1 Introduction: Singapore and its Englishes

1.1 Historical and present-day background

1.1.1 Historical background

Present-day Singapore is an island-state of approximately 710 km² located at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. Early written records name it *Pu Luo Zhong* (蒲羅中, from Malay *Pulau Ujong* 'island at the end [of the Malay Peninsula]', Savage and Yeoh 2005; third century, Turnbull 1996), *Temasek* (from Javanese *Tumasik* 'sea town'; fourteenth century, Prapañca 1995: 14.2, l. 3), and finally *Singapura* (from Sanskrit *siṃha* 'lion' and *puram* 'city'; sixteenth century, Brown 1983). This latter name became established and the island changed hands repeatedly, belonging in turn to the Śrivijaya thalassocracy, to the Javanese Majapahit Empire, to the Thai Kingdom, and to the Malacca Sultanate, when it was destroyed by the invading Portuguese in 1613 (Brown 1983: 41, Turnbull 1996: 4).

In the early nineteenth century, the Johor Empire founded a village on the site of Singapura. Aboriginal Malays (Orang Kallang and others) lived scattered over the island, but had limited interaction with the ruling classes. In early 1819, Singapore had around a thousand inhabitants, among whom were some thirty Chinese (Turnbull 1996: 5).

On 28 January 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles, investigating possible locations for an East India Company station, anchored near Singapore. A treaty with the Sultan of Johor was signed on 6 February, leasing the island to the Company: modern Singapore was born. After disputes with the neighbouring Dutch were resolved, Singapore became a permanent British settlement under the direct administration of Calcutta (Turnbull 1996). Before the Anglo-Dutch Treaty, colonial administrators in Singapore appealed to the existing colonies Malacca and Penang[1] for settlers and traders, promising a tariff-free port. A great many Chinese arrived early on, and by 1821, of the 5,000 inhabitants, 3,000 were Malays and over 1,000 Chinese (Turnbull 1996: 13). Malays flocked in from the entire archipelago. Indians were mostly soldiers in the British Indian Army, but there were a few businessmen too,

[1] Previously established British dependencies on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula.

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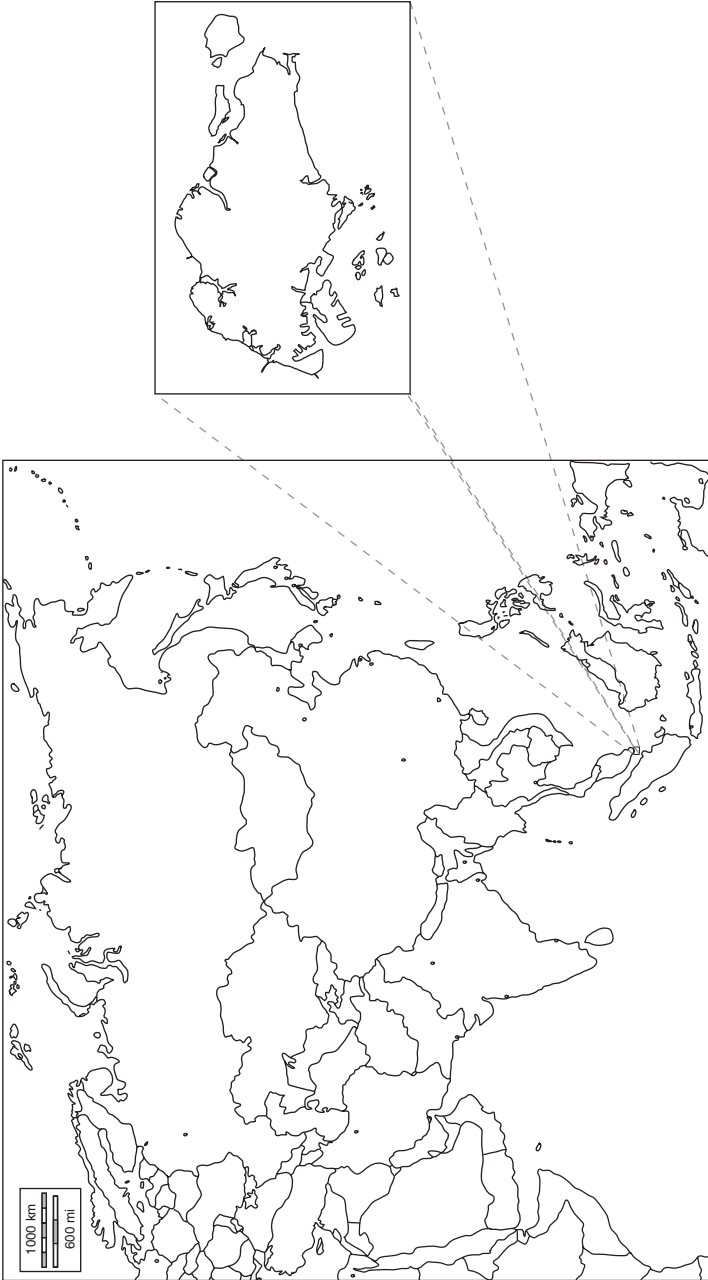
Figure 1.1. The location of Singapore within Asia. The city-state is located at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula; it is sandwiched between Malaysia to the north and Indonesia to the south and southwest. The island is just 1° 22′ north of the equator.

Source (Asia): http://d-maps.com/carte.php?lib=asia_map&num_car=13293&lang=en

Source (Singapore): http://d-maps.com/carte.php?lib=singapore_map&num_car=15621&lang=en

some from Penang and Malacca (1996: 14). The first official census of 1824 reported 11,000 inhabitants, with the Malays still in the majority – three years later they were overtaken by the Chinese.

Between 1827 and 1836 the population almost doubled (Turnbull 1996: 36) and in 1860 it stood at 81,000. The Chinese, representing 65 per cent in 1867, came predominantly from the southern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. The Hokkien (Fùjiān) were the largest group and dominated commerce, followed by the closely related Teochew (Cháozhōu). Cantonese and Hakka (Kèjiā) came mostly as labourers and craftsmen. More Indians arrived in this period, mainly from southern India, but also from Punjab, and at this time they formed the second largest group (Turnbull 1996: 39–40). The Malays came third, and the Europeans formed a tiny minority, with fewer than 300 British, nearly all men who, however, held key positions in the civil service and business.

Singapore became a Crown Colony in April 1867, and in 1911 numbered over 185,000 inhabitants, of whom almost three-quarters were Chinese. Immigration continued, Europeans increased their numbers slightly; the Indians were the only ethnic group to see their number decline: most had used Singapore as a transitory port to seek employment in the neighbouring Malay States (Turnbull 1996), which had come under British rule with the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824.

Under colonial rule, Singapore saw its education system develop slowly. At first, the authorities were only interested in providing teaching in Malay, which was seen as the only viable means of communication in the region – Chinese was divided into too many dialects,[2] and the Indians spoke many different languages. Leading positions in politics were reserved for Europeans anyway, and the few Chinese who became Justices of the Peace or members of the Legislative Council were wealthy and spoke English well, and consequently sent their sons to Britain for their studies. A number of privately run schools offered classes in Hokkien, Cantonese, and Tamil, but they had no government backing. English-medium instruction was largely the responsibility of Christian missionaries. Only the Raffles Institution provided secondary education in English; but the few Malay and Chinese classes it offered had to be closed down due to lack of funds and interest in 1894 (Wijeysingha 1963: 97). It was only after World War I, which left Singapore

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[2] On the question about the dialect/language status of the various Chinese varieties, see DeFrancis (1986: 53–67), Ramsey (1987: 16–17, 28–9), and Mair (1991), among others. Although speakers normally refer to them as dialects, they are often mutually unintelligible (Cheng 1996), and some (such as Cantonese) have their own, more or less standardised writing system. Ultimately, such naming issues are of a social, rather than linguistic, nature (Trudgill 1995). Therefore, and in accordance both with linguists specialising in the field (Bao 2001; Tan 2003, among others) and with vernacular Singaporean usage, varieties of Chinese are herein called dialects.

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unaffected except for a quickly subdued mutiny of its only regiment,[3] that education became more important, and by 1939, of the 550,000 inhabitants, 72,000 children were enrolled in school, of whom 38,000 were in Chinese, 27,000 in English, 6,000 in Malay and 1,000 in Tamil schools (Doraisamy 1969: 38).

The Japanese invasion on 15 February 1942 resulted in three years of occupation and the death of some thirty thousand. When Commonwealth troops retook Singapore and Malaya in 1945, it was a devastated city and although British rule was welcomed back, confidence in the colonial masters had been shattered. In April 1946, civil administration being restored, Singapore was again a Crown Colony, and Peninsular Malaysia became the Malay Union. The latter was modified into the Malay Federation in 1948.

At that stage, Singapore's population of 941,000 consisted of 78 per cent Chinese, 12 per cent Malays and 7 per cent Indians (Turnbull 1996: 229, 234), a situation that roughly prevails today. The Singapore Improvement Trust was established – the future Housing Development Board – to better the situation for the thousands that were left in precarious housing conditions after the war. Education was stepped up, with the government finally acknowledging the demand for English-medium primary education. The University of Malaya was created in 1949, and a Teacher Training College was also founded. In 1954, the English-medium primary school intake was higher than the Chinese-medium one.

When the first elections were held in 1955, Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party (PAP) formed a coalition government which had to tackle a number of strikes and internal political and racial turmoil. After almost four years of agitation and negotiation, self-government was effective from 1959, with the PAP winning forty-three of Parliament's fifty-one seats (Turnbull 1996: 263).

In a referendum held in September 1962, Singapore voters agreed to the government's proposal for a merger with the Federation of Malaya. This was a short-lived experiment, which ended on 9 August 1965, when Singapore was ejected from the Federation and became independent again. Initial distress caused by the shock of being left alone, without an economic hinterland and natural resources, was overcome by successful policies, which soon attracted foreign investors. Singapore flourished, and the Malaysian episode was soon put behind.

The education system was developed, strongly emphasising pragmatic disciplines rather than the humanities. Racial relations were an issue, especially after serious riots in the sixties. Various schemes were introduced, among them an annual Racial Harmony Day which aims to promote mutual respect and understanding, and a quota system for public housing. The government

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[3] The Indian Army 5th Light Infantry, consisting solely of Punjabi Muslims, 'were bitter that the British were fighting against Muslim Turkey' (Turnbull 1996: 126).
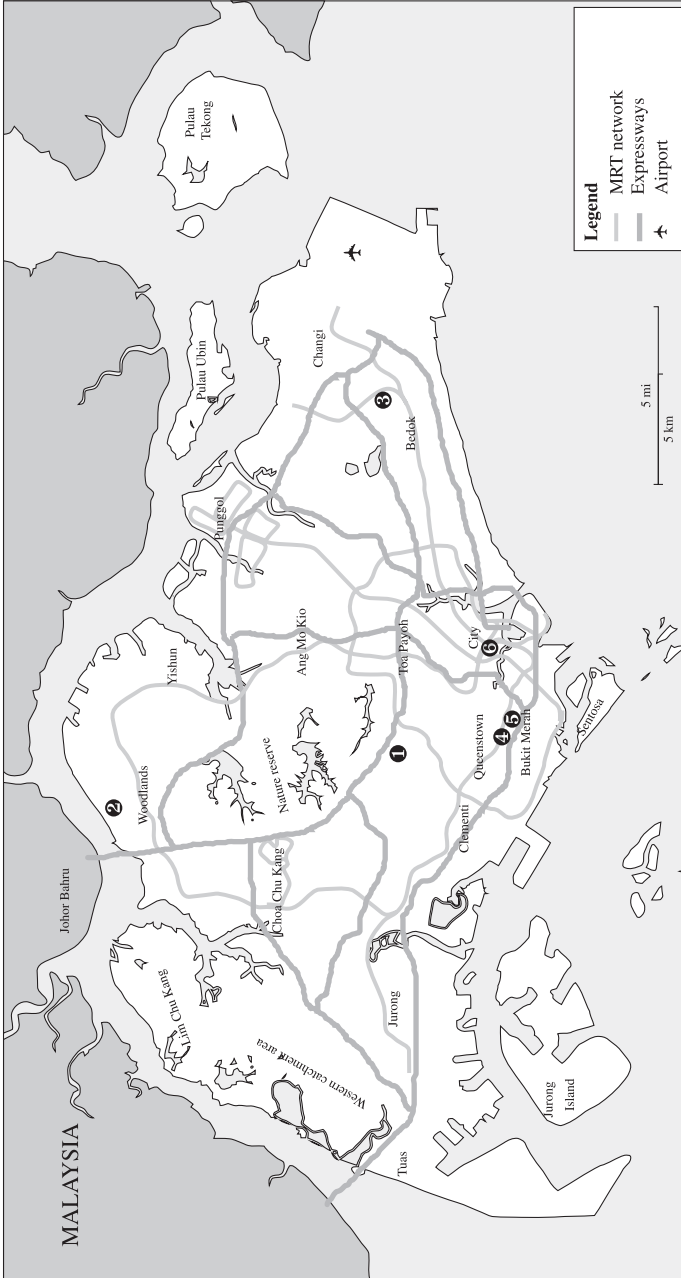
Figure 1.2. A map of Singapore, showing major highways, Mass Rapid Transit network, and residential areas, as well as the three schools where data were collected for this study (marked by ❶, ❷, and ❸). The Central Business District (❻) is just east of Chinatown. The highest population density is found in the CBD and adjoining areas, although settlements (Housing Development Board 'New Towns') exist all over the island. A nature reserve and water catchment area is located in the geographical centre of the country. Labels ❹ and ❺ refer to the discussion on pp. 10–11.

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introduced a massive public housing construction scheme, which now houses over 80 per cent of the population. Tenants own their flats which they buy at subsidised rates. Living conditions further improved with strong economic growth (averaging 8 per cent yearly between 1960 and 1999 (Singstat 1999)). This situation prevails, and thanks to efficacious policies, the Asian Crisis of the late nineties had only a minor impact on Singapore's growth. The same seems to hold true for the crises of the late 2000s: in 2011, GDP per capita was at SGD 62,008 (GBP 31,581), which was second only to Japan in East Asia, and the growth projected for 2012 was 4.41 per cent (IMF 2011).

1.1.2 Linguistic diversity

When the constitution was written in 1963, the thorny issue of linguistic diversity was addressed. 'Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English [are] the four official languages of Singapore' (Constitution: §153A). Technically, they all enjoy the same constitutional status, §53 also stating that they may all be used for debates in Parliament. Simultaneous translation during sittings is provided, but English as the working language of the government is used overwhelmingly.[4] All government websites are in English without any translation – except for some important information leaflets.[5] Unlike other countries with more than one official language, Singapore's legislation is entirely in English. The other three official languages are known as 'mother tongues'. Every ethnic group has one assigned to them, and they are taught it as a second language at school – since 1987 English has been the only medium of instruction for all groups. Thus all Chinese are taught Mandarin, all Malays Malay and all Indians Tamil as a second language[6] – in English.

The aboriginal language, if Singapore can be said to have one, is Malay. Widely spoken in the area, Malay is the sole official language of Malaysia, and its dialectal and mutually intelligible sister Indonesian is Indonesia's official tongue.[7] Given the regional predominance of Malay (over thirty million speakers in the two neighbouring countries (Lewis 2009)), it may come as a surprise that in the 2010 Census, only 17.7 per cent of Singapore's population declared literacy in it (Wong 2011).

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[4] Between 11 February 2006 and 20 September 2007, there were 641 questions asked in Parliament. Of these, 34 (5.3 per cent) were in Malay, 81 (12.6 per cent) in Mandarin, and just a single one (0.2 per cent) in Tamil (Parliament of Singapore 2007).

[5] For instance the information booklets on measures to counteract infectious diseases (avian flu, SARS, dengue fever), which are made available in the four official languages (MOH 2005b,a). Generally, information pertaining to far-reaching government schemes is available in all four languages as well.

[6] Recently, this has been somewhat relaxed, with parents allowed to enrol their children for 'mother tongue' classes other than their assigned ethnic language.

[7] The names given to the different varieties of Malay eloquently reflect their sociopolitical, rather than linguistic, difference: *Bahasa Malaysia* 'Malaysian language' in Malaysia, *Bahasa Indonesia* 'Indonesian language' in Indonesia, and *Bahasa Melayu* 'Malay language' or simply *Melayu* in Singapore and Brunei.

Table 1.1. *Language most frequently spoken at home. Data for 1980 from Foley (1998: 221) citing Lau (1993: 6), for 1990 and 2000 from Leow (2001), and for 2010 from Wong (2011)*

	1980	1990	2000	2010
English	11.6 %	18.8 %	23.0 %	32.3 %
Mandarin	10.2 %	23.7 %	35.0 %	35.6 %
Chinese dialects	59.5 %	39.6 %	23.8 %	14.3 %
Malay	13.9 %	14.3 %	14.1 %	12.2 %
Tamil	3.1 %	2.9 %	3.2 %	3.3 %
Others	1.7 %	0.8 %	0.9 %	1.1 %

Singapore's Constitution gives Malay a special place: the Malays are regarded as 'the indigenous people of Singapore', and, therefore, their language deserves particular support and encouragement (Constitution: §152). Furthermore, Malay is officially designated as the 'national language' (§153A), which is different from the official language status that it also holds. In practice, this status as a national language means that Malay is the language of the national anthem and of drill commands in the army and other marching bodies. It is also part of the national coat of arms, which bears the motto *Majulah Singapura* or 'onwards Singapore' – and of the President's residence, which is called the *Istana*, 'the palace'.

Socially, Tamil plays a minor role: the fourth official language is used along with the others in warning signs on buses, in the information booklets mentioned above (MOH 2005b,a) as well as in announcements on MRT[8] platforms to 'stay behind the yellow line'. It is the main home language of only 3.26 per cent of the population (Wong 2011) and its fate seems sealed: since 1911, these figures have been dropping (Bao 2001: 281) and nothing seems to indicate a change in this trend. One of the problems for Tamil is that the Indian community is fragmented. It encompasses linguistic and ethnic groups as diverse as Tamils, Telugus, Malayalees (Dravidian), Punjabis, Bengalis, and Sinhalese (Indo-Aryan). Together, they amount to 9.23 per cent of the population (Wong 2011); but their linguistic background makes Tamil a non-native language for a high proportion of them.

The Chinese, who represent over three-quarters of the republic's population, are also a fragmented population, although less so. Most are of southern Chinese extraction, the majority originally hailing from Fujian Province (Hokkien, 福建) and Guangdong. Linguistically, the most sizeable dialect group is Hokkien (49 per cent of the 2010 dialect speakers in Table 1.1), which is mutually intelligible with Teochew (Cháozhōu, 潮州), the third largest group (19 per cent). These are both varieties of the Southern Min (閩南) dialect group. Other varieties include Cantonese, a sizeable community

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[8] Mass Rapid Transit, Singapore's underground train system.

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(25 per cent) which forms a distinct dialect group (Yuè, 粤), as well as Hakka
(Kèjiā, 客家) (Bao 2001: 282). Ancestral Mandarin speakers, however, have
never been represented in any significant number (but see next paragraph).
This has changed in recent decades, with the increasing immigration of Chi-
nese professionals, but northern Chinese of the Mandarin dialect group still
make up only a negligible proportion of the community.

   Malay and Tamil, besides their status as official languages and as edu-
cational 'mother tongues', have received little encouragement from the gov-
ernment. The same cannot be said of Mandarin: launched in 1979, the
'Speak Mandarin Campaign' aims to promote the use of Mandarin among
the ethnic Chinese. First directed at speakers of Chinese dialects, it later ex-
panded to address English-educated Chinese too and encouraged them to use
Mandarin in their everyday transactions (SMC 2009). Critics have argued
that in an attempt to unite the Chinese and to preserve their cultural identity,
the campaign has actually severed cross-generational communication, with
young Singaporeans having increasing difficulties communicating in dialect
with their grandparents. Proponents of the shift point to the enhanced cross-
dialectal communication, and not less importantly, to the improved position
in commercial dealings with the emerging superpower China.

   The campaign has been a success. The majority of Chinese have embraced
Mandarin, and in the 2010 Census, 35.6 per cent of Singaporeans indicated it
was their dominant home language, outnumbering the other dialects which
stood at 14.3 per cent (Table 1.1). Besides the emphasis on Mandarin in
education (some élite schools offering bilingual programmes), many parents
are generally supportive of the movement and speak Mandarin to their chil-
dren. Mandarin has also replaced Hokkien as the lingua franca for everyday
intra-Chinese transactions. This means that Mandarin, despite not being
the language of immigrant Chinese, has become a native (or nativised) va-
riety in Singapore. This shift within Chinese does not, however, entail a
shift towards Mandarin culture (of course dialect groups, being much more
than simple linguistic entities, each exhibit their own traditions and culture).
Typically, the traditional[9] is now associated with 'the dialects', as opposed to
Mandarin, a new variety, associated with modernity and openness (commu-
nication). Young Chinese tend to overlook differences between dialects, with
which they are no longer familiar, using instead Mandarin and English, and
a whole body of traditions is in danger of being forgotten – a fact sometimes
lamented in public (Chiang 2009; Abu Baker 2009).

1.1.3 The place of English

Ever since Raffles' arrival, English has had a privileged place in Singapore.
As the language of the colonial masters, it was remote from the populace,

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[9] 'Traditions' in this setting refers to a wide array of cultural practices, including religious
customs, associated with weddings, funerals, etc., as well as more everyday concerns such as
superstitions based on dialectal homophony or age-old legends.

who used Bazaar Malay (a pidgin form of Malay) as a lingua franca, and their own varieties within their community (Hokkien within the diverse Chinese). Provision for education was poor, and it was only slowly that schools, mainly in Malay and English, were opened by the government (Erb 2003: 20). After the Japanese Occupation, however, enrolment in English-medium schools increased every year, reaching 50.4 per cent in 1962 (Platt 1975: 366). In 1987, English was made the only medium of education, with the three mother tongues effectively taught as second languages. This move was a logical consequence of the fact that enrolment in Malay-medium schools had diminished substantially over time, and the last Tamil-medium school had closed three years earlier due to a lack of pupils (Gupta 1994: 145–6). Recent calls for a return to providing Chinese-medium education have so far met with little action from the government (Gupta 1994: 147), although various schemes for more advanced mother tongue training are seeing some success: the so-called 'Special Assistance Plan' schools are élite institutions where some subjects are taught in the mother tongue; they currently only exist for Mandarin (MOE 2008). Statistics on pupils' home language show a similar trend, too: among Chinese students starting their primary education, the proportion coming from 'English-speaking homes' was 20 per cent in 1988, 40 per cent in 1998, and 54 per cent in 2007 (MOE 2008).

English, therefore, can be considered a main language in Singapore. As the language of politics, of the courts, and of education, its status is such that non-proficient speakers are significantly disadvantaged. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that 32 per cent claim to use it as their dominant home language (Table 1.1). And this cannot be a result of interethnic marriage alone, which stands at 20.2 per cent of all marriages (Singstat 2010). There must therefore be parents who speak the same mother tongue, but who decide to use English with their children or between themselves. And this is not surprising, seeing that all the years they spent in schools meant daily conversation in English. Furthermore, many parents see English as an important language, and rightly so: as the medium of education and a central subject in schools, it is crucial to pupils' performance. This presents a further motivation to use English at home, at least with the children. One example of the position of English with young speakers is given by one of my informants (i.M.3.m),[10] whose hobby is poetry writing on a blog. As a Malay, he has had Malay as a second language since starting compulsory schooling. Nonetheless, he prefers to write in English, for obvious reasons:

[10] The data used here are referenced according to the following coding scheme: ii.M.gr, where the first element refers to the school (i = Junior College, ii = polytechnic, iii = vocational training college), the second to the ethnicity of the participants (C = Chinese, M = Malay, I = Indian), and the third to the setting of the recording (dia = dialogue, gr = group, rm = radio–microphone). Individual interviews as well as informants themselves are coded as e.g. i.C.1.m, where the first two identifiers are as above, the third is a running identifier, and the last indicates the informant's sex (m = male, f = female).

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> I don't think in Malay . . . My thoughts are mostly in English, so when I write [in Malay], when I want to associate words with my ideas, they tend to come out English first, then I translate into Malay. And so it's hard to get the smooth flow kind of writing in Malay. So I write my poems in English.

The predominance of English over the other local languages can also be seen in less obvious domains. The Singapore Post, for instance, expects addresses to be written in English (more appropriately, in the Latin script – see below). A similar point can be made about the translation of place-names. All languages have contributed something to Singapore's toponymy: the aboriginal nature of Malay is apparent in its references to geographical features (*bukit* 'hill', *sungei* 'river', *telok* 'bay', *pulau* 'island', etc.), the many Chinese immigrants named their settlements in their dialects (Ang Mo Kio 'rambutan bridge' (Hokkien); Yew Tee 'oil pond' (Teochew)), and the British used 'imperial' names (Queenstown, Canberra Road, Victoria Crescent, Dover Road, Commonwealth Avenue, etc.). Few Indian toponyms remain, Dhoby Ghaut[11] being a famous exception (Savage and Yeoh 2005: passim).

Translations or transliterations of place-names also show an interesting pattern. Every street in the Singapore Street Directory (Singapore Land Authority 2003) has been transliterated into Chinese. Translations of English place-names are usually quite consistent, with an accurate semantic rendering: Redhill Road is 紅山路, each character bearing the exact semantic content of the three English morphemes, and they are even in the same order. This is obviously to the detriment of phonemic resemblance, the Chinese being Hóngshān Lù. In contrast, Jalan Mata Ayer is a road in northern Singapore with a Malay name (*jalan* 'road'; *mata ayer* 'spring', lit. 'eye water'): its Chinese transliteration is *rělán mǎdá yàyì*, which may well display some phonemic similarity, but which bears no semantic content relevant to the original Malay word – *rělán*, which is consistently used for Singapore's *jalan*, does not refer to a road, path, or anything of the sort, other than by its phonetic closeness to the Malay original,[12] and *mǎdá yàyì* is equally nonsensical, *spring* being *quán* in Mandarin.

Perhaps the most striking example, however, is that of Redhill Road (Hóngshān Lù, marked by ❺ on the map on p. 5), which lies not far off Jalan Bukit Merah (❹ on the same map). This latter road's Malay name means Redhill Road (*jalan* 'road', *bukit* 'hill', *merah* 'red')! It is translated into Chinese as Rělán Hóngshān. It would appear, then, that if in the 'English' (or rather, Latin-spelling) road name, there is a distinction between *redhill*

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[11] *Dhoby* means 'launderer' and a *dhoby ghaut* is the location where washing would take place (Savage and Yeoh 2005). Today it is the name of a major MRT interchange and its immediate surroundings.

[12] Pinyin ⟨r⟩ represents the phoneme /ɻ/ (sometimes [ʐ], see Appendix A), which is, arguably, similar to the Malay affricate /d͡ʒ/, spelt ⟨j⟩.