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Choreographing linguistic landscapes in Singapore

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Abstract: This paper proposes the notion of choreographed multilingualism to describe the top-down dimension of Singapore's linguistic landscape. Using a range of examples of official multilingual discourse, including public signage, exhibition artefacts, and print texts, it identifies a quadrilingual constellation that reiterates across different modalities, stabilizing into a visual-spatial formula. As a semiotic feature, the quadrilingual formula is an indexical that calls up the trope of neat multilingualism, whereby the four official languages of Singapore (English, Chinese, Malay, Tamil) are construed in a relation of equilibrium and equitability, while nonofficial/nonstandard languages, language varieties, and Chinese dialects are relegated to oblivion. The trope of neat multilingualism in turn evokes a larger sociolinguistic ambiance shaped by the official language policy and the language education system in Singapore. The paper theorises this situation in respect of Michel de Certeau's spatial theory, arguing that official discourses in Singapore corroborate the multilingual "place" produced by technologies of choreography.

Keywords: choreographed multilingualism, linguistic landscape, language policy, Michel de Certeau, Singapore

The term "choreography" originally means the written notation of dancing. In contemporary usage, the term refers to the stylised design and arrangement of kinetic sequences in dance and theatre; or more generally, a premeditated exercise that entails the planning and composition of embodied movement leading to non-spontaneous aesthetic outcomes.

In this paper I use choreography as a conceptual metaphor to think through the nature of "top-down" sociolinguistic practices in Singapore, taking the form of official discourses issued by state-affiliated bodies, and crafted with an intention to disseminate objective information or regulate public behaviour. I further propose the concept *choreographed multilingualism* to describe a specific modality of

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discursive practice that deploys several different languages while carefully negotiating and moderating the power relations among them.

Choreographed multilingualism represents the rational, precise, and geometric management of textual discourses that dovetails with higher-order narratives, such as those governing the state's language policy and language education system. Singapore's demographic is encapsulated by the abbreviation CMIO, designating its major ethnic groups: the city-state's population of 5.7 million comprises 74.4% of Chinese (C), 13.4% of Malays (M), 9% of Indians (I), and 3.2% of other (O) minorities, according to a 2019 survey of population trends, conducted by the Department of Statistics (2019: 5). The government's language policy is grounded in s.153A of its Constitution, wherein English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil are instituted as the four official languages. This policy is reinforced by the bilingual education system, where students learn English alongside one Mother Tongue Language (MTL, namely Chinese, Malay, or Tamil, depending on patriarchal ethnicity) as compulsory subjects. Together, these form the basis of the language establishment in the city-state, the source of power and legitimacy from which top-down discursive practices emanate (for a fuller account of Singapore's sociolinguistic profile with an emphasis on language policy and language planning, see Wee 2018, chap. 1).

One ramification of Singapore's language policy and language planning is that the organisation of languages in public spaces is streamlined into an immaculate, if contrived, quadrilingual balance evincing a visual equilibrium among the four languages. Such equilibrium, as I will demonstrate, is very much a semiotic effect. Hence, choreographed multilingualism exemplifies de Certeau's (1984) "strategy", specifically in the "objective calculations" undertaken as to which languages must (not) be represented and how they should be spatially configured in relation to each other; as well as in the concealed connections between discursive practices and "the power that sustains them from within the stronghold of its own 'proper' place or institution" (xx). The situation in Singapore is all the more interesting given that there is no legislation mandating whether or how the four official languages should be represented in public discourses, unlike in some other multilingual countries such as Belgium and Canada.

In what follows, I take a linguistic landscaping angle into an analysis of Singapore's multilingualism as a discursive-semiotic construct. As "ideologically charged constructions" (Leeman and Modan 2009: 332),linguistic landscapes, by virtue of their being "anchored in political social economic framework", can be seen as one mechanism of language policy (Shohamy 2015: 168). They reveal "ideological presuppositions according to which particular display types were or are rationalized"; more precisely, "a particular display convention ASSERTS or PROPOSES a version of ethnolinguistic arrangements and the 'shape' of a bilingual

culture" (Coupland 2012: 4–5; original emphasis). Given this understanding, this paper examines the strategic "ethnolinguistic arrangements" that corroborate what de Certeau might call a multilingual "place" (as opposed to "space"), with a view to elucidate the ideological structures underlying the visual-spatial patterns that constitute the "shape" (both material and abstract) of Singapore's multilingual culture.

1 (A)symmetries of multilingual spectacles

We first look at multilingual signage in public spaces. Here, language is not only informative (e. g., a pamphlet on how to prevent the spread of dengue fever), expressive (e. g., a public campaign slogan playing on a clever pun), or appellative (e. g., a sign on a train advising commuters to exercise vigilance on potential security breaches),[1] but more pertinent to our purposes, performative. What interests me specifically is the *semiotics of multilingualism* as evidenced in public discourse; that is: how multilingualism as an abstract idea (or ideal) is systematically choreographed via formulaic visual-verbal configurations on emplaced signs, notices, or artefacts for public consumption.

Figure 1: A multilingual sign with four languages at a construction site. Author's photo.

1 This typology is based on Karl Bühler's classification of the three functions of language, later developed by Katharina Reiss 19891977 into her text-type theory.

Figure 1 shows a multilingual sign featuring English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. Placed outside construction sites warning people to stay away from potential danger, it can be sighted everywhere in the city, where engineering projects are constantly underway. It should be noted at the outset that not all public signs or notices in Singapore are multilingual. Generally, information deemed to be of high or general importance will be communicated simultaneously in the four official languages; these include matters concerning safety, health, social security, public campaigns, or institutional policies with implications for livelihood (e. g., retirement fund schemes). A significant proportion of the public discourse in Singapore is in English only; such monolinguality is itself telling of the dominant status of English as a nexus language with the capacity to transcend the other three official languages.

That being said, multilingual, and more specifically, quadrilingual, signs such as the one in Figure 1 are typical, everyday artefacts in Singapore's linguistic landscape. Using Sebba's (2012: 106–109) framework for the analysis of multilingual written discourse, one might say the following of the sign:

– the *unit of analysis* is defined by the visual-spatial perimeter of the rectangular wooden sign (pinned outside a construction site) on which texts are printed in four tiers;
– the *language-spatial relationship* is that of symmetry, where each language occupies an approximately equal amount of space on the sign and appears in the same colour as well as font type/size, with the Tamil line in a slightly smaller font size in this instance due to its length. The series of exclamation marks cutting vertically through the four tiers furnishes another layer of visual cohesion. The four languages also appear in a more or less conventionalised sequence, viz. English, Chinese, Malay, Tamil.
– the *language-content relationship* is that of equivalence,[2] where the four language versions each carry the same appellative message and thus may be considered mutual translations; and
– the *language mixing type* is that of a mixed unit, containing four monolingual units layered in delineated tiers. Note that what is called language mixing here

2 Other language-content combinations include a *disjointed* relationship, where each language text has a different content; and an *overlapping* relationship, where only part of the content is available in both languages (Sebba 2012: 107). Cf. Reh's (2004: 8–15) four-part model: (a) *duplicating* (the same text appears in two or more languages), which is Sebba's *equivalent* texts; (b) *fragmentary* (the text appears in full in one language, with parts of it translated into the other language[s]); (c) *overlapping* (parts of the text are shared between two or more languages, while other parts appear in one or the other of the languages), the third of Sebba's categories; and (4) *complementary* (distinct parts of the text appear in different languages with no overlap in content), which is Sebba's *disjoint* texts.

pertains to the entire sign; within each language segment, there is no evidence of mixing, with each segment conforming to the respective standard varieties.

The above profiling enables us to call the sign in Figure 1 a "parallel" multilingual text (cf. Coupland's [2012: 9–13] "parallel-text bilingualism"), characterised by symmetrical language–spatial relationships (with visually matching units in each of the four languages), equivalent language–content relationships (where the content of each language unit is identical) and multiple monolingualisms (with no language mixing within each language unit) (Sebba 2012: 108–109; cf. Heller 2002: 48).

The above characterisation generally captures the principal features of choreographed multilingualism in Singapore. Because of the ubiquity and visibility of such signs (which occasionally take on more significant physical dimensions), they are day-to-day spectacles in the urban landscape – *spectacles of multilingualism*.[3]

Figures 2–17 show further examples of multilingual spectacles, with slightly more complex wording. The texts in question are emplaced in public facilities or infrastructure, namely trains/train stations (Figures 2–10), buses (Figures 11 and 12), and elevators in public housing estates (Figures 13–17). They are tokens of a type: that of top-down (official) signage issued by public authorities or their affiliate agencies, as opposed to bottom-up (nonofficial) signage put up by private agents such as individuals or commercial entities (Backhaus 2007: 80–83; see also Landry and Bourhis 1997: 26–7; Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). More specifically, they belong to what Scollon and Scollon (2003: 175–189) call "municipal regulatory" and "municipal infrastructural" discourses.

In each of these examples, the same message is conveyed in four discrete languages, mostly arranged in the same sequence as we have noted in Figure 1 (English, Chinese, Malay, Tamil). Variations can be observed: Figure 13 uses the sequence English, Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and Figure 14, English, Chinese, Tamil, Malay; Figure 4 apparently has only three languages, but that is because the orthography of romanised Malay is such that in this case the Malay form overlaps with the English form ("Chinatown"). Across all cases, English is positioned either at the top or on the left of a unit of analysis (i.e., a standalone sign). Following Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006: 179–201) notion of "information value", English is here semiotically produced as "an agreed-upon point of departure" (181) embodying the essence of the information on the sign.[4] This is indicative of a "code preference

3 Cf. Jaworski's 2018 notion of "writing spectacles", referring to large-scale texts characterised by their visual extravagance, immersiveness, performativity, reiterative visual motifs, and diverse materiality.

system" (Scollon and Scollon 2003) or "politics of code sequence" (Coupland 2012: 11) that privileges English vis-à-vis the MTLs.

Figures 5, 8, 9, 16 and 17 have a different material setup, where the messages appear on separate "twin" signs placed alongside each other – English/Chinese-plus-Malay/Tamil pairings for the first three, and English/Malay-plus-Chinese/Tamil pairings for the last two.[5] This kind of setup is used in cases where there is too much information for all the four languages to be housed on a single sign. These twin signs have identical colour and design schemes, and hence they are otherwise no different from the usual quadrilingual format.

On the whole, the signage deploys a balanced, angular frame with a more or less equitable visual-spatial distribution among the four official languages. Minor asymmetries can nonetheless be found, though notto the extent that we might describe their language-spatial relation as "asymmetric" (Sebba's terminology). In Figures 11 and 15, the English headnotes have a larger font size than in the MTLs (and in 11, with a different colour coding and full capitalisation, across the top, middle, and bottom information segments). In Figure 17, the English and Chinese headlines are respectively larger than the Malay and Tamil headlines on the twin posters. In Figures 6 and 12, the headword "notice" appears only in English and is visually marked with underlining and full capitalisation (Figure 6), or with a larger font size, full capitalisation, and by being "stenciled" into a white bar that stands out against the purple background of the sign (Figure 12). In these cases, English performs a metadiscursive role by signalling the nature of the discourse to which it points. And in Figure 10, which shows a panel introducing an artwork displayed in a train station, the description is available in four languages, but the title of the work and the name of the artist appear only in English.

Notwithstanding the above, there is little by way of a clear visual hierarchy in the signage. Visual hierarchies arise in situations where the space allotted to different languages is asymmetric, suggesting directionality in translation, where

4 Following Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) hierarchy of dimensions of visual space, a left-right configuration corresponds to the Given-New cline in terms of information value, where "given" means the information "is presented as something the viewer already knows, as a familiar and agreed-upon point of departure for the message" (181); a top-bottom configuration corresponds to the Ideal-Real cline, where "ideal" refers to "the idealized or generalized essence of the information, hence also as its, ostensibly, most salient part" (187).

5 The examples in Figures 16 and 17 are electronic posters on illuminated LED screen boards. The twin posters appear in succession, not simultaneously, on the screens. In arranging the posters on the page, I have instinctively placed the English/Malay poster on the left (and within each poster, English a ppears above Malay), producing the illusion of a quadrilingual matrix, with implications for interpreting the information value produced by the relative placement of various languages. In so doing, am I not complicit in corroborating the code preference system I am suggesting here – that English always appears in the salient top-left position vis-à-vis the MTLs?

"the language given in prominent position appear as the original version of the message to be conveyed, while the other languages contained are assigned the status of mere translations" (Backhaus 2006: 60). The visual-spatial setup of the signage in the preceding examples is on the whole balanced rather than asymmetric, although, as we have seen, English does occasionally have relative salience by way of size, colour, and typographical differentiation (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 177, 201–203). The same message is encoded across the four languages in full; and because of the overall symmetrical design, there is no obvious sense of directionality in translation that might suggest a visual divide between "original" and "translation". In other words, translation is being repackaged as parallel writing, circumventing the negative connotations of derivation and deviation conventionally associated with translation.

Notably, each monolingual version is also "watertight" with no traces of code-mixing between each other; nor do we see resources from the local vernacular (e. g., Singlish, colloquial Singapore Mandarin) figuring in these signs. These examples therefore conform to Sebba's (2012: 108–109) criteria for "parallel" multilingual discourse, and also corroborates Backhaus's (2006: 58–60) observation that official multilingual signs tend to relate information across two or more languages in "mutual translation".

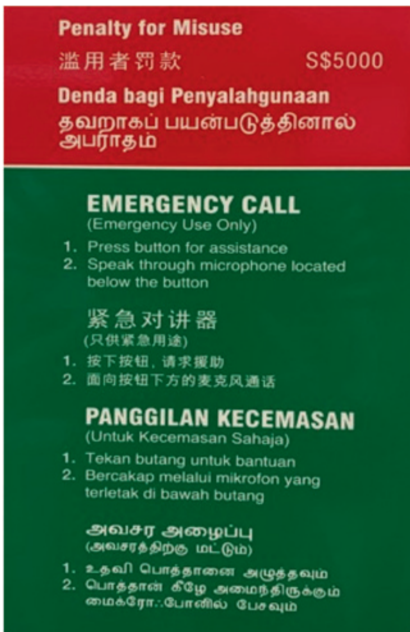

Figure 2: A sign in a passenger train on the use of the emergency call button. Author's photo.

Figure 3: A sign in a passenger train on the use of the emergency door handle. Author's photo.

Yet visual hierarchies are attested in other examples of official signage in a more pronounced manner. Figure 18 shows a multilingual banner in a neighbourhood warning residents about the outbreak of dengue fever. We see English taking on a marked salience here in terms of space (two lines for the English and one line for each of the MTLs), size/typography (the letters at the top are printed in a bigger font with full capitalisation; the word "dengue" is colour-coded and has an enlarged and thickened font), and order (English comes on top of the MTLs). The three MTLs, on the other hand, each take up an approximately equal amount of signage space. This again indicates an information value or code preference system that foregrounds English, reinforced by the fact that there is more information in English than in the MTLs. Appearing in English only are the words "Yellow Dengue Alert" (cast in a large font, on the right-hand side of the banner); the instructions to obtain further information on social media below the main taglines "Get updates on dengue clusters" and "Download myENV app"); and the slogan

Figure 4: A sign on a train platform at the Chinatown MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) station. Author's photo.

"Our Lives. Our Fight: Do the 5-Step Mozzie Wipeout Today" in the yellow bar at the bottom, alongside the name of the sign producer (National Environment Agency).

This example thus differs from the previous ones in that its language-spatial relationship is *asymmetric* (Sebba's [2012]) and its language-content relationship *fragmentary* (Reh's [2004]): translation is not mutual in this case, as the full text is

Figure 5: A caution sign in a passenger train. Author's photo.

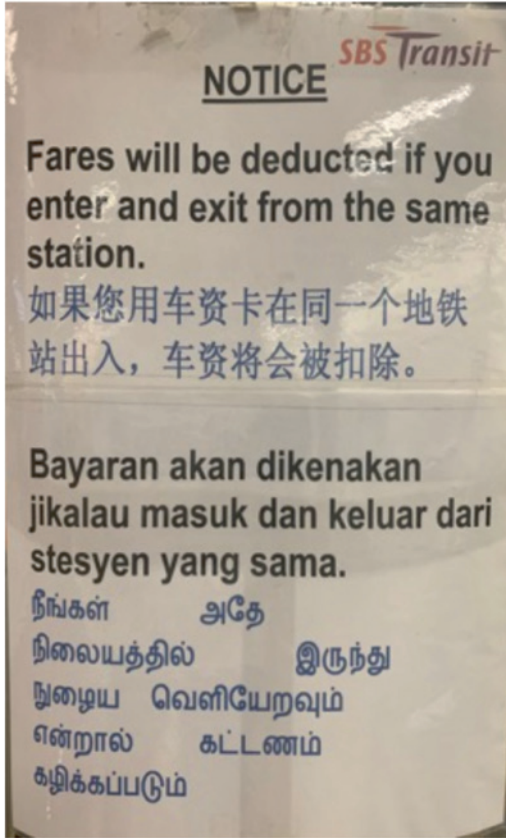

Figure 6: A sign in an MRT station on fare deduction policies. Author's photo.

arguably in English, with only the tagline ("There is an outbreak of dengue in your neighbourhood") translated into the other three languages.

Yet this asymmetry confirms Backhaus's (2006: 62–64) observation that power relations dictate language choice as far as official multilingual signs are concerned and that such relations are often expressed in the visual hierarchy of languages as represented on the signs. Thus, in metropolitan Tokyo, official signs tend to feature Japanese in a more prominent position than minority languages such as Korean and Chinese. This is a hardly surprising phenomenon that falls in line with Japan's monolingual ideology; it "leaves little doubt about prevailing power relations in the city", where "Japanese is the language in which all places are originally named, and all rules originally written. Other languages appear as supplementary translations, and care is taken that this relationship is unmistakably expressed" (64).

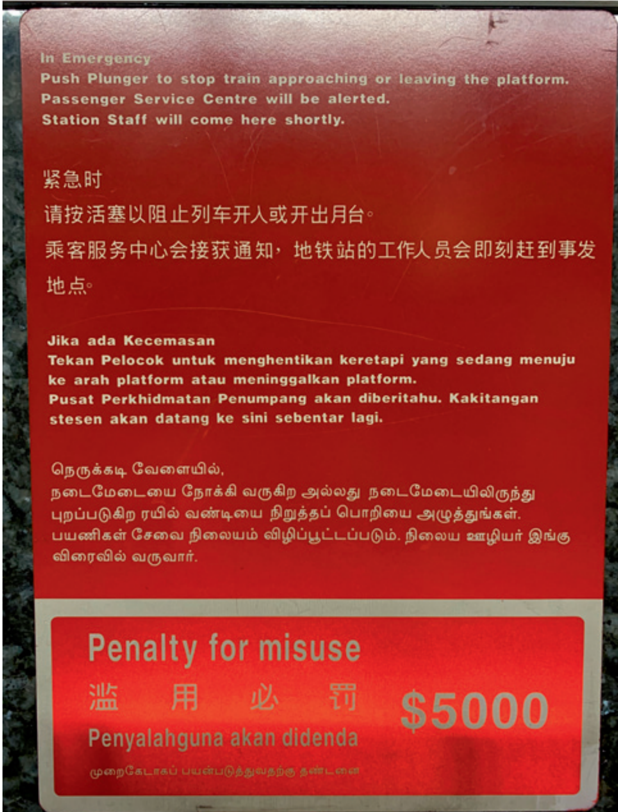

Figure 7: A sign on a train platform on the use of the 'push plunger'. Author's photo.

Applying this observation to our examples, the salience of English in multilingual signs such as in Figure 18 (and perhaps, to a lesser extent, Figures 6, 10, 11, 12, 15, and 17), can be conveniently explained in terms of the uneven power relations between English and the MTLs, where the former has hegemonic status as the language of administration and law, serving as an umbrella language that encompasses the three ethnic languages. On this view, the visual-spatial foregrounding of English here is a material manifestation of the symbolic capital of English vis-à-vis the MTLs. As in society, so in semiotics.

Yet unlike Japan, Singapore is a multilingual regime whose policy mandate is to sustain the balance of power relations among the four official languages – or at least the illusion of such balance. Therefore, unlike official signs in Tokyo where Japanese enjoys unrivalled semiotic primacy, those in Singapore are generally not as unequivocal on the role of English as the language of power, to turn Backhaus's

Figure 8: Two sets of bilingual signs in train stations on the use of fare cards. Author's photos.

(2006: 64) formulation around. With respect to the dominance of Japanese in his examples, Backhaus adds the qualification that "the mere existence of official signs containing languages other than Japanese constitutes a noteworthy concession to linguistic minorities in Tokyo" (64). In Singapore, languages other than English have more than a "mere existence" and serve more than a "noteworthy concession". Rather than supplementary to English, they are a crucial counterpoint to English, and are substantively important to perpetuating the image of multilingualism in discursive representations such as official signage.

On this reading, the sheer multilinguality of the signage in the above examples demonstrates that, in spite of the dominance of English in most aspects of society in Singapore, the MTLs are still eminently, even disproportionately, visible in the linguistic landscape. In all cases, whether symmetrical or asymmetrical, language choice is subject to regulation in official discourse; and to regulate in this context means precisely to prevent the overt semiotic monopoly of English so as to achieve the visual-spatial effect of equitable representation for *all* the official languages.

This is multilingual choreography at work, based as it does on a *strategic* model, wherein the visual-spatial configuration of languages represents "the calculus of

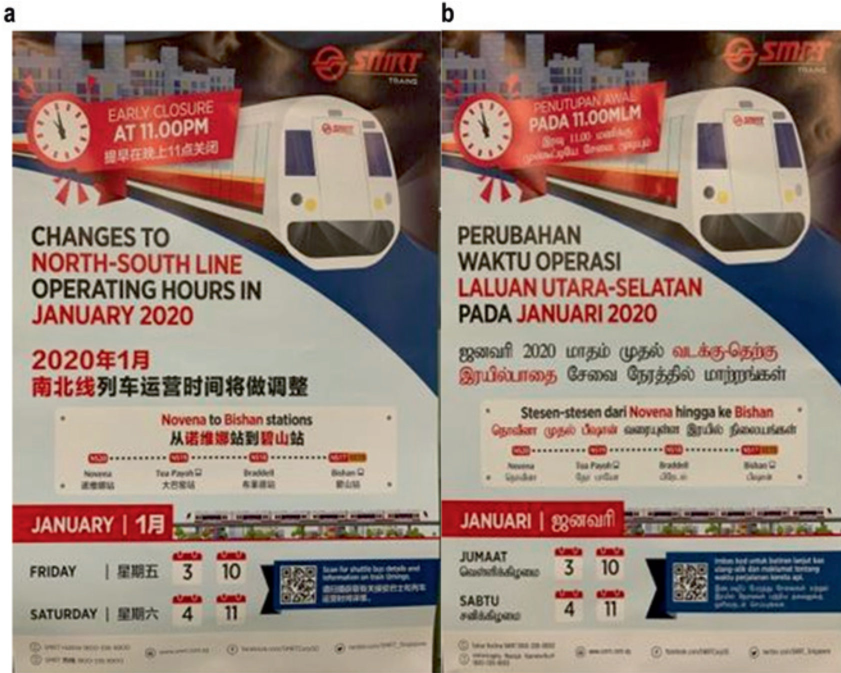

Figure 9: Two sets of bilingual signs in train stations on changes in operating hours. Author's photos.

force relationships", implemented by "a subject of will and power" (de Certeau 1984: xix), here the State and its affiliated agencies. Further: the constellation of four official languages, by way of excluding the vernaculars, dialects, and other recognised but nonofficial languages (such as the many Indian languages other than Tamil), circumscribes the linguistic landscape of Singapore into a "proper" *(propre)* (de Certeau's term) based on "standard" languages as defined by a purist ideology.

By spectacularising the official languages of Singapore using a quadrilingual matrix, hence marginalising several other languages outside that matrix, the choreographed discourses in question project a totalising and "geographical" structure of multilingualism that is: "visual" (in the form of signage or other artefacts oriented to the public), "panoptic" (because reiterative and ubiquitous), "theoretical" (through its exclusion of speech varieties actually spoken on the ground), and "geometrical" (via a recognisable language configuration) (see de Certeau 1984: 93). What ensues from these structural operations is a "conceived space" (Lefebvre's term) where languages are classified and categorised, stratified and sanitised; or, in de Certeau's sense, a multilingual "place" rather than "space".

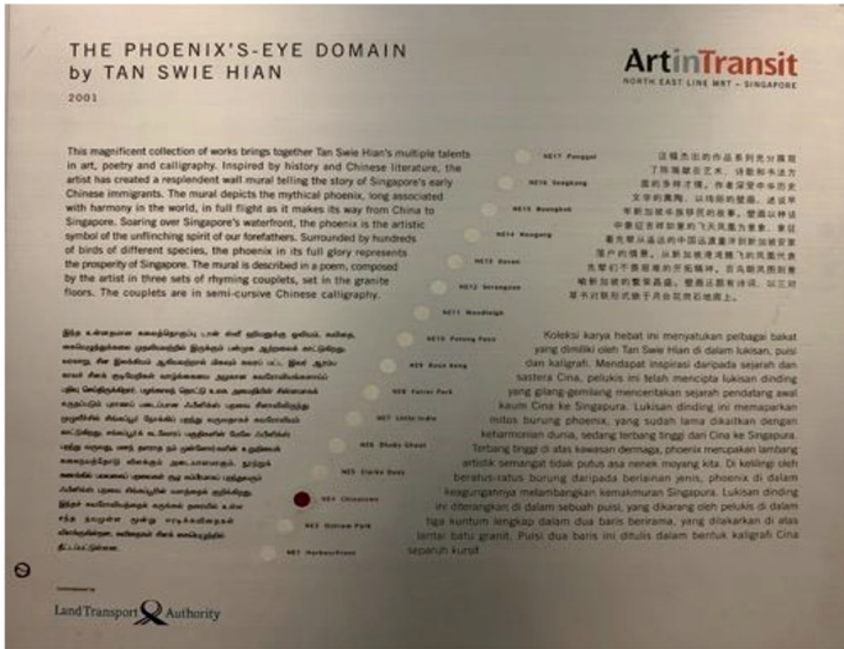

Figure 10: A sign introducing an artwork emplaced in a train station. Author's photo.

2 Spectres of official multilingualism

It is not enough to simply identify the semiotic make-up of multilingual spectacles; one must push further and ask: what specific functions do these features fulfill, and what kind of sociolinguistic narratives do they index?

In terms of function, the texts in the official signage seen above are on the one level informative-appellative – for instance, to alert passengers on the emergency call function in the train car while warning against the abuse of that function; to remind passengers to tap their transit card on the electronic reader before alighting buses; to guide people on what (not) to do when trapped in an elevator. On this level, the quadrilingual constellation participates in what Cook (2013: 69–70) calls "community multilingualism", where each of the featured languages caters to a specific language-based community by furnishing the same information or instructions in mutual translations.

Most multilingual signage have some kind of instrumental message to be communicated to intended recipients in their respective languages. But community multilingualism is most central to signage dealing with critical

Figure 11: A sign in a public bus on transport vouchers. Author's photo.

communications, such as health and security matters. As we have seen in Figure 18, for instance, despite the visual hierarchy, a clear attempt has been made to communicate the core information not only in English, but also in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. It would have been more economical for the authorities to produce an English-only banner, but when it comes to nontrivial affairs, monolingualism is an unfavourable option, as the potential costs of leaving out non-English-speaking residents are high. Here the gravity of the subject matter (a health threat) is such that the information must be related to all, in particular elderly citizens or new immigrants some of whom may only be literate in one of the three MTLs.

But there is also a performative aspect to the reiterative figuring of communications in multiple languages, which fossilises into a discursive-semiotic template invoking societal multilingualism writ large. This is somewhat akin to what Cook (2013: 68–69) calls "atmospheric multilingualism", where the presence of a language serves not primarily to denote (meaning) but to evoke (a feel, an atmosphere). For example, English words or phrases are often appropriated as signifiers of chicness on T-shirts and advertisements in Japan, where the comprehensibility

Figure 12: A sign in a public bus reminding passengers to tap their fare card when alighting. Author's photo.

of the English to target consumers is not at all the point; and Chinese is used on bilingual signs in the Chinatowns of some British cities, mainly to create an aura of "Chineseness" than to serve any informative purposes.

What the multilingual spectacles in our Singapore examples evoke is similarly a type of atmosphere, more specifically an *affect structure* that reverberates the schema of the official language policy, and by extension the multiracial policy, often abbreviated as CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others). While the referential value of a four-tiered multilingual sign is not unimportant, no intended recipient is expected to dutifully read the same message in each of the four languages. The tiering of a message into a complex of translations is itself meaningful as a visual motif; it activates the *spectre of neat multilingualism*, where each official language is given an autonomous voice, and none is overtly marginalised. The quadrilingual grid thus functions as an ambient or "floating signifier", signifying the contours of a multilingual ethos, as part of the city's "spatial branding", to use Leeman and Modan's (2009: 353) terms. To encounter quadrilingual signs in Singapore on a daily basis, then, is to repeatedly rehearse in one's subconscious mind the official language policy in its abstracted form.

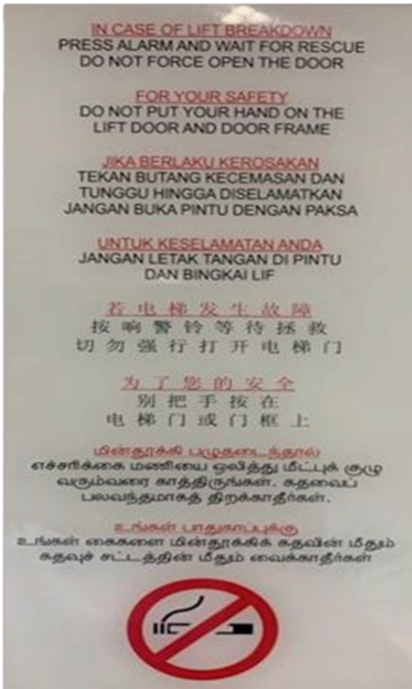

Figure 13: A sign outside an elevator in a public housing estate on what (not) to do in the event of a facility breakdown. Author's photo.

The distinction between community multilingualism and atmospheric multilingualism, or between the informative-appellative and performative-indexical dimensions of multilingual signage, is best illustrated by the example in Figure 19, which stands in contrast to that in Figure 1. Like the "danger" sign in Figure 1, this sign too is placed outside a construction site, the difference being that the message here is directed to construction workers rather than to the public. Interestingly, six rather than the usual four languages are featured on the notice: English, Chinese, Malay, Tamil, Thai, and Bengali, with the headnote in English only.

Two points should be noted: first, the vast majority of construction workers in Singapore are immigrants (especially from South Asia), not locals; two, the headnote makes it clear that the message is addressed to "foreign workers", requiring them "to produce their original work permits without demand" (and work permits are irrelevant to local residents). The latter point explains why the Thai and Bengali languages make an unusual appearance here; presumably the message is intended for contract workers speaking those two languages. The question then arises as to why Thai and Bengali, the languages of the intended recipients, appear at the bottom rather than at the top of the sign: a bottom placement, in Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006: 187) scheme, represents the Real –

Figure 14: A sign outside an elevator in a public housing estate on facility maintenance. Author's photo.

the specific, the practical, and the down-to-earth – as opposed to the Ideal (top placement), associated with idealised essence. More than that: it is significant, given that the local people are evidently not the target audience, that the message has to be made available in the four official languages of Singapore – preceding Thai and Bengali and adopting the unmarked sequence English-Chinese-Malay-Tamil.

The key to understanding the semiotics of this sign lies in the functional differentiation among the several languages featured on it. In Figure 1, the four

Figure 15: A sign inside an elevator in a public housing estate on what (not) to do in the event of a facility breakdown. Author's photo.

languages on the "danger" sign are a holistic package, at once appellative and performative – they are imperatives directed at members of the public belonging to different language communities, though their format is at the same time performative by virtue of their being set in a formulaic matrix. By contrast, in Figure 19 there is a clear division of labour among the six languages, with Thai and Bengali being fully instrumental – they convey a substantive appellative message to the respective language communities; English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, on the other hand, have an atmospheric function, serving to rerun the official multilingual "script" via a quadrilingual constellation that evokes the "atmosphere" or *sensibility* of official multilingualism.

Read as an aggregate of discrete signs, that is to say, as a gestalt (Ben-Rafael and Ben-Rafael 2015: 19–21), the official multilingual discourse we have looked at are *metonymic* in that they call upon an institutional context larger than themselves, and in so doing they perform the ideologies of that broader context. Their formulaic structure, i.e. the conventionalised visual-spatial arrangement of the four languages on the material sign, triggers a language ideological subtext quite apart from the referential meaning of their texts – that Singapore is multicultural, that its four official languages enjoy equal status, and that their respective

Figure 16: Two sets of bilingual signs about safety appearing in succession on a digital board outside an elevator in a public housing estate . Author's photos.

language communities coexist in harmony. That subtext is the "atmosphere" emanating from the totality of signs choreographed on the basis of the same template of four languages.

The formulaic visual-spatial matrix that we have identified resonates with Bakhtin's concept of *genre feature*. Citing Bakhtin, Blommaert (2015: 109) explains that the use of genre features such as common language "is taken by the author [of a novel] precisely as the *common view*, as the verbal approach to people and things normal for a given sphere of society" (Bakhtin's words). Hence, for Blommaert, form constitutes an "indexical nexus" that is used "to project socially stratified meaning", or what Bakhtin calls "verbal-ideological belief systems". And this indexical nexus materialises what is called style, "because it can be played out, always hybridized, in ways that shape recognizable meaning effects", which are themselves historically and socially produced.

Articulating this to our case, the legitimacy of the English-Chinese-Malay-Tamil quadruple as a language template for top-down communication is part of a

Figure 17: Two sets of bilingual signs about dengue fever appearing in succession on a digital board outside an elevator in a public housing estate. Author's photos.

"verbal-ideological belief system" enshrined in Singapore's official language policy. The replicative and proliferative use of the quadrilingual frame, in which the four languages are juxtaposed in visual-spatial equilibrium, projects the "common view" of Singapore as a multilingual city. That frame, as we have seen in our examples, is "played out" across a broad range of discursive and artefactual formations, their "recognizable meaning effect" being the ethos of multilingualism which, as I have just argued, is constantly called up as a spectre, an atmosphere.

If the quadrilingual template is indeed evocative of the spectre of official multilingualism, equally it can be seen as embedding within its semiotic grid a certain history – that of linguistic legislation and related policy making in Singapore. That history is a meaning potential, a latent ideological substratum beneath the visual-spatial structure of the sign. To that extent, the matrix comprising English, Chinese, Malay, Tamil constitutes a frame pregnant with "invokable histories", one "in which time, space, and patterns of agency coincide, create meaning and value" (Blommaert 2015: 110).

Figure 18: A banner warning about the outbreak of dengue fever in a neighbourhood. Author's photo.

In other words: what I have called the frame, template, matrix, or formula bringing the four official languages in juxtaposition is an *indexical*, in Silverstein's (1992, 2003) sense, a language-ideologically charged semiotic figure that enacts translocal (macrotextual) meaning on a local (microtextual) plane (Blommaert 2015: 107). This indexical in turn triggers a *trope*, a "relatively conventionalized (and therefore historical) [set] of metapragmatically attributive meaning" (Blommaert 2015: 107). More specifically, the quadrilingual constellation of English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil on material signs (a local enactment) is a visual genre that indexically calls up the trope (a translocal attribute) of ethno-linguistic equality, as enshrined in Singapore's national pledge: "We, the citizens of Singapore / Pledge ourselves as one united people / Regardless of race, language, or religion / To build a democratic society / Based on justice and equality / So as to achieve happiness, prosperity / And progress for our nation".[6]

This takes us to the notion of chronotopes, defined as "historically configured tropes [that] point us to the fact that specific complexes of 'how-it-was' can be

6 https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/community-engagement/education/resources/national-symbols/national-pledge (accessed 28 January 2020).

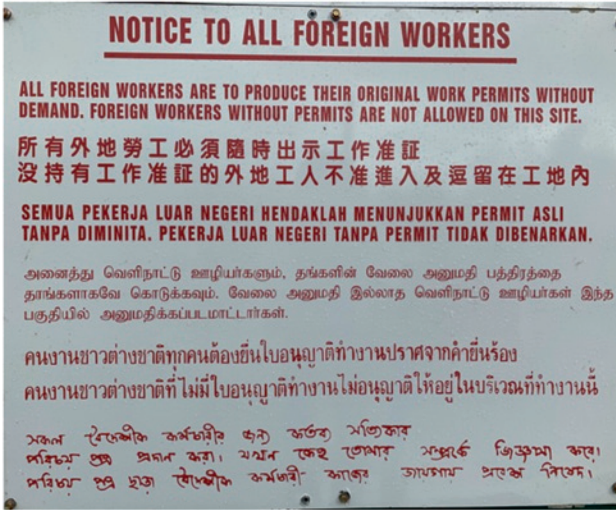

Figure 19: A multilingual sign with six languages at a construction site. Author's photo.

invoked as relevant context in discourse and affect what can and does happen in discursive events" (Blommaert 2015: 111). In our case, the chronotope in question is the entire, albeit relatively short, history of multiculturalism and its associated institutions (the CMIO, the official language policy, the bilingual education system) – the "specific [complex] of 'how-it-was'". There is also a spatial element here, as the signage we have been looking at appears in public, openly accessible, and geographically mappable spaces, or de Certeau's *proper* (*propre*).

A chronotopic perspective thus enables us to look at official signs as timespace configurations, where quadrilingualism serves as a generic figure on signs whose panoramic spatial distribution in public spaces confers upon them a façade of legitimacy and authority. That generic figure, thanks to the ubiquity of signs, creates an underlying and sustained visuality, one that continually recalls the trope or narrative of linguistic and ethnic equality. It is in this sense that the quadrilingual formula is fully performative; it points us indexically toward the schematic structure of official (not street) multilingualism that has a certain history, serving as "tropic emblems" that bring "chunks" of that history to the "interactional here-and-now" of reading signs (see Blommaert 2015: 111).

Figure 20: (a) A quadrilingual display board at the Founders' Memorial exhibition in Toa Payoh, 2019. (b–d) Two sets of three bilingual panels, entitled "What should the memorial be like?" and "Choosing a design"; from top to bottom: English-Chinese, English-Malay, English-Tamil.

3 Language choreography across media

Choreographed multilingualism is scalable to different media. Beyond official signage, it also operates in, for instance, public exhibitions and print artefacts with patronage from state-affiliated institutions. The same quadrilingual formula observed in public signs and notices extends to these other platforms of communication and engagement, suggesting that the multicultural trope is also multimodal, making its presence across modes and media.

My first example on this is a 2019 exhibition held at several locations in Singapore on the prospective Founders' Memorial, a large-scale public facility "commemorating Singapore's founding values and ideals".[7] The exhibition,

7 https://www.foundersmemorial.sg/ (accessed 19 January 2020).

organised by the Singapore Heritage Board (a statutory board of the Singapore government), showcases several design models for the Memorial. These are submissions from an international architectural design competition held in connection with the Memorial's construction. In the spirit of public engagement, viewers are invited to choose their preferred design and log their preference into a digital system for the judging panel's reference, "to be part of the making of the Memorial".[8]

Figures 20a–d show several multilingual display boards from the exhibition. Figure 20a exemplifies a neat quadrilingual setup, rather in line with but more complex than the visual-spatial frame we have seen on public signage. The text here is a quote from the Prime Minister on the significance of the prospective Memorial, available in four language versions in mutual translation. The spatial configuration is on the whole quite balanced. Having said that, the English panel is afforded more visual weighting compared to the MTL panels: its colour is of a brighter (red) tone; it is also slightly larger in size (with its text printed in a bigger font; compare the Malay panel at the top-right) and placed in the centre-left of the display board.

Even then, the apparent asymmetry in Figure 20a is relatively subdued as compared to Figures 20b–d. Each of these latter panels pairs English with one MTL, creating three sets of bilingual configurations: English/Chinese, English/Malay, English/Tamil, with perfectly aligned texts. Differing from the symmetrical quadrilingual grid, this bilingual matrix foregrounds English as the original language. First, English has a numerical superiority due to its sheer repetition: for every unit of information (e.g., "What should the Memorial be like?"; "Choosing a design"), English appears thrice as opposed to just once for each MTL. In addition, on each panel English appears on the left of an MTL, once again producing the semiotic effect that English is a "given" language within what seems to be a stable code preference system (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 179–185; Scollon and Scollon 2003).[9]

From a purely logistical perspective, juxtaposing three bilingual pairs produces redundancy, requiring more space and increasing the costs. The English-MTL pairing, and the corollary repetition of the same information in English, can be explained only by recourse to its language ideological imperatives. Recalling our earlier point about language performativity and atmospheric multilingualism,

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8 https://www.nationalmuseum.sg/our-exhibitions/exhibition-list/founders-memorial?sc_lang=en (accessed 19 January 2020).

9 In the exhibition space, the three bilingual panels are not placed in any distinct hierarchical order. Here again, I have the arranged the figures in the sequence English/Chinese, English/Malay, English/Tamil, reproducing and hence reinforcing the code preference system English, Chinese, Malay, Tamil through my own discourse.

the constellation of panels in Figure 20b–d offers not just objective information pertaining to the new architectural project to members of the public speaking different languages. In other words, the provision of the same information in the four official languages in mutual translation and in three sets of bilingual formation is not only, or even primarily, an act of community multilingualism.

What is also at work here is a surreptitious performance of Singapore's official language policy and, in particular, the bilingual education policy, on the basis of the exhibition's discursive infrastructure. In pairing English with each MTL across three bilingual panels, the setup sustains the visibility of all four official languages, thus mirroring the English-plus-MTL schema underlying the bilingual education system. Yet the setup also underscores the overarching importance of English through the latter's triple iteration for every unit of information, construing it as the language that is being *translated out of*. On the other hand, the MTLs, each appearing on just one of the three bilingual panels, are construed as the language being *translated into*.

Such construal of the direction of translation between English on the one hand and the three MTLs on the other is rather significant.[10] In any multilingual situation, when a language is translated out of but not into, it serves exclusively as a source (or translated) language; this imbues the language with the prestige of an original, thus giving it “voice”: it is audible, it speaks, and not only in its own medium but through other languages as well. Conversely, when a language is translated into but not out of, it serves only as a target (or translating) language. The conventional, but not critical, wisdom is that the target language receives and replays the original;[11] it too is audible, only that it utters the voice of the original. Just as English speaks through the MTLs, so the MTLs are *spoken through*. The bilingual panels therefore have the effect of sharpening the English-MTLs divide along the Source-Target binary, with the meaning effect of raising the status of English to that of the original, the primary point of reference, while relegating the MTLs to the implied secondary role of mimicry.

My second example is another 2019 exhibition, entitled “Let's Rojak Interculture Playstreets”, supported by the Singapore Wellness Association and the Harmony Fund administered by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. This mobile exhibition circulates across various public libraries, targeting a younger audience. Hence the use of *rojak* (a local salad made of a mix of vegetables

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10 English-into-MTL may *in fact* be the direction of translation being practiced in producing these multilingual texts, although here it is the *construal* of that directionality, which means the social meaning behind the setup, that is important.

11 This is the equivalence-based paradigm of translation, which has been problematised by poststructuralist and postcolonial thinking on translation.

and fruits), adding a playful, childlike tone to the exhibition, which aims to "inspire [viewers] to surprise one another with a few greetings in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, to recognise the many beautiful holy buildings we may have passed through countless times and to have an intimate conversation with our neighbours about our faiths" (this text appears on a banner introducing the exhibition).

Although the word *rojak* in the title might suggest the celebration of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity, it is, oxymoronically, a *streamlined heterogeneity* fully aligned with top-down discourses on multiculturalism dovetailing into a heritage education agenda. For example, there is a deft even-handedness with which the four official languages and their associated cultures are represented on a series of pull-up banners of equal dimensions and similar design. One of these introduces the characteristics of cultural festivals as celebrated by people from different religious or ethnic backgrounds in Singapore, including Hari Raya Puasa and Hari Raya Haji (for the Muslims); Good Friday and Christmas (for the Christians); Vesak Day (for the Buddhists), Chinese New Year (for the Chinese community in general); and Deepavali (for the Hindus), each coded in a different colour. Another set of banners introduce the 10 major religions *officially recognised* in Singapore as well as their places of worship.

More pertinent to the language theme is a set of four banners (Figure 21) entitled "How to say it in English, Chinese, Malay & Tamil", introducing basic words ("how are you", "thank you", "sorry", "yes/no". "goodbye", "welcome") in the four official languages. The subject matter here cannot be more trivial, but what is important for our purpose is the underlying language ideological value. The sequence in which the four languages are mentioned in the title is a recurrence of the unmarked serial we have seen in previous examples. The installation itself is set up in accordance with the by now familiar quadrilingual template, where one banner is assigned to each official language and where words are laterally laid out in perfectly symmetrical translation across the languages. In this regard what is excluded is much more interesting than what is included: the constellation English-Chinese-Malay-Tamil has become such an enduring visual formula that its very invocation instantly silences several other languages, language varieties, and dialects (Singlish, Chinese dialects, non-Tamil Indian languages), eradicating them from the face of official multilingual discourses. What ensues is a *sanitised* multilingualism untainted by traces of language specimens that fall outside the quadrilingual frame.

The texts in the four languages are also matched by images of people representing the corresponding ethnicities. The four banners in Figure 21 are thus text-image entities collating (only) institutionalised languages and their corresponding ethnic stereotypes, but also heteronormative gender relations (from the left: English/ Caucasians, Malay/Malays, Chinese/Chinese, and Tamil/Indians, in each case

Figure 21: A set of four banners in the “Let's Rojak Interculture Playstreets” exhibition educating young viewers on basic words in English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. Ang Mo Kio Public Library, 2019. Author's photo.

coupling a man with a woman). The installation can therefore justifiably be seen as a multimodal instantiation of the official language policy and multicultural policy.

Also significant is the fact that the words on the MTL banners are romanised. The motivation here is of course to enable viewers to pronounce non-English words – and in the official recognised variety: for example, the Chinese words are transliterated using the Hanyu Pinyin, based on Standard Mandarin. Notwithstanding this practical function of romanisation, the orthographic presentation creates a visual imbalance. Except for Malay, which adopts a romanised script as it is used in Singapore, romanisation is tantamount to the domestication of non-alphabetic scripts, in this case Chinese characters and the Tamil *abugida* script, subsuming them into a visual economy broadly associated with Western languages in general and English in particular. This issue could have been easily circumvented by using two script forms (the original script and the roman script) on the Chinese and Tamil banners, so the absence of these non-alphabetic scripts might be considered a conscious decision. We see once more how asymmetrical nuances can sit within a largely symmetrical frame; more specifically, that within a quadrilingual layout that is prima facie balanced, minute details reveal the unequal power relations between English and the MTLs.

Lastly, choreographed multilingualism can be performed on printed discourse. I enumerate below a few examples of multilingual texts-in-print; inasmuch as these are publicly and freely available, they too can be said to form a part of the local linguistic landscape.

- In celebration of Singapore's golden jubilee in 2015, the National Design Centre published a set of brochures, one in each of the four official languages, outlining the history of the design industry in Singapore. There is much overlap among the four language versions in terms of content, which means they are in large part mutual translations, though a minimal amount of information targeted at specific ethnic communities is available in the respective languages. This situation conforms to Sebba's (2012) and Reh's (2004) “overlapping” model of multilingualism.
- In view of the spread of dengue fever in 2019, the National Environment Agency put out an illustrated brochure on dengue fever, with exactly the same information in English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. The brochure takes on a twin format, with English/Malay on one half of the brochure and Chinese/Tamil on the other half. In each of the twin sections, English and Chinese are given salience over Malay and Tamil respectively by means of bold typography, colour coding in red, and a larger font (for headings). The relevant webpage of the Agency (https://www.nea.gov.sg/dengue-zika/dengue) is monolingual in English, perhaps suggesting that the comprehensive

availability of information in four languages is more likely to occur offline (as part of the physical linguistic landscape) than online.

- The Media Literacy Council put out an information guide entitled “Tips for spotting false news” in conjunction with the promulgation of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) in 2019. The guide is available in four languages in full, mutual translation, and pinned on notice boards in neighourhood housing estates. The Council's website is monolingual, with an English-only document (https://www.betterinternet.sg/-/media/MLC/Files/SID-2018/Quick-Tips/1_How-to-spot-Fake-News_Tipsheet.pdf) offering similar information to those brochures, again suggesting the performative role of multilingualism as part of the linguistic landscape.
- In 2019, a new political party named Progress Singapore Party printed and distributed pamphlets featuring all four official languages. The spatial layout is such that, on both sides of the pamphlet, English overarches the other three languages, printed in a bigger font and stretching across the length of the pamphlet. On one side of the pamphlet, the three MTLs are arranged in the shape of an inverted triangle, with Malay and Chinese placed on top of Tamil; on the other side, Malay and Tamil are stacked together (Malay on top), with Chinese appearing on their right side, in a bigger font. Overall, this configuration semiotically produces the code preference system English-Chinese-Malay-Tamil.
- Singapore's National Library Board regularly publishes the magazine “Time of Your Life” for senior citizens, with overlapping content in four languages, though each language also carries its own unique information, such as recommended titles in the respective languages.

4 Language Policy in Linguistic Landscapes

The preceding sections have presented a range of examples from official signage, public exhibitions to discursive artefacts, converging on the systematic management of signs and specifically on the choreography of multilingualism. At its heart, choreographed multilingualism is a methodology that subsumes the minute logistics of discrete signs and artefacts. This methodology takes the form of a visual-spatial schema in which the official languages are laid out in a matrix that is relatively balanced in terms of how they are configured within a given frame. It is the networking of the four languages into a translational constellation where the same message is reiterated in mutual translation. On occasion, the frame is skewed toward English at the apparent disadvantage of the other three languages, highlighting the relative salience of English. On the whole, however, such asymmetries

do not compromise the holistic equilibrium that characterises official multilingual discourses.

The quadrilingual frame is an indexical that activates a formulaic trope, that of neat multilingualism: a multilingualism marked by delineated categories of named, official languages within, to the exclusion of languages or language varieties which the establishment regards as nonofficial or nonstandard. Neat multilingualism speaks to what Heller (2002: 48) calls "double monolingualism", where "[o]ne is expected to speak each 'language' as though it were a homogeneous monolingual variety… Mixed varieties, which of course are common in bilingual settings, are frowned upon". This is a narrative in which English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil coexist as parallel identity capsules separated by reified borders. It finds concrete expression in quadripartite symmetries that accord (approximately or perfectly) equitable visual-spatial resources to the four official languages, while at the same time fixating invisible, impermeable borders among them.

In this regard, the conspicuous absence of language mixing in monolingual language segments within a multilingual discourse is symptomatic of a categorical neatness that distinguishes choreographed multilingualism. Importantly, the trope of neat multilingualism is evocative of the broader milieu in which it is conceived, more specifically the official language policy and the bilingual education system, which form the base of the language establishment in Singapore. Multilingual spectacles featuring the four official languages are therefore more than just texts or artefacts. They call up, by way of indexicality, a visuality of equilibrium-equivalence, triggering the chronotope of a regulated sociolinguistic realm underpinned by the discourses of language policy and language planning.

This excursion into Singapore's linguistic landscape takes us back to de Certeau's spatial theory. What the data in this paper point to is a "rationalized, expansionist… centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production" (de Certeau 1984: xii), an institutional apparatus that operate according to certain "mechanisms of discipline" (xiv) determined by the official language policy. These disciplinary mechanisms may govern, for instance, what languages can(not) be used in official multilingual discourses, the relative placement of those languages, the kind of translation that takes place among them, and so forth.

The multilingual platforms thereby created are "technocratically constructed, written, and functionalized" (xviii), complying to "prescribed syntactical forms", namely: (a) "temporal modes of schedules" (xviii) – for instance, multilingual banners on dengue fever are put up or taken down in response to exigencies of the health situation; multilingual exhibitions come and go according to schedules prefixed by relevant agencies; and (b) "paradigmatic orders of spaces" (xviii) – for instance, the emplacement of official signage in highly visible public spaces in the

city; the segregation of the space on the sign or poster into four equal portions (or, as the case may be, with slight asymmetries in favour of English) as well as the conventional sequencing of the four languages. The resulting linguistic landscape is, following de Certeau, a multilingual "place" produced by technologies of choreography rather than a multilingual "space" created by spontaneous energies from below.

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