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**Marketing the voice of authenticity:
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Marketing the voice of authenticity: a comparison of Ming Cher and Rex Shelley¹

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Abstract

In 1995 two novels by Singaporean writers were published. Ming Cher's *Spider Boys*, a first novel, was published by Penguin in New Zealand, while Rex Shelley's *Island in the Centre* was published in Singapore by the regional publisher, Times Books. The marketing of both implied that they were authentic voices of Singapore. The varieties of English used and represented in the two novels are compared to the varieties of English attested in sociolinguistic studies of Singapore. Shelley's novel represents Singapore English in a way that allows a readership familiar with Singapore to relate the characters to their sociolinguistic setting, and it has a Singaporean readership as its major target. Cher's novel has a non-Singaporean readership as its primary target and is written throughout in variety of English that results from the Cher's experiences as a learner of English, mediated by editors. The novels are used to illustrate concepts of authenticity in representation of language and in marketing strategies.

Keywords: Cher (Ming), English (non-standard), English (Singapore), novel (Singapore), postcolonialism, Shelley (Rex), Singapore

Introduction

Two major novels with Singapore settings, by authors from Singapore, were published in 1995. Ming Cher's *Spider Boys*, a first novel, was published by Penguin in New Zealand, while Rex Shelley's *Island in the Centre* was published in Singapore by the regional publisher, Times Books. Shelley's two previous novels, *The Shrimp People* and

People of the Pear Tree, were also published by Times Books, and won prizes in Singapore's literary competitions.

The novels are by authors with very different social, geographical, and educational backgrounds, and use English in sharply contrasting ways. They were both marketed in ways that implied a claim of authenticity for them, and the concept of authenticity has been an element in reviews of the two books. Concern with an "authentic, natural and stable identity" (Gilroy 1991:121) is part of the discourse of response to literatures from places or groups which are seen as 'exotic' or 'non-mainstream', and the way in which authenticity is seen from an insider perspective and from an outsider perspective is likely to differ. Other literary merits may, in the context of this discourse, be subsumed to authenticity. In this paper I do not want to give the impression that authenticity, of whatever sort, is to be positively evaluated -- a search for authenticity at the expense of all else can sometimes give the impression that fiction is indistinct from sociology. But it is important to explore these notions of authenticity. I will begin by examining the implied claims of authenticity made by the publishers, and then move on to relate the representation of language in the novels, in relation to the sociolinguistic features of language use in Singapore.

The blurbs and the biographies

The ways in which the authors and their publishers join together to present themselves and their novels in the blurbs and the author-biographies of the novels show how an implied claim of authenticity is made for both works. Both novels are described as portraying the lives of 'real people'. Both authors are presented as having experienced the times, social milieu and events of which they write. The marketing of the two novels also indicates imagined readership.

Island in the Centre has a long blurb on the back cover, which alternates blue print (normal font below) and red print (bold print below). The blurb makes constant reference to the thematic links with Shelley's previous two novels, which, like this one, have Eurasians "taking major roles". The blurb ends:

As in his *People of the Peartree*, he brings in the Japanese viewpoint when the war breaks out, mainly through the eyes of Nakajima-san, an introverted man, an island in the circles he moves in, often alone but always an island in the hub of life around him.

It is a tale of real people going about their simple lives, dealing with officious clerks, difficult uncles, European planters enjoying the sunshine and luxury of the good old days, ordinary people vacillating between the bases of their upbringing and the pulls of the changing world around them, unwillingly sucked into dramas of the underworld of brothels and gangsters and the war.

It is the mixture of spices as before with the same curry-hot piquancy that leaves a full rich after-taste.

This blurb assumes in the reader a knowledge of Shelley's previous novels. It also emphasises the centrality of Eurasians in his story, and expects the reader to know something about them. The last paragraph compares the novel to the cuisine of the Eurasians, linking it with their mixed ancestry, and their stereotypical characteristics. The Eurasian community of Singapore and Malaysia, of which Shelley is a member, is a small community of mixed race descended from Europeans on the male line. The Eurasians played a vital role in the British Empire as brokers between the 'natives' and the European British administrators (Gupta 1994, Gupta 1996). The Eurasians were seen as a major English-speaking group from the nineteenth century onwards, and their centrality in

Shelley's novels therefore gives him major characters for whom English is likely to be the principal language.

The *Spider Boys* blurb begins with a quote from the novel, after which an indication of plot moves to an evaluation:

In the 1950s, Singapore street gangs bet on their fighting spiders, using their victories as a measure of power and prestige. For some the spiders are but a beginning, merely a transition, towards a more violent and dangerous world.

Written in the street-slang English that is one of the author's native languages, this hypnotic first novel will be one of the most talked about literary events of the year. A moving and sensual story, *Spider Boys* brings to mind *Lord of the Flies*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Paddy Clark Ha Ha Ha*.

The blurb puts the language of the novel in the centre stage. The extract gives us the street-gang setting, and a sense of the language used in the narrative voice. The three novels to which *Spider Boys* is compared all deal with young males and are all experimental in their language use. The implication in this blurb is that the 'street-slang English' in which it is written would have been the language of the Chinese gangs engaged in the spider fighting. This is not the case historically, nor in the novel. In the 1950s the working class groups were still largely segregated by Chinese dialect group. Chinatown, for example, was largely a Cantonese area of Singapore, while members of other groups of Southern Chinese ancestry congregated in different areas, including some large *kampongs* (areas of wooden housing with thatched or tin roofs) such as the one in which Kwang lives, many of which were largely inhabited by members of the Hokkien group, the largest single group in Singapore, or the Teochew group. Although in the

Singapore of the 1990s English is widely heard in all social circles, and is a plausible language of play (and criminality), this was not the case in the 1950s, when Chinese children playing in the streets would have been more likely to use a range of Chinese dialects (especially Hokkien and Cantonese) and would have used principally Malay in speaking to non-Chinese. Cher, therefore, is in the position of using English in settings where a reader familiar with Singapore would expect other languages to have been used.

Each novel has a photograph of the author to the left of the blurb. In each photograph the author has his lips closed, lifted at the corner in a slight smile, and is looking at the camera warily, head tilted slightly to the left. Apart from this identical facial expression, the photographs are iconographic opposites. Shelley is seated in a chair with his hands resting on his knees. The left side of his face is in heavy shadow, the right brightly lit. He is dressed in a well-pressed long-sleeved white shirt and is wearing a tie. His grey hair is thin on top, severely cut at the sides. He is clean-shaven, bespectacled, and a watch is visible beneath the cuff on his left arm. Cher is standing in the open air, with dark clouds around his head, and bushes behind him. He is bare chested, and his nape-length hair, cut in a square fringe, is tousled on top. He looks tanned. Around his neck he is wearing a pendant, perhaps an amulet or a Maori *tiki*. The choice of this image for Cher is, we must assume, to do with establishing his credentials as an authentic voice of the streets.

The biographies of the writers, inside the novels, continue this contrast:

Rex Shelley was born in 1930. He belongs to a greying generation of Singaporeans that has seen the last vestiges of the Colonial raj, lived through the Pacific War and the Japanese Occupation, and experienced the trials and uncertainty during the turbulent struggle for independence and the radical changes following it.

Mr. Shelley is currently serving on the Public Service and Education Service Commissions and has his own trading business. Besides writing, he plays the piano, paints on fabrics and swims.

This biography then ends with the details of the awards given to Shelley's previous novels. Note that this biography does not mention the fact that Shelley is a Eurasian. Singaporean readers may be expected to know this, or to infer it from the blurb. It is unlikely that a reader outside South-East Asia would realise it -- many would assume from his name (and even from the rather shadowy photograph) that he is a white man of British ancestry. The publicity material of *Island in the Centre* is written by and for Singaporean readers, who do not need this to be spelt out for them. The biography emphasises his historicity -- for the Singaporean reader his authenticity as a Singaporean Eurasian is already known.

Cher's biography positions him as a rakish adventurer:

Ming Cher was born in 1947 in a slum village in Singapore. One of seven children, he left school at thirteen and became a street drifter in the manner of the characters in this novel. He was construction supervisor on a hospital project in South Vietnam at the height of the war there and later became a merchant seaman sailing the world. He has lived in New Zealand since 1977, where he was an importer and retailer of Indonesian goods before becoming a writer.

Ming Cher has been married, although his Maori wife is dead. *Spider Boys*, his first novel, was begun in an attempt to explain his past to his son Marco (twelve), who lives with his mother in Australia. Ming Cher writes only in the English he learnt at school and spoke on the streets of Singapore. He is fluent in Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin, Malay,

Indonesian and Vietnamese, but in none of these other languages does he read and write.

This is a biographical sketch closely linked to the promotion of Cher as the authentic voice of ‘street-slang’. His working class credentials are certainly displayed, even though (like Shelley) he has also engaged in trading. But this is a biography written by and for non-Singaporeans. The term ‘slum village’ would appear to be an ad hoc term which corresponds to the Singaporean *kampong*, which is usually glossed (misleadingly, though etymologically reasonably) as *village*, but is better defined in this context as an urban settlement with wooden houses of a traditional design, usually mono-ethnic. What is most interesting about this biography is that Cher’s experiences outside Singapore are not presented as having contributed to his use of English. He is said to ‘only’ know the English of his childhood, something which is surely impossible given his long years out of Singapore (presumably since the 1960s or early 1970s) and, since 1977, in New Zealand, and given his relationships with non-Singaporean women. In reality he has been adding to his knowledge of English in all those years. Talib (1998) places him in a tradition of cultural hybridity and migration, in which many ‘Singaporean’ writers have participated. The real Cher may be in this tradition, but his novel is being presented as an authentic ‘exotic’ voice purely Singaporean.

Varieties of Singapore English

I will now move on to examine the way in which the two authors’ representations of Englishes relate to the varieties of English attested in Singapore in sociolinguistic studies.

Ecology of language in Singapore

English is one of a number of languages used on a daily basis in Singapore. It fits into a complex ecology of language (Gupta 1998). Monolingual Singaporeans are extremely

rare -- nearly everyone uses two or more languages on a daily basis, choosing their code based on a complex set of socially meaningful choices (see, for example, Platt and Weber 1980). The kind of English a person uses is in part based on their own social and educational background -- there is a proficiency scale in English which is linked to skill in (the Singaporean variety of) Standard English². But speakers who can use Standard English do not restrict themselves to it -- most also move for various social functions to a local variety of English in Singapore which is sharply different from Standard English, especially in grammar. This is a contact variety, in that it shows signs of major influence from other languages.

In Singapore the contact variety is called *Singlish*, although in my writings on it since 1989 I have referred to it as *Singapore Colloquial English*. I have analysed this variety as the L variety in a diglossic English, and others (such as Platt and Weber 1980) have seen it as the basilect in a lectal continuum. I have developed a model (Gupta 1989, Gupta 1991, Gupta 1994) to identify features characteristic of the two varieties, which allows the novels to be related to the spoken features of English in Singapore. I identify there as being 4 features which are criterial of Singapore Colloquial English, and 4 which are criterial of Standard English. The use of these diagnostic features reflects an orientation or focus of a user towards Standard English or towards Singapore Colloquial English. It is possible for an instance of a diagnostic Standard English feature to be non-standard, as in the case of hypercorrection, which generally occurs when an inflectional morpheme is used in a situation where Standard English does not require it. I refer to this as *hypercorrection*. For example, a Singaporean undergraduate wrote on a computer bulletin board:

May her coming birthday brings her good luck.

The *brings* is a criterial feature of Standard English. It indicates a focus (Le Page and Tabouret Keller, 1985) on Standard English. It is non-standard, but not the kind of non-standardism that characterises Singapore Colloquial English.

The examples below (Gupta 1994) are all drawn either from children over the age of 5 years who have (Singapore Colloquial) English as their native language, or from adults educated to a high level (at least up to age 18) in English and who are able to move from Standard English to Singapore Colloquial English. Data are spoken unless otherwise indicated. Transcribed data are in normal orthography, while data which was written retains its original spelling.

Features of Singapore Colloquial English

Particles: These are a small set of words, mostly loans from Southern varieties of Chinese, which are used to indicate the attitude of speakers to what they are saying. In particular, they contradict what an interlocutor has said, make an assertion, or add a sense of tentativeness (Gupta 1992). They are often utterance final. The most common are *ah* (tentative), *lah* (assertive) and *what* (contradictory). *Lah* is the most stereotypical feature of the English of Singapore and Malaysia.

EXAMPLES [particle underlined]

Her price is too high for me lah. (adult)
 Make this one hah. (adult)
 The first one downstairs ah. (adult)
 go get ur own ac first la. (adult, computer bulletin board)

Verb groups without subjects: Singapore Colloquial English uses PRO-drop. When a subject can be retrieved from the context, it does not have to be expressed.

EXAMPLES [retrievable subject indicated in parenthesis]

Go where? (child, 5;11 -- you)
 Because going Toa Payoh. (child,5;11 -- they)
 OK, fly away already. (adult -- it)
 Still got fever? (adult -- you)
 Don't want. (all -- I)

The cupboard hit. Then scratch the dry part off, then got blood come out of it. (child 7;8, explaining why his brother's leg is bleeding -- he is the subject of 'scratch')

Conditional clauses without subordinating conjunction: Certain conditional and temporal clauses, where Standard English would have *if* or *when*, do not require a conjunction in Singapore Colloquial English, e.g. *You do that I hit you.*

EXAMPLES [the Standard English conjunction corresponding to the sense is supplied]

You put there, then how to go up? (adult, =If)

Disturb him again, I call Daddy to come down. (adult, =If you ...)

I sit here talk, can hear also. (adult, =If I sit here and talk, the microphone can still hear my voice)

You take pink flower is more nicer. (child. 5;11) (=If)

Subject + -ing and Subject + Complement: Where Standard English requires a part of the verb BE, Singapore Colloquial English has the option of omitting it.

EXAMPLES (^ indicates where BE would occur in StdE)

He ^ scared. (child, 5;11)

Today I ^ going swimming. (child, 5;11)

Flower ^ there ah. (adult)

My no need. (child, 5;11 -- I have told him how space travellers sleep strapped in. His remark is glossable as 'In my spaceship there is no need for that')

you ^ not ks (adult, computer bulletin board³)

Features of Standard English

Aux+Subj in interrogatives: Except in the formulae *What's* and *Where's*, interrogatives in Singapore Colloquial English are unlikely to show the processes of inversion and DO insertion that is found in Standard English. So the presence of inversion in interrogatives is a sign of the use of Standard English.

Verb morphology: The inflectional morphemes that identify Standard English are those for the past tense, the third person singular present tense and the past participle. The marking of tense and concord is optional in Singapore Colloquial English but required in

Standard English. The *-ing* ending of the present participle is the only verb ending normally used in Singapore Colloquial English.

Noun morphology: The marking of number and case in nouns is compulsory in Standard English but optional in Singapore Colloquial English, so the use of plural and of genitive forms is diagnostic of Standard English. In Singapore Colloquial English pronouns are the same as they are in Standard English, however.

Certain complex verb groups: Singapore Colloquial English has few complex verb groups, other than those with CAN and WANT TO. Any complex verb group with other auxiliary verbs is diagnostic of Standard English.

The Englishes in the novels

Island in the Centre uses multiple narrative voices. Some sections of the novel are written in the form of the first person diary of the principal Japanese character, Nakajima, and represent various stages in his learner variety of English. Here he is early in the book (p31):

Must try to write some every day.

But today I have no vacancy. All day full occupied. After my evening meal I must go and fix generator in Estate which is winking all the lights.

Just like starlight. Up-down. Because the engine is hunting. (This is correct word. It is technical, scientific word. But I do not know why.)

These sections include many diagnostic features of Standard English (this short extract has 4, with 2 complex verb groups, and 1 instance of verb morphology and 1 of noun morphology). They have few of the features of the contact variety, except at points where Nakajima is learning it without knowing what it is, or at points (as in the PRO-drop of the first sentence in this extract, [^] *must try to write*) where the features of the contact variety

might be expected to coincide with those of a Japanese learner variety, or indeed with the diary genre. Nakajima's English teacher, Mrs Lee, is constantly vigilant for Singapore Colloquial English (p35):

I must not say "lah" and "man" like others. Mrs Lee saying it is poor language. She is my purloiner of good English.

The rest of the novel is in a third person narrative, using Standard English, but often is "narration from a point of view within a character's consciousness" (Fowler 1986:135). The main points of view used are those of the three principal characters, Dominic (Da), Nakajima, and Vicky, and the perspectives of Da and Nakajima are signalled by a variety of linguistic devices, some of which (especially the naming of characters and lexis) are fairly soon apparent to a reader, but others of which (especially sentence length and complexity) are inferred as Shelley trains the reader to recognise them. Here, for example, we have the point of view of the disreputable Eurasian, 'Da' (p43):

Communion time did not bring up anything special either. He always woke up from his reveries and thoughts at Communion time. It was the parade of the devout of the parish to him. He had picked up all sorts of little details watching the people walk up to and from the Communion rail. Mrs. Machado's new expensive hat. The Cornelius girl's low neckline. She had never dressed like that before. Peter Dorale's started thinning on top. Not much, but it has started. Bernard's not with his missus today. Probably needs to go to confession. Basil's still going with Matilda, it seems.

Here we get the "fluid version of free indirect thought" (Toolan 1990:73) that places us in Da's consciousness. The naming of other characters is appropriate given Da's relationship to them. As the book progresses the reader learns to identify informal

locutions like *the Cornelius girl, missus* and *going with* as signals (Fludernik 1996) that are associated with Da's point of view. Da himself is referred to as *Dominic* in these sections.

A few pages later (p46) we are with Nakajima's point of view:

They had a coffee at a coffee shop on the corner of Victoria Street and Bain Street. Da kept plying Nakajima with questions about Nagasaki, about the Kluang job and about his life, past and present. Nakajima was pleased to find such a friendly companion. They had the bond of both being Catholics. But *Da-san* was quite an interesting person. He was definitely not Chinese. He could be Malay. But Malays are Muslims. Nakajima was quite sure he was not Indian. He knew the Indian. Most of the people in his estate were Indian. That was why Mr. Evans spoke Tamil.

Da-san did not speak like an Indian. He didn't roll his head as he spoke.

Nor did he get overly excited. It puzzled him.

Although the narrative sections using Nakajima's point of view do not include the learner errors which we have, by this point in the book, learned to recognise in his diary, the sentence structures are very simple, with most sentences having only one clause in the free indirect discourse sections. The naming is appropriate for Nakajima (*Da, Mr Evans*) and we are further helped to recognise Nakajima's point of view by the use of the Japanese honorific in '*Da-san.*'

Shelley also uses a range of Englishes in his representation of speech. The reader is made conscious of ethnicity and of what language characters are supposed to be speaking. Features of the language in both narrative and dialogue allow the reader who is aware of the sociolinguistics of language in the region to identify characters and to place

them social and ethnically. For example, here is the educated Hardial Singh at a small hotel in Malaya (p82):

“*Achar!*” Hardial Singh exclaimed as he looked at the book which was the hotel register. “*Hoi*, Mr Chin, how is it that the surname is squeezed in so small here? And in a different kind of writing too.”

“He forgot, lah. So he put it in later, lah. Making small writing to fit in, lah,” the hotel keeper replied, smiling, and added as he looked at Hardial Singh, “You wan’ drink?”

Hardial Singh speaks a Standard English with interjections (*achar, hoi*) that reflect his Indian ethnicity, while the hotel keeper uses a variety of the local contact variety, which in his case shows him to be a speaker of limited proficiency, as he is in a setting where Standard English would be preferred. Hardial Singh uses 3 Standard English features in this extract (inversion in interrogative, complex verb group, verb morphology), while the hotel keeper uses 1 Standard English feature (verbal morphology, *forgot*) and 4 Singapore Colloquial English ones (3 instances of the pragmatic particle *lah*, and one example of PRO-drop, *making small writing*).

The two Eurasians, Da and Vicky, move between Standard English and the contact variety according to the function of the discourse, and even within the discourse (p211):

“Where’re you stayin’?”

She gave the address. he laughed. “Boy! Girl, that’s the fancy ladies’ area, isn’t it? Hey, I mus’ visit you one day. I think ...”

“Well?”

“Don’t interrupt me, girl. I know that area like the back of my hand.

Consider it done, Vicky. Fixed. *Habis.*”

“Ta. What’s the price?”

“Doan be liedatt?”

“Business is business.”

“Please, lah! Dog don’t eat dog. *Serani* cannot eat *Serani*, lah! Only because their mouths aren’t so big. You know, *Geragok*, *udang gerigau* got small mouth. But big tail!”

He laughed at his joke heartily while she winced at it on the other end of the telephone line.

“So?”

“I want nothing from you, Vicky. I not *Jaudi*.”

Again we see the mixture of Standard English features (plural nouns, verb inflections and complex verb groups) alongside a scattering of Singapore Colloquial English features (the pragmatic particle *lah*, BE-deletion). Shelley also uses variant spellings to indicate an informal pronunciation style. There is no glossary in *Island in the Centre*. There is a general pattern of italicising words which are felt to have their origins in other languages⁴ (although *lah* is not italicised), but most of these expressions would be well understood by a Singapore readership, even though many are used only by older speakers in the current contact variety.

The point of view in *Spider Boys* also varies, with many sections using the point of view of the boy. Kwang, and some others the point of view of the gangster Yeow. These points of view are not distinguished by linguistic signals. The narrative is in a variety of non-standard English which nevertheless uses very few of the diagnostic features of Singapore Colloquial English, and has many features which are diagnostic of Standard English in the context of the Singapore English situation.

The first extract is one of several sections which describe the setting and give information of an anthropological sort (p120f):

Midterm school holiday begin. The Hungry Ghost Festival is coming soon. Chinese temples in every part of Singapore were busy organizing their annual opera shows of ancient stories to appease the lost souls set free by the King of Hell for a month holiday. “Ancestor worship is a must,” state the blind man of the Kuan Yin Temple. “Better for them, better for us.”

Desperate people worships their religion harder. The village were full of desperadoes. The day before the Ghost Festival starts on the first full moon of the seventh lunar month, pigs scream under the knives in the small communities within the community, who make joint efforts to buy a pig, chickens, cook foods, make cakes, patiently folding up joss stick papers into the image of a small boat with a cone in the middle, working out the amount of coins to be thrown away as part of the sacrifice to please and stop angry hungry ghosts from haunting them.

When popular Wong who manages the annual show pass the hat around, everybody give face. Donations from all sorts pour in for the Kuan Yin Temple to stage a three-day, three night opera show on the playground. Blind Man and his wife welcome hired nuns and tankies (mediums) into the temple to perform rituals.

On the first festival morning the whole village was vibrating. Giant incenses that take three men to carry has arrived. The opera stage was setting up. Opera actors, actresses, musicians, and makeup artists arrive with gypsy hawkers from elsewhere to boost the occasion.

This section, as is typical of the narrative, contains no instances of any of the diagnostic features of Singapore Colloquial English, and contains 42 instances of the diagnostic features of Standard English. Non-standard features do include variable tense marking

(e.g. *the village were full / pigs scream*) and concord marking (e.g. *Wong - manages / the blind man - state*), but the diagnostic features of Singapore Colloquial English, which show that a user is focusing (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985) on the contact variety, are absent. The non-standard features used by Cher even include the hypercorrect use of third person singular concord with a plural subject (*Desperate people worships, The village were*), which are just as diagnostic of Standard English as the standard uses of the same morphology. The pattern we see in Cher's work, which avoids the diagnostic features of Singapore Colloquial English, is similar to natural patterns found in the speech and writing of English users of relatively low proficiency. We can refer to this as a *learner variety*.

Unlike most users of low proficiency, however, Cher has access to a wide vocabulary of hard words (e.g. *appease, desperadoes, alter ego, inscrutable*). The spelling and punctuation is also absolutely standard, and a large number of very complex verb groups, especially passives and perfectives, are used. The juxtaposition of these formal and advanced learner features with non-standardisms characteristic of users of low proficiency, is not one which it is easy to find a match for in the Singapore community. The absence of a correlate in the community suggests that the mixture of features results from contributions being made to the final text by more than one person, presumably by Cher and by one or more editorial hands. However, his unusual personal biography must have included substantial but unsystematic self-education in adult life, which could also be expected to lead to an idiosyncratic variety of English.

As in *Island in the Centre*, there are more features of Singapore Colloquial English in the dialogue than in the narrative of *Spider Boys*, although there are rather more features of Standard English in the dialogue than might be expected if Cher were attempting an accurate representation of the contact variety. The extract below exemplifies the

prevalent pattern, with little difference between the linguistic features of the dialogue and those of the narrative.

Early next morning. On their way to exercise spiders at their regular place, Kwang pull Ah Seow backward by the collar. “Walk slowly,” he said and flash out a red crispy ten-dollar note around the nose with a twinkle little smile.

“Waah...!” Ah Seow exclaim. “How many matches altogether?”

“Didn’t count, win everywhere. Somebody offer me one dollar for this one.” He toss a round spider box in the air to catch it with a leap. Let’s run...!”

On arrival at their usual place, he pull out a magnifying glass. “Do you know what this is for?”

“To look at the spider,” Ah Seow reply. “What is there to show off?” But he was surprise. He has never seen anybody using a magnifying glass to study spider. He poke about. “What for? Where do you copycat?”

“Don’t disgrace me I don’t copycat anybody else,” Kwang snap back and trace his spider’s movement on the big yam leaves.

As is usual in the novel, there are few examples of Singapore Colloquial English in the narrative (none at all in this extract), and several examples (6 in this short extract) of the diagnostic features of Standard English (noun morphology, verb morphology, complex verb groups) There are only 2 instances of the diagnostic features of Singapore Colloquial English in the dialogue (both PRO-drop, *^Didn’t count*, *^win everywhere*). On the other hand, the dialogue contains 5 instances of features diagnostic of Standard English (noun morphology, inversion in interrogatives, complex verb groups). We can safely say that neither the narrative nor the dialogue is using Singapore Colloquial

English. Unlike Shelley, Cher never uses variant spellings -- the spelling is standard throughout.

In natural Singapore Colloquial English, and in naturalistic literary representations such as those by Shelley, the pragmatic particles account for the largest category of Singapore Colloquial English features. In *Spider Boys*, however, pragmatic particles are rare in the dialogue, and absent from the narrative. It is not surprising that they are absent from the narrative -- the Standard English interrogative inversion is also rare or absent in narrative for the same reason. Pragmatic particles (like interrogatives) are features of interactive discourse and are (like tag questions and like the Standard English discursal elements *you know*, *like*, and *you see*) therefore truly colloquial, in the sense of being linked with dialogic speech. In *Spider Boys*, the use of the diagnostic features of Singapore Colloquial English is slightly higher in the dialogue than in the narrative, but Standard English features continue to dominate in both. The difference between Standard English narrative and variably Standard English or Singapore Colloquial English dialogue is much more marked in *Island in the Centre*.

If Cher is reflecting the real street language (English or any other language) of Singapore, however, pragmatic particles should be more common in the dialogue. Cher, however, unlike Shelley, is construing a non-Singaporean readership. His novel was said to be begun for his (Australian) son, and is published outside Singapore. He does not assume a Singaporean readership that will understand cultural and linguistic allusions. He explains the cultural setting and the rare 'exotic' words (such as *tankies*) are glossed in the text. Expressions with an etymology in local languages other than English are usually translated, even where they would not be in Singapore English. Kwang's kampong is in *Ho Swee Hill*, which is the translation of the place known in Singapore as *Bukit Ho Swee* -- Cher has translated the Malay word *bukit* into English *hill*, even though

this place is always known as *Bukit Ho Swee* in Singapore. Presumably the pragmatic particles would come into the same category of words unlikely to be understood by a non-Singaporean readership. With its imagined non-Singaporean readership, the language is at once exotically non-standard and yet devoid of the local features that would present comprehension problems to a foreign reader.

In *Island in the Centre* the way the characters move in and out of SCE, and the attitudes of the characters to 'good' and 'bad' English, is something Singaporean readers will recognise and respond to. Talib (1998) identifies Shelley's first novel, *The Shrimp People*, as being the most successful representation of language use in a Singaporean literary work, and *Island in the Centre* continues to reflect Shelley's interest in representation of language.

In *Island in the Centre*, the principal characters are ones which can plausibly be thought of as likely to use English extensively, and we are constantly made aware by narrative comments what other languages are supposed to be being used, such as:

The stranger asked the hotel keeper some questions in Hokkien. (p83)

But although I was told when I enquired that it was a Portuguese church, all the prayers were in Latin. (p55)

I had a drink and talked to the Chinese madam. To my surprise, she could speak some Japanese. (p57)

They had been talking in Malay, mostly Bazaar Malay. (p79)

In *Spider Boys*. language is almost never used for characterisation, setting, or to identify characters of different ethnic or social backgrounds, as it is in *Island in the Centre*. It is rare in *Spider Boys* for the reader to be aware of the language characters are supposed to be speaking. The Singapore reader knows that it is implausible the real equivalents of the characters in this novel would have used English at all the places in

which the novel uses English. There is no sense in *Spider Boys* of the use of multiple varieties of Chinese, and there are only rare narrative comments such as:

He raise a finger for a tea in Malay at the burly Indian sitting behind two
20-gallon copper drums of hot water boiling over slow charcoal fire. (p12)

We are occasionally made aware that the characters are not to be imagined to be using English. In one scene, language is used for characterisation, when the gangster, Yeow, is approached by a secret police officer on a train (p109):

Well-dressed Yeow with dark glasses and a Rolex watch caught the
attention of the British security chief who dress like a tourist in the first-
class area.

“Nice watch,” he comment in English inside the canteen while Yeow was
having a snack. “May I share your table with you, sir?”

Yeow has no idea in English so he just smile.

The chief smile back. “Can’t you speak English?”

Yeow smile again and the chief walk away.

This character uses a rather stilted Standard English and would seem to be the only character who is linguistically individualised.

Cher does not manipulate dialogue as ‘realistically’ as Shelley. The non-standard features of the narrative are not the diagnostic features of Singapore Colloquial English, and appear to be motiveless in artistic terms. Language is not being used in a way that reflects the use of English and of other languages in Singapore. The non-standardisms are similar to those of Amos Tutuola’s novels, which were described by Afolayan (1971) as “a temporary intermediate point in the bilingual evolution of a dialect” rather than as a register of English. Cher’s unaided writing would presumably have features that result from his limited education in early life, plus his wide experience and reading in later life.

His English is better described as a learner variety than as the ‘authentic’ street voice of Singapore. Shelley, on the other hand, (like Chinua Achebe or Wole Soyinka, or James Kelman) works at using a variety of Englishes from the wider repertoire that he has at his disposal. One of the varieties that Shelley, along with these other writers, has at his disposal, is Standard English. Shelley’s text is therefore *crafted*, in the sense that the use of standard and non-standard varieties is a result of his stylistic decision, in an effort to create a sense of the differences in varieties of English in Singapore, and to use English to characterise languages other than English. Cher appears not to have Standard English at his disposal, and his choice of variety appears not to be motivated by his stylistic decision, but by the writer’s more limited repertoire of Englishes.

Editors and reviewers

Spider Boys was marketed as the natural voice of its writer -- written in “the street-slang English that is one of the author’s native languages”, which suggests an *authenticity* rather than a *craftedness*. In normal editing practice texts of most sorts are corrected for language, and novels may also be edited for characterisation, and even plot. Crick’s biography of Jeffrey Archer (1995) gives details of how Archer’s wife corrected his grammar, spelling and punctuation (p188), his editors cut his text (p226f), developed character, changed representation of dialect, and corrected factual errors (p350f). In the autobiographical writing of less educated writers, such as the biography by the British traveller, Betsy Whyte, it is usual for editors to be involved in correcting text. In the foreword to the second volume (Whyte 1990) her editors, Peter Cook and Ian Gould record that:

Read aloud by one familiar with it, her narrative flowed effortlessly without pause: the natural breaks were there -- but unsignalled. Formal punctuation, spelling, paragraphing, seems necessary to help the reader to

‘listen’ as Betsy intended. But that was all: we call ourselves ‘editors’ for lack of a better term: in fact we were mainly exhorters, advisers, sounding boards.

Whyte’s text, as is usual, consists of a narrative in rather informal Standard English, for example (p9):

Mother had been living in a state of confused despair since father’s death, quite unable to put her mind to anything much. At first she had wandered through the house singing coronachs to her aching heart, with tears running down her cheeks. This doleful singing had such a depressing effect on all the rest of us that one day I burst out, ‘For God’s sake, Ma, stop that or you are going to put an end to all of our days.’ She did stop it and tried very hard to keep her heart up.

The argument of Whyte’s editors is that standardising the text allows the story to come through more clearly to a readership educated to read only in Standard English. The tradition of writing in varieties other than Standard English is also very much one of authorial choice. Where novels or poems are written in Scots, or in non-standard varieties of English, this is generally the choice of writers who have control of Standard English. For less educated writers of autobiography or novels, such as Whyte, or Cher, the use of editors or even of ghost writers would be expected.

In the case of *Spider Boys*, it is not clear what editorial involvement there was, but clearly the editors at Penguin made a decision not to edit the text to render it into Standard English. One would expect a writer showing the learner variety pattern of English to fail to maintain Standard English habits in other areas of language, such as spelling and punctuation. The standardness in these areas suggests editor involvement at least in spelling and punctuation, and in unknown other areas. There may have also been

some involvement from other contacts of Cher's, before submission to the publisher. The editorial decision was ostensibly based on the assumption that the book was written in the English the author 'spoke on the streets of Singapore', and that it was therefore a variety of English that had a right to be used as a medium of literature. I have argued, however, that the pattern of non-standardism is not the one which characterises Singapore colloquial English, and the the novel does not reflect a setting where English of any variety would have been used.

The best known author (and one of very few indeed) on whose behalf a similar decision was taken in the 1950s is Amos Tutuola. Tutuola's publishers, Faber, even went to the extent of reproducing (in *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, 1952) a page of his manuscript complete with their minimal editorial changes. Collins (1969:106f) discusses this editorial "hands-off" decision, which he admires, but which some readers (many of them in Nigeria) saw as exotification or as patronising. Collins points out the inconsistency of admiring the attempt to represent non-standard varieties by authors who can speak Standard English (Achebe, Soyinka, etc) while not allowing those whose normal usage is non-standard to have their natural expression. He asks (1969:111) whether we are "to assume that a writer normally speaking standard English can use nonstandard English better than normal speakers of those forms?"

As we can see in the analysis of the extracts from *Island in the Centre* and *Spider Boys*, a major difficulty in the use of the (silently edited) learner variety throughout a novel is that it makes it difficult for the writer to express social characteristics of characters in the novel. This 'monochrome' language seems to present particular difficulties for readers from the locations where the novel is set. For members of the Singapore speech community (or of a Nigerian or Ghanaian one) linguistic negotiation is a crucial part of daily life and the skilful portrayal of this in a novel allows for individuation of character

and for swift portrayal of social factors. The writer able to exploit this, such as Chinua Achebe or Wole Soyinka, can build on the reader's knowledge for a number of literary purposes (see, for example, Cossier 1991). Readers who are not familiar with the setting of the novel come to it with a knowledge of the range of varieties in their own language settings and many writers wish to convey some sense of that setting without creating difficulties in readability.

Island in the Centre and *Spider Boys* were reviewed in Singapore's leading English newspaper, *The Straits Times*, by the same reviewer, Koh Buck Song (Koh 1995a, 1995b). Koh (1995a) referred to the "gritty realism" of Shelley's writing, and commented that "His attempt at capturing the authentic language of the times will make for a valuable resource for linguists." He sees *Island in the Centre* almost as a historic document, with "a backdrop of local detail drawn with a keen ear and a comic eye." This is validating Shelley's authenticity very much in the tradition of fiction as sociology. His much longer review of *Spider Boys* (1995b), which is accompanied by a report on a telephone interview of Cher, repeatedly emphasises, both overtly and covertly, the inauthenticity of Cher's language and his marginality in Singaporean society. He refers to Cher's adoption of the name *Alan*, his relationship to a Maori woman and to a white woman (his son's mother). He also makes sure the reader knows that Ming Cher's surname is *Cher*, which means that he has changed the ordering of his personal name and surname from the Chinese order (surname first) as used in Singapore, to the 'Western' ordering of surname last. Although he reports that Cher is "still a Singaporean" he lets us know that Cher refers to Singaporeans in the third person, rather patronisingly, and in terms that Singaporeans would see as a typical comment of an *ang mo*⁵:

Cher ... thought only Western readers would be interested.

“When I visit Singaporeans, I see their houses is full of schoolbooks,” he said ... in the broken English in which the novel is told.

Koh reports that Cher’s six brothers and two sisters still live in Singapore. But he has a lifestyle available only to the exceptionally wealthy in Singapore:

He was the only one to leave the family home, in a Bukit Ho Swee slum.

“I have no education. What hope can I have in Singapore? It was a twist of fate , that sort of thing. I just go where the grass is green.”

The grass is certainly greener for him now in Whangaparaoa Peninsula, New Zealand, where he lives alone in a three-bedroom bungalow⁶ about the size of half a football field.

There he grows oranges, grapes, peaches and macadamia nuts and goes sailing and fishing.

Koh also takes issue with the blurb’s assessment of the English used. Koh sees the English of *Spider Boys* as “not exactly fluent Singlish but a rough translation from Chinese dialect.” Koh cannot have the syntax in mind here, as the fundamental grammatical structures of *Spider Boys* are clearly English. Chinese has no inflectional morphology whatsoever, and has distinctive patterns of negation, clause connection, word formation and so on, which have no parallels in *Spider Boys*. He may have seen the variable marking of tense and concord as characteristic learner errors of someone whose Chinese is better than their English. But what Koh probably has principally in mind is the use of metaphor and proverb which at times draws on Chinese rather than English tradition (e.g. *that fucking-face teacher, he sounds like a double-headed snake*). Koh also identifies what he calls ‘slips’ in authenticity, focusing on the pragmatic particles and on lexis:

Terms like *lah* are used too seldom and inconsistently. There is no *lor*, *leh*, or *meh*.⁷

One character says “no worries”, obviously a standard New Zealander’s reply which no true Singaporean, let alone a street gangster here in 1955, would use.

Koh continues his location of Cher in the ‘West’:

The publication of *Spider Boys* under a major imprint comes out of a recent trend in the West to pay more attention to minority cultures, such as the Glasgow of Howard Kelman’s Booker winner last year, *How Late It Was, How Late*.

In sharp contrast to this portrayal of Cher as a non-Singaporean, a review by Parker (1995) from Australia praised Penguin for publishing *Spider Boys*, so giving “a very public voice to groups who do not use standard English”. *Spider Boys*, she says, can “take you into a world where few western readers have been” and can liberate writers “from the narrow dictate that all tales must be told in standard English.” The impression of authenticity to an outsider may be created by a high level of the exotic in a text.

Insiders and outsiders

That these two novels were published in different places is crucial. It is part of the colonial heritage that publication abroad, in the ‘West’ (and this includes New Zealand) is seen in Singapore as more prestigious than local publication. It is also a fact that publication (and residence) in ‘the West’ ensure a writer a more substantial critical response (Talib 1998). Koh’s review of *Spider Boys*, which appeared in the Singapore press, highlighted the achievement of a Singaporean writer being published by Penguin. *Amazon.com*, a book supplier on the world-wide web, simply lists *Island in the Centre* as “hard to find” -- the result of its being published in Singapore. It is publication by

Penguin which, according to Parker, legitimises the learner variety. The power to do this resides in the prestigious overseas publication.

It would be instructive to know more of the process by which *Spider Boys* was created. The text that remains is in part the product of a much travelled writer, who has not mastered Standard English, and in part, probably, the work of editors who have decided to allow some of the non-standard features to remain to create a spuriously authentic voice. These editors would not know which non-standard features are seen in Singapore are part of the Singapore contact variety, and which are seen as being associated with low-proficiency learner varieties. The writer's international experiences and 20 years of residence in New Zealand are not presented in the marketing as having had any impact on his Singaporean voice. The validity of his experience since leaving Singapore life is denied. This suggests a static view of *culture*, which attributes a unique and unchanging culture to an individual, rather than a dynamic one, which allows for the possibility of the individual's moving away from his culture of origin. Cher is marketed, through the mediation of his New Zealand editors, as a pure voice of Singapore. The editing decisions made in *Spider Boys*, and the repeated emphasis in the blurb, exoticise the author, by emphasising the unusual in his language.

Readers of different cultural backgrounds will read the same novel differently (Spivak 1991), and writers may construe their audience as dominated by readers of particular backgrounds. *Spider Boys* is written in a variety which will be a challenging read for all potential readers, but which avoids Singapore lexical terms that may not be understood elsewhere in the world. It will give a taste of the *foreign* to readers less familiar with Singapore but to a reader in Singapore the features may puzzle because of a lack of resonance within the familiar society. Shelley, published in Singapore, and expecting to be principally read in Singapore, builds upon Singaporeans' knowledge of the local

language setting, does not hesitate to use (unglossed) terms that are geographically restricted, and gives local readers an impression of authenticity which is less apparent to a reader not familiar with Singapore.

Notes

- 1 This paper was presented as a poster session at the *Harold Orton Centenary Conference: Dialectal Variation In English*, University of Leeds, March 24 - 26 1998. I would like to thank the reviewers for their comments, and John McLeod for his careful reading and helpful suggestions.
- 2 I use the term *Standard English* (StdE) to refer to that variety that exists world-wide in forms that differ from each other only slightly (mainly in a small number of lexical, and orthographic features, and in different distribution of perfective and progressive verbs). StdE is the variety taught in schools and seen as usual in most writing and formal speech throughout the English speaking world. I use the term *non-standard* to refer to anything which is not Standard English in that sense, for whatever reason. In this texts under examination in this paper the 2 kinds of non-standard English are those which result from the use of a contact variety, *Singapore Colloquial English*, and those which result from the use of a *learner variety*.
- 3 *ks* is an abbreviation for *kiasu*, a word of Hokkien origin meaning 'very keen to get as much out of something as you can'.
- 4 All are words of Malay origin. *Habis*: 'finished'; *Serani*: 'Eurasian'; *Geragok*: 'prawn', also (derog.) term for Portuguese Eurasian; *Udang gerigau*: 'prawn'; *Jaudi*: (usually derog. when used in English) 'Jew'.
- 5 *ang mo*: Hokkien origin, literally 'red hair'. Usually derog., 'ethnic European'.
- 6 In Singapore a 'bungalow' is a luxurious detached house, lived in by only the very wealthy in this heavily populated island.
- 7 *lor*, *leh* and *meh* are three more of the pragmatic particles used in Singapore Colloquial English, particularly as spoken by ethnic Chinese.

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