CATHERINE LIM

Romancing the Language

A Writer's Lasting Love Affair with English

I had fallen head over heels in love with a foreign language that others in my community were indifferent to, had grudgingly learnt or positively hated. I embraced the English language fully, wanting to learn everything about it, to celebrate it and serve it, like the completely enamoured and enslaved lover.

This delightful collection of essays by Catherine Lim explores her love affair with the English language through her stories and anecdotes about her relationship with the language.

In the author's own words, "This book is primarily to satirise (and also to celebrate) my special relationship with the English Language … I actually want the reader to smile a little and think, 'That's vintage Catherine Lim, a mix of wit and bluster and showing off!'"

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a collection of essays

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Mother Tongue

It's said that even if you speak several languages, there's only one in which you live — your mother tongue.

The language in which I live, breathe, think and dream is, by that definition, not the Hokkien of my parents and their parents, and their parents' parents, all the way back to the southern Chinese province of Fukien, where we came from, so long ago. It is English. English is my mother tongue in the fullest, most meaningful sense of the word. I started speaking it only when I was already six, well past that narrow window of time during which, according to the psychologists, children pick up any language they hear and speak it fluently, effortlessly.

Mother tongue. That name is far more appealing than its prosaic synonyms of 'native language' or 'first language'. For it has a resonance all its own, with its powerful combination of two primordial images that evoke strong emotion — the first, at the individual level, of the biology of birth and bonding; and the second, at the highest level of the human species, the evolutionary development of language, over thousands of years, that has made our species unique on the face of the planet.

The two images come together, movingly, in the universal language of motherese, the first speech sounds that a baby hears from its mother, as their faces are drawn close together in smiling wonderment, establishing a permanent link between language, need and identity, in whatever diverse paths the combined interactions of these three forces will take throughout the individual's life. The importance of motherese must have been the impetus behind UNESCO's establishment of International Mother Language Day which takes place on 21 February.

There could have been something of the emotional impact of motherese in my first contact with English when I attended a convent school at the age of six, in the little town of Kulim in the north of peninsular Malaysia, then called Malaya. The sheer excitement of the new language had instantly relegated the Hokkien of my birth and upbringing to secondary position. It seemed that I was walking into a brave new world. By about the age of ten, I had not only learnt to speak the language of the colonial masters fluently, but had become fully aware of its political and socio-economic power that my native Hokkien could never aspire to.

This awareness had made me, alas, even at that age, a most unlikeable snob and prig whose behaviour, in today's open-minded, eclectic and egalitarian society, would be roundly — and justifiably — censured on social media. The self-consciousness had actually led me to conduct a secret research on many of my schoolmates, mainly during the school recess which lasted about twenty minutes when we could talk freely in the school playground. My sense of social superiority made me see an unmistakable

correlation between their parents' low social status and the absence of an English education. Their fathers were mainly labourers, rubber tappers, peons, coffeeshop attendants, hawkers, lorry drivers, poultry or fish sellers in the town's only market, ticket sellers or attendants in the town's only cinema, shopkeepers, managers of small family businesses, then later perhaps owners themselves of small businesses such as the laundry or groceries business, on an excruciatingly slow ascent in the claim to prosperity and social status.

One classmate never wanted it to be known that her father was a trishaw pedaller. Every morning he sent her to school in his trishaw before he pedalled off to earn his living taking other schoolchildren to their schools. One day, when she had forgotten to take her pocket money from him to buy the usual rice bun to eat during the school recess, he called after her loudly, in the full view and hearing of her classmates, and she turned, red-faced with shame and anger, to walk back slowly and pick up the small coin from his outstretched palm.

It would only be much later that I realised that a more worthwhile subject of study, for which socio-economic status was not at all relevant, was human relationship itself, and its basis in human nature. I wanted to explore in depth the relationships between parents and children, husbands and wives, men and women, the rich and the poor, in all their complexities, conflicts and subtle ironies. But as a schoolgirl, I could only feel the pain and embarrassment of my classmate whose father never went to school, much less an English school, and had to support his family through one of the humblest

forms of livelihood, on a par with road-sweeping and garbage collecting.

My own father had a reasonable English education that enabled him to earn a living as an accountant. English was not his mother tongue, as it was mine. But he spoke it fluently enough, although his education in English fell far short of the kind that was necessary to pave the way towards a social standing and elitism, which could hope to match, but even then only remotely, that enjoyed by the British community. These lived in exclusive bungalows with large gardens and did their shopping at Robinson's in Penang, rather than at the modest stores in Kulim. The kind of education that dared aspire to this lifestyle had to be of the advanced type, indeed, so advanced as to be beyond the reach of the majority.

For a start, it necessitated going through several stages of the educational system, which was based strictly on the British model. Each stage was more demanding than the preceding one, so that by the end of the whole process, none of the cohorts from the beginning would be left. All would have fallen by the plebeian wayside. It was like an arduous ascent to a mountain peak that remained haughtily beyond reach.

The strenuous educational system started with primary education lasting six years. Halfway through, a number from my Primary One cohort had left, for a variety of reasons: inability to continue paying the monthly school fees and other school expenses, the necessity to stay home to do the housework in place of the mother who had once again given birth, the need to help out at the father's noodles stall in the market, or simply the need to

drop out of an education based on a foreign language that was just too difficult to learn. One classmate left because of illness brought on by malnutrition; another, aged twelve, was asked to leave because the nuns suspected she was pregnant.

The secondary school phase, lasting four years, saw more dwindling of numbers. Several of my classmates left to take up jobs as waitresses or to get married. If we managed to make it through secondary school, our education culminated in the taking of the all-important General Certificate of Education examination, administered by the University of Cambridge, where the exam papers were sent to be marked and graded. By that time, candidates would have been sixteen or seventeen years old, and poised to take their place in the working world.

The Cambridge Certificate was invaluable as a means, in a certificate-conscious society, to get any job that required the ability to speak and read in English, such as in a post office or a bank. Such jobs were few and were won only after strong competition. Getting a good grade certified by the Cambridge Examinations Syndicate greatly improved the candidate's chances. It was, moreover, rewarded by much family pride and congratulatory good wishes from neighbours.

There was a girl in our town, several years my senior, who, when she found out that she had failed in the exam, locked herself in her room and committed suicide by repeatedly stabbing her throat with a pair of scissors. Her grieving parents took the trouble of getting an English-educated neighbour to fake a Cambridge Certificate, meticulously copied from a real one, to place in the coffin with her.

Fortunately for me, my good grade in the Cambridge exam paved the way to the higher education I coveted. By this stage, I was the only one left of the original cohort to make it to university, supported all the way by modest scholarships and money earned from giving private tuition to Chinese-educated students who felt, perhaps with a twinge of resentment, that a working knowledge of the foreign language was necessary at some stage in their careers.

The highest point of an English education (which I never achieved) was its continuation and culmination in the birthplace of the language itself, that is, Great Britain. It was the dream and ambition of many to get into one of the prestigious colleges or universities there, and return home with even more burnished certificates, diplomas or degrees. The ultimate desire, buried deep in the Malaysian psyche, was to get a medical degree and come home with the prestigious appellation of 'Dr' attached to the name. A 'Dr Tan Oon Teik' or a 'Dr A.S. Sinnathamby' was, by virtue of that title, superior to a mere 'Mr James Williamson' or 'Mr Arthur McCullough'.

If the ambitious young doctor, returning to his hometown, soon set up his own clinic, his proud parents could die happy. I remember a man who insisted that his son's name on the sign plate outside his clinic was not conspicuous enough. He wanted the 'DR' to be stretched out to a full 'DOCTOR', spelt out in bold capital letters. One day he got very annoyed with a Malay *mee rebus* seller who had parked his large cart outside the clinic, not only blocking sight of the sign plate, but degrading it by close proximity to the rickety cart piled with cheap-looking yellow noodles and vegetables. The man angrily waved the

offender away with a string of English expletives he had picked up from his son.

I also remember a neighbour, a middle-aged woman who never referred to her son, a graduate from a medical college in Scotland, other than as *lo koon* which was Hokkien for 'doctor'. The maidservant was told precisely and frequently that *lo koon* wanted to eat this or that, that *lo koon* didn't like his shirts starched too much. One day the maidservant absentmindedly put one of the doctor's shirts in the large family washtub in which there was already a pile of used female undergarments, thereby violating the tradition that strictly forbade such close contact and contamination. She was severely scolded by the mistress of the house. "Don't you dare do that again. Do you want to bring bad luck to *lo koon*?" His name had become forever submerged by the honorific.

The medical profession was the crème de la crème in society. The few doctors in Kulim drove along the town's one main road, in a Ford or Morris Minor, alongside bicycles, trishaws and the occasional bullock cart. They ate in the best local restaurants and never in the open-air food stalls in the marketplace, where sometimes the rickshaw pedaller, who kept his place at the bottom of the totem pole, squatted barefoot on a bench, and finished his bowl of steaming boiled rice in seconds, shovelling it into his mouth with chopsticks that moved so fast you saw only a blur. The doctors were not necessarily disdainful of the crude, simple folk but said they really enjoyed the steaks, sausages and pork chops in the one or two restaurants specially set up to cater to the British community nostalgic for home food, and with plenty of money to spend for it.

Dr Thong, one of my father's friends, regularly dined at a restaurant reputed to provide the best western food in town. It was originally called 'Lock Kee Restaurant', but the good doctor had persuaded the owner, Ah Bah, to change the name to 'Lucky Restaurant'. Ah Bah, whose English was limited to polite greetings, salutations and apologies of "Goo eev-vening, Lok-tor Thong", "Goo bye, Meester and Meesus Lobinson", "Tank you velly much", "Sol-ee, pe-lease execute me, my Eeng-lis not so good", was amiable enough, moreover, to allow the doctor to commemorate a great British royal event by changing the name of his wife's family business from 'Chia Soon Coffee Shop' to 'Coronation Place'.

As the ultimate gesture of benign patronage, Dr Thong told Ah Bah that from henceforth he would call him 'Johnny'. Ah Bah laughed loudly and good-naturedly, revealing a full set of gold teeth that he was secretly determined to keep, despite the doctor advising him, with a sad shake of the head, to replace with proper teeth, as gold teeth had long since lost their value as a status symbol.

Once Dr Thong invited a British couple he had gotten to know, a Mr and Mrs Graham, to dine with him at the Lucky Restaurant. As they ate and laughed heartily, a little group of the town's urchins clustered at the doorway to look at the sumptuous-looking pork chops, covered thickly with gravy and surrounded by luscious potatoes and green peas, that Ah Bah had expertly cooked and was now placing in front of his guests. The urchins, young boys with dirty bare feet and wearing only rough black cotton trousers held up with string, stared, gaped and

gawked at the exotic fare, scratching their backs and armpits where the mosquitoes had bitten. The aroma of the good stuff emboldened them to take deep breaths and make excited comments to each other. Dr Thong said, with a great show of annoyance, "Johnny, please shoo them away. How can we eat properly with them staring like that!" Ah Bah rushed at them, shouting some dialect curses, and they fled. "The riff-raff of the town," said the doctor apologetically to his guests.

In one of my stories years later, set in Singapore, the protagonist is a Dr John Thong who speaks impeccable Queen's English. But his wife (whom he was obliged to marry because her businessman father had financed his medical studies in the UK) speaks a bad, ungrammatical local variety called Singlish. He is thoroughly ashamed when she speaks loudly and cheerfully at the classy formal functions to which men are expected to bring their wives. Back home, he vents his irritation:

"Why must you keep talking endlessly? Weren't you in the least bit aware that Mrs Ramachandran wasn't at all interested?"

"Why? Cannot talk at party — uh? So what to do? Eat and eat. Get more and more fat, uh? The food this time not so good, I tell you. I tell Mrs Lamachanlan, and she agree. Prawns — aiyah — not porperly cook, I tell you!"

"Could I ask you urgently to refrain in future from raising your voice and laughing so loudly? There are important, respectable people around. And don't gossip so much. It's not at all becoming of a woman with a husband who commands no small respect in society."

"Aiyah, lespect, what lespect. What gossip? I never gossip,

say bad thing about people. And what, cannot laugh at party, meh? Everybody laugh, why you never kee-ticise them?"

"They talk and laugh like civilised people. You talk and laugh like a fishwife. Do you know you are a source of great embarrassment to me?"

"All-light, all-light! Next time you don't ask me go to any party. You go, I don't go. If people ask, say your wife speak low class Eng-lis, not your good high class Eng-lis. You know what? People like better to listen to me. This Mrs Ludoff Carventish — her name very hard to pornounce — she say she enjoy listen to me. You so prr-oud and show-off. Nobody like listen to you, see?"

Head over Heels

From a young age, I saw that the Chinese community in Kulim was split into two camps — the English-educated, English-speaking minority, on one side; and, on the other, the dialect-speaking majority who had never gone to an English school or had dropped out after a few years. The two groups, facing each other across an unbridgeable socio-economic chasm, could not have differed more in their names, speech, dress, behaviour, occupations, manners and sense of identity.

"Roland Chow — you mean that man over there, standing by the pillar? His name is Roland Chow?"

"Yes."

"No, it can't be! He's wearing a singlet and khaki shorts, and he's picking his teeth!"

"Yes, that's Roland."

"Listen, he's shouting in vulgar Teochew to someone across the road. You MUST be mistaken."

"No, I'm not."

"Does he know how to pronounce his own name? I bet he calls himself 'Loleng Chow'. What does he do, for goodness' sake?"

Ah, the Treachery of the English Language

A murderer was caught, not by the squad of trained detectives assigned to bring him to justice, but by English grammar.

The man had been a suspect in the murder of his wife who had gone missing. The detectives had sternly questioned him at various times, hoping that mounting pressure would cause him to make a slip in the story he had repeatedly told them about how she had gone missing. But the story stayed the same.

He said that his wife had gone shopping at the Prima supermarket at about ten in the morning, saying she would be back for lunch by one. She had called from Prima at about noon to say she would be a little late. He had waited till two, then had driven to the supermarket to do a search, and had ascertained, by talking to some of the sales assistants, that she had indeed been there. He called some of her close friends whom she might have visited after the shopping, but apparently none had seen her. Finally, in desperation, at about six in the evening, he decided to contact the police. His story was supported by alibis all the way.

He looked very distraught when some relatives came to comfort him and said tearfully, "She was such a good wife. She always took such good care of me. I will miss her badly."

Was such a good wife. *Took* good care.

He had used the Past Tense. But the wife had been reported to be only missing, not dead. It could only mean one thing: He knew she was dead. And that could only mean one thing: He had killed her. He had been betrayed by English grammar.

The Past Tense sets traps, not only for murderers, but also for liars.

There was a man who no longer loved his wife, but had to lie several times a day with the three affirming words 'I love you' because she demanded to hear them. She was one of those women for whom the ability to vocalise love was its very proof. The lying was very painful to him, for he was a very truthful man who couldn't bear to be guilty of the smallest falsehood. But he was also a peace-loving man, and the thought of upsetting his wife who loved him excessively was simply unbearable. He had to find a way out of the excruciatingly painful position. And, to his great relief, he did. He worked out a plan which he followed meticulously.

Whenever she exclaimed to him "I love you!", he reciprocated immediately with the same affirmation, with the same degree of enthusiasm, as she expected and desired. It pleased her immensely. She kept up this ritual throughout the day, so that their bedroom, the bathroom, the sitting room, the kitchen, indeed every part of the house, became love's echoing chamber. If she could have

shouted out the words from the rooftop, she would have expected an instant response from him looking up from the ground. Such was her obsession. But he didn't mind at all, thanks to his masterplan.

Unknown to him, it was about to unravel. For suddenly the wife began to notice something very puzzling about his responses. They seemed to be made only under very precise, very odd circumstances, as if some force was directing them. For instance, he uttered "I love you" loudly in response to hers only when he was in the shower, but not when he stepped out to dry himself and get dressed. When he drove her to her mother's house on her daily visits there, he uttered them only when he was starting the car, but not once afterwards, during the long drive. At a party to celebrate her fortieth birthday, when she turned to him before cutting the cake and said cheerfully, in everyone's hearing, "I love you," he remained silent, much to her distress. But seconds later, amidst the loud cheering and clapping of hands after the cake-cutting, he said those three precious words, to her relief.

It was all so very mysterious to her! Why was he so inhibited at times, so forthcoming at others? Was something wrong with him, with her, with both of them?

She consulted a marriage counsellor who told her not to worry, as the fact that her husband responded at all after so many years of marriage was proof that he really loved her. She consulted a medical specialist who explained that it was likely a sign of the onset of male menopause. She consulted a behavioural psychologist who said it was probably some habit that had its roots in childhood. She

consulted her church pastor who advised her that even if she suspected her husband was having an affair, she should forgive him.

She had the good sense to consult a linguist. The language expert explained that the matter had to do with English grammar. It was English grammar that her husband had had recourse to, in order to handle a terrible dilemma he had found himself in. The dilemma would have meant either telling a lie which would have been impossible for him to do, or upsetting his wife, which would have been just as impossible. But English grammar was in possession of a special feature that had enabled him, to his great relief, to get out of his quandary.

This helpful feature was the Past Tense form. It had enabled him to do simultaneously the two things he had thought impossible. That is, it had enabled him to tell his wife the truth, the hard truth that his love for her now belonged to the past: *I loved you then. I loved you when we first dated; I loved you for your sweet, soft, gentle voice; I loved you for your beautiful, sexy, slim figure*.

It had also, in the most marvellous way, enabled him, at the same time, to sound as if he were telling her what she wanted to hear. This was because the tiny *d* sound of the Past Tense of the verb 'love' could not be heard amid the loud sounds of falling water in the shower, of the car engine being started, of the laughter and cheering at the birthday party. So his wife heard only the Present Tense of 'I love you'. Our good man had been saved by verb inflection in the English language.

But clearly not from his wife's impending wrath, once the linguist had explained everything to her. Suddenly

this language expert grew alarmed that the very expertise he had prided himself on, would be the cause of blame from an irate husband, if the wife should go on a rampage of fury, as she was likely to do. With a mounting sense of urgency to pre-empt the blame, he rushed to meet up secretly with the husband, and urged him to do the one thing that was sure to appease the wife: to say 'I love you!' clearly, unequivocally. One hundred times, if necessary. "I can't! I can't!" wailed the poor man. The Past Tense was his truth, and the Present Tense would be a lie.

The linguist had an idea. His expertise once again came to his rescue, but in a totally different way. This time, the solution had to do, not with English grammar, but with English pronunciation. He got the husband to practise saying, slowly and correctly, "Isle of Man, Isle of Wight, Isle of Yew", but in a special way, exactly as instructed. The anxious man had to repeat the names of the first two islands silently, in his head only, but when it came to the third island, he had to open his mouth wide and shout it out loud. "Isle of Yew!" *I love you!*

Needless to say, the wife was satisfied and the marriage was saved. The English language could be treacherous, but is ever forgiving of its users, and will tolerate the role of the expert linguist who is only too happy to help the hapless layman negotiate its many pitfalls.

I Am Liking Indian English!

Of the three major ethnic groups in Singapore, the Indians must be the most consistent, prolific and confident speakers of the English language. They are not necessarily more competent speakers than the Chinese or the Malays in their actual use of the language, or show a greater understanding of the rules of usage. Rather, this confidence seems to be the result of something much deeper, that is, race itself. It appears to be an inheritable trait of personality and character, going back through aeons, that is marked by extroversion, expansiveness, sociability and geniality that find natural expression in language, both spoken and written, taking it to amazing heights of eloquence. These qualities have never been part of Chinese conservatism or Malay reticence that is evident in their learning of a foreign language.

Take any equitable sample of Singaporeans who have been through English education in Singapore, and the chances are that the Indian speaker will stand out among his national counterparts. Whether in student clubs, college organisations, trade unions or political parties, Indian representation is disproportionately the greatest,

About the Author

CATHERINE LIM is internationally recognised as one of the leading figures in the world of Asian fiction. The prolific writer and commentator has penned more than 20 books in various genres — short stories, novels, reflective prose, poems and satirical pieces. Many of her works are studied in local and foreign schools and universities, and have been published in various languages in several countries.