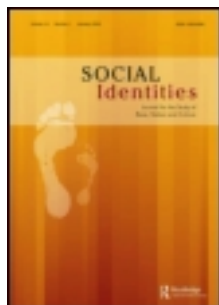


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Singapore *Pharmakon*

Irving Goh & Ying-Ying Tan

Taking Derrida's Dissemination and Monolingualism of the Other as points of departure, this paper seeks to inscribe the event of language(s) in Singapore in a time of disease, which has been the untimely dissemination of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in 2003. As we will show, this event of language(s) can be said to take on an outline of pharmakon, which is both poison and remedy at the same time as Derrida's thesis in Dissemination goes, since the languages that were eventually deployed to save this city-state were the same ones that the State previously tried to banish. Post-SARS, the renewed injunction against these languages has picked up momentum, even though the exceptional situation of SARS has made power come to terms with the fact that these languages are the ones that speak of, and speak to, an immanent community here. We will therefore also show that there is a certain schizophrenic capture or striation of languages in and through political discourse here.

This *pharmakon*, . . . this charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be—alternatively or simultaneously—beneficent or maleficent. (Derrida, 1981, p. 70)

Opening Knots

What follows—which is an unveiling if not a schizoanalysis of an event of language(s) in a time of disease, namely the time of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in Singapore some time in 2003, a *pharmakon* situation as we will call it—has certain bearings to certain philosophical constellations that we will need to acknowledge. What we have to say has stakes in questions of linguistic idioms, translations, place, dwelling, community, identity, play, cut, decisions. As such, it would already have its debt to the works of Nancy, Derrida, Irigaray, Spivak, and Deleuze–Guattari, just as

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any other similar discourse, in another space, in another time, would have to be.¹ The articulation of these bearings, and our acknowledgement here, are in a way necessary because what they have said singularly and in their collectivity, and what we want to say, speak of certain similar minor histories of minor narratives. Together, we speak of certain immanent discourses repressed, suppressed, and/or oppressed by institutions, dominant cultures, politics, political economies, etc. And together, we project a somewhat common future desire—a desire to free what Deleuze and Guattari would call ‘minor languages’ so as to give place to a thinking of not only these marginalized discourses in themselves, but also to give place to a thinking of a certain immanent (‘truth’ of) community as *it is* as opened or exposed precisely by these discourses. To have these bearings, we are in no way *passively* submitting to the call of writing from contemporary Western philosophical projects. If there is indeed a call of writing that we are responding to here, it is that of the immanent discourses from within our own space. That is what we are first and primarily responding to. We seek to write the event of language(s) that is taking place and yet, as we will show, denied of a place here. (We will therefore not obsess ourselves alongside here with a prosthetic analytic reading of Derrida’s (1981) *Dissemination*, from which the name of *pharmakon* is taken, and which subsequently informs the title and a couple of sub-headings of this paper.) That is not to say that we are, as if in a quick turn away from an already announced indebtedness, denouncing and denying the spaces of writing opened up by those Western philosophical endeavours. That would have been impossible anyhow. (And therefore we will re-mark certain phrases from *Dissemination* as epigraphs at certain places of this paper, as a reminder not only of the laws of reading and writing, but also a reminder of our debt to those continental philosophical traces that have encouraged the writing of *other* minor writings.) With regard to Western philosophical projects, we will need to negotiate between indebtedness and the threat of (a paradoxical) (auto-)appropriation into or by that space wherein and whereby all such writing would become some sort of reified discourse. Admittedly, it is not easy manoeuvring that negotiation. There is a politics, and an ethics, of that negotiation. And it would be a negotiation that jolts one to ask (again) (from the beginning) what a ‘postcolonial writing’ is or can be, especially if without those projects. One would ask what and how a ‘postcolonial’ body or a body in a ‘postcolonial’ space would write, if not why need he or she write in the first place, especially before an academic audience. And one would not arrive at any easy answers. There are knots to this negotiation. And this is unfortunately not the space to disentangle them. So with regard to the Western philosophical projects then, we will just have to content ourselves here by saying that we will therefore be *actively* intercalating our writing within those constellations in simultaneity of our responding first and primarily to the appeals of the immanent language(s) of our space. We cannot resist (the responsibility of) writing. We will need to write an *other* writing—a complement, if not a violent supplement—that enters into a dialogue with that constellation that has always awaited, and continues to invite, the arrival of the *other*.

Opening Cuts

Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine. (Derrida, 1998, p. 2)

As non-Malay speakers, we, like many other Singaporean Chinese, and like Singaporean Indians, and Singaporean Eurasians, born and living in Singapore, are cut from our national language. We are foreign tongues, so to speak. Do we henceforth remain to dwell in this space of a city-state?

We are also cut from our mother tongue. And this is even more complex than our cut from the national language. For one of us, mother's tongue (i.e. the linguistic idiom or the language spoken by our respective biological mothers) is Hokkien. For the other, it is Foo-Chow. In any case, both our respective mothers are themselves cut from their respective linguistic idioms. They cut those languages away from themselves, so that they will not arrive in/to us. Yet perhaps those cuts would have been redundant. For they would have been cut by father's tongue—that is the condition of citizenship here. Our respective fathers' tongue would have been the determination of our respective ethnic particularity. They would have been the linguistic trace of our particular inheritance. And to be sure, even that tongue would have been cut. As Singaporean Chinese, we would be given, by the State, by its institution of education, a non-maternal 'Mother Tongue' that is Mandarin.

Yet Mandarin, before the State's institutionalization, had not been either the dominant or common tongue of the Chinese population here in the history of Singaporean Chinese communities.² The Chinese community in Singapore in fact has had many (*other*) tongues—Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Foo-Chow, Hainanese, Hakka, and a whole multiplicity of others. For many in the Chinese community, Mandarin is not their mother's tongue, nor father's tongue for that matter. And as said already, neither was it their common language of communication. It was largely a foreign language. But it was instituted as their official language in Singapore, imposed as the 'Mother Tongue' of the Chinese community. The motivation of this imposition has been nothing but the attempt to organize and manage the plural Chinese community, to construct a unitary 'oneness' of the Chinese community, in the name of forging a 'Chinese-ness' within that community, via a foreign, prosthetic monolingualism that is Mandarin. Put in another way, the motivation is nothing short of a biopolitical logic of control according to a Foucauldian analysis, an attempt to homogenize all the heterogeneous Chinese tongues into a singular totality. This imposition came under a program called the Speak Mandarin Campaign that began in 1979 and that continues today. In 1991, the program's unitary logic of homogeneity was once again reiterated by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. Speaking on the Speak Mandarin Campaign, he underscored Mandarin's unifying function, through which Singaporean Chinese 'should be a single people, speaking the same primary language'.

If the local census can be an accurate gauge, the program has been a huge success. Mandarin is rapidly replacing the other Chinese tongues as the language of the

household for Singaporean Chinese. The percentage of Singaporean Chinese who reported speaking Mandarin in the home environment jumped from 10.2 per cent in 1980 to 45.1 per cent in 2000. At the same time, the use of other Chinese languages at home dropped drastically, from 81.4 per cent in 1980 to only 30.7 per cent in 2000, a drop of almost 50 per cent in only twenty years (Singapore 2000 Census of Population, 2001). It would not have been difficult for the program to achieve its desired outcome. The program in some ways understood the psychology of its target and it was able to put in place a procedure that would guarantee its apparent success. The first strategy was to denigrate all the other Chinese linguistic idioms, the real mother tongues of the Chinese people. To do so, these linguistic idioms became categorized derogatorily as 'dialects', the tongue of peoples who are compromised in terms of economic viability, social status, and education. It became a matter of class-distinction therefore, playing on the almost natural class-consciousness or class-anxiety of the people of this space, when these 'dialects' became regarded as a mark of the lower class-status of those who spoke them. From 1979 to 1982 then, the program targeted the low-level, blue-collar workers, telling them to use a language of 'higher prestige'—Mandarin—so that they might advance in terms of social class and economic prospect. Lee Kuan Yew, then Prime Minister, likened Chinese linguistic idioms other than Mandarin to undesirable excesses that impeded the next generation's learning of English and Mandarin in schools. As he has said in 1979, 'don't overload the child with dialects. It is a real burden'. And parents 'must lighten . . . children's learning load by using Mandarin as the mother tongue in place of dialect' (1984). Parents were discouraged from adding to the 'burden' and not to speak 'dialects' to their children. In 1982, 'dialects' were officially banned on national television. Foreign artistes from Hong Kong and Taiwan who could not speak Mandarin were forced either to stammer in Mandarin on television, or else be cut from television appearances. Shows imported from Hong Kong and Taiwan were dubbed in Mandarin. On national radio, the evening news program in 'dialect' was reserved, if not relegated to a 20 minute slot—shared by six dialects.

One of us however did not begin with a mother tongue—be it a maternal or paternal, or a foreign, institutional mother tongue. One of us (and this is not anomalous, to be sure) began with what is commonly known, spoken, heard, communicated, understood, and shared, in this space, as Singapore English. We consider this a language in itself, in its own right—a language of this space, a language having a singularity of its own. And it is with this language, shared among so many in a communitarian way, shared without ethnic or racial borders among the Chinese, Malay, and Indian peoples here, that we and other Singaporeans speak more than any other tongue. It is the language that *just* brings Singaporeans of different races together. It is the language that we belong to, the language in which we all dwell. And Singapore English's singularity comes about only because it is at the same time always plural, always heterogeneous. We can even say, at a certain duration, it might even be *other* of itself. This is because the acoustics, the rhythms, the inflections, the lexico-morphological inventiveness, the syntactic 'deconstruction', are always cut,

always folded, always accented, by the multilingual phenomenon of an immanent community here. It is an always arriving singular plural language. And perhaps for that immanent community—that gathering that comes about only because of mutual desires between a multiplicity of people of heterogeneous race and language, and not emerging from any contrived government-initiative sociality—Singapore English can be said to be our monolingualism that is never monolingual. That is in fact the true, actual, mother tongue for one of us, therefore. For one of us, what was communicated between mother and child in the beginning has been Singapore English, a linguistic idiom common to this space.

Our consideration of Singapore English would be similar to how Spivak (1994) considers Bengal English, an English that might at one point be intelligible to any English language speaker but at another escapes the grasp of the latter to a point of non-communicability. That non-communicability particular to the non-native Bengalese gives Bengal English a somewhat exclusivity that nevertheless at some point excludes the non-native *other*. Singapore English shares that aspect of exclusion. But we think that such an exclusion is but a paradoxical necessity of initiation into an *other* language by the non-native other. It is what is not familiar to the ears, what cuts the normalized, naturalized harmonics of speech of the Same, that gives due attention to a ‘listening-to’ (Irigaray, 2002) to the speech of the Other. It is only the insistent cut of exclusivity that calls attention to itself. What cuts then is also a call, a communicability in itself as such—in spite of an absence of supplementary knowledge of what is (to be) communicated, a call for a future communicability. That insistent initiating exclusion is then the invitation to the other, an invitation to the other to approach the language, to enter into a communicability within the language. This exclusivity would be an ‘auto-deconstruction’ of its exclusivity: it shuts a door, but only with a force such that it allows the door to open or ricochet back out, welcoming the other.

Exclusivity therefore projects or disseminates a language as a language—as how English from the Western world used to be. It insists, affirms, a language, resisting even the ‘variety’ theory,³ which at the end still reworks or re-mythologizes a One pure, master language at the origin. (We will keep in mind that when we say ‘a language’ here, the indefinite article remains a critical index of a singular plurality.) We recall Spivak (1994) here, obviously, especially when she speaks of Bengal English as an ‘*Indian* language’, a language of India, an English that is not Bengalized. There, Spivak rejects the idea or ideology of Bengal English to be a ‘variety’ of some greater, ‘standard’, universal English. That is what we will likewise insist here on Singapore English too—no variation on a theme.

To reiterate, Singapore English is our dwelling. We dwell in it. We remain in it—because its accent will always inflect our speech, even if we erase all the plays of non-English elements within the English that we speak. And we can safely say that this is the case for many of us here in Singapore. And yet, increasingly, or else at regular intervals of our very short history, we are told that that language does not belong here. There is no space for such a language, such a discourse, to take place here. It has

to be cut away. We are potentially cut from our sense of dwelling and belonging from this space. Singapore English is the rhythmic of this space. It is the pulsating force that gives this space its liveliness, its life, its heart or heartbeat. And as we have also suggested previously, it gives space to an immanent community, whereby people create it among themselves via this language. To wit, we can say that such a space of such speech is the *heartland* of Singapore. And yet as the trope of 'heartland' goes in political rhetoric here, it has to be denigrated. We are reminded of a 1999 National Day Rally Address whereby the 'heartlander' Singaporean who speaks Singapore English is marked as somewhat lagging behind his/her 'cosmopolitan' compatriot (Goh, 1999). It has to be cut away. The heart or heartbeat of the land has to be cut off—life cut away from this space. Some time ago, there was a column that ran in the national newspapers lamenting that this space is only a space of work, of labour, and that life happens only elsewhere.⁴ One must only be a foreigner in another space for life to happen to us.

Pharmakon-Poison

The *pharmakon* is that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it ... (Derrida, 1981, p. 110)

To be sure, we will have to acknowledge at the outset that Singapore English, like any language (and definitely like English itself), did not surface as if naturally or monolithically, as in some myth of pure unitary origin. There is no original, monolingual Singapore English. Before Singapore English, we were given a language—English of the British tongue, a language of our past colonial masters. In what now seems like a scene of repetition, a replaying of the colonial scene, it was re-given to us with the coming to power of the People's Action Party (PAP) government in 1965. In the same year, English was made an official language in Singapore. The role of English as an official language was based on the twin ideologies of 'pragmatism' and 'neutrality' (Ho & Alsagoff, 1998). English was thought to be pragmatic for Singapore because it promised to give Singapore access to Western scientific, technological, and economic information. It had the promise of developing and modernizing Singapore, and the promise of ensuring Singapore's survival in the global marketplace. And the myth of English's neutrality only stems from the historico-geographical fact that English is not an Asian language, not the mother tongue of any of the ethnic groups and therefore is an appropriate common language for inter-ethnic communication. It is this sense of 'neutrality' that English serves to express national identity and national consciousness in one unified tongue.

Due to its importance in serving Singapore's economic concerns as well as forging a national identity that plays down ethnic boundaries, English is institutionalized as a compulsory language in schools, taught largely by foreigners in the beginning. English is also delegated the important roles of being the language of government, law, legislation, science and technology, education, international communication and

diplomacy. English is the primary working language in Singapore, the *de facto* national language (Llamzon, 1977, in Crewe, 1977). English is the capital to which every worker or potential worker in Singapore has to be plugged in as part of the flow. The use of English is so widespread that, according to the Singapore Census of Population in 2000, 71 per cent of the resident population aged 15 years and over is literate in English, an increase from 63 per cent in 1990. The use of English in the household also became more prevalent in the last twenty years. While only 8.9 per cent of Singaporeans claimed to speak English at home in 1980, 23 per cent of Singaporeans claimed to speak English in the household by 2003. This also explains why English has become the *lingua franca* for inter-ethnic communication, especially among the younger generation of Singaporeans. The census reports indicate both the efficiency and effectiveness of the Singapore government's language and education policies. On paper, Singaporeans are indeed now speaking in one 'neutral' language—English, and are able to express the national identity and national consciousness in one unified tongue. Via this language, the political dream of social cohesiveness, of a sense of belonging, of a sense of nationhood, of the building of a people regardless of race and religion seems to be coming true.

But the English of communities here has gradually betrayed itself to be an English cut from the 'original', given English. Communitarian English, or Singapore English, in no doubt ingenious, playful ways (despite play being hard to come by here, if we have not suggested this already), is found to be irrepressibly of plural and heterogeneous cuts of the multiplicity of linguistic idioms of this space. It is in excess of the stream-lined efficacy and clinical propriety of the English of our past colonial power. It is in excess of the linguistic horizon that apparently maintains a sense of a united people without racial or ethnic boundaries. To follow Derrida, it is a violent supplement. And so the State, not only in its anxiety to preserve and perpetuate a sense of 'one-ness' but also in its anxiety over economic access, tends to read this communitarian Singapore English as self-excluding in the face of opportunities to enter into the global trade community today. It begins to see it as a violent cut to the opportunity cost of Singapore participating in global commerce. For the State then, this leak or over-flow of heterogeneity within this communitarian language needs to be repaired. It becomes a national imperative to resurrect that 'original', given English, and so Singapore English gets cut in order to filter out the 'contaminating' elements—those linguistically heterogeneous intercalations, in other words.

Singapore English henceforth is cut into 'Standard Singapore English' and 'Singlish', a now derogatory term used to refer to the colloquial form of English spoken in Singapore. On 14 August 1999, then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew voiced his concern about the latter at a speech given at the 34th National Day Celebration. With regards to Singlish, he said:

In fact we are creating a different new language. Each family can create its own coded language; nothing wrong with that except that no one outside the family can understand you. We are learning English so that we can understand the world and

the world can understand us . . . Do not popularize Singlish. Do not use Singlish in our television sitcoms, except for humorous bits, and in a way that makes people want to speak standard English . . . The people who will benefit most are those who can only master one kind of English. Singlish is a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans.

So Singlish, even though it cannot be denied the ‘fact’ that it is a ‘language’ even from the side of power, is not only considered an embarrassing self-mockery—we can use it humorously only so as to deprecate ourselves, so as to make us feel ashamed of our immanent mode of communitarian discourse. (But who’s laughing *at* us? And even if there are hints of sniggers from the outside, what is there to be ashamed of as long as between interlocutors we understand one another familiarly? Besides, are not those sniggers partly a projection of an anxiety of being excluded from a conversation between familiar persons, and therefore an anxiety of a stranger awkwardly standing outside peering awkwardly in?) It is also considered a disability, a ‘bad’ language, which needs to be cut away like a disease or sickness, or like poison. We find more on the charge of Singapore English as poison. Goh Chok Tong, then Prime Minister, in 1999 asserted at the National Day Rally: ‘Singlish is not English. It is English *corrupted* by Singaporeans and has become a Singapore dialect’ (our italics). This contamination that is Singlish, this weed, needs to be weeded out.

For power, there must be put in place, there must be staged, a desire to clamor toward the ‘standard’—the ‘one kind’ of English as if that is the only type of English. There must be at least some form of resurrection of that English of the colonial masters that will re-place Singapore English. Not unlike the Speak Mandarin Campaign, the (very absurd-sounding, for its time) Speak Good English Movement was launched in 2000. At the launch, Goh Chok Tong said,

The ability to speak good English is a distinct advantage in terms of doing business and communicating with the world . . . If we speak a corrupted form of English that is not understood by others, we will lose a key competitive advantage. My concern is that if we continue to speak Singlish, it will over time become Singapore’s common language.

We need not point to the reiteration of English as capital here anymore. What is interesting here is the ironic rejection of ‘common language’. As said already, a common language is something the government has yearned for since Independence, a common tongue to forge a nation. With Singlish/Singapore English, we have undeniably a ‘common language’. Yet that is not good enough. In fact, in the eyes of power, it is not a good thing.

For power, it is better that Singlish is totally repressed. For power, it is no longer even an issue of speaking the ‘appropriate’ English in the ‘appropriate’ context. From the side of power, there is a call for even the total elimination of Singlish, ironically charging that using this common language is likened to being unpatriotic, even though that language is what the multiplicity of communities here makes them feel as

belonging to this space. Goh Chok Tong again, at the launch of the Speak Good English Movement in 2000, pointed out that Singaporeans

should not take the attitude that Singlish is cool or feel that speaking Singlish makes them more 'Singaporean'. They have a responsibility to create a conducive environment for the speaking of good English . . . If they speak Singlish when they can speak good English, they are doing a disservice to Singapore.

There cannot be a situation in which we could dexterously negotiate between a playful and inventive Singlish/Singapore English and the more 'proper', 'serious', 'standard' English, a diglossic situation in linguistic terms. To continue using a linguistic taxonomy to describe the politics of language in this case, what we have here can perhaps be said to be a cultivation of a schizoglossic situation. Taken on its own, schizoglossia is a linguistic malady in societies exposed to more than one variety of their own languages (Haugen, 1972). When one is suffering from schizoglossia, he or she will suffer from linguistic insecurity. The victim of schizoglossia will think that his or her own language is never good enough. And this insecurity will be projected with 'false humility' and 'needless self-deprecation' (Hall, 1950, p. 236). He or she will try as much to repress the lesser, unfashionable, undesirable, language. Following that, the victim will be understandably obsessed with the form of which the (correct(ed)) language is presented. The victim will be over-compensating in terms of being superfluously concerned with how the (correct(ed)) language looks or sounds to his or her interlocutor or intended addressee. Throughout the event of his or her address, the schizoglossic person demands assurances that he or she is understood. And there will come a time when the schizoglossic person cannot and/or is unable to decide when to use which language, especially when the repressed language swirls up to the surface and gets itself entangled with the 'correct(ed)' one, because what is repressed never stays underground as Freud has already told us.

We are increasingly made as if schizoglossic, as if we have an anxiety to choose another language over what we know as Singapore English, which is the free play of differences and interactions between the supposed and superficial two poles of 'Singlish' and 'Standard Singapore English'. As if there is an imperative for us to translate our Singapore English into something else. And in this way, we are also made to perceive ourselves as infected with a schizophrenic discourse. We are made to think that the blanks of Singapore English (blanks interrupt speech and writing in schizophrenic discourse according to Irigaray (2002), and Singapore English is English 'broken' in many places of its syntactic structure, according to Goh Chok Tong in the Speak Good English Movement speech in 2000), the non-communicability of it bears a cost to the socio-economic progress and survivability of the space that we inhabit. It is creating too many holes. We have to block, stop the play of Singapore English. We will have to stop that language from surfacing. We will have to repress Singapore English so that it will not go on creating blanks, shooting blanks. So that we will be in place. So that we will belong, in place (but as a foreigner to the State-imposed language). Our linguistic idiom, which is at the same time that of the

communitarian in this space, has become a 'target language', a language targeted to be arrested in its movement, in its liveliness, and not a language targeted to arrive at.

All linguistic idioms have to be translated into an English that the State takes to be 'neutral', universal, 'standard'. Even its policy of bilingualism cannot hide the fact that it still privileges one language as the first language over the other. (Given the rise of China as a global economic force and hence having almost direct geographic impact on Singapore, and Mandarin gradually becoming another international language of global commerce, the State has nevertheless ensured and restated English as Singapore's economic advantage. No doubt, in the name of economics, the State sends its entrepreneurs to China. And it invites China's students and businessmen to Singapore. But despite (or rather, as it is programmed to be, *in*) this arrangement, there would never be a high chance that Mandarin will overtake English as the dominant linguistic idiom here. For who or what they invite into this space, they also neutralize by what else but that apparent 'neutral' force called English. Playing host to these students and professionals, the State has also taken the right to teach them English before they intercalate themselves within the economic affairs of this space. Despite bilingualism here, we (will) have never mastered the Chinese language, and neither the State itself. The State is even belated in acting out its bilingual policy. It was only in the 1990s that State officials themselves began *learning* to speak Mandarin.) At the end of it all, we would have to be monolingual to this English—an English that is never 'neutral', but is derivative of the British and/or American English, and whose status as 'standard' has really been done away with in such 'post-colonial' times.

And yet, perhaps, our discourse, our linguistic idiom, is indeed immanently schizophrenic. It is cut always, cut with blanks, so as only to allow something to happen within it, so as also to maintain a communitarian opening that will always receive a plurality of heterogeneous differences and differentiation. It is cut always so that it is always a becoming-other and hence also a promise of the future of (the) language. The State will refuse these cuts. It 'will refuse the schiz', as Irigaray (2002) says, and hence lose a certain touch and contact with the community. As such, the State is somewhat cut off from the community.

Only in exceptional times will the immanent plays of cuts be recognized by the State. Then, what the latter has cut off as impossible or undesirable will cut back as necessary. And it will also be in such times that a schizoglossic and/or schizophrenic impulse cutting through the State will be made explicit too. In Singapore, that exceptional time was 2003—a time of emergency, a time of disease, a time of SARS.

Pharmakon-Remedy

In the early months of 2003, the thread of the deadly SARS found its way from China and Hong Kong into Singapore. Like Hong Kong, the city-state of Singapore went into panic, quite naturally so, as deaths were reported and the number hospitalized every day kept rising. Schools were shut. People suspected to be at the threshold of

getting SARS were quarantined within their own homes. Tracings were done (with logistical help from the military) on hospitalized patients to record the people he or she had been in contact with so as to predict and manage or control the next wave of contamination, or to locate and neutralize the primary carrier of SARS. High-tech heat-scan machines were placed at the entrances of critical governmental buildings through which people entering would pass and have their body-heat imaged and recorded, so as to prevent people with high fever—one of the symptoms of the onset of SARS—from proceeding further, which would have threatened to infect the entire place. For the clinical management of the spread of SARS and the efficient decontamination of the city—and we will acknowledge that it was undeniably a good and necessary measure then—what came into place appeared very much like a state in a state of emergency with curfews and border patrols.

The media, which is State-advised and State-subsidized in Singapore, was packed with messages transmitting information on the disease itself, and on precautionary methods. The tone of these messages was of course serious, official, and even severe. There was definitely the gloomy atmosphere of a state of emergency. We were after all besieged by a deadly disease. But then, out of the blue so to speak, there was ‘Sar-vivor’. ‘Sar-vivor’ was a rap music-video, and helming the performance was television figure Phua Chu Kang. Phua Chu Kang is a fictive character in a highly popular local comedy sitcom of the same name. As a contractor/boss, or ‘towkay’ as one is called here, of a mini construction business, he absurdly lives up to the signs of wealth not unfamiliar to the common folks of this prosperity-driven society. His excessive ornaments include gaudy, chunky gold chains around his neck, a white Mercedes Benz, and a huge house with an interior koi fish pond (another mythic symbol, in the form of a species of fish this time, of wealth in this society). But instead of leather shoes, he goes around in bright yellow rubber boots meant for work at a construction site, and hence giving him the disposition of a working-class figure. And he speaks only in Singlish/Singapore English, to add to his quintessential local ‘heartlander’ outlook. There is no pretension to his language (though this is a paradox because it is essentially an act assumed by Singaporean Indian actor Gurmit Singh who plays the Singaporean Chinese Phua Chu Kang). And that is ultimately Phua Chu Kang’s real appeal. It is his speech and the comic contretemps with that linguistic idiom that allows his character to communicate so easily with many Singaporeans. And Phua Chu Kang became the iconic dispenser of information during the SARS epidemic.

‘Sar-vivor’ was a cautionary rap on the dangers of SARS and the civic responsibility for a more-than-usual intensification of hygiene awareness to prevent one from being afflicted by it and to delimit the dissemination of the SARS virus. We would like to make note of two things of ‘Sar-vivor’. The first is the linguistic idiom deployed. It is a creative, playful, heterogeneous, accented, Singapore English—in other words, a Singapore English heavily inf(lect)ed with and/or by Singlish. And it is because of this that we thought ‘Sar-vivor’ was a very timely and wonderful creative line of flight. On the one hand, it provided the necessary instructional material or message of SARS awareness, educating the public about maintaining personal hygiene: ‘kiasu a bit, be

safe, not Sar-ry' ('kiasu' being a common Singlish word, originating from Hokkien, to mean 'afraid to lose' or overly cautious), Phua Chu Kang playfully quips. 'Use your brain, use your brain!' ('brain' pronounced as 'blain', again, a common Singlish enunciation), he raps, appealing to the public on the urgency of thinking through intensified personal hygiene at such times. On the other hand, the medium—its language (and delivered in usual Phua Chu Kang comic fashion), its performative format—obviously appealed to almost everyone, providing them with a light (-hearted), positive, escape from the deathly untimeliness of SARS. For example, when it came to the matter of informing the public about the Home Quarantine Program, Phua Chu Kang raps, 'If you kena home quarantine, don't go out except in your dreams! Tahan a while and cooperate, don't give everybody a big headache!' ('kena' and 'tahan' are again two common Singlish words originating from Malay, meaning 'to be hit by' and 'tolerate' respectively). At the end of it all, it could even be more than comic relief. For what manifests as a light-hearted phenomenon or event actually cuts deep into the hearts of questions of the right to (use) (a) language, the right to creativity within language, and community, as we have discussed earlier, and more critically here, the salvation of community in a time of disease.

The other thing about 'Sar-vivor' that should be noted is what came at the end, at the back, or what lies behind, the music video. Like an end-credit, what audiences would have seen, flashed explicitly on screen, was the acknowledgement of a branch of the State-government—the Ministry of Health, and the Health Promotion Board—another governmental arm, as both the sponsors and the approving authorities of 'Sar-vivor'. And in the acknowledgement, 'Sar-vivor' was claimed and recognized as a 'community project' in the sense of a gift to the community. This is where we think power betrays its schizophrenic state with regards to language. The end of 'Sar-vivor' is but the implicit acknowledgement that Singlish/Singapore English remains the language that speaks to a critical mass; that it is the common tongue of the community of the city-state and therefore any medium and message of critical information must at the end be supplemented by this linguistic idiom. What power has tried to cut away from the community, it finds itself needing to turn to it and use it so as to give place to effective communication in a state of emergency. The clinical survival of the state, without which its economic survival would not even matter, must first be restored with a language that the state has previously deemed poisonous.

Indeed, as our analysis so far would have suggested already, the linguistic idiom of 'Sar-vivor' would not have been possible on broadcast. The injunction against such a possibility has been very explicit. Before the time of SARS, Phua Chu Kang had in fact come under fire from the State. In his 1999 National Day Rally Address, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong considered Phua Chu Kang to be a bad influence to the people, especially to the education of the young. The linguistic idiom of Phua Chu Kang, which incidentally is the discursive mode of common life and power, would be recognized as the bane of this nation-state. According to Goh Chok Tong, Phua Chu Kang, 'in trying to imitate life, ... has made the teaching of proper English more

difficult'. He would go on to say (in an interesting non-detachment of real life and fictive life) that Phua Chu Kang should attend English lessons to improve his 'poor' English. It was only with the exceptional time of SARS that a surfacing of that language became necessary. We have said that power's appropriation of that linguistic idiom at that time is symptomatic of a schizophrenic discourse. And just as how general schizophrenic discourse would go, what it allows to give place to, what it opens for something subterranean to surface, it would anxiously cut back to close that gap again. So it was not surprising that—and we anticipated this—there came a renewed injunction against 'Sar-vivor'. In post-SARS state, no longer in a state of clinical emergency, 'Sar-vivor' had to be outlawed. That which had been given to the community (that is of the community anyway in the first place) as something of community had to be cut away. That cut came in the National Day Rally Speech of 2003, only a few weeks after the critical SARS period. As if the State had no hand in 'Sar-vivor', as if it did not leave its signature on it, as if it were not the remaining marks, the last words, the credits of 'sar-vival', it now denigrated the precise words of 'Sar-vivor'. It was a cut indeed, almost literally, without doubt: 'Our Speak Good English people want me to *send Phua Chu Kang for that tongue operation*.⁵ Then he will stop telling people to "Use Your Blain"!' In terms of the language situation of this space, there must always a cut from elsewhere, just like the given cut of English from Britain.

There was another event of language during the time of SARS. 'Dialects'—Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese (the five biggest groups)—were being heard once again in the living rooms of Singaporeans. Edu-info-mmmercials were aired in the different 'dialects' in the Mandarin channels, a few times an hour. The pioneer official 'dialect' program was *Everybody's Talking*, a special hour-long talk show and phone-in forum on SARS on the then MediaWorks channel. This show was helmed by a team of experts, comprised of doctors, ministers, journalists. And then there were the 'dialect ambassadors', who were actually artistes who would dispense information in their five respective 'dialects', translate callers' questions from 'dialect' to Mandarin, and then translate the response from the experts from Mandarin to 'dialect'.

The 'dialects' not only became something as if of a linguistic norm, as if they had never been repressed before, but became critical linguistic idioms, critical to the dissemination of health-care information that would impede the spread of SARS to 'dialect' speakers who obviously were quite oblivious to the messages transmitted by the official languages. 'Dialect' here became a potential remedy, where previously it was poison to the tongue of Singaporeans, poison to the education of the future generation of Singaporeans, poison to the global socio-economic potential of Singapore. The fact that 'dialects' had to be aired on television, a medium of the masses, quite possibly betrayed the picture governmental census had been trying to echo. The air of Singapore quite obviously remains accented with 'dialects', surviving in a subterranean fashion, *sotto voce*, no matter how much the government wants to cut them away, to forget about them. And it would be a certain critical mass of such underground speakers of 'dialect' (but perhaps much less than that of Singapore

English), since the medium of the masses has had to be deployed. In the exceptional time of SARS, these second(ary) voices now cannot be forgotten. They have to be spoken to in their own tongues. 'Dialects' now have to be brought to the surface again, resurrected. The apparent bilingual language policy of the government now has to cut itself, undercut itself, so as to save the nation from imminent destruction by a disease.⁶ But, as in the case of the introduction of the 'dialect ambassadors', the resurrection of the 'dialects' has to be done in a limited way. They cannot surface as independent, autonomous linguistic entities. They still have to be translated, re-translated, rephrased. The rein of control is still tight on the 'dialects'. And this control now manifests itself by making the 'dialects' foreign. They are made as if foreign because they are not detached from subtitles. Every enunciation of a 'dialect' speech is necessarily followed by a Mandarin subtitle, as if they would not be understood without them.⁷

Interestingly, in the first installment of this program, no one called in using 'dialect'. In the final installment, and in an uncanny coincidence, out of nine callers, five spoke in 'dialects', one of each group. Interestingly, they would first indicate in Mandarin the desire to speak in their 'dialect'. There is a sense of undecidability or indecision, as if a scene of schizoglossia were being played out. There is obviously a knowledge of two (or more than two) tongues, and yet not knowing which to use. Mandarin, the 'official' tongue, in such a program, becomes unofficial, and becomes odd. To speak in the 'dialects' becomes the linguistic norm, which in pre-SARS times (and post-SARS times, we should add here) was not. This having to switch, to tune in, to decipher as always which is the 'accepted'/'desired' language shows itself here. The callers feel the need to make sure, in a tentative way, with insecurity, which language can I speak? Which language must I speak? Despite the green light to speak on broadcast for the first time in one's own immanent biological mother or father tongue (as if permission must be granted first in order to do so), there remains a sense of self-deprecation for what is to come, for what is to be uttered. This goes the same for the 'dialect ambassadors' who, incidentally, would always start the program asking their respective 'dialect' clan associations and viewers to forgive them for their imperfect command of 'dialects'. One of them even added that the Speak Mandarin Campaign has been too successful.

Closing Knots: Singapore Post-Cuts

[I]f, consequently, one got to thinking that writing as a *pharmakon* cannot simply be assigned a site within what it situates, cannot be subsumed under concepts whose contours it draws, [but] leaves only its ghost to a logic that can only seek to govern it insofar as logic arises from it—one would then have to bend. . . . into strange contortions what could no longer even simply be called logic or discourse. All the more so if what we have just imprudently called a ghost can no longer be distinguished, with the same assurance, from truth, reality, living flesh, etc. One must accept the fact that here, for once, to leave a ghost behind will in a sense be to salvage nothing. (Derrida, 1981, pp. 103–4)

While we have been attempting at an unveiling of immanent discourses of this space —immanent discourses that in fact unconceal for us here an immanent community, that is, a community uncontrived, but a gathering assembled by a common desire (to speak a certain language, a certain dialect), a community without totality—and at the same time to provide a schizoanalysis of power's biopolitical double-take on these discourses exceptionally evident in a time of emergency like the time of SARS, we will have to admit that we ourselves are here also already a bit schizoglossic, a bit schizophrenic, a bit auto-repressive here. We are here seeking to speak for an event of immanent languages. But instead of letting play the full range and intensity of Singapore English, or even enunciate in a certain 'dialect', we are here speaking with a guardedness, by depending on the linguistic norms of a performative academic discourse, hence cutting away any heterogeneous intercalation of plural languages into this English that we are speaking 'properly' here, in order to be listened-to in academic fashion.

If, as suggested in our opening, there is indeed a 'postcolonial' backdrop that we are inextricably writing against here, what can our ethics of writing be, so that we write with a responsibility for the 'postcolonial' peoples of our 'postcolonial' space, and such that we write with a responsibility for a 'postcolonial' future? Will a 'postcolonial' writing be always falling back to a politics of academic discourse, so as to give voice to a 'postcolonial' thought, so as to empower certain repressed and/or suppressed minor narratives to surface? How else should or could we write, so that we could still remain faithful to the immanent discourses of this space that we seek to give voice to? Why can we not write in Singapore English here in this space of academic discourse? In fact, why should a Singapore 'postcolonial' thought be written, after all? Does it need to be written? Does it need a prosthesis as writing? (Again, with that question, we are haunting our writing with a certain continental philosophical tradition of *écriture*.) To be honest, but without being too derogatory, this space of Singapore is hardly a space of writing in the strict academic sense. Neither is it a space of philosophical thought. Whether it is the success of a governmental programming or not, it is common knowledge that the condition of living here, the condition of being alive here, is primarily predicated upon a condition of economic survival and economic well-being, and hardly a life of meditating on philosophical principles. And at the end of it all, when we have revealed the cuts made by power into the languages and communities of our immanent living, after we have tried to cut power's schizophrenic capture of those languages precisely by exposing its schizophrenic obsession or guardedness over them, will it matter to the peoples of these minor narratives? (In a way, we would already have been arguing for a radical surface in which those cut languages could inscribe their revolutionary trajectories.) Will they read this, in the first place? And what would or could they do too, after reading this? Most likely, it would be a silence that follows—and an indifferent silence too. (We do not need to say that today, post-SARS, all is quiet. There are no more dialect program broadcasts. And *Phua Chu Kang* has aired its final episode. Even when the government wanted to cut *Phua Chu Kang*'s highly-popular Singapore English, any sound of protest or resistance has been but

negligible. They would have remained *sotto voce*, underground, as if disappeared, as they have remained, like disappeared, spectral beings of an immanent community.) It is possibly a silence without regard (for anything). But let us say that it is not a silence of emptiness. This silence is possibly one of potentiality, its powers, its effects, we will never have knowledge of, and we can never write of it. This silence is not unlike that indifference that the powers here call 'apathy', which generates a certain anxiety in governmentality as to a non-knowledge of what its subjects are thinking, and which manifests as an apparent non-commitment to or non-faith in any governmental program. Does this silence also not liberate itself from any politics (and whatever ethics) of a 'postcolonialism'?

Notes

- [1] Especially influential to this paper have been Nancy (1994), Spivak (1994), Irigaray (2002), Derrida (1998), and Deleuze and Guattari (1986; 1987).
- [2] In the migrant history of Singapore, the majority of Chinese migrants came from South China, thus bringing with them the Chinese languages predominant there. According to the census conducted in 1957, only 0.1% of the population claimed Mandarin to be their mother tongue (Borkhorst-Heng, 1998).
- [3] Broadly speaking, the 'variety' theory affirms that there is no poor copy or erroneous version of a language. Instead, they are all 'varieties' of *a* language (in the sense of a singular One), each having their particular characteristics evolving within unique cultural contexts.
- [4] There were in fact 2 columns dealing with life in Singapore. The first column did not in fact deal with life as we are dealing with it here, or as dealt with in the above-mentioned column. But obliquely it still touched on life—if not the absence of it—in Singapore. Life occurred in that column as the name of the sub-daily of the national newspaper—*Life!* The writer of the column talked of an overseas assignment, of the joy of living as an expatriate, experiencing the fun that is only enjoyed by the expatriate in Singapore. And he ended by proclaiming the eternity of *Life!*—indeed, the endlessness of a life of work, labour, here, as if that is what living is all about, as if that is the only objective in life, life as work, life nothing but labour.
- [5] Interestingly, the tongue operation was mentioned in the context of Korean parents sending their children for tongue operations so that they would not speak English with a Korean accent.
- [6] Though of course, the State was quick to dispel talk that this was a move toward easing the ban on dialects. The spokesperson for the People's Action Party, Chong Weng Chiew claims that 'this just happens to be an urgent issue' (*The Straits Times*, 10 May 2003). Member of Parliament Tan Cheng Bock goes further to say that this is a unique situation that will probably not happen again, 'after this generation, there will be no such *problem* [the use of dialects]. It is the problem of my generation and my mother and father's generation' (*The Straits Times*, 10 May 2003, our emphasis).
- [7] Selected political discourse is exceptional to this case though. In certain situations, 'dialects' are given the premium status in political discourse—there is no need for translation, no need for subtitles. Power acknowledges that 'dialects', no matter how subterranean or *sotto voce* they are, remain the languages of the people—the tools for bonding, for identity, for intimacy. So even though it is within the political realm itself that the importance and existence of 'dialects' are denigrated, PAP politicians, for every election since Independence, would wax lyrical in 'dialects' at rallies, without translations, without subtitles. In recent elections, the 'dialects' have played such important roles that politicians view the ability to

use 'dialect(s)' as the key to winning votes. Politics in the public sphere therefore are discussed in the same tongue(s) that policy-makers are trying to eliminate, using the cut tongue to speak.

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