

# **Words in Asia**

**A report on the 4<sup>th</sup> Asialex conference, Singapore, 1-3 June 2005**

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Singapore is an easy city. In contrast to many Asian cities, the pavements are broad, clean and relaxing to stroll along. Maps, in English, are available everywhere, and the street signs are in Latin script and easy to follow. The eye is treated to soaring skyscrapers or pretty old houses or vividly decorated temples at every turn.

Like the city, the conference was elegant, impeccably organised, and with delicious things to eat at every juncture. It was a packed three days, with streams for lexicography, sociolinguistics and literature, brought together under the title of “Words in Asian Cultural Contexts”.

The opening plenary was a welcome contribution from the giant of Asian cultural contexts: mainland China. Prof. Yihua Zhang for Guangdong showed us how the Chinese are using new technologies to combine traditional methods of word formation with the latest innovations, mixing characters and letters and numbers to make new Chinese words. The participant list showed just two people present from mainland China, which made it all the more welcome that one of them set the conference off to a vigorous start.

To treat Chinese as a single language is to sweep rather a lot under the carpet, and Hong Kong’s official policy “biliterate and trilingual” acknowledges that while there is, to a first approximation, one written language, the same cannot be said for the spoken language: Hong Kongers need to be able to read and write in Chinese and English, and to be able to speak in Cantonese (the local Chinese language), Putonghua (the official, Beijing-based form of the spoken language) and English. For us Europeans, with alphabets deep in our consciousness, this in itself is a challenge to comprehend, but for Jacqueline Lam, Lan Li and Tom McArthur it is much more. It is project of preparing a bi-tri dictionary.

English language teaching was the topic of many talks, particularly from Japan. (Although there were twenty-three talks from Japan, twenty were about ELT. Of the other three, one was on Japanese and Turkish, one evaluated a monolingual Japanese resource by comparison with English ones, and the third was by an Englishman.) It was the use of new technology that was most intriguing. Consider, for example, the comment from the floor following Shigeru Yamada’s presentation on web-based EFL dictionaries: “COBUILD used to be available on-line but Collins took it down because it was too popular”. It is true that extracting a revenue stream from the web is a

challenge, but nonetheless, as the rest of the world scrambles for as many web hits as it can possibly get, I can't help but sense an ostrich at work.

Prof. Yukio Tono chaired a session on handheld electronic dictionaries in Japan, with contributions from Seiko and Casio. The handhelds are rapidly coming to dominate the market. (Some schoolteachers require all their students to have one.) We heard about Seiko's Pop Song Translation competition, in which Japanese schoolchildren were invited to translate five chart-topping English songs into Japanese. They had 18,000 entries. Their study concludes "Up until now, we designed electronic dictionaries the same way as Pocket Dictionaries, however, for the future, we should consider the user interface to inspire users' learning activity".

While the lexicography stream was the most relevant for most Euralex members, the other aspects offered complementary insights: a paper by Richard Powell explored how the transition from English to Malay as the language of the law in Malaysia is the subject of Government-sponsored terminological activity, but also raises questions of conservatism and status in the legal profession: will a lawyer be taken as seriously if they speak Malay? What strategies are there for lawyers to add weight to their arguments, and is there a status advantage, however slight, in speaking English? These sorts of questions are also close to the surface in Singapore, a multilingual society with four official languages (Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil). English is the lingua franca, and a large share of Singaporeans have English (or the local variant, Singlish) as mother tongue. I discovered an interesting relationship between Chinese-descended Singaporeans speaking and writing Chinese: while they will operate freely in spoken Chinese, the number of school hours required for learning a large vocabulary of characters is not easily found in an English-based school curriculum, so many Chinese-descended people are not literate in Chinese but only in English.

While Asian talks and themes were central, there was nothing exclusive about it. The two dictionary publishing systems presented were from South Africa (Gilles-Maurice de Schryver's Tshwanelex) and New Zealand (Dave Moskovitz's Matapuna). The final plenaries were from an Australian (Susan Butler, exploring the English of Southeast Asia, with its rich mix of coinings of thoroughly mixed parentage), a Chinese American (Lily Wong Fillmore, on the fearsome obstacles non-native English speakers face in the US education system) and an American (Charles Fillmore, showing how lexical semantics works with syntax and discourse structure to build the meanings that language exists to convey).

Asia is not an easy concept. With half the world's population, stretching (geographically and culturally) from Israel in the West to Japan in the East (with Australia and New Zealand semi-detached to the South), with China and India moving to dominate global capitalism while, across much of the continent, Islamic values are key, a unifying principle is hard to find. Yet the conference made sense of the diversity. It was good to find presentations from Kuwait, Israel and Iran (the local team are to be applauded for their commitment in obtaining visa clearance for the Iranian delegate). While India

had few delegates, it will host the next conference, in Chennai (formerly Madras) in 2007. Post-colonialism, political and economic systems with histories of recent trauma and question marks over their stability, the meeting of ancient cultures and languages in contexts of rapid, sometimes explosive, economic growth and state-of-the-art technology, that was the Asia I saw at Asialex.

Singapore is pre-eminently a meeting-point of trading routes around Asia, and the view from the conference hotel (once you were high enough to see over the other skyscrapers) was of the biggest port in the world –thousands upon thousands of bright-coloured containers stretching over a vast acreage in the tropical sunlight, the sea beyond dotted with ships carrying wares to all corners of the world. The conference charted how words, too, travelled, and changed, and brought about change. My sincerest thanks to Anne Pakir and her team, and the National University of Singapore, for organising a very rich and thought-provoking conference.