Cenoz, 2015; Hollington, 2019; Hollington & Nassenstein, 2019; Inagawa, 2015; Järlehed & Jaworski, 2015; Pitzl, 2018; Swann & Deumert, 2018; Swann & Maybin, 2007) and, some would argue, commoditised (Rubdy & Tan, 2008). Electronic devices and equipment dominate most of our daily life, making digital communication ubiquitous and almost unavoidable. This mode of communication is now progressively crossing over from the virtual into the physical landscape (Dejica, Hansen, Sandrini, & Para, 2016; Gee, 2011; Zappavigna, 2018). Symbols and communicative affordances (Kress & Bezemer, 2015) used in digital interaction can be encountered in the physical landscape, as exemplified on signboards of large agglomerations and multilingual cities. Interestingly, these observed linguistic practices are more symptomatic of urban multilingual contexts. According to Blommaert (2012), in 'superdiversified' environments, people are more likely to blend available linguistic and communicative resources to create complex linguistic and semiotic forms. These hybrid forms of communication, which may be an epiphenomenon of globalisation and its resulting hypertextualised communication patterns, are progressively 'de-standardising' our traditional writing practices. Nevertheless, they are increasingly perceived as a practical means to save time and space in the current fast-evolving world (Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2015).

This paper, which builds on current debates on creativity in language use and display (Aikhenvald & Storch, 2019), aims to investigate and discuss the forms of creative language use on signboards collected from two adjacent countries, Singapore and Malaysia. In particular, alphabetical letters, which are blended with images or symbols to form words/ phrases, are examined and analysed in view of the latest linguistic

landscape literature (Peck, Stroud, & Williams, 2019; Pütz & Mundt, 2019), but also through the analytical lens of multimodality (van Leeuwen, 2005, 2011) and language creativity (Aikhenvald & Storch, 2019; Deshors, Götz, & Laporte, 2018). Following an overview of the sociolinguistic backgrounds of Singapore and Malaysia, which contextualises the linguistic situation and language dynamics of the two countries, a discussion of the theoretical foundations, literature adopted, and methodology, is presented. The findings of the study are then discussed in the subsequent sections.

1 Sociolinguistic Overview of Singapore and Malaysia

Singapore and Malaysia are multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual neighbouring countries located in Southeast Asia. Singapore is situated at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. Both Singapore and Malaysia were colonised by the British Empire, from which they gained independence in 1957. Singapore was part of Malaysia until 1965. The countries rifted over political and economic issues. Since then, Singapore developed independently and today it has become one of the world's leading cities. Malaysia has also progressed in its own unique way and is currently moving towards a knowledge-based economy.

Singapore has a population of 5.63 million, which consists of Chinese (74.3%), Malays (13.4%), Indians (9.0%) and other ethnicities (3.2%) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2019). Four official languages are used: English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil (David, 2008). English is widely spoken and is the language of education and administration. Singapore implements a bilingual policy in schools, where English is learned as a first language and mother tongues are taught according to different ethnic groups (Mandarin for Chinese, Bahasa Melayu for Malays, and Tamil for Indians). The aim behind the maintenance of mother tongues is to promote the use of local languages and thereby enhance ethnolinguistic vitality (Landry & Bourhis, 1997) through the preservation of traditional cultures and values (David, 2008). According to Simons and Fennig (2018), Singapore boasts 24 living languages as well as several immigrant languages, such as Indonesian, Japanese,

Korean, Thai, and Urdu. Due to the variety of languages found in Singapore, the cityscape is filled with a multitude of signs, many consisting of bilingual and multilingual texts. As Singapore is a fast-paced, vibrant country embracing technology, electronic communication has become part and parcel of the communication trends of the city-state.

Malaysia has a population of 32.6 million. According to the Department of Statistics (2019), the Malays form 69.1% of the population, the Chinese constitute 23%, the Indians, 6.9% and other ethnic groups make up the remaining 1.0%. Simons and Fennig (2018) note that Malaysia has an estimated 136 languages—134 are living and two are extinct. The major languages are Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil. Several other languages include Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Teochew, Iban, Kadazan, Dusun, Punjabi, and aboriginal languages. After independence, the Malay language became the de facto language of choice among most Malaysians and is now recognised as a national lingua franca. This status is verified by Article 152 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia (Manan, David, Dumanig, & Naqeebullah, 2014). The Malay language is used as a tool for nation-building to consolidate Malaysian identity through a common language. English continued to officially function in the administration, education, and law sectors until 1967. The post-1970 period saw a drastic change in the education policy, which removed English as a language of instruction and established the Malay language. Nevertheless, the four main languages are widely encountered on signboards in all major cities in Malaysia. This diverse pattern provides space for each ethnicity to ensure its equality and to live harmoniously 'under one roof'.

In summary although Singapore and Malaysia have different language policies, due to the common history of the two independent nations, English remains an important language of broader communication in both countries. Moreover, the linguistic landscapes of Singapore and Malaysia are replete with bilingual and multilingual signboards that attest to the multilingual and multicultural fabric of the two respective societies.

2 Creativity and Language Play

A key notion discussed in this paper is 'creativity'. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2019) defines 'creative' as 'involving the use of skill and the imagination to produce something new'. Similarly, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2019) describes the same word as 'having or showing an ability to make new things or think of new ideas'. Both definitions emphasise the idea of innovation and novelty. Creativity is part of the modern and promoted values that are highly valued in the domains of technology, employment, and education. According to the World Economic Forum, creativity is listed as one of the top ten skills in 'The Future of Jobs'. It is also celebrated in several curricula in different countries within different educational ministries and part of several schools' values.

In applied linguistics, creativity has been mostly theorised by sociolinguists. For example, a definition of creativity in relation to speech is provided by Carter and McCarthy (2004, pp. 63-64), who state that creativity includes "offering some new way of seeing the content of the message; making humorous remarks … playing with language form to entertain others … oiling the wheels of the conversation". This definition emphasises that an important ingredient in linguistic creativity is stretching the boundaries of the language in addition to humour and playfulness. This permeability of the language is an important feature of creativity, which also brings about innovation and/or novelty into language forms. Commenting on this aspect of novelty, Carter and McCarthy (2004, p. 64) also explain that "linguistic creativity imply change and normally involve a single producer who brings about 'novel' changes to the language or to forms of language in ways which are innovative and schema-refreshing". In his subsequent work, Carter (2007, p. 602) envisions creativity as involving re-creation as well as creation, remembering as well as dismembering, and re-vision as well as vision. This conceptualisation of creativity is echoed by Swann and Maybin (2007, p. 491), who argue that creativity in language allows us not simply to reproduce but to "recreate, refashion, and recontextualise linguistic and cultural resources".

A dimension of creativity that has been theorised by Deumert (2014) hints at the fluid property of languages and how they can be flexible and malleable resources. She contends that "all language is liquid, signs can always be manipulated, twisted, and changed in new contexts", as "creativity is located at the interface of the old and new, sameness, and difference" (Deumert, 2014, pp. 84, 171). Bringing this understanding of creativity to the linguistic landscape, fluidity can also be understood as the flouting of language norms or the departure from conventional uses of the language.

This last observation emphasises another important feature of creativity; namely, not only does it do-things-with-words (as discussed in pragmatics and particularly under Austin's speech act theory), it plays with linguistic form. This idea is pointed out by Swann and Deumert (2018, p. 5). The above conceptual models, which have theorised the concept of creativity, has guided the data collection, analysis, and interpretation phases of this project.

In view of the sociolinguistic literature on creativity and language play, the expression coined for this paper as 'creative language forms' accounts for the use of language in innovative, playful, and sometimes incongruous or eye-catching ways. We also envision this term to encompass language forms in which alphabetical letters are blended with images/graphic elements in a stylised form.

3 Linguistic Landscape Studies

Linguistic landscape studies is a subfield of sociolinguistics that has become a growing niche over the last two decades. The term 'linguistic landscape' was initially used to describe the functions, roles, and effects of signs in a landscape. Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 25) define linguistic landscape as "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings … of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration". In this definition, the linguistic landscape of a territory

has two basic functions—informative and symbolic—and it serves to reflect the linguistic characteristics of a geographical region, and symbolise the value and status of the in-group language within that sociolinguistic setting. This definition has since expanded and incorporated semiotic artefacts, which Shohamy and Waksman (2009, p. 328) define as "all possible discourses that emerge in changing public spaces". With this expanded definition, scholars have looked at numerous landscapes from different perspectives, such as bilingualism and multilingualism (Backhaus, 2007; Rasinger, 2018), second language acquisition (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008), grassroots literacy (Juffermans, 2008), identity (Johnson, 2017), language ideology (Lanza & Woldemariam, 2009), language commodification (Leeman & Modan, 2009), and language policy (Barni & Vedovelli, 2012). Nevertheless, creativity remains a rather under-researched topic in this domain of inquiry. In the next few paragraphs, the most relevant and recent studies related to the current project are discussed.

Hsu (2008) explores creativity in the linguistic landscape of English advertising in Taiwan. The copywriter's motivations, discourse domains, socio-psychological effects, and attitude of both English-literate and illiterate readers are discussed in the research. According to the interviews of copywriters, English mixing conveys a sense of internationalism, high quality, authenticity, metropolitan orientation, urban experience, middle-class lifestyle, and a trendy taste appealing to a younger generation of readership. According to Hsu, brand names for local products that use English as a strategy of marketability drives consumers to think the brands are more international and fashionable. To attract young consumers' attention, mixing intra-sentential English vocabulary in the body copy of advertisements is a common tactic in Taiwan. Different English mixing strategies are used between high-end and low-end products. For high-end products, English mixing is used to describe the product to create a sense of professionalism and high quality. For low-end products, easy-to-read English is used to create a sense of familiarity. Direct translation of Chinese grammatical structure into English mainly characterises nativised English usage in Taiwan's advertising discourse. Hsu's (2008) study explores why English

mixing advertisements have become popular in Taiwan and delves into the examination of attitudes towards this phenomenon from both copywriters' and readers' points of view.

Luk (2013) analysed bilingual texts in Hong Kong's cityscape and mass media to account for linguistic creativity and language play. She collected ten examples of bilingual visual language play through ethnographic observations and analysed their textual properties, semantic features, and socio-pragmatic use. In her results, four major findings can be highlighted:

1. creative phonological and lexical crossover between Chinese/Cantonese and English, such as bilingual punning and hybridised intra-lexical code-mixing

2. use of bilingual texts to complement and/or boost the meaning of the texts in the other code

3. use of cross-linguistic puns to create 'double-voiced discourse' and 'double meaning' through a visual parody

4. typographical design and spatial arrangements to produce playful effects of the texts.

Luk (2013) concludes that even though the analysis evolved around a small data sample, the findings provide evidence of bilingualism and the impactful role of English in local, intra-societal communication. The data also shows that the ownership of English has increased as a source for local communication. Further research is suggested to explore the linguistic ideologies and identities behind these playful bilingual texts.

Jaworski (2015) added a new dimension to the semiotic resources in which words, phrases, logos, and marketing slogans are integrated with new, creative topography and orthography that involves innovative uses of punctuation marks, diacritics, and titles. His data, collected through various commercial districts in different cities across the world, includes

different types of graphemic marking: dot (full stop, period, point), three dots (ellipsis), comma, title, apostrophe, exclamation mark, colon (and semicolon), umlaut, underscore, circumflex, 'invented' or 'misplaced' diacritics, brackets, mathematical symbols, and prefixes (<i->). Jaworski (2015, p. 231) calls this "new, translingual, middle-brow register" as 'globalese', which is part of the 'global semioscape' (Thurlow & Aiello, 2007). Globalese is readable and the meanings are understandable, but they form indistinguishable boundaries between words and pictograms on a global scale. His study suggests these creative ways of using non-standard orthography and topography are dominating the contemporary urban landscapes, and indicates cosmopolitan 'practice and competence' (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002).

A study by Curtin (2015) has delved into the construct of linguistic creativity in Taipei's linguistic landscape. According to Curtin (2015), creativity is a common activity that plays with linguistic, social, and cultural boundaries and is best understood in relation to normative (language) ideologies and practices. Bilingual environments seem to be especially conducive to linguistic creativity. As argued by Curtin (2015), Taipei's linguistic landscape, rife with cultural and historical background, provides a fertile environment for creative linguistic landscaping. As the economy grows, Taipei's linguistic landscape now employs sophisticated design elements, such as typeface, colour, and image. Colour and script point to the distinctive Taiwanese-Chinese identities of shops. An important observation made by the author is that Taipei's linguistic landscape is an engagement in power relations, especially with the use of Mandarin characters. As she notes, since the Kuomintang government promoted Mandarin as the national language of Taiwan, the ethnolinguistic diversity and history of the island has been erased. The creativity in Taipei's linguistic landscape can also be used to challenge this authority. In one of the collected examples, the owner implies that "knowing onlookers" read the name of the shop in Taiwanese Southern Min (the majority language of the island with a writing system that has not been fully standardised). Most importantly, the creative practice in Taiwan's commercial linguistic landscape, often shares two features: a breaking of prescriptive norms, and a blurring of boundaries.

3.1 Research Questions

From the literature reviewed above, it can be inferred that with the exception of the few studies discussed, creative language forms are in much need of further investigation and the findings of the current study can further contribute to the existing literature by exploring and examining the different categories subsumed under the label 'linguistic creativity'. Subsequently, the aim of this paper is to expand on the nascent literature on creativity in street signage through the collection and analysis of photographs of signboards from two countries that are not examined in the afore mentioned studies, Singapore and Malaysia. The initial hypotheses that guided the data collection were revised in light of a preliminary analysis, and the following research questions will be discussed in the remainder of this paper:

1. What are some forms of creativity on shop signs?

2. How is creativity indexed through the use of semiotic and linguistic resources?

These research questions were chosen to fit the findings of the remaining analysis and the revised hypotheses.

3.2 Multimodality as an Analytical Framework

To answer both research questions, a multimodal approach (Sebba, 2013) is adopted in this study, based on the idea that writing in itself is multimodal (Kress, 2010). Stroud and Mpendukana (2010, 2012) argue that both visual and textual layers or elements play important roles in the analysis of public signage such as advertising billboards and shop signs. Sebba (2013) emphasises that some written texts are linear and make little or no use of layout or lettering fonts, while other texts make full use of the visual medium for complex layout, multilayering, and the use of a range of graphic devices. Kress and van Leeuwen (1998, p. 187) observe that many texts "are no longer just written, but 'designed', and multimodally articulated". Hence, it is vital to examine the interaction

and blending between textual and graphic or visual elements on signboards to build a foundation for understanding creative language forms.

3.3 Data Collection and Methodology

Spolsky (2009) observes that when literacy is more widespread, there are more possibilities for signs to be visible and present in the linguistic landscape. To validate his argument, he provides a comparison of the density of signage and languages between Times Square in New York and an isolated African village. This scholarly debate raises the problematic issue of statistical count and language diversity in the data collection process. Inadequately selected research sites may hinder the investigation and potentially lead to misleading results. Taking such an issue into account, Singapore city (Singapore), and both Kuala Lumpur and Penang (Malaysia) were selected as research sites to ensure a triangulated data collection (Ben Said, 2011). The rationale for the choice of these locations is attributed to these cities being urban, modern, and multilingually diversified. Moreover, these locations were neighboring cities and were sites previously colonised during British dominion. Despite practicing different language policies, English remains a language of considerable importance in the selected sites, particularly as a language of broader communication.

The data for this study was collected during autumn 2014. The collected data is a small representative sample of 'creative language forms' of signboards found in Singapore's and Malaysia's cityscapes, but are not meant to be statistically representative of the integrality of the two countries' complex linguistic landscapes. Shopping malls around Singapore city were first visited and photographs of signboards taken with a digital camera. After traveling to Malaysia, data was then collected from Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Both locations are sizeable cities in Malaysia and are filled with modern developments; hence, they provide rich insights about the use of creative language forms in the linguistic landscape. A total of 50 signs were collected for this study through opportunistic and informal sampling.

4 Findings

The findings regarding the examination of creative language forms are separated into the following two categories:

1. objects stylised to represent letters

2. creative language play.

4.1 Objects Stylised to Represent Letters

In early records of human writing systems, people used marks, artefacts and objects to communicate. For example, rocks would be placed in a specific position to mean something, such as a reminder of a deceased person, or indicate a pathway. Marks were used for the specific purpose of communication, but they did not relate to any language in particular (Coulmas, 1991). Other objects, such as sticks, knot-strings, and pebbles were used as means of communication, but these resources and affordances were not always systematic or efficient. Hence, in the subsequent evolution, writing pictures that resembled letters were drawn or engraved in a more or less systematic and iconographic method to convey messages. Words and phrases were gradually developed through graphical conventionalisation; that is, pictures were linearised, stylised, and associated with specific meanings (Coulmas, 1991).

For example, the native Americans extensively used pictures to serve the purpose of communicating messages (Mallery, 1893). Pictures that consisted of artificially-produced graphical marks were used as memory aids as they were related to language. These pictures later produced sentence writing (Friedrich, 1966), even though there was no relation between parts of grammar. Nevertheless, the function of these pictures was iconic, and they served a variety of purposes, such as being harboured as shop signs or transport billboards. In the present-day, iconic signs are used for a variety of purposes, including advertising and touristic marketing. A tourist may not understand a language in a foreign

country, but the iconic signs can transmit particular messages to them. Similarly, written symbols are formed from pictorial designs.

The data collected in the current study shows that visual elements are stylised to replace alphabetical script in various shop names. This situation has become a common practice in Asia for commercial purposes (Rubdy & Tan, 2008). Images are used for decorative or symbolic purposes, but also to target cosmopolitan consumers and audiences. These pictures act as 'language objects' (Jaworski, 2015) on shop signs, and they contain an element of performance and dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1981) to communicate with consumers. The metalinguistic elements contained in the image act as an icon for consumers, allowing them to decipher the content and message of the sign, even if the foreign readership is not fluent in the English language. Some examples are given below:

Figure 1. 'The Laundry Corner', Singapore.

In Figure 1, a pair of trousers hanging on a washing line is stylised to resemble a lower case <n>. This letter/pictogram is used to replace the <n> in 'Laundry'—this picture is used as a representative element of clothes to inform customers about the laundry shop. 'Laundry' is written in a playful manner and features a windy effect often seen when clothes are hung to dry in the sun.

Figure 2. 'YY Snooker Centre', Penang.

In Figure 2, two snooker balls are used to replace the letters <oo> in 'Snooker'. The phrase 'A Best Place to Play Snooker' conveys a promotional message advertising the value of the business for customers. In the top left corner of the sign, the Malay translation of 'Snooker Centre', *Pusat Snuker*, is written for local customers who may not be fluent in English.

Figure 3. 'International Horse Show', Kuala Lumpur.

In Figure 3, horseshoes that resemble the letter <o> are substituted for the <o> in 'H<u>o</u>rse' and 'Sh<u>o</u>w'—this graphic element serves as an icon which visually evokes an equestrian theme, blending harmoniously with the related lexical item 'Horse', in addition to the picture of a horse drawn above the words. 'Horse Show' is written in large, bold font and placed at the centre of the sign in order to capture the audiences' attention.

Figure 4. 'Durian Durian', Singapore.

Figure 4 shows a picture of half a durian replacing the letter <d> in '<u>D</u>urian', with one piece of the fruit's flesh/pulp replacing the dot in <i>. The picture of half a durian is used as a marketing strategy to capture customers' visual interest. In addition, as the fruit is rather exotic to foreign travellers visiting Singapore, the visual and textual stylisation may add to the interpellation (Althusser, 1971) of customers. It is possible that foreigners may have heard about the notorious odour of the durian; however, they may not know what the fruit looks like. Hence, the picture of half a durian is used as a metalanguage. The durian flesh is used to decorate the shop sign in order to look trendy and evoke a 'durian' theme.

Figure 5. 'EpiLife', Singapore.

In Figure 5, various types of electronic gadgets such as mp3 players, wires, plugs, USB sticks, and adapters are creatively juxtaposed to form the shop name 'EpiLife'. To provide some background, 'EpiLife' is a shop in Singapore that sells several types of mobile devices, including leading brands such as Samsung, LG, Sony, and HTC and a large selection of earphones, headphones, and portable speakers. An online store is also available for people who prefer internet shopping. The eye-catching use of pictograms is a stylish, fashionable, and innovative way to inform consumers about the newest electronic gadgets sold in the fast-moving city-state of Singapore.

Based on the discussion of the data above, it can be argued that graphic elements such as images and pictures are stylised to replace letters of the alphabet on shop names to serve several purposes: (1) symbolise and represent a shop's products and services, (2) be used resourcefully as a commodity, and (3) index style, innovativeness, and creativity. In particular, while the graphic elements are used to communicate visually or non-verbally with consumers, the coalesced letters allow for an easy reading of the content of the signs. In this respect, the creativity in these signs lies in the hybrid combination of linguistic and semiotic elements, which are used as multimodal resources or affordances, and signal modernity, and vibrancy. With respect to readership, if the audience of these signs is 'excluded' from the signs (i.e., being unable to read the language contained therein), they are not excluded from the visual stylisation, which enables them to interpret the sign with relative ease.

4.2 Creative Language Play

According to Bruner (1972), 'play' is viewed as providing a means to social adaptation, to learning of skills without suffering consequences of errors, and as a means to the understanding of rules which later be put to the service of social and ideational functions. In the context of language use, the word play has been used in early literature announcing the advent of research on creativity. For instance, 'play' accounts for innovative uses of the language (Cook, 1996, 2000). This term fulfils the notions of fantasy and the unconscious (Cook, 1994).

Language play is defined by Luk (2013, p. 237) as:

> The artistic and creative manipulation of the linguistic properties of a language (eg., phonology, morphology, and syntax) to achieve playful (or 'ludic') effects as an alternative to the conventional and serious functions of language use for information transmission.

Some scholars term 'language play' as speech play, linguistic creativity, or verbal arts, but these are similar to the concepts in poetic uses of language. As a form of expression, language play in advertisements is not directly related to persuading consumers and audiences, but it usually has some broader meanings and implications (Cook, 1994).

In the data, there were several signboards categorised under the label 'creative language play'. Innovative spellings that are commonly used in electronic communications, such as SMS, communication apps, and chats, can now be observed on signboards. Electronic communication norms are progressively being exported onto physical signboards demonstrating thereby how digital literacies (Gee, 2017) have seeped into conventional sign-design practices. Phonological crossover and playful pun that evoke creativity are becoming a common practice in Southeast Asia and particularly within the emerging Tiger Cub Economies (Edwards, Ho, & Choi, 2017).

Figure 6. 'belif ', Singapore.

In Figure 6, 'belif' is spelled with <f> instead of <ef>—this spelling is usually encountered in electronic communication, and allows for linguistic parsimony and the economy of space and time. Specifically, the interface of SMS allows users to type only up to 160 characters in one text. Nevertheless, 'believe in truth' is written next to 'belif' to render a comprehensible version for the shop and its overall theme. It is possible that the word 'belif' is used in this shop to capture the attention of customers and to provide a modern, urban touch to the sign.

Figure 7. 'Purpur', Singapore.

A similar spelling anomaly, on the surface, occurs in Figure 7, where the name of the shop is strategically mispelled as 'purpur'—the word 'purpur' has a quasi-similar pronunciation to the colour 'purple'. It is also written in purple colour to keep with the theme of the label or inscription. The deliberate flouting of orthographic conventions is used as a marketing strategy. More specifically, as is the case in modern electronic communication, the traditional orthography is stretched, played with and, as Deumert (2014) argues, 'manipulated', or 'twisted'. It is also possible that the spelling of this sign is a linguistic 'wink' (Lamarre, 2014), which aims to debunk or debase the prescriptive norms relating to language use. Therefore, the orthographic 'misspelling', in addition to being creative, can also be regarded as 'transgressive' (Pen-

nycook, 2009).

Figure 8. 'Durian Mpire', Singapore.

Figure 8 shows 'M̲pire' spelled with <m> instead of <em> for the usual spelling of 'empire'. This creative spelling of <m> that resembles the pronunciation of <em>, is commonly known as phonological 'crossover' (Luk, 2013). A phonological crossover is "the use of bilingual pairs of words that are homophones or near-homophones (i.e., where the pair of words only shares the initial sound or the vowel or the rime)" (Luk, 2013, p. 243). As a phonological crossover of <m>, 'Mpire' is used to display a modern spelling that is creative and reminiscent of electronic communication. It is also catchy and fulfils the objective of attracting those passing by and the potential clientele. The visual depiction of the thorns of a durian are also used as a background and a drawn out white durian is appended to the left side of the signboard. All elements are harmoniously placed together and coincide to evoke the same theme.

Figure 9. 'Sogurt', Singapore.

Figure 9 is an example of morphological blending, which is a common way to generate words in the English language. Typical examples of this linguistic phenomenon are expressed in words such as 'smog' (smoke + fog), or 'brunch' (breakfast + lunch). However, the term 'sogurt' is a neologism and a creative blend that is not typical of the phenomenon of blending and also not a part of the corpus of the English language. It blends the two elements 'so good' + 'yoghurt' and also consists of another linguistic alteration discussed above, namely phonological crossover. Specifically, the pronunciation of 'sogurt' 'resembles the pronunciation of 'so good'. The product advertised consists in a premium frozen yoghurt. A 'heart' is placed on top of 'sogurt' —a common creative language icon or element that is also used as an emoticon in electronic communication (Danesi, 2016). Jaworski (2015) claimed that the 'heart' or 'love' ideograph that appears on any physical landscape is part of the 'global semioscape' (Thurlow & Aiello, 2007) or 'globalese', a cultural-commercial register that indexes spaces as 'global' (Jaworski, 2013, 2014, 2015).

Figure 10. 'Hairitage Hair Studio', Penang.

Figure 10 shows a banner of a hair salon, 'hairitage'. The creator combines two words, 'hair' and 'heritage', to form the playful and creative blend 'hairitage'. Phonically, 'hairitage' resembles the pronunciation of 'heritage'. This playful pun suggests the need to fulfil a creativity effect which is also impactful in terms of its marketable impact on the audience. It is a commonly used technique in the advertising industry (Hashim, 2010, p. 524).

The abovementioned data fulfils a number of creative functions: (1) to convey a contemporary, urban lifestyle, (2) to capture customers' attention, (3) to stretch the language rules in a transgressive, non-conformist, and innovative manner, and (4) to fulfil creative impact for the purposes of advertisement and commodification. In addition and as mentioned earlier, while these creative uses of the language may on the surface exclude an audience of non-English speakers, through visual, iconic, and graphic elements, some signs still allow for an easy interpretation of the intended meaning by both speakers of English and other languages.

5 Conclusion

Through the results presented in this study, there are indications of new methods being used to produce written language forms on signboards, such as combining graphic elements with alphabetical script to form appealing names for shops, as well as creating playful puns and adopting new spellings. These 'creative language forms' are mainly designed to capture customers' attention, index modernity, and fulfil a commodifying purpose. As emphasised above, the literature reveals important lacunae when it comes to the investigation of 'creative language forms' on street signs, it is hoped that the findings of this study will further add to the scholarly debates and discussions of such innovative forms. More specifically, more research attention ought to be cast on further understanding the different types of linguistic creativity on signboards not only in Singapore and Malaysia, but in other contexts and environments as well. Based on the findings of our study, it is possible to infer that Singapore and Malaysia are moving into the digitised era where the language of signboards is becoming similar to the language found on electronic platforms and interfaces. These hybrid forms are a growing trend in several Asian cosmopolitan centres crafted with the intention to save space and reduce the time needed to read or peruse signs. As a result, the fast changes induced by economic globalisation and electronic communication are creating more innovative literacy practices, where multimodality, creativity, and hybridity are becoming the new norms.

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