

Graphic Linguistics

BY NGIOM



A very Jude anoneh was attacked by a murder of crows in the quiet Zen garden unexpectedly.
 * Jude anoneh means pretty Japanese girl.

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MALAYSIA HAS ITS 'MANGGLISH' AND SINGAPORE HAS ITS 'SINGLISH' AS THE TWIN EQUIVALENT OF A MANGLED KIND OF ENGLISH THAT IS A LOCALISED DERIVATIVE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE - IT IS VERNACULAR ENGLISH, FOUND ALL OVER THE FORMER BRITISH COLONIES.

JESVIN YEOH PUAG HWA VISUAL RENDITION OF SINGLISH TICKLES AN AUDIENCE AT THE SINGAPORE DESIGN WEEK IN 2009.

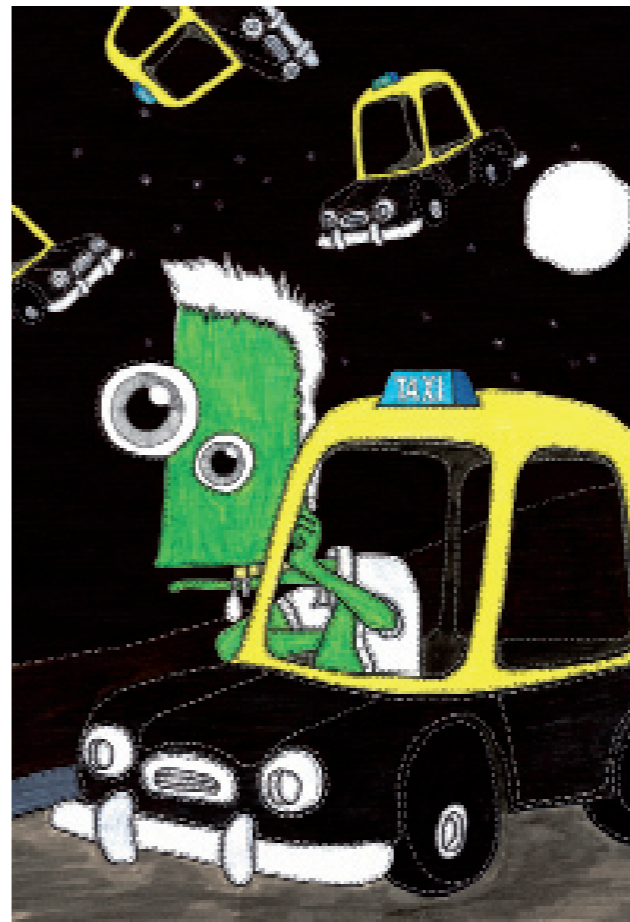


The 'true' queen's English is really only spoken by a small minority in parts of the south of England and the occasional newsreader from the bbc or cnn, out of the hundreds of millions who uses the language. Even then, the English spoken in England vary all over that country - those from the east of London spoke differently from the west of London, and the north-east of England has its own idiosyncrasies and spoken Welsh English sound more Indian than 'English'. So, like any other, the language flux and change over the years and often indigenous words are grafted into the language - words such as 'bungalow', 'veranda', 'shampoo', 'pariah', 'thug', 'loot', 'jungle' and 'rattan' were originally Indian.





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Malaysians and Singaporeans understand each other perfectly well when they communicate in vernacular English, and when spoken; the speakers are as amused as those who listen. There is an informal playfulness in the way local words are thrown in, as well as the sharing the joy of twisting and contorting the formal syntax. In vernacular English is like a code between communicators, like a shared intimacy – like performing cultural rites. Friendly profanities like 'bladibarsket' (bloody bastard) spews out without second thoughts in parts of conversations, and words like 'maluation' (embarrassment from Malay 'malu' + English '-ation') as part of a commentary.

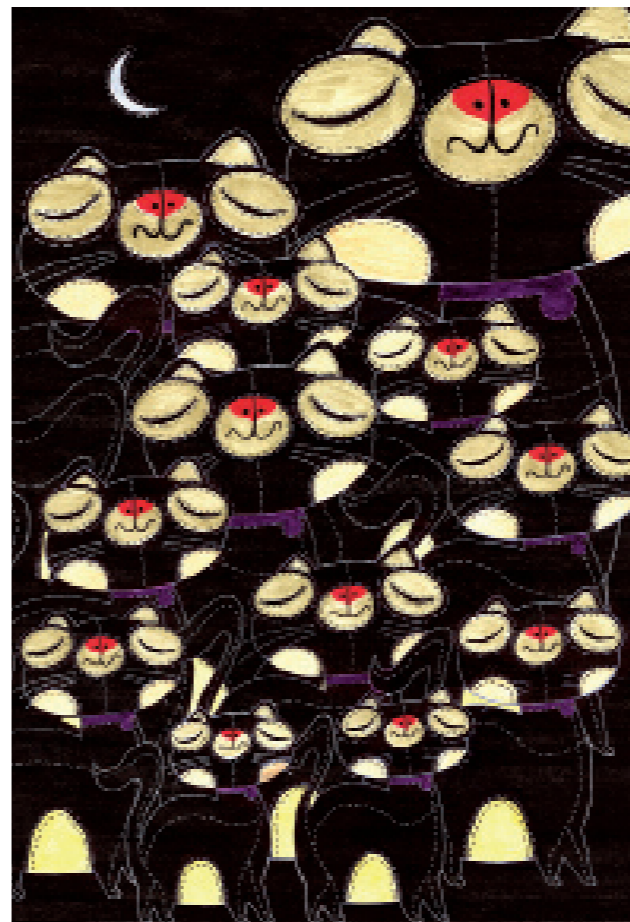
Often, Malay words are inserted into a phrase, and the phrase is commonly understood: "Please don't kacau (disturb) me", or a mix of Malay and Chinese dialect words are thrown in: "I kena (hit with) punish lah.... very pai seh (Hokkien for embarrassed) eh! In Singlish, the Chinese dialect equivalent to Malay are more commonly used:

English: "I was hit with a summon".
 Manglish: "I kena (Malay word) summon".
 Singlish: "I tio (Hokkien word) summon"

Or,

English: "He got a scolding"
 Manglish: "He kena scolding".
 Singlish: "He tio scolding".

- 1 Under the window, five gabra lizards jump quickly into a matchbox.
 * Gabra means to panic or be so nervous that you mess things up.
- 2 Four yellow top black taxies drive up Jalan Bukit Merah on a quiet hazy night to liak gao.
 * Liak gao means peeping tom.
- 3 Vanilla hazelnut with fudgy brownie and extra juicy quarter pounder always make me a yau kwee.
 * Yau kwee describes a glutton or avaricious person.
- 4 Really amaze by how that Apu neh neh able to give a few jukeboxes to the discotheque.
 * Apu neh neh is a childish word for an Indian man.
- 5 I saw a dozen ya ya papaya fat black cats walked and jumped across the vacant quad one xmas night.
 * Ya ya papaya describes an arrogant attitude.



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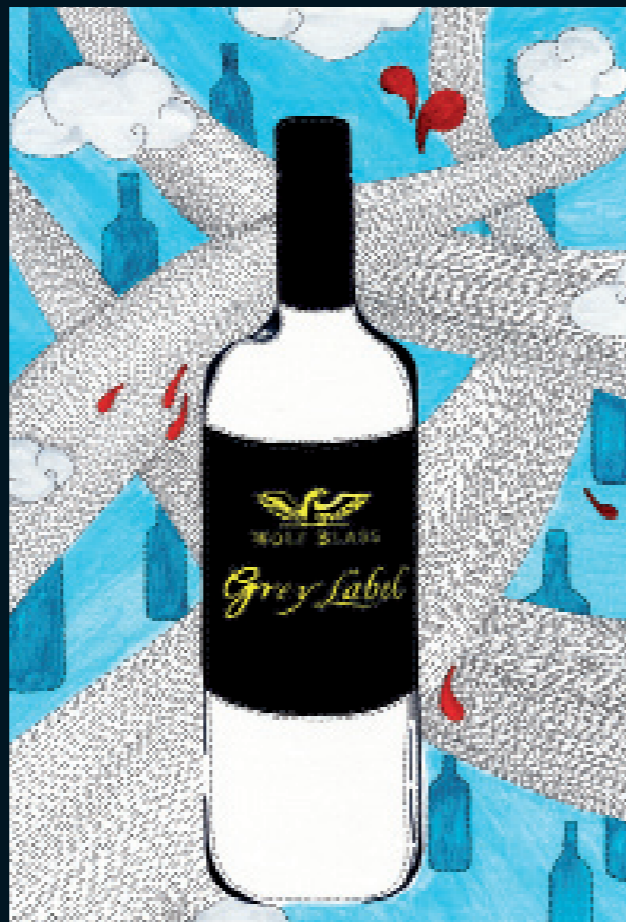
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Singaporean artist, Jesvin Yeo Puay Hwa is taking her Singlish a step further than the rudimentary stuff. To her the vernacular slangs are not only matters of the linguistics, but also are equal graphic challenges. How does one mix linguistics and graphics in the Singlish sort of way? She has an urbane proposition to it – a layered kind of interpretation – an artistic offer to the audience – an installation to be exhibited that involves the onlooker. Two aspects of seeing are involved – the audience first of all sees the graphic work, and to know the meaning of the pictures, the audience then read the text behind the pictures. The texts are created by mini LEDs that shine onto the perforations that are punctured onto the picture, which are then projected onto a backdrop. It is a simple method that enables the lighted text to appear behind the pictures.

Her texts are designed and arranged as typographies, which have become graphic forms behind the pictures, resulting in two layers of art in one offer. The LED lights that are used to form the typographies contrast with the traditional flat graphic used for the pictures, bringing the issues to a contemporary setting. She calls her exhibits 'Singapore Pangram', wherein she describes her Pangram as, "a sentence that uses 26 letters of the alphabet. Taking the concept of a pangram as a point of departure, this exhibition explores the language of Singaporeans, with 26 pangrams created using the Singlish vocabulary".

It is an artistic interpretation of a Singaporean reality that contrasts with officialdom, which is somewhat embarrassed with the fact the English isn't usually used properly in Singapore: A country where officialdom prides itself in doing things 'properly'. Jesvin's artistic offer belongs purely to the realm of art, but it touches on a wider Singaporean debate, where at the other end of the spectrum is the 'Speak Good English Movement', which is a government led movement to 'encourage Singaporeans to speak grammatically correct English that is universally understood'. Pockets of resistance do exist after all, and with it, a promise of innovation. ●

- 6 Early early don't say, I have already pack my gift box with finest Jack Daniel's liquor and zippo.
* Early early don't say is Singlish for "Why didn't you say so earlier?"
- 7 Crazy and kiasu fat Tai Tai bought many very exquisite opal jewels.
* Kiasu is a Hokkien adjective literally meaning, "afraid of losing". Tai Tai means a rich man's wife.
- 8 You bak chew tak stamp sia, buy this forged antique bronze jewellery for sixty-five thousands!
* Bak chew tak stamp sia is classic Singlish hybrid of Hokkien and English. Literally translates as "eyes have been pasted over with a stamp", meaning to be blind.
- 9 Why we have to come to this kind of quiet ulu place just to buy a dozen boxes of grey label wines?
* Ulu is a Malay term used to denote the remoteness of a place, with connotations of backwardness.

