

Local Names for Local MRT Stations

By Zhou Rongchen

The finalised station names of the Thomson MRT Line (TSL) as voted by the public were announced by the Land Transport Authority (LTA) during the groundbreaking ceremony of the new line on 27 June. With a total of 22 stations, the TSL has six interchange stations that will use their existing station names, while the remaining 16 stations will have new names. The public was invited by LTA last January to suggest names for these new stations, and to participate in a voting exercise of these suggested names last May. Several criteria for the new station names were clearly stated on the official website of the naming exercise, including:

To illustrate the history and heritage of the station's location; and reflect Singapore's multi-racial and multi-cultural identity.

Results of the voting exercise, however, failed to meet these criteria of reflecting Singapore's multi-racial and multi-cultural identity. Of the 16 new stations, only one station has a finalised station name of local origin, while the rest are based on English names, showing a clear dominance of English in comparison to the local languages. Two of the working station names, Lentor and Sin Ming, are of Malay and Chinese dialect origin, respectively. Originating from the Malay word *lentur*, the working name Lentor was retained for the station, while Sin Ming was renamed as Bright Hill (after the Kong Meng San Monastery in the district). If the name Bright Hill was derived from the monastery, why was the station not directly named as the dialect name *Kong Meng San* or the hanyu pinyin name *Guangming Shan/Hill*?

In addition, Napier was voted as the name for the station located at the Tanglin Gate of the Botanic Gardens instead of the Malay name *Taman Serasi*. How effectively can the name of an Englishman/a New Zealand City (Napier) reflect the local flavour of our Botanic Gardens as compared to *Taman Serasi*, which means "harmonious garden" in Malay? Moreover, the station is located near the historic, now-defunct *Taman Serasi Hawker Centre*. The English name *Great World*, devoid of any local flavour, was voted as the name for the station located near the historic *Tua Seh Kai* amusement park on Kim Seng Road, instead of *Kim Seng*. Names like *Da Shi Jie* or *Tua Seh Kai* could have been more appropriate in reflecting the local flavour of the area. Other names listed for voting that did not ultimately garner enough votes include *Kebun Baru*, *Bukit Ho Swee*, and *Ann Siang Hill*, etc. Of all the finalised names, 15 out of 16 are English names; giving the false, unreal impression that one is in a western country.

A large number of over 4,000 people took part in the voting process. Although the identities and backgrounds of the voters were not revealed by LTA, one can make the reasonable assumption that the majority of them are technology-savvy youths with English as their first language, as the voting exercise was carried out online and entirely in English; thereby leading to the result of almost all English names. The three choices of names provided by LTA for each station were derived from the first round of suggestions from the public. Although most of them were English names, there were nevertheless some local names to vote for, but the voters favoured the English names in the end. This voting exercise did not achieve its original aim of “reflecting Singapore’s multi-racial and multi-cultural identity”.

Another point to note is that for the Malay station names, all the Malay translations are exactly the same as the English names, with the exception of Gardens by the Bay, translated to Taman di Pesisiran. These Malay translations were finalised by the Malay Translation Committee. Interestingly, some English vocabulary and English location names have been incorporated into colloquial Malay. For example, “north” and “south” can be directly used in colloquial Malay, without being translated into their corresponding Malay words *utara* and *selatan*. As explained by my Malay colleague, it would seem awkward and clumsy to purposefully translate the familiar English names of these places into Malay.

Why is there only one local name out of all the 24 stations in this brand new Singaporean MRT line? Although English is the working language of Singapore, the fact remains that Singapore is an Asian country built upon its multi-racial and multi-cultural foundation. There are many station names on the older MRT lines that reflect our local flavour well, e.g. Bishan (Mandarin), Ang Mo Kio (Hokkien), Kembangan (Malay), Tanjong Pagar (Malay) and Dhoby Ghaut (Tamil), etc. These local station names not only bring a sense of familiarity to Singaporeans, but also play a part in strengthening our local identity and awareness over the years.

The argument that local or dialect names are difficult to pronounce and hence cause inconvenience is subjective. To some, English names can be equally difficult to pronounce. For example, Caldecott and Orchard Boulevard stations on the TSL can be quite difficult for some Singaporeans to pronounce. (“Boulevard” is a word with French origins.)

Singapore has been moving towards a monolingual society in recent years. SMRT added Mandarin announcements on MRT services two years ago, but the Mandarin announcements were quickly removed due to public pressure to do so. According to those who called for the removal of the Mandarin translations, Singaporeans do not need these translations. However, they seem to have forgotten about the older generation of Singaporeans who may not be proficient in English, and about the fact that English is not an Asian language although it has gradually become the first language of younger Singaporeans. There were announcements in all four official languages at interchange stations back in the 1990s. Reinstating them would be a good move in placing equal emphasis on all four official languages.

We can see the trend towards a monolingual Singaporean language environment from a simple naming exercise of MRT stations. How would the language environment of Singapore be in the next 10 years? The minority Chinese dialects would have disappeared; there would be very few Singaporeans who are truly fluent in the three major Chinese dialects (Hokkien,

Teochew and Cantonese); the declining standards of Mandarin, Malay and Tamil would have lowered their statuses even further; but English would remain the unchanging dominant language of the society. Whether Singaporeans would still be speaking Singlish, Standard English that is closer to British or American English, or an evolved form of English is a topic for another day. With ongoing westernisation, Singaporeans may very well lose the very characteristics that make them uniquely Singaporean in 10 years' time. However, the future of non-English languages in Singapore may not be so bleak. The trend towards a monolingual society can still be slowed down, or even reversed, if Singaporeans concerned with language and culture make good use of other platforms like new media to complement community and government efforts. The naming of MRT stations could be a good start.

Update: LTA announced on 15 August that the Thomson Line will be merged with the previously-announced Eastern Region Line to form the Thomson-East Coast Line (TEL), a continuous 31-station line to be fully completed by 2024

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