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FROM *PASIR RIS* TO *PIONEER*: SINGAPORE'S MASS RAPID TRANSIT (MRT) STATION NAMES IN RELATION TO ITS IDENTITY*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Place names not only have a referential function (i.e., they refer to places in real or imagined worlds) but are also crucial in building a sense of identity for the communities they name. Toponyms bring about mental and emotional associations between people and places, such as that of time and space, of history and events, and of people and social activities (Basso, 1990), thus conjuring a sense of place, or the feelings of belonging and identity that people attach to a place. A similar argument can be made about the names of metros and railways. These names typically christen the areas that they serve, and hence it can be argued that they are place names as well. Though a popular transport mode in urban areas, the names of metros and railways has been under-researched. The act of naming metro stations, although deceptively simple:

[...] could have important effects on the identity (both locally and externally) of the community area in which it is located, for the benefit of community members and other transit users alike (Douglas, 2010, p. 177).

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The station name functions as an agent of identity: it provides people living in the surrounding neighbourhood with a form of identity while promoting a collective civic pride. On a more practical front, the length, language, and naming strategy of station names, if harnessed correctly, can help first-time users like tourists to correctly identify their destination, and contribute to a smooth rail transit (Fraszczyk, Weerawat & Kirawanich, 2020).

In this study, the authors investigate the relationship between Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station names in relation to identity in the context of Singapore. The paper has two aims: firstly, to determine the common naming strategies of Singapore's MRT station names, and secondly, to identify salient aspects of Singapore's identity through analysing MRT station names, as well as the process of naming and/or renaming MRT stations. It is worth bearing in mind the fact that the Land Transport Authority (LTA) which manages Singapore's MRT system notes that these station names, like other toponyms, help passengers to identify the location of MRT stations, illustrate the history and heritage of the station's locality, as well as commemorate Singapore's multiracial and multicultural identity (LTA, 2013a). While the naming of metro stations can sometimes appear to be factual and unbiased (Douglas, 2010), the name selected to refer to a station perpetuates certain ideologies and identities that the namer holds. Such beliefs then get encoded as a linguistic expression (i.e. as a place name in the public transport system). We argue that station names reflect the state's language and socio-political policies and shed deeper light on some of the complex and contradictory forces at play in the nation's linguistic and socio-political identity. On the one hand, an analysis of station names, particularly among newer MRT lines where the public can suggest and vote on station names, mirrors the country's language shift towards English. From a cognitive perspective, the language utilised in the station name is used to construct and convey Singaporeans' identity as speakers of English, borne as a result of language-in-education policies, which they draw upon to mediate the names in the cityscape. At the same time, in multilingual Singapore, names in the local Mother Tongue Languages (MTLs) like Malay serve as indexes of localness (Ainiala, 2020) of the area around the station. This suggests that station names are connected to the heritage and history of the station's locality. Yet, as we will see, the cultural function of names (i.e., the name as a metaphor for the area's history and heritage) takes a backseat in view of the socio-political identity of pragmatism, or "the commitment to rationality with the aim of achieving practical results, particularly in order to ensure continuous economic growth" (Chua, 1995, p. 68), which prizes the practical, referential function of station names.

The data used in this paper derives from a study by the authors on the languages and naming practices used in naming 142 MRT stations across Singapore's

five fully operational MRT lines. Research on Singapore's MRT, from the transport perspective, focusses on its evolution and how it meets the needs of Singapore's transport system (cf. Looi & Choi, 2016; Palliyani & Lee, 2017) while linguistic research centres on linguistic landscape studies of signs in MRT stations (cf. Tan, 2011; Tang, 2020). The authors exported the official MRT station names from the LTA (2021) before using primary and secondary sources to analyse the toponyms. Primary sources like digitised newspapers, maps, and press releases were consulted, as were secondary sources like books on Singapore place names (Savage & Yeoh, 2013; Ng, 2017), and government agencies like the Housing and Development Board (HDB), the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), National Parks (NParks), the Ministry of Education (MOE), and the National Heritage Board (NHB). These sites were chosen because they contain explanations on how Singaporean places are named. Thereafter, the authors classified the station names according to an earlier taxonomy (Lim & Perono Cacciafoco, 2020), which they used to analyse the naming strategies of stations along the NSL (Singapore's oldest MRT line) and the DTL (Singapore's second-newest MRT line). In this paper, the authors extended this system to analyse 142 MRT station names across Singapore's five fully operational MRT lines (see Section 4). The findings not only demonstrate the naming strategies of Singapore's MRT stations, but also illustrate how Singapore's identities are represented via station names, as the analysis of station names and the naming and renaming process "can uncover subtle operations of nationalistic, sociocultural, and economic promotion meant to enhance certain viewpoints" (Adami, 2020, p. 10).

2. IDENTITY, PLACE NAMING AND (RE)NAMING

The essence of identity lies in answering the question of who we are. Versluys (2007, p. 89) argued that "identity is the everyday word for people's sense of who they are", something which De Fina (2006) notes, encompasses the geographical, ethnic, social, political, and even ethical domains. Other scholars have added a linguistic element to identity. Linguistic identity is a self-definition based on one's perceived membership of a language group (Bordia & Bordia, 2015), for instance, believing that one is an English or a Spanish speaker. It is evident that identity is multi-faceted and relates to how individuals define themselves through, among others, where they live, the ethnic and social groups they belong to, their political and moral leanings, and the languages they speak. Consequently, names, or more specifically, toponyms, function as "folded texts", which mark these above-mentioned elements of social identity (Joseph, 2004, p. 176). Toponyms are full of connotative meaning, shaped by the individual's environment, perception, and life experiences, and hence, "transform the sheer physical and

geographical into something that is historically and socially experienced” (Tilley, 1994, p. 18). If an individual has had positive experiences with the place in question, the place name brings about positive connotations, and hence, functions as an identity marker that binds individuals to these places. Helleland (2012, p. 109) poetically described that whether one lives in an urban or rural area, the place name helps them establish bonds with these places. People may move out or away eventually, but this does not stop them from familiarising themselves with the new place, which occurs by knowing its place name.

Collective identities embedded in place names may sometimes be brought about by those in power. The very act of choosing one toponym over another in the naming process reflects the political, cultural, and economic ideas and values that the regime deems important, which in turn, shape the identity of the society. After all, toponyms are politically important and “can be used as tools by the hegemonic groups to penetrate their world views into the daily life of the people and thereby naturalize their ideologies in society” (Düzgün, 2021, p. 3). This quote reflects the idea of Critical Toponymies, an area of study which has gained traction in the last two decades, where the focus of study shifts away from the linguistic to the political. Rather than merely analysing the etymology of toponyms, scholars treat place names as political and economic tools and investigate the political and economic choices why a certain place name is chosen or not (cf. Berg & Vuolteenaho, 2009; Azaryahu, 2011; Light, 2014; Light & Young, 2015). Under a critical toponymic lens, toponyms can thus be used by political regimes to transform an existing identity into a new one or to erase it (Gnatiuk, 2018, p. 2). This is probably best discerned in the toponymic renaming in Bucharest, Romania, after the fall of communism, where the new National Salvation Front (NSF) government sought to create a post-socialist identity. While the NSF had roots in the socialist past, it recognised that “there was nothing to be gained from defending socialism” (Light, 2004, p. 162), and hence, looked to the pre-socialist past to “erase the socialist period from collective memory” (Light, 2004, p. 168). Accordingly, the NSF institutionalised a new official narrative of national history that coalesced around the former glories of the Greater Romania period of the early 20th century. Over 100 streets were renamed to celebrate the territories, leaders, and even cultural and scientific figures during the golden era of Romania’s history. Yet, the street renaming process was significant for who it excluded — women, ethnic and religious minorities. In Romania’s quest to carve out its nationalistic post-socialist identity, such toponymic changes (and omissions) inscribed “a distinctly *Romanian* and Orthodox narrative of history and identity onto the landscape of the capital” (Light, 2004, p. 166).

In sum, toponyms are integral in constructing an identity. For ordinary people, place names bring to mind the sights, sounds, smells, and emotions and

create the sense of place in geographical spaces. For those in power, toponymic naming and renaming inscribe new narratives of the national history and identity onto the landscape. It is with this in mind that we now turn our attention to Singapore's MRT system.

3. BACKGROUND: SINGAPORE'S MRT

While first proposed in 1971, Singapore's MRT was not constructed until 1982. The whole process of the construction of the MRT came to be known as "The Great MRT Debate" (Lim & Perono Cacciafoco, 2020) as both the government and Singaporeans were split over whether the MRT system should be built. Ong Teng Cheong, the Minister for Communications, whose portfolio oversaw Singapore's public transport, argued that the MRT "would allow for more intensive development and better economies of scale" (Ong, 1980, p. 1), as well as raise the quality of public transport. He reasoned that with the "comfort, efficiency and reliability of MRT would make urban travel less burdensome, and enable us to make more meaningful use of our time" (Ong, 1980, p. 1). Yet, Ong was opposed by ministers in his own Cabinet, such as Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, who worried about the cost of building an MRT system and preferred an all-bus public transport system. The Trade and Industry Minister Tony Tan famously said that it was "foolish to build MRT" (Wong, 1981). It was only in 1982, where it was found that an all-bus public transport system was untenable that the government finally gave the go ahead for the MRT ("It pushed for an MRT here", 1982).

Today, there are five fully operational MRT lines in Singapore:

1. The North South Line (NSL), colour-coded red, which opened in stages between November 1987 and 1989;
2. The East West Line (EWL), colour-coded green, which opened in stages between December 1987 and 1990;
3. The North East Line (NEL), colour-coded purple, which opened in 2003;
4. The Circle Line (CCL), colour-coded yellow, which opened in stages between 2009 and 2011;
5. The Downtown Line (DTL), colour-coded blue, which opened in stages between 2013 and 2017.

By the end of August 2021, Singapore's sixth MRT line, the Thomson East Coast Line (TEL), colour-coded brown, had nine operational stations, and stations along the TEL are set to open in further stages between 2022 and 2025. Two MRT lines are under construction, the Jurong Region Line (JRL; which is slated to open in stages from 2026) and Cross Island Line (CRL; which is to be completed around 2031).

The decision over who gets to decide the MRT station names is an issue worth exploring. After the MRT system was given the green light in 1982, the Provisional MRT Authority was tasked to build and operate Singapore's MRT system (Wee, 1982, p. 9). One such responsibility was identifying the sites and giving names the first MRT stations in Singapore. The board could also change the names of MRT stations to better reflect their locations; *Thomson* station (NSL) was renamed as *Novena* due to it being near the Novena Church ("Sites of MRT stations", 1982). In 1983, the role of managing the MRT, including the naming and renaming of MRT stations, fell to the MRT Corporation (MRTC), which replaced the Provisional MRT Authority in constructing and managing the MRT.

Today, the naming of stations falls under the purview of the LTA, formed in 1995 through the merger of four public entities, most notably, the MRTC. Citizens now have a greater say in the naming process. For newer stations like the CCL, DTL, and TEL and even for extensions of existing lines like the CCL, the LTA provides working names for the stations being constructed. The public is then invited to suggest new names or keep the working names, along with a brief explanation for their choice. The LTA collates and decides the names that meet the naming criteria of helping commuters to identify the station's location, illustrating the history and heritage of the station's location, and reflecting Singapore's multiracialism and multiculturalism, before sending the names to Singapore's Street and Building Names Board for approval. A public polling exercise is conducted for the final station name. This public consultation exercise stems from the LTA wanting to let commuters "determine this permanent aspect of the station's identity" (LTA, 2017). We will now turn our attention to these station names and the naming practices underpinning these toponyms.

4. WHAT'S IN AN MRT NAME?

Ng (2017, p. 7) lists three primary ways in which Singapore's place names are labelled. Place names have an internal grammatical structure, which some scholars refer to it as a toponymic structure (Tent & Blair, 2019; Tent, 2020). Toponymic literature notes that the most common toponymic structure is specific element + generic element (Tent, 2020). Tent gave the example of *Boat Harbour*, where *Boat* is the specific element, or the name given to the place and *Harbour* is the generic element which identifies the place's topographic feature. Given that Singapore's MRT station names name the surrounding geographical features of an area, be they neighbourhoods/planning areas, roads, hills, or water bodies, the three toponymic structures of Singaporean toponyms that Ng observed are also evident in station names, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Toponymic structures of Singapore's MRT stations

Toponymic structure	Definition	Examples of station names
Simplex names	Made up of a single word	EWL: <i>Tampines</i> , <i>Queenstown</i>
		NSL: <i>Woodlands</i> , <i>Novena</i> , <i>Orchard</i>
		NEL: <i>Kovan</i> , <i>Hougang</i> , <i>Punggol</i>
		CCL: <i>Esplanade</i> , <i>Dakota</i>
		DTL: <i>Rochor</i> , <i>Bencoolen</i>
Duplex names	Made up of a specific element + a generic element	EWL: <i>Tuas Link</i> , <i>Changi Airport</i>
		NSL: <i>Bukit Gombak</i> (comes from the Malay words <i>Bukit</i> 'hill' and <i>Gombak</i> 'a collection of')
		NEL: <i>Outram Park</i> , <i>Clarke Quay</i>
		CCL: <i>Lorong Chuan</i> (comes from <i>Lorong</i> 'alley/lane' [Malay] and <i>Chuan</i> 'fountain' [Hokkien])
		DTL: <i>Jalan Besar</i> (comes from the Malay words <i>Jalan</i> 'road' and <i>Besar</i> 'big/wide'), <i>Bedok Reservoir</i>
Complex names	Made up of one or more specific element(s) + one or more generic element(s)	EWL: <i>Tuas West Road</i>
		NSL: <i>Marina South Pier</i>
		NEL: –
		CCL: –
		DTL: –

Station names may sometimes name an entire neighbourhood or the planning area that the station serves. In this case, the station name is a simplex name, and some examples include *Tampines*, *Orchard*, *Hougang*, *Esplanade*, and *Bencoolen*. There are a number of duplex station names which combines the name of the area they serve and a geographical feature. These geographical features can be either natural or man-made. For instance, *Bedok Reservoir* on the DTL is named after the surrounding water body of the same name; *Bedok* is the specific element indicating the place that the reservoir is located at, *Bedok*, while *Reservoir* is the generic element noting the topographical feature. An example of a man-made geographical feature in the generic element is *Jalan Besar* (DTL), which comes from the Malay words *Jalan* 'road' and *Besar* 'big/wide' and is named after a road of the same name. Finally, a small number of stations have complex names, or names

which have one or more specific element(s) and one or more generic element(s). Two examples found are *Tuas West Road* (EWL) and *Marina South Pier* (NSL). In both station names, there is one specific element that points to which planning district the station is found. There are two generic elements, one marking the cardinal direction and another stating the geographical feature of the place.

Amongst Singaporean toponyms, Ng (2017) observed that duplex names consisting of a specific and generic element were the most common (e.g., *Orchard Road*, *Jalan Hajjah*, and *Bukit Mugliston*). Specific elements like *Orchard*, *Hajjah*, and *Mugliston* indicate the location of the places they name and are combined with generic elements indicating the place's geographical type like *Road*, *Street*, or lexical items in the national language, Malay, like *Jalan* 'road' and *Bukit* 'hill'. Note that the order of specific and generic elements is reversed when they are named in Malay as the generic element often comes before the specific one, as seen in the above-mentioned examples. In contrast, most MRT station names are simplex names. This could be due to simplex names being shorter in length and simpler to read as opposed to longer duplex or complex names, thereby minimising the confusion commuters face whilst orientating themselves in the rail transit process. Furthermore, since station names identify where the station is located, simplex names are more efficient as they immediately identify the specific element, i.e., the geographical location of where the station is situated, without lengthening the name by adding details about the toponym's geographical type.

Lim and Perono Cacciafoco (2020) drew from toponymic classification systems by Singaporean and international scholars (Baker & Carmony, 1975; Savage & Yeoh, 2003; Tent & Blair, 2011; Ng, 2017; Perono Cacciafoco & Tuang, 2018) to come up with their own taxonomy. They grouped MRT station names into seven categories: associative, borrowed, descriptive, eponymous, legends and anecdotes, occurrent, and others. Amongst the 142 MRT stations analysed, associative naming is the most utilised naming practice. 54 MRT stations (38.03%) were found to have associative names. Stations with associative names refer to nearby topographical features, be they physical or man-made. Stations named after environmental attributes found near the station include those of water bodies, hills, and parks like *Marina Bay* (NSL), *Bukit Gombak* 'a collection of two hills' (NSL), and *Labrador Park* (CCL). Associative naming is extremely popular in newer lines like the CCL and DTL, accounting for 33.33% and 67.65% of the stations on the CCL and DTL respectively. Common man-made structures motivating station names include nearby roads like *Pioneer* (EWL; named after the nearby *Pioneer Road North*), *Tuas West Road* (EWL; named after *Tuas West Road*), and *Cashew* (DTL; named after the nearby *Cashew Road*); tourist attractions like *Chinese Garden* (EWL) and *Botanic Gardens* (CCL and DTL); and buildings like churches (*Novena*; NSL), houses (*Woodleigh*; NEL), performing arts centres

(*Esplanade*; CCL), business parks (*one-north*; CCL), and even former amusement parks (*Beauty World*; DTL). The fact that so many stations exhibit associative naming is unsurprising, as identifying places by the name of surrounding landmarks can promote a sense of place identity. Moreover, this associative naming can help commuters see how streets, neighbourhoods, and landmarks “fit together in a cogent urban whole” which assists in their urban wayfinding (Douglas, 2010, p. 183) as they have the correct impression of where they are heading towards.

Borrowed names account for 13 stations (9.15%). These stations are named in languages not spoken in Singapore and/or foreign concepts, including transferred names from other localities. Examples include *Simei* (EWL; named after the Four Beauties of Ancient China), *Buona Vista* (EWL and CCL; meaning ‘good sight’ in Italian), *Marsiling* (NSL; named after the *Maxi* village in China), *Canberra* (NSL; named after Australia’s capital, Canberra), *Somerset* (NSL; named after a British town with the same name), and *Dakota* (CCL; borrowed from the American aircraft Dakota DC-3, which used to land at the airport formerly located in the area).

Descriptive naming is another highly productive naming practice and is the second most frequent naming pattern. Collectively, 32 MRT stations (22.54%) elucidate qualities of the area that the station serves, be it the activities, economic trades, and land uses, or common plants found in the locality. Examples of descriptive station names include *Tanjong Pagar* (EWL; means ‘cape of stakes’ in Malay and pays tribute to the place’s origins as a fishing village), *Yew Tee* (NSL; means ‘oil pond’ in Teochew and is named after the oil storage facilities in the area during World War II), *Kranji* (NSL; named after *Kranji* trees that were commonly grown in the area), *Little India* (NEL; describes the nearby ethnic enclave the station serves), and *Bukit Panjang* (DTL; comes from the Malay words *Bukit* ‘hill’ and *Panjang* ‘long’, and describes the 132-metre Bukit Panjang Hill formerly in the area).

There are also 30 eponymous MRT stations (21.13%) which commemorate well-known important people and groups. Examples of eponymous names include *Clementi* (EWL; named after Sir Cecil Clementi, the Governor of the Straits Settlements between 1887 and 1893), *Admiralty* (NSL; named after the Rear Admiral of the British Navy, who lived in the area), *Boon Keng* (NEL; named after Lim Boon Keng, a prominent Chinese doctor), *Nicoll Highway* (CCL; named after Sir John Nicoll, Governor of the Colony from 1952 to 1955), and *Tan Kah Kee* (DTL; named after Tan Kah Kee, the founder of Hwa Chong Institution, which the MRT serves). Notwithstanding, there is a trend among the newer lines like the CCL to have more stations named after Europeans. Eight of the nine eponymous place names on the CCL are named after Europeans. The principal exception is *Tai Seng*, named after the Tai Seng Rubber Factory, which was established in the area in the 1930s. While Singapore’s MRT stations do not exhibit the same level

of “commemorative naming under an agenda sought with propaganda” (Bagoly-Simó & Lehmann, 2017, p. 5), the large number of eponymous stations named after British and other Europeans shows that Singapore’s identity as a former British colony remains evident in its place names.

Other minor naming patterns include stations named after legends and anecdotes, while occurrent names are relatively fewer. Three stations (2.11%) are named after legends, while another three (2.11%) have occurrent names which mark historic events that happened in the area. Lastly, there are seven stations (4.93%) under the category of Others. It is difficult to ascertain the naming practices behind these toponyms as some of them like *Kovan* have unclear etymologies, while most such as *Punggol* have numerous, inconclusive explanations. As an example, the name *Punggol* could mean ‘hurling sticks at the branches of fruit trees to bring the fruit to the ground’. Another interpretation of the place name is ‘a place where fruits and forest produce are offered for wholesale’, implying that *Punggol* was an agricultural area. A third explanation involves the man who started *Punggol* village, Wak Sumang, who gave *Punggol* its name after obtaining permission to start a new village (Chan, 2018).

This section analysed the toponymic structure and naming practices of 142 MRT stations in Singapore. We will next look at how station names reveal certain aspects about the Singaporean identity, focussing particularly on its linguistic and socio-political identity.

5. MRT STATION NAMES AND SINGAPOREAN IDENTITY

5.1. Linguistic identity

Before 1980, Singapore’s linguistic identity was described as a polyglossic one (Platt, 1980). The country’s citizens were highly multilingual, and the average Singaporean had a linguistic repertoire of six to eight language varieties, which often excluded English. The state played an active role in language management and its centralised approach to language policies (Kuo & Jernudd, 1994) is evident in how “different language policies through the years have been implemented aggressively through policy statements and through the education system” (Cavallaro & Ng, 2014, p. 35). Singapore’s formal education policy, introduced in the 1950s, allowed the media of instruction in schools to be in its four official languages — English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. Notwithstanding, Chinese-, Malay-, and Tamil-medium schools eventually shut in the 1980s due to falling enrolment. This is unsurprising as the state promoted English as an interethnic lingua franca from the outset and as a language that enables Singaporeans to access the “knowledge, technology and expertise of the modern

world” (Tan, 1986, cited in Rappa & Wee, 2006, p. 84). The Bilingual Education Policy (BEP), introduced in 1966, meant that school-going children had to study English and an MTL that was assigned based on ethnicity (i.e., Mandarin Chinese for the Chinese, Bahasa Melayu for Malays, and Tamil for Indians).¹ The BEP is a cornerstone of Singapore’s education system and remains in schools until today. The notion of MTLs in the Singaporean context is somewhat different from how a mother tongue might be traditionally defined by linguists as the “language(s) one learns first, identifies with, and/or is identified by others as a native speaker of” (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008, p. 11). In contrast, MTLs taught in Singaporean schools are, ironically, not the language that Singaporeans grew up speaking or identifying with. According to the latest census, English is the language most frequently spoken at home. Amongst the resident population aged 5 and above, 48.3% of them use English at home (Department of Statistics, 2021). Moreover, English is the most frequently used household language for all of Singapore’s main ethnic groups except the Malays (however, the proportion of Malay households with English as the most frequently spoken language at home more than doubled between 2010 and 2020). Given this set of statistics, it is not uncommon that English is the first language that most Singaporean children learn and have come to acquire native-like proficiency in a country that “lives and breathes in English” (Yong, 2019). Tan (2014, p. 337) also found that an overwhelming majority of younger Singaporeans believe that English is a language that Singaporeans can identify with as their own. According to Tan, the linguistic identity of younger Singaporeans as English speakers will “continue to be so for future generations”. Returning to Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty’s definition of a mother tongue, then, there is little reason why MTLs in Singapore schools can be justified as a mother tongue in the traditional sense, which is the first language to be acquired by students, the language they identify with, and/or the language they are most proficient or competent in. In Singapore, the BEP means that the MTL foisted on the child at school is a language assigned based on his/her ethnicity, which is often not the language one learns from infancy (i.e. L1).

One can also observe how some MTLs contribute to transferred place names, particularly in the case of Mandarin Chinese. The ancestors of Singaporeans hailed from southern China in great numbers during the early 19th and 20th centuries in search of better work opportunities or to flee political upheaval and natural disasters in their country of origin. However, many of these migrants still felt a deep

¹ The main ethnic groups in Singapore are Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others. Among its resident population of 4.04 million Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents, Chinese made up 74.3% of this number, Malays comprise 13.5% of the resident population, while Indians consist of 9.0% of this figure. The remaining 3.2% are classified as Others, or people who are usually of Eurasian, European or Arab descent (Department of Statistics, 2021).

sense of belonging to China, their homeland. Inevitably, given the strong affiliation that early migrants felt towards China, a number of Singaporean places eventually assumed names after people and/or places in China in the country's official and predominant language, Mandarin Chinese. Similar borrowings in Mandarin Chinese are also observed in places like Taiwan (Republic of China), where a variant of Mandarin Chinese is spoken. Taiwan was also ruled by the pro-China nationalist Kuomintang at various points in its history, and thus, have streets named after figures like Sun Yat-sen (the founder of modern China) and Chinese cities/provinces like *Ningxia*, *Tibet*, and *Beiping* (an old name for *Beijing*). In this sense, Singapore, with an ethnically Chinese-majority population,² mirrors the experiences of other places with significant ties to Mainland China: place names commemorate figures or places found in Mainland China, and get inscribed into the local landscape in the official language of Mainland China, Mandarin Chinese.

The languages behind station names tell a story of Singapore's sociolinguistic realities and language shift: from multilingual to an English-knowing bilingual identity, with Singaporeans confident in using both varieties of Singapore English³ and their ethnic language (Pakir, 1991, 1994), a situation which other scholars have described as English-plus bilingualism (Cavallaro & Ng, 2014). In earlier MRT lines, where station names were decided by the Provisional MRT Authority and/or the MRTA, English accounted for only 37.14% and 43.75% of the station names of the EWL and NSL respectively. It can be argued that earlier lines were more representative of Singapore's linguistic diversity, since most of the station names were in a non-English language. In contrast, English station names made up 63.33% and 50% of names along the CCL and DTL — lines where the public did have a say in suggesting and/or voting for names. While the CCL and DTL serve areas in Central Singapore which tend to have English names, it is also worth noting that the trend towards English-oriented names continued in Singapore's sixth MRT line, the TEL. Table 2 summarises the working name, proposed names for polling, and the final names of 16 stations.

² It is probably for this reason as well, i.e., Singapore's Chinese majority population, that most borrowed station names in our dataset occur in Mandarin, as opposed to the other MTLs. According to our data, there are no Tamil borrowed names. The Malay language is used to name *Bugis* station (along the EWL and DTL) and we argue that this is a borrowed name; the name *Bugis* has Malay origins, and is borrowed from a group of people who originated from southwestern peninsula of Celebes (present-day Sulawesi, Indonesia) who came to Singapore in the 19th century.

³ The two varieties of English in Singapore are Singapore Standard English (SSE) and Colloquial Singapore English (CSE), more commonly known as Singlish. According to the diglossic model proposed by Gupta (1989), SSE is the High (H) variety that is used for formal purposes like education, law, and the media while CSE is the Low (L) variety that is spoken for informal purposes, such as between family and friends.

Table 2.
The working name, proposed names, and the final names of 16 TEL stations
(LTA, 2013a; LTA, 2013b; LTA, 2014)

Working name	Proposed names	Final name
1. <i>Woodlands North</i>	<i>Woodlands North Republic Crescent Admiralty Park</i>	<i>Woodlands North</i>
2. <i>Woodlands South</i>	<i>Woodlands South Champions Way Woodgrove</i>	<i>Woodlands South</i>
3. <i>Springleaf</i>	<i>Springleaf Nee Soon Village Thong Soon</i>	<i>Springleaf</i>
4. <i>Lentor</i>	<i>Lentor Lentor Green Teachers' Estate</i>	<i>Lentor</i>
5. <i>Mayflower</i>	<i>Mayflower Kebun Baru Ang Mo Kio West</i>	<i>Mayflower</i>
6. <i>Sin Ming</i>	<i>Sin Ming Bishan Park Bright Hill</i>	<i>Bright Hill</i>
7. <i>Upper Thomson</i>	<i>Upper Thomson Thomson Village Thomson Park</i>	<i>Upper Thomson</i>
8. <i>Mount Pleasant</i>	<i>Mount Pleasant Whitley Old Police Academy</i>	<i>Mount Pleasant</i>
9. <i>Napier</i>	<i>Napier Rd Taman Serasi Botanic Gardens South</i>	<i>Napier</i>
10. <i>Orchard Boulevard</i>	<i>Orchard Boulevard Tanglin Grange Rd</i>	<i>Orchard Boulevard</i>
11. <i>Great World City</i>	<i>Great World Kim Seng River Valley</i>	<i>Great World</i>
12. <i>Havelock</i>	<i>Havelock Bukit Ho Swee Zion Rd</i>	<i>Havelock</i>
13. <i>Maxwell</i>	<i>Maxwell Ann Siang Hill Neil Road</i>	<i>Maxwell</i>

Table 2 cont.

Working name	Proposed names	Final name
14. <i>Shenton Way</i>	<i>Shenton Way</i> <i>Shenton</i> <i>McCallum Street</i>	<i>Shenton Way</i>
15. <i>Marina South</i>	<i>Marina South</i> <i>Marina Boulevard</i> <i>Marina Coast</i>	<i>Marina South</i>
16. <i>Gardens By The Bay</i>	<i>Gardens By The Bay</i> <i>Marina Barrage</i> <i>Marina Gardens</i>	<i>Gardens By The Bay</i>

A linguistic analysis of the final station names shows that an overwhelming majority, i.e., 15 of them (93.75%) have English names. The sole exception is *Lentor*, which derives from the Malay word *lentur* ‘flexible’ or ‘bending’ (Zhou, 2014). The predominance of English names is evident in stations where non-English names were proposed, such as *Springleaf* and *Mayflower*, as the final name selected was still in English. Furthermore, a closer inspection shows that all three proposed names for half of the stations are in English (cf. *Woodlands North*, *Woodlands South*, *Upper Thomson*, *Mount Pleasant*, *Shenton Way*, *Marina South*, and *Gardens By The Bay*). As Adami (2020, p. 13) argues, selecting a name for the station is highly dependent on the commuters’ “stored knowledge, cognitive schemas, and experiences”. The process of choosing a name becomes an act of social communication, one which hinges on the metro user’s cognitive configuration, and can contribute to affirming “persistent “naturalized” ideologies” (Adami, 2020, p. 13). The English-orientation of a large number of proposed names and final station names, given that the final station names reflect the choice of the majority who voted for them (LTA, 2011), can be argued to represent and cement the linguistic identities of Singaporeans as English speakers, fostered due to their education backgrounds and the use of English as a *lingua franca*, which might lead to the preference for English names.

While English is framed as an economic tool, MTLs are marketed as a cultural tie that preserves the culture, roots, and identity of Singaporeans (CLCPRC, 2004, cited in Ng, 2014, p. 370). To this end, toponyms in MTLs, particularly in Malay, Singapore’s national language, have been used to assert a sense of localness. This was especially poignant in the late 1960s, when the landscape was *Malayanised*, as newly-independent Singapore shifted its allegiance away from its British colonial masters to the Malay world of Southeast Asia, where Singapore is situated. To this end, streets were named after Malay words referring to flora, fauna and culture, and the generic elements *Road* and *Street* were substituted with the Malay

words *Jalan* and *Lorong* (Yeoh, 1996). Two decades later, Malay names were used to name stations and denote a local Singaporean identity. In 1986, English station names like *Maxwell* and *Victoria* were given names in Malay, becoming *Tanjong Pagar* and *Bugis* respectively. The MRTC Chairman Michael Fam was quoted as saying: “We have nothing against (English) names ... We have no hangups about our colonial past. But we thought we’d have a few more local names” (“Quotable quotes”, 1986, p. 11). Likewise, looking at Table 2, one can also see a handful of names in MTLs (especially in Malay and Chinese) suggested for station names (e.g., *Kebun Baru* [a Malay name proposed for *Mayflower*], *Sin Ming* [a Chinese name proposed by the LTA], and *Taman Serasi* [a Malay name proposed for *Napier*]). MRT station names not only mirror Singapore’s language policies, but, crucially, offer a window to the linguistic identity of Singaporeans. Station names in MTLs have been utilised by both naming authorities and passengers themselves to memorialise, in linguistic terms, the heritage of the area. The cognitive schema here is that heritage is to be represented in names in a non-English language, just as learning MTLs in school was justified in identity- and culture-preserving terms. Yet the fact that most station names in newer lines, which the public can suggest and vote for, are in English is highly indicative of the English-plus bilingual identity. Some might even argue that the overwhelming use of English in final station names reflects a monolingual, English-oriented identity in Singapore. Language is used as a tool by Singaporean commuters to construct, mediate, and convey the English-knowing bilingual identity that characterises its society. Singaporeans are linguistically confident to propose English names and such toponyms are then taken up by the LTA and/or supported by Singaporeans. At the same time, naming authorities and commuters use non-English languages to coin toponyms as a means of representing the heritage of the area

As argued previously, governments can utilise toponyms as tools to shape identity according to their socio-political, linguistic and, increasingly, economic ideologies. To this end, it is instructive to look at the renaming of MRT stations, particularly in the 1980s, as a mirror of the state’s ethno-racial and linguistic policies. In 1984, the MRTC announced that *San Teng* on the NSL would be renamed as *Bishan*. The new name was to better reflect the upcoming HDB in the vicinity (“Six stations are renamed”, 1984, p. 10). *Bishan*, known formerly as *Kampong San Teng*, was derived from *Peck San Teng* (碧山亭), meaning ‘pavilions on the green’, a Cantonese name of a cemetery. The name change of *Bishan* reflects the *pidginising* of place names in the 1980s; Romanised dialectal toponyms like *Peck San* and *Nee Soon* were given Hanyu Pinyin equivalents, such as *Bishan* and *Yishun* (the latter is another station on the NSL). While the station name was changed to better reflect the name of the government housing in the new town, this shift stems from the *pinyinisation* of place names, aimed at

eliminating multiracial heterogeneities by merging different dialect groups among the Chinese (Yeh, 2013). The *pinyinisation* naming pattern aligns with the state's ethno-racial identity for the Chinese people, i.e., seeing themselves as Chinese Singaporeans, which is achieved through the linguistic policy of promoting the neutral variety, Mandarin, instead of dialects.⁴ Therefore, the renaming of *Bishan* and *Yishun* stations suggest how prevailing street or town names may be modified to reflect the ethno-racial and linguistic policies of the state, which, in turn, results in the naming of MRT station names to better reflect the new geographical names.

5.2. Pragmatism

Singapore's pragmatic identity stems from post-independent Singapore being preoccupied with the notion of survival as independence was "foisted on a population under conditions beyond their control" (Chua, 1995, p. 69). This, coupled with the perceived geographical vulnerabilities of the small island-state, gave rise to a narrative of vulnerability and survival that has indelibly shaped its national identity. As scholars have noted, Singapore's identity "is primarily couched in terms of pragmatism and economic realism, to the neglect — or, indeed, with deliberate suppression — of cultural dimensions of the national identity" (Yang, 2014, p. 412).

As Yang (2014, p. 413) writes, Singapore's pragmatism and economic realism has manifested in certain ideological principles that he labels as "the cornerstones of Singapore's identity as a nation". These include anti-welfarism, meritocracy and elitism, and limits on political freedom. The brand of political pragmatism is evident in station names given in the mid- to late 1980s, which showed the top-down naming strategy pursued by the MRT. The *Singapore Monitor* recounts an incident in 1985, where people living around the newly renamed *Queenstown* station (EWL) suggested that it be named *Tanglin Halt* instead. During a briefing on the new station between the MRT and constituents, a resident, Mr Martin Marini, mentioned that the housing estate surrounding the station was known to residents as *Tanglin Halt*. *Queenstown*, according to Marini, was more general as it covered a larger area. In response, MRT public relations manager, Tammie Loke, said that the MRT's naming panel selected *Queenstown* as it was a better-known name (Loong, 1985). Some petitioned the local parliamentarian Tan Soo Khoon to change the station name to *Tanglin Halt*, but the station remained as *Queenstown*. Another case is seen in a letter written by a Mohamed Nazran,

⁴ Dialects of Chinese in Singapore include Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese, and Hakka. They were brought by Chinese Singaporeans hailing from Mainland China, who spoke regional tongues. Although dialects and Mandarin use the same script, Chinese dialects are regarded as mutually intelligible varieties of Mandarin.

who suggested that *Kampong Glam* was a better name for *Bugis* station, as it was situated within the *Kampong Glam* area that was earmarked for preservation (Nazran, 1989). This somehow makes sense, given that the current *Bugis* station is the nearest MRT station to this historic site. While it was peculiar that the author wrote this letter three years after the station became known as *Bugis*, the MRTC replied that *Bugis* better reflected the geographical location, especially considering its closer proximity to the former *Bugis Street* as opposed to *Kampong Glam*. The MRTC further added that it was difficult to change the name, as this would entail “replacing hundreds of system maps, route diagrams, fare charts, not to mention the entire control panel at the Operations Centre” (Loke, 1989, p. 34). It is noteworthy that one reason for rejecting the suggestion was also based on the logistical challenges behind changing the name, which reflects the pragmatic considerations for the rejection. These two examples suggest that a consultative approach to naming, one where people could propose names which are taken up by the MRTC, did not happen. From the MRTC’s perspective, the goals of efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and practicality may be compromised by adopting the names preferred by commuters. Such a trend is indicative of Singapore’s *political* pragmatism (Ooi, 2010), where personal freedoms, for instance the freedom to suggest station names, may sometimes be sacrificed for economic and social goals, in this case, the smooth running of the MRT system, especially in its early years.

Although station names should ideally recognise the history of the areas they serve, and, in this case, *Tanglin Halt* and *Kampong Glam* were believed by residents to better reflect the name and identity of the heritage-laden neighbourhoods near the station, the suggestion was rejected by the MRTC. In the case of *Bugis*, the name was believed to better reflect the historical geography of the station, which raises the question of whose history, heritage, and/or culture gets marked in the naming process? The explanations provided by the MRTC reflect a top-down decision-making process: names are decided by the MRTC and requests for name changes based on culture and heritage are often ignored in favour of a more pragmatic and prominent station name. In the 1980s, the name *Bugis* was based on what the MRTC saw as the name that best represented the location of the station, which was then explained as helping commuters to easily identify the station. While station names have some degree of heritage-connoting function in the sense that they linguistically encode the history and heritage of the surrounding area, it is eventually superseded by the pragmatic, referential function of names to identify the area it serves.

It was not just the decision to build the MRT that was analysed using dollars and cents. The naming and/or renaming of stations could also be justified on economic grounds, particularly, as Singapore sought to market itself as a tourist destination and generate tourist income, especially since tourist arrivals from Western

countries formed a significant proportion of tourist arrivals in Singapore during the 1980s (Hornby & Fyfe, 1990). For instance, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB) suggested in 1985 that two MRT stations be renamed after nearby tourist attractions. It was proposed that *Outram Park* be renamed as *Chinatown*, and *Victoria* was to be rechristened *Bugis* as it was near the popular tourist spot, *Bugis Street* (“STPB suggests renaming”, 1985). A year later, the MRTC announced that *Victoria* station would take the name *Bugis* in line with the STPB’s suggestion and rationale. However, the corporation decided against the STPB’s name change for *Outram Park*, arguing that “the station is not located at Chinatown” (“Three MRT stations to be renamed”, 1986, p. 15). Yet, the MRTC did not abandon the name altogether, noting that *Chinatown* would be a possible station name if the MRTC decided to build a north-east line that would start at *Outram Park*, pass through *Chinatown*, and move towards *Hougang* and *Punggol*. This reality materialised as *Chinatown* became a station along the NEL and DTL, serving the ethnic district and tourist attraction of the same name. One can see how station names fit in to Singapore’s pragmatic identity that is based on the need to generate economic growth. The premise of STPB’s proposed name changes was that the new names would better mirror the geographical locations of tourist attractions. That the identity of these places as tourist sites is reflected in the station name also helps tourists to find their way — they know and have a correct impression that the station helps them to get to the tourist attraction, which encourages them to visit these sites due to better connectivity, and thus boosts the economy.

The renaming of the *Polytechnic* MRT station to *Dover* is another story showing how station names get caught up with the pragmatic national identity centring on economic realism. In 1997, a new MRT station along the EWL was announced. Serving primarily students of the nearby Singapore Polytechnic, the *Polytechnic* station was to be built just beside the polytechnic (“MRT station for poly”, 1997). This resulted in some pushback from the public as Singaporeans wrote to the local main newspaper, *The Straits Times*, to criticise the decision. They argued that students who commuted to the polytechnic were well-served by two existing stations, *Buona Vista* and *Clementi* (Kua, 1997). Others disapproved of the use of taxpayers’ money to build an MRT station that catered to students of one school (Leong, 2002). Although the LTA eventually went ahead with the construction, the station was renamed *Dover*, after the nearby *Dover Road*. To some Singaporeans, it would seem highly impractical and irrational to use public money to construct an MRT station named after an educational institution, which was served by two existing MRTs.

That Singapore’s MRT system has become a vehicle for the pragmatic ideology comes as no surprise. It is not just station names and the naming authorities that get caught up with pragmatism, but transport operators’ decisions that get

framed in realist economic terms as well. A notable example would be the decision to close *Buangkok* MRT along the NEL. *Buangkok* can be translated as ‘united countries’ and is a Teochew name, named after the former Singapore United Rubber Plantation, 万国 wàn guó ‘multi nations’ in Chinese. The transport operator running the NEL, SBS Transit, announced in June 2003 that *Buangkok* MRT station would not open with the rest of the NEL for financial reasons (Chua, 2003). Furthermore, SBS Transit cited the absence of housing developments within a 400-metre radius for its decision. It urged those within the area to use the more popular stops of *Sengkang* and *Hougang* (*Buangkok* is sandwiched between these two MRT stations). This argument was repeated by the LTA, who defended the decision to build *Buangkok* station despite not using it; the LTA said that it was cheaper to build all stations along the NEL at one go, and despite not opening *Woodleigh* and *Buangkok*, it was the best way to use public funds. Angry letters poured in; the MP for the area, Charles Chong, described SBS Transit’s last-minute notice as “disgusting” and within a month of the announcement, impassioned emails from at least 35 resident groups were sent to Chong (Chua, 2003). A local resident who just moved into the area wrote that “[...] SBS Transit owes all the residents in the area, an explanation for disclosing the news at such an ‘opportune’ time” (Chua, 2003). This was a shock to most residents when SBS Transit had guaranteed in January 2003 that the station would not be shut. Further appeals and petitions yielded no result, although a prominent minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, was greeted by eight cardboard cartoons of white elephants when he visited the area in 2005. While it is interesting that the station name became synonymous with the lack of purposeful use (rendering the station as a literal and metaphorical white elephant), what is more apparent is how the pragmatism and economic realism has crept not just into the naming of stations but into the decision to open or shut them as well. One can witness how the naming operations and broader processes in the MRT system are governed by pragmatism. In the case, the decision by SBS Transit (and to some extent, the LTA) was motivated by a profit-always-prevails strategy: the extra costs (and possibly lower revenues) brought about by low footfall and the lack of a sizeable group of commuters in the immediate vicinity meant that the station remained shuttered despite being already built, much to the chagrin of commuters, whose writing in and petitions did nothing to change the minds of SBS Transit and LTA.

6. CONCLUSION

In sum, the authors examined the station names of 142 Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations across Singapore’s five fully-operational MRT lines. The aims were two-fold: to determine the common naming strategies of Singapore’s MRT stations,

and to analyse features of Singapore's socio-political and linguistic identity through a study of the station names. Associative names were the most common given that they identify the station through prominent landmarks surrounding the station which helps in urban commuters' wayfinding process. Other common naming strategies include descriptive, where the station describes aspects of the area such as the activities, economic trades, land uses, or common plants found in the locality, and eponymous names after people or organisations. Hence, a station name can index localness, not just by including local languages or having local place and personal names, but also by describing the local characteristics of an area. Less common naming patterns include borrowed names, where the station is named after a foreign language, such as the case of *Buona Vista* (named in the Italian language), concept, or place; legends and anecdotes, where the station is named after a story; and occurrent names, where the station is named after a historic event that occurred in the vicinity.

We have argued that station names reflect the state's language and socio-political policies. On the linguistic front, Singapore's language-in-education policies has resulted in a language shift towards English. As names reflect cognitive schema and experiences of commuters, it is not surprising that Singaporeans' languages of proficiency and their educational backgrounds intersect as the inhabitants overwhelmingly suggest and vote for English-oriented names in newer MRT lines where commuters have a stake in deciding their preferred names. Notwithstanding, similar to MTLs indexing one's ethnicity and cultural heritage in the education system, MTL-based toponyms mark the area's history and heritage in linguistic terms. One can see the identity-building and heritage-preserving functions of station names in the context of Singapore. Yet, Singapore's pragmatic socio-political identity means that the practical, referential function of names takes precedence over the cultural dimensions of station names.

In some cases, existing station names might also be renamed to help tourists better identify the tourist site and hence, attract more tourists to the area, as it was the case with *Victoria*. It is noteworthy that the Singaporean MRT system does not undergo the same type of toponymic commodification as other rail systems, e.g. those in Dubai and Winnipeg, where naming rights are sold to huge corporate sponsors in a "a rent-seeking practice that transforms the symbolic capital of place into the economic capital of the 'toponym-as commodity'" (Rose-Redwood, Sotoudehnia & Tretter, 2019, p. 848). Notwithstanding, the renaming of Singaporean stations according to tourist sites accords these stations public visibility. The prestige of being associated with a particular tourist attraction can be turned into economic capital when tourists, because of better connectivity and accessibility, visit these sites. Such economic capital is aligned with Singapore's pragmatism, where socio-political policies are made with an economic end in mind.

In sum, this paper aims to be a useful starting point in incorporating both traditional and critical toponymic perspectives in toponyms. As toponyms are “cultural vehicles of language and history” of an area (Basik, 2020, p. 2), the authors have built on previous research to analyse the languages and naming practices of station names. However, there is no apolitical way of naming places because, as we have seen, the naming process is closely tied to issues of language-in-education and socio-political policies, which in turn shape the identity of the city-state as reflected in the names of MRT stations. Ultimately, this promotes a greater understanding of language, culture, and society through a holistic analysis of the naming practices and decisions surrounding station names found in urban locales.

ABBREVIATIONS

BEP	— Bilingual Education Policy
CCL	— Circle Line
CLCPRC	— Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee
CRL	— Cross Island Line
DTL	— Downtown Line
EWL	— East West Line
HDB	— Housing and Development Board
JRL	— Jurong Region Line
LTA	— Land Transport Authority
MRT	— Mass Rapid Transit
MRTC	— Mass Rapid Transit Corporation
MOE	— Ministry of Education
MTLs	— Mother Tongue Languages
NEL	— North East Line
NHB	— National Heritage Board
NParks	— National Parks
NSF	— National Salvation Front
NSL	— North South Line
STPB	— Singapore Tourist Promotion Board
TEL	— Thomson East Coast Line
URA	— Urban Redevelopment Authority

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SUMMARY

FROM *PASIR RIS* TO *PIONEER*: SINGAPORE’S MASS RAPID TRANSIT (MRT) STATION NAMES IN RELATION TO ITS IDENTITY

This article examines the station names of 142 Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations across Singapore’s five fully operational MRT lines using primary sources (digitised newspapers, maps, and press releases) and secondary sources (scholarly research on Singapore place names and information from government agencies). There are two research objectives: firstly, to determine the common naming strategies of Singapore’s MRT station names, and secondly, to analyse features of Singapore’s socio-political and linguistic identity by studying these names. Common naming patterns of Singapore’s station names include associative names, where the station is named after nearby physical or man-made features; descriptive names, where the name describes a particular aspect of the area; and eponymous names, where the station is named after a famous person or entity. We argue that station names reflect the state’s language and socio-political policies and shed deeper light on some of the complex and contradictory forces at play in the nation’s linguistic and socio-political identity. Singapore’s language shift towards English is evident as English is frequently used to name stations, particularly among newer MRT lines, where the public can suggest and vote on station names. At the same time, there are toponyms in local languages like Malay that serve as indexes of localness of the area around the station, showing the cultural dimension that station names have as metaphors for the area’s history and heritage. Yet, Singapore’s pragmatic socio-political identity ultimately means that the practical, referential function of names takes precedence over the cultural functions of naming.