

## The Recording of “Verisimilar Speech” in Malaysian-Singaporean Writing in English-english: Problems and Accommodations<sup>1</sup>

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Missionary didn't let us go, you see. She bin learn us to speak, like White man way. Know about a White god story, teaching us to do longa White man way.

Hagar Roberts, “Between Two Worlds” (an Art Exhibition in Adelaide, 1994)

Post-colonial theory does not necessarily apply to the treatment of “verisimilar speech” in prose by writers in the former British territories. This paper is not about the “dynamic interaction between European hegemonic systems and ‘peripheral’ subversions of them” (Ashcroft, et. al. 195), even if the question of English and englishes crops up inevitably in the discussion of *langue* and *parole* hereafter.

As far as I can verify, there is hardly any useful research undertaken in this field, and yet the practice and recording of verisimilar speech is of capital importance to the development of language in general. The way speech or *parole* interacts with language or *langue* is the foundation for the change wrought in every tongue. The individual variations of the speakers of a language from the linguistic norms of application and organisation within a speech community pave the way towards the enrichment of language in general. In this respect, the members of a speech community may rightfully look up to their writers, one of whose duties, if any, may be the precise recording of verisimilar speech.

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<sup>1</sup>This article is a relatively modified version of a paper given at the Flinders University conference on New literatures in English, “Factions and Frictions,” September 26-30, 1994. It was first accepted for publication by the conference organisers in its house journal; then it was “transferred” to an Australian literary journal for publication; finally, it was accepted for publication by the *The Gombak Review* and the *Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies*, and the author has – up to the moment – no inkling of its fate in print.

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In this paper I shall treat only the verisimilar speech of characters, and not that of authors or narrators. The difference here is one of “verisimilar speech” as opposed to “verisimilitude” which is defined by Webster’s online dictionary as: “The appearance of truth; the quality of seeming to be true.” According to G. Giovannini, verisimilitude is “degree of likeness to truth that induces belief that the action and characters in an imaginative work are probable and possible” (354B-355A). This definition however has to be weighed with the nuances available in the French concept of *vraisemblance extraordinaire* (what rarely happens) and *vraisemblance ordinaire* (what usually happens). Verisimilar speech in this paper therefore refers to the use of different speaking styles, that is, the colloquial or dialectal speech, in imaginative works, excepting, for the moment, the authorial and/or narrator's voice.

There is no easy solution to the problem of recording verisimilar speech. If an author were to represent phonetically the mannerisms of speech of any one particular individual speaker, given the various registers and/or idiolects, i.e., the *parole* that he or she of all ages is likely to use at any moment in any one given day, taking into consideration the person or persons he may be addressing, and including himself of course, the author concerned may need more than the skills he might rightly lay claim to, not to mention the reader who might quite possibly be left wandering by the wayside of the tale since the enormous variety of speech in their almost algebraic notations would simply sail over his head.

To avoid such an obvious barrier towards communication between the creator who is in the majority of cases patently seeking to be understood, excepting the great majority of poets, of course, and the receptor who is normally only willing to make the least of all concessions, there is – needless to say – one great big way out and that is quite simply to transcribe or rather translate in standard English the speech of their characters. The notion of what constitutes standard English and its “appropriation” depend on where you come from (Ashcroft 38-77). Here we are not concerned with Post-colonial theory; no psychological Otherness nor other “centre” and “outback” power equilibrium is at stake. This is the solution that most Malaysian and Singaporean writers settle for, though the ability to do so varies from author to author and is never quite consistent even in any one case.

Before I tackle the problem of verisimilar speech in post-Independence texts, I must quote a local writer of the early nineteenth century who had already, in everybody’s view, broken with indigenous traditional practice and in whose writings present-day writers in the region could have sought inspiration. V.S. Naipaul, himself, might have read him if we are to compare the similarities in the technique of observation and reportage in his travel writings. Here's an example (in my translation) drawn from Munshi Abdullah’s *Kesah Pelayaran Abdullah dari Singapura ka-Kelantan*:

And then just as I was walking by, I saw an old woman by a well, her back bent with age, her hair no longer than four finger-lengths and white as though furred by a cotton bow; she carried a jug full of water. I said to Tengku Temana and Grandpr, “Wait a moment, I would like to go up to this old woman and ask her how old she is.” So I went up to her and asked her: “How old are you, Mother?”

Her reply was: “My coconut tree is already dead, and then the next that I planted, that too has grown old, only very rarely bearing fruit, and that too very very small in size.” So I queried: “What’s the meaning of the coconut tree, Mother? I simply don’t understand.” Then she said: “Our custom in these parts is to plant a young coconut tree whenever a child is born; so that later when the child has grown up and somebody asks him: “How old are you?,” he may reply: “This’s the coconut palm of my age.” When I heard that I just couldn’t contain myself and broke violently into laughter. Then I asked her again: “How many years had already gone by since she was born?” She said: “I was already a big girl when the present Raja’s great grandfather had married and become the Raja.” So I turned to Tengku Temana and asked him: “How long is it, more or less, from that period to the present time?” Tengku Temana said: “Of the same age there’s nobody around anywhere in the territory of Kelantan. I have it from some old folk that there may be some hundred and fifty or hundred and sixty years since then.” Then I looked at the old woman, tall as a twelve-year old, her skin folded over in creases and toothless. (84-86)

It is interesting to note that here Munshi Abdullah without attempting to report the particular speech patterns and rhythms most probably emanating from the old lady uses instead standard Malay to convey some or all of the flavour of the Kelantanese dialect, but then his reportage adheres to the rhetorical nature and usage of a language which does not require verisimilar pronunciation and mannerisms to render the speech as an authentic real-life recording.

Oddly enough, foreign writers drawing from the Malaysian milieu for their stories also, by and large, prefer the same solution. It must be remembered that writing by several pre-Independence writers, such as, George Maxwell, Frank Swettenham, Hugh Clifford, Henri Fauconnier, Bruce Lockhart, Anthony Burgess and so on, constitutes a sort of “traditional” corpus for local writers to draw or rely on, but I’d rather choose an example from an Englishman who became an Australian perhaps as a result of having written *A Town Like Alice*. Jean Paget, the heroine of the novel (or rather a novel based on real life experiences) whose life the narrator is relating, returns to Malaya after the last World War with the express purpose of visiting the Malay village, Kuala Telang, near Kota Bahru, where she had spent, together with several other women, three long years as an internee during the Japanese regime.

They stopped in front of the headman’s house, and she got out of the jeep a little wearily, and went to him, and put her hands up in the praying gesture, and said in Malay, “I have come back, Mat Amin, lest you should think the white mems have forgotten all about you when their need is past.” He said, “We have thought and talked about you ever since you went.” (Shute 117)

In a way, this passage illustrates most of the problems we are dealing with regarding the intelligibility of speech in fiction. Anyone who knows Malay can recognise that Malay grammar and style, particularly word order, are not being adhered to in the dialogue. Besides, Nevil Shute uses the same standard (received) English for recording or representing the speech of British characters in the rest of the novel. Even if we allowed a form of Malay written according to English

grammatical rules for Jean Paget, the sentence translated literally into Malay would not make much sense to a Malay, just as it would not with the English sentence used to represent the Malay of Mat Amin.

Now, let’s look at how Jean Paget might have actually used Malay to express the same sense while remembering that in the story she spent three years in the village in the care of the headman, Mat Amin. Her Malay would be quite locally Kelantanese. She would have in any case not “put her hands up in the praying gesture” to a Malay who is invariably a Muslim. She might have – to stretch a point – touched her forehead and breast with her open palm and uttered her words, while slightly bending forward. Most probably, she must/would have hailed Mat Amin, one arm waving over her head in the direction of the headman, her eyes peering but almost closed in the glare of the Malaysian sun: “*Eeh! Tabek Dato’ or Selamat Penghulu, or Salaam-alaikum. Khabar baik-kah?*”

In the meantime, Mat Amin, his eyes peeling wide, his face lighting up like the Tumpat lighthouse, his opium-stained teeth flashing while he sheepishly tucks his sweaty, dirt-coloured singlet into the roll of his chequered batik sarong on his sagging belly, throws his hands up for an instant only to grab at his unfolding sarong the very next instant, and then cries: “*Alamah! Mem Paget-kah? Alhamdulillah! Bismillah selamat datang-lah!*” And all the half-naked street urchins of the village would have by then surrounded them, and only then would Jean Paget have been able to get a word in sideways:

“Eeh! Penghulu! Greetings. How are you?”

“Hell, is that you Mem Paget? Praise be to Allah! In the name of Allah, hearty welcome!”

“Excuse me, won’t you? Penghulu Mat, long time no see. Even though I have been far away, I haven’t forgotten you. Are you alright, Tuan?”

“Ooooooh, absolutely well, Mem Paget. Just doing very well, indeed. All of us getting on fine since Independence. Got land to cultivate, so have big house too; got even mosque in our village. What do you say to that!”

Of course I’m exaggerating, but this possible conversation not only highlights the difficulty of recording verisimilar speech but it also draws attention to the particular inappropriateness of the dialogue in question.

It is easy to see that Nevil Shute tried to get round the problem of expressing verisimilar speech: he either didn’t know Malay and the Malays or simply lacked the skills required to cope with phonetics and grammar cutting across intrinsically diverse languages. His solution, that is, the easy way out, applies also with slight variations to almost all indigenous Malaysian and Singaporean writers.

The difficult way out, of course, would be for the writer to devise a whole set of coherent and consistent spelling systems to represent exactly the phonological colour of the language of the speaker by adapting the same to the particular idiomatic and grammatical – as well as ungrammatical – usage of the latter. As everybody can well imagine, this latter solution would prove too trying a task for the average reader. An example of the difficulty can be gauged from the classic works of the genre: Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, especially the last section in Dilsey's words, V.S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* (215), or to take an example from something nearer us, the prose poems in David Dabydeen's *Slave Song* (72), without the notes and translations, of course. Before I come to what I consider an equitable solution to the problem of representing verisimilar speech in fiction, let me consider yet another Malaysian piece of writing which does not attempt to come to terms with the issues at stake:

This family discussion was an extension of the Ratnam drama – they baited him. His daughter-in-law, Anjalai, busied herself, turning a deaf ear to the dark insinuations. But Ratnam, sensitive to such barbs, shouted back retorts.

“You're everybody's daughter-in-law!”

“Don't open your shit-stinking mouth, Ratnam!” Govindan warned. “I'll push a broomstick down your throat.”

“The cashier is speaking to me? How was the showing today? Did many men buy your wife's wares?” Ratnam said.

“Do you think I'm Anjalai? Do you think that thing she wears round her neck doesn't come from men wearing themselves around her?” Letchumi yelled.

“Who are you calling a prostitute?” Anjalai, roused, screamed back.

“I didn't say that at all,” Letchumi said sweetly.

“Only, you go around showing your neck, arms and whatever else.”

We didn't know what the words meant but we caught the savagery behind them. I was revolted. (Maniam, *The Return* 76)

There are a few overall points that need to be made. (In fact, my comments apply generally to Maniam's play, *The Cord*, as well.) First, that the speakers here are all Tamils, Tamils from a milieu of rather modest economic circumstances, evidently forming part of a community brought over as indentured labourers, most probably from the Coromandel Coast. The speech is being reported by a narrator who, though he originally came from their midst, rose from their ranks to become a teacher, trained in England. The question that needs to be asked first is whether the author was trying to be faithful to the language used by the speakers, and that language would most probably be a pidgin Tamil, spoken in Kedah, with certain local modifications from the Tamil used in Tamil Nadu since the speakers would inevitably not belong to a caste which could choose to remain in India and procure for themselves a necessarily enlightening education. But then, the narrator declares that he “didn't know what the words meant.” Does that mean, he is excusing himself from being faithful to the users of the language in the original, or is this a narrative device to put some distance between the narrator and the author? Whatever form the dilemma might take here, we note from the continuation of the quarrel in the following page that, indeed, it was verily Tamils who were taking it out on themselves as only they seem capable of doing, and that is, before the physical violence breaks out, there's that inimitable building up to a crescendo with language that breaks through all bounds of decency or prudence:

Muniandy walked into the quarrel at that moment.

“You’ve been displaying your jewellery! The evil snakes are hissing again,” he said and thrashed his wife.

“Don’t touch the girl!” Ratnam said.

“She’s my wife!” Muniandy yelled.

“Who says? Not the urine-drinking old drain scrounger!” Govindan said.

Muniandy, enraged, ran round to Govindan’s house. “Come out if you’ve a muscular tongue!” (Maniam, *The Return* 77)

Just one comment about the images Maniam uses to approximate the portmanteau adjectives telescoped into substantives describing, or referring to, an individual, common in Tamil though the starkness of the language used may be called into question, for instance: *peepoola naarum vaai* (shit-stinking mouth), *avalmeel paavikkappatum aankal* (men who let themselves be used on her), and *muuttiramkutikkum palaiya alluur piccaikkaaran* (the urine-drinking old drain scrounger).

Without having to go into an analysis of the merits or authenticity of the speech here, I must say right out that, although the author has managed to get the tone and vehemence of the situation across into correct English, there’s little of the speech that would ring true should the same be translated into Tamil. For this reason, it would be right to assume that the narrator’s declaration about not understanding the speech, in actual fact, applies perhaps to the author himself; or, contrariwise, perhaps even when he understood his mother tongue well enough, it was just that he could not manage to get the language/lingo across into English.

Fortunately, I have in writing what Maniam thinks he does when recording colloquial speech. Here’s a quote from a personal letter written in 1992:

I must confess I read very little Tamil but I’ve been exposed to spoken Tamil in my childhood and adolescence. I don’t do a translation of actual spoken Tamil into English but I still have to make the characters speak English as if they are speaking Tamil. This I’ve done mainly by entering the cultural density and textures within which these characters live. This also applies for characters who speak Malay or any Chinese dialect. What I’ve done in all the three cases is to let myself enter the pattern of their thoughts when they speak Tamil or Malay or Chinese and assimilate these patterns into English. This process isn’t all that mechanical as it may sound on paper.

As one might reasonably expect, it is to playwrights that one might or should turn to for proper or convincing use of verisimilar speech. Before Malayan independence, barring a few one-act undergraduate plays published in student magazines, there was no great interest expressed by the local literati in the theatre. Apart from the annual school Shakespeare performances, of course! From the latter half of the sixties onwards, encouraged by the awarding of prizes through competitive rivalry, full-length plays got to be written and staged, so much so that in 1974 an article on the use of dialect in Malaysian plays appeared in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. The author, Anthony Price, drew from plays by Edward Dorall, Patrick Yeoh, Ghulam Sarwar and Goh Poh Seng to assert mistakenly (as I had shown in my reply in the succeeding number of the same

journal) that a “crippled, colourful dialect” of, I presume, English was being used. The evidence since then tends to show that playwrights from both sides of the Johor Straits still have not come to grips with this problem and continue blithely to use – with slight modifications – standard prose for local or regional speech. Here’s the response to Anthony Price’s claims in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*:

Dear Sir [Editor],

Whilst I agree with Anthony Price’s concluding statement that “... Malaysian dramatists are losing touch with their roots, losing contact with their audiences, and debilitating their art by writing closet drama” (*Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 9.1: 9), I do not see how he could have arrived at his conclusions after all the glaring contradictions in his article. It would have been understandable if he had asserted that the post-May-1969 regime in Malaysia is a *fait accompli* and that eighteen years of post-colonial rule has reduced Malaysia to what it essentially is: a miniscule Asia, in that *bahasa Melayu* or the official version of it, *bahasa Malaysia* is the only common denominator of the Malaysian peoples. Doubtless, *putonghua* [the common language of mainland Chinese] and Tamil could still assert themselves as developing literary languages of subordinate appeal in the region, but then the Chinese and Tamil writers would also have to seek their audiences elsewhere, as the gifted Tamil poet, I. Ulaganathan achieved in Tamilnadu, India.

Mr Price’s main linguistic flaw is the indiscriminate use of the terms “idiolect” and “dialect.” Since English has only been spasmodically introduced in Malaysia, it would almost be impossible for him to uphold that a valid dialectal English is being used. Owing to the characters’ diverse provenance and affiliations to social, temporal, and geographic units, I would say he must be thinking of something like “register” and “style” when he writes “dialect,” though “idiolect” would be a good, cover excuse for his purposes.

His article tries to make one point: that Edward Dorrall and Goh Poh Seng have over the strewn bodies of failed dramatists “succeeded” in not only conveying the different language backgrounds of their characters but also their temporal and social classes by the use of an English that is broken or pidgin, both for comic and serious situations. My point is that his many quotations give the lie to his claims.

Let’s begin with his first quotation from Dorrall on page 4. Who is Jerry? His interesting use of *ah* throws him into a nonplus. In line 8, the *ah* cannot possibly be the Chinese final particle, exclamative, or interjection, as the sentence is rather a retort. So, it should be the Malay *ah*, showing surprise, disagreement, worry, etc. But this *ah* as an interjection would best be placed at the beginning of the sentence with an exclamation mark. Now, because he has used the Chinese final particle correctly in the tenth line, are we supposed to think Jerry is some Straits Chinese, well and truly baptized? Or that his real Chinese name was corrupted from *Jen* to *Jerry* by his schoolmates? Perhaps his name was *Can*, and they decided to call him Jerry in order not to embarrass him.

On page 7, Dorrall is quoted: “... I have retained broken English in both comic and serious situations.” The two ample scenes that follow I hope are not presented in any “seriousness.” Let’s go back to the page 4 quotation. I don’t detect much broken English in the *serious* second half of the piece, especially lines 19-21,

except for [lack of] concord: no syntactical ruptures or flagrant assaults on Mother English.

The quotation on page 5 from Goh is even more wrong-headed. To illustrate how “the principal conflict of many plays [...] between English-educated children and their tradition-bound parents” affects dialogue, we are regaled to a choice bit from Mrs Wong and her son, Chong Kit. Rather surprisingly, Mrs Wong (“I know I got no Senior School Certificate like you”) starts off speaking flawless English and on the whole (with three lapses) better than her educated son, even when she repeats her son’s words (lines 14-15).

Let’s move to Dorrall on page 8: Mrs Tay says: “Today, I get cake, I get nice *makan* [food], all for you.” Fine, but then in the stage directions we note: “*The cakes and jellies go flying over the floor.*” The question is, does the use of Malay here make the English more Malaysian? Or is it merely *pasticcio*: to lace the speech with Malaysian terms? True, *makan* is used for food in general by all sorts of Malaysians, but then, we discover that it refers specifically to *jellies*. What jellies? Malay *agar-agar*? Or Indian *alvaa*? When I first read the word *makan*, I thought of *satih* and *rojak*. On page 7, Dorrall maintains: “... I believe that when a man feels strongly about anything he always expresses himself forcefully, however faulty his grammar...” Yet, on page 8, when Mrs Tay angrily cries: “Lousy fellow! Useless loafer!,” the orthography of *fellow* is very Royal-Asiatic and rounded; I would have thought years of Americanisms would have brought it down disgracefully to a simple Malaysian *fàlla*.

Finally, I must admit I was caught out for a duck by Mr Price’s philosophic observation on page 9: “An inability to detect and use irony is, however, a common characteristic of Malaysian life....”

Yours faithfully,

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(Wignesan, “Correspondence: Malaysian Plays” 69-71)

Now, before I proceed any further with my paper, let me give some samples of conversation or attempts at verisimilar speech to be found both in fictional prose and faction in the Malaysian-Singaporean context. The first is from Spencer Chapman’s *The Jungle is Neutral*:

The officer in charge, after assuring himself that I was alone and unarmed, put a guard over my rucksack and started to question me. He was young, clean-shaven, pleasant-looking, and very polite. He spoke fairly good English. His first words were, “You are English gentleman: you must not speak lie.” That was all very well, but I had rather a lot to explain away and I asked for a drink of water to make time. (263)

Here it is important to realise that the direct speech comes from an educated and polite Japanese officer leading a punitive expedition to Kampong Jalong in Perak. Spencer Chapman haplessly allows himself to be captured at an on-route



camp on the Sungei Chemor. The officer on scrutinising Chapman's identity card sees that Chapman is a major, and though then a fugitive during the War in the Malayan jungle, "he jumped to his feet and saluted – surely the height of Japanese politeness!" (Chapman 265). The previous quotation then is a sort of language in English that one instinctively associates with speech from the phantasmagoric and exotic Orient (with a capital of course to Occidentals) (Wignesan, "Literature in Malaysia" 113, 123). Even if we are not told who the speaker is, we are most likely to think it emanates from a native of the Far East. Why? Probably because a Chinese or a Malay would not use definite or indefinite articles before nouns or pay much attention to number: "speak lie" instead of "tell lies." It is also due probably to the perpetuation in serious literature of the sort of mockery of speech that Orientals are supposed to mouth in English. This attitude and practice by English writers derives from a literal translation of, say, Chinese into English. For example, the Chinese sentence: *you ren hai shuo de bu hao* (meaning: There are people who still can't speak well enough.) This statement translated literally would be: "Have people yet speak not good" (de = particle needed in Chinese to introduce an adverb of manner).

Even well-known and able authors like Somerset Maugham prefer this stereotyped distortion of the syntax and idiom in the vernacular which makes literal transpositions into English quite comical as the following extract will show:

"Four, five." He paused for a minute. "Headman, he no go coast. He say, he wantchee go home."

"Tell him to go to hell."

"Headman say, you velly sick, you die. If you die and he go coast he catchee trouble."

....

"More better you say yes," said Kong. "Maybe white man has launch, then we go down to coast chop-chop."

"Who is he?"

"Planter," said Kong. "This fellow say, him have rubber estate." (Freitas 146-147; Wignesan, "Writing in Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei" 151)

Next, I shall take an example of tongue-in-cheek writing by perhaps the most brilliant and the most gifted of all Westerners to come to Malaysia who has besides produced the best six-hundred, albeit the most hilarious, pages ever written in and on Malaysia. Anthony Burgess, too, sticks more or less to standard, intelligible English when representing local speech, except for minor word order or the mix-up with definite and indefinite articles and number (concord: accord between subject and verb), a common failing, for instance, with the English spoken or written generally in India (Wignesan, "Religion as Refuge" 79).

*The Malayan Trilogy* is also one of the few examples of mixed style prose in writing on the region (Stevick 208-219); the other example that I shall deal with further down being of uniform prose of a doubtful dialectal nature in the hands of a minor Singaporean writer, Goh Poh Seng. Here's a quotation from Burgess' *Time for a Tiger*. The scene recounts a conversation between two Malaysians: Alladad Khan and Hari Singh on hospital beds before the arrival of a visitor, Mrs. Hari

Singh. The language is couched in repartee and lofty pedantry; the mocking playfulness of the narrator, an educated British colonial, obviously sympathetic but given to overly pulling the leg of the local immigrant misfits borders on farce. Burgess wrote about people he actually knew in person (Burgess “Letter”).

We have to remember that in the following extract Burgess is parodying Indian affectedness and grandiloquence through the use of a burlesque and mock-heroic style while at the same time – even if the characters were not given to such polished speech in their everyday lives – attempting to make much of the characters’ sense of squeamishness:

“I do not apprehend the drift of your somewhat verbose statement.”

“The time when you placed, unasked, your great importunate foot on the foot of the memsahib.”

“Oh, that? That was nothing.”

“You call it nothing, but God remembers and God punishes. Providence has long ears and great eyes and a long avenging arm. Your foot has been mauled by the foot of divine justice.”

“I would entreat you to say nothing of this to my wife Preetam and the children. They will be visiting me this morning.”

“I will say nothing directly to your wife. I will merely hint at the singular appropriateness of your punishment.”

“I beg you to be quiet about it. See, I have food here in my locker. There are bananas and chocolate and a small jar of chicken essence. You are welcome to share these things with me.”

“I shall have many gifts coming to me from my friends. I do not need your bribes. I am satisfied, however, that justice has been done, and I will say no more about this very distasteful matter.”

....

[In the meantime, the wife and children arrive.]

“Here,” said Hari Singh in loud generosity, “is a newspaper for you to read. It is in English but, doubtless, that will present no difficulties to one who has many English friends and has studied assiduously a certain book which he has not yet returned to me.”

“It shall be returned. Though why one so eloquent with his feet should consider a book of English words important I cannot understand.”

Hari Singh laughed loud and false. “He refers to my skill at football,” he explained to his wife.

Alladad Khan tried to read the Timah Gazette, but he could make out the meanings of very few words. (Burgess, *The Malayan Trilogy* 167-169)

So a conversation of this nature is possible in very correct or standard English between someone who knows only a little English and another who obviously does much more, simply through the qualification by the author that one of the two does not know the language, – or as in the example attributed to Nevil Shute above – that the characters addressed each other in Malay. Lloyd Fernando in *Scorpion Orchid* also adopts the same technique.

As far as Malaysian and Singaporean writers are concerned, by and large, they stick to standard English speech and only now and then twist it around by adding Malay and Chinese particles, especially the “lah” and “kah” for Malaysian or Malay vernacular speakers and the “ah” and “ma” for the corresponding Chinese vernacular speakers. Here and there, too, one would throw in the usual Malaysian swear words or exclamations, such as, *Allamak!*, *Adohi!*, *Aiyah*, and so forth and so on. I could pick endless examples of local writing to illustrate this general practice of rendering verisimilar speech, but this act of redundancy can in no great way enhance the demonstration. Very rarely, as isolated examples in rather indiscriminate recording of varying idiolects, local authors manage to convey some of the flavour of local speech, as, for instance, is the case with the character Chuang in the opening passages of Gopal Baratham’s novel, *A Candle or the Sun* (5-7).

Perhaps one example from an erstwhile Malaysian resident should suffice. Han Suyin laves her Malayan novel, *And the Rain My Drink* with Malay and Chinese words and phrases which she translates alongside, or in footnotes, the original transliteration she uses, but doesn’t cringe from splashing speech with the universal particle “man” and the Malay emphatic particle “lah.” She also often names the language of the speech in the original.

Mr. Bee’s energy was tremendous (“I belong to forty-one committees, man, forty-one, lah”), and perhaps what pleased him most about his displays of vitality and public spirit was that none of his efforts ever came to anything. [...] We both gazed longingly towards the stage. “Yes, man, when I was a kid I could have aimed that far, but I tell you now I shall be happy-lah when this is all over. It’s sending up my blood pressure.” And Mr. Bee held out his wrist for me to take his pulse. I murmured that nothing would happen, but “That’s what people always say,” retorted Mr. Bee. “But ‘They’ have us on their black list, the shu tsai (the forest rats). Anyone who works with the whiteskins.... (126-127)

And lastly, what, in my opinion, would be edifying is to draw from a highly intelligent and gifted author who apparently visited Malaysia for the first time in the early eighties before writing about them, one of the few writers who has depicted Malaysians in their native habitat as exactly and as convincingly as possible, although he only sometimes manages to convey their speech in English as it is naturally spoken in Malaysia. I’m of course speaking of V.S. Naipaul and his *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*:

The land was perfect for a Malay settlement, for wooden houses on stilts or pillars, for green gardens and tall shade trees. [...] Many young people were about with green cloaks or gowns and white turbans. [...] Other costumed figures (waiting for prayer time, like actors waiting for a stage call) were lounging about the verandah or porch of the shop at the corner, where – as part of its independent Islamic way – the commune sold little things to passing motorists.

I bought a few ounces of fried shredded sweet potato. It came in a stapled plastic packet. It tasted less of sweet potato than of the frying oil. The taxi-driver said, “You see the kind of bullshit we are getting these days?” He pronounced the word

“bu’shi.” I heard it as “bushy,” and thought at first it was his word for a village Malay: “You see the kind of bushy we are getting these days?”

I offered him some sweet potato. He said, angrily, “No.” (260)

In *pu tong hua*, the common language of mainland China, “*bu shi*” means “is not” (literally: “not is”).

This is the kind of misrepresentation that cannot be averted in the hands of lesser authors like, say, Goh Poh Seng in his *If We Dream Too Long*:

Mr. Sinnathurai spoke as if he were imitating Peter Sellers imitating Indians speaking English. All sing-song, all curling of the tongue. Ten minutes of this would exhaust one’s tongue if one were not an Indian. After Hock Lai and Kwang Meng told Mr. Sinnathurai that they were not as fortunate as Nadarajah, his son, Mr. Sinnathurai said, “Whada pity, whada pity,” and rolled his head sadly from side to side, Indian fashion. Mr. Sinnathurai had all the Indian mannerisms and gestures. Shaking of the head as if the head was on a loose hinge, and clicking the tongue, clut clut clut. He brought them over to introduce to some of the other male relatives. “These are friends of Nada in school. Aren’t they nice to come and say goodbye?” he said. “This is my yelder brudder, Chelvam, the trade unionist from Ipoh. You mayaf heard of him, perhaps?” he rolled his head, asking.

...

“Yen, this yis Singam, my younger brudder, an advocate and solicitor from Seremban,” Mr. Sinnathurai introduced, chirping happily.

And so they were led round a long line of male relatives. They were not introduced to the female relatives.

Maybe it’s a custom, Kwang Meng mused.

A bell rang, warning the visitors to disembark.

The relatives stirred.

“Yis only the first warning,” Mr. Sinnathurai announced. “Nut to worry, nut to worry,” he said merrily. (157-58)

It would have been less confusing if the author chose to specify the kind or ethnic origin of the “Indian” he was describing, for instance, the provenance and social class of the Tamils in the above case.

Despite Goh Poh Seng’s undisguised and unmistakable contempt for Indians of all sorts, I must say that this is the only work by a Malaysian author where one may sample some verisimilar speech, pertaining to the young locally educated class of Chinese and Indians, but his is a very minor talent, and he isn’t able to work out a proper and consistent phonetic system to represent all the characteristic mannerisms of speech peculiar to each ethnic group in the region. His side comments on the speakers are rather concealed prejudices breaking through: they are not studied linguistic expressions or indications on how to pin down the pronunciation and/or tone one might expect of the characters.

All authors who do not faithfully represent their characters’ registers and/or idiolects in the Malaysian and Singaporean context are in one way or another

guilty of misrepresenting their characters' ethnic origins and/or individual backgrounds. They have probably not thought out or worked out the intrinsic personalities of their characters well enough, nor have they creatively imagined them into real life situations, however much they may have come to life in their own heads, or however much they may have taken them right out of real life itself.

For the moment, it appears that, apart from occasional passages and passing scenes in which they may have come to life in a few novels and short stories (here I'm thinking of Siew Yew Killingley's "A Question of Dowry" and "Everything's Arranged"), a great deal of the fiction I have perused on or from the region simply has not tackled this problem of verisimilar speech satisfactorily. In a way Killingley has managed in one story to come close to verisimilar Malaysian "undergraduate speech," but this is like a drop in the murky pond of indiscriminate Malaysian-Singaporean writing. Here is an example from the story:

"So after Finals what you intend to do?" She asked the current question of the year.

"Oh myself? Sure fail man," came the classic answer in an unconvincing tone.

"Eh, don't joke, man. I think you sure become Assistant Lecturer in the department, if not Lecturer."

The flattered Johnny was led to reveal his real ambition to become a Sales Representative in one of the big firms.

"Not to say what ah, to become a lecturer is all right. But think of it ah, now we give them helluva headache; if myself become one, sure die man. Sure, sure, got prestige and all, but can't be boddered man. Too much trouble. Better still become Executive. Supply and demand, what. Know that means know everything. Also ah, you know what I can take if I get fed up? Can take that what you call Ford pills for Executive fatigue. Then also can easily save on big salary, can buy nice Jag and take girl friends for drives. Can easily tackle and get a good wife too, but that better not want too soon, because why? Trapped lah! After, they want this, want that, then worse headache than marking essays, what you think?" (Killingley, "Everything Arranged" 189)

Unless I am mistaken, not a single author has consistently noted – apart from the more or less standard English of the speech of his characters – the mannerisms of speech peculiar to each user of the language of his predilection in the work. We are either left to imagine any pronunciation or forced to accept the bland, "meaningless" punctuation-like particles (ah! lah!) as their characteristic brand of Malaysian-ness or Singaporean-ness. Nor are we told to what extent these characters are capable of maiming the language which their creators themselves are sometimes guilty of.

Without in any way wanting to impose any restrictions on local writing in the region, I should nevertheless think that it might be thought reasonable in these circumstances to adhere to certain "ground rules" in the communication of verisimilar speech, such as:

- 1) that writers give the necessary clues to the idiolects or registers, i.e., parole as opposed to langue, of their characters in the text accompanying the speech, especially if the speech is patently un-verisimilar;

- 2) that writers supply some such clues even if the speech appears to be verisimilar;
- 3) that writers make the ethnic backgrounds and/or provenance of their characters (such as, locality: urban or rural, etc.) quite clear either in a note or preface or in the text itself if they use standard English to convey the speech of their characters;
- 4) that writers work out either a system of phonetic representations in common for particular language users (making the necessary allowances and/or explanations for the idiolects or parole of the characters) or attribute to each speaker his particular mannerisms and/or pronunciation, as for example, the clipped vowels and slurred consonants of some Tamil speakers.
- 5) that writers strictly avoid using what they think might be verisimilar speech in writing (the test being it must ring true to a similar native speaker in the milieu) if they have not worked out with diligence any one of the above options, since it might only serve to confuse or give offence to the reader.

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