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# Frenglish shop signs in Singapore

KENNETH KENG WEE ONG, JEAN FRANÇOIS GHESQUIÈRE AND STEFAN KARL SERWE

Creative and novel blending of French and English in the shop fronts of beauty and food businesses in Singapore

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## Introduction

The presence of French in advertising communication within largely non-French speaking communities has been noted by a few linguists. Haarmann (1984, 1989) found that French is used in Japanese advertisements as ethno-cultural hieroglyphs which connote refinement, poshness, style and tastefulness – stereotypes of France and French culture. The unintelligibility of French to Japanese patrons is perceived as a non-issue, as social or symbolic meanings are deemed to be more vital to attract patrons than denotational meanings. A parallel case was found in British advertisements of food, fashion and beauty businesses where French symbolism or linguistic fetish is seen as attractive to largely non-French, English-speaking patrons (Kelly-Holmes, 2005). Notably, French symbolic meanings are sometimes accompanied by elaborative messages in English. Kelly-Holmes (2005) noted that English is used only where message comprehension is important for explicit communication. Curtin (2009) documented the fact that ‘vogue’ or ‘display’ French shop names favored by high-end restaurants and beauty salons in Taipei occurred concomitantly with vogue English. Vogue English is relatively more ubiquitous across the city’s linguistic landscape due to its connotations being exploited in a wide span of applications vis-à-vis the chic prestige of French, which is tied to food, beauty and fashion businesses. The Taipei case shows that non-idiomatic French is employed as a socio-commercial accessory, similar to the case of decorative English used in Japan (Dougill, 1987) and in Milan, Italy (Ross, 1997). However, a more recent study on Tokyo shop signs gleaned linguistic patterns other than vogue

English and vogue French (MacGregor, 2003), such as French + Japanese and English + French + Japanese. A recent study by Serwe et al. (in press) found that French and French-like shop names are increasingly in currency, with local shop owners keen to stand out and appeal to the increasingly cosmopolitan and sophisticated clientele in Singapore, who are nevertheless overwhelmingly non-French speaking. They further found that French and French-inspired shop signs of food businesses can be classified into four categories, namely, monolingual French, French + another language, French function words + another language, and coinages, noting that there are idiomatic usages and non-idiomatic usages in the first three categories. In this paper, we throw the spotlight on coinages, which we argue are mostly explicable as French-English code-switched blends. We focus on localized nominal concoctions used by shop owners across food and beauty commercial entities within Singapore. We borrowed the term ‘Frenglish’ from Martin’s (2007) study to refer to the French-English blends. However, we noted that Martin’s study focused on the use of English in advertising communication in France, where English is the minority language that is largely sidelined by the Toubon Law. Contrastively, English in Singapore is de facto the national language, while French is a foreign language with few speakers.

## Background to code-switched blends

The process of coalescing parts of two or more source words to form a coinage or neologism has been extensively documented (e.g. Gries, 2004), but studies on code-switched blends, or conjoined

morphemes sourced from at least two languages, are relatively rare. McArthur (2000) documented street and store signs in Zurich and Uppsala which showed what he calls ‘macaronic tendencies’, or the juxtaposition of languages. A prime example he highlighted is *BionaReformhaus*, a name of a health food shop in Zurich. The shop’s name consists of the Greek word formation element *bio-*, from *bios*, and a back clipping, *na*, from Latin *natura*; *reform*, which is of Latin origin; and the German word *haus*. In McCormick and Agnihotri’s (2009) study of multilingual signs in Cape Town and Delhi, they noted an advertisement for a plumber which included two English loanwords, *plumber* and

*phone*, with attached Xhosa morphemes which resulted in *iplumber* and *fownela*. MacGregor (2003) documented two novel English-Japanese-French hybrid forms, namely *Steak House Polaire*, where the word order is Japanese or French although the shop name is in English and it included the French adjective *polaire* (‘polar’); another hybrid form is *Tanning Studio Sole*, where *sole* is the Japanese form of the French *soleil* (the phonetic equivalent in Japanese is *so-ray*). Schlick (2003) found some shop names which are hybrid forms, such as *Last-Minute-Urlaub I’tur*, *Software Dschungel* (English-German) and *Gösser HABAUKUK Cafëbeisl Habakuk* (Austrian German-Hebrew-French). However, the shop names which MacGregor and Schlick labeled as hybrid are not code-switched blends per se.



**KENNETH KENG WEE ONG** is a lecturer at Nanyang Technological University. Concurrently, he is a research associate at the University of the Free State. His research interests are English-Chinese bilingual processing, codeswitching, and computer-mediated

discourse analysis. He is also an Associate Editor of Asian EFL Journal. Email: [ongkww@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:ongkww@ntu.edu.sg)



**JEAN FRANÇOIS GHESQUIÈRE** is a French Language Coordinator at Nanyang Technological University. He is also an official examiner, assessor, and instructor for *Diplôme d’études en langue française (DELF)* and *Diplôme approfondi de langue*

*française (DALF)*, which are administered by CIEP (Centre international d’études pédagogiques) for France’s Ministry of Education. Email:

[JeanFrancois@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:JeanFrancois@ntu.edu.sg)



**STEFAN KARL SERWE** is a researcher and doctoral student at the University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg. Stefan’s research interests lie primarily in the area of (interactional) sociolinguistics and the analysis of multilingual discourse, particularly in

exploring the relationship between language use, identity, religion, and occupation. Email: [stefan.serwe@uni.lu](mailto:stefan.serwe@uni.lu)

## The present project and an ethnolinguistic profile of Singapore

Photographic evidence for this study was collected between 2009 and 2012, and comprised photographed shop signages in various parts of Singapore, in upscale districts and residential heartlands. Our corpus of photographic images of food and beauty shop fronts are augmented by screenshots of commercial websites (where available) of the photographed businesses which are found in Singapore and/or Malaysia. The study excludes international or foreign brands. In this article, we focus on presenting and discussing conspicuous and exemplifying images of shop names in the food and beauty industries which qualify as French-English blends.

Singapore is a cosmopolitan city-state, a first world nation and a multilingual melting pot with four officially recognized languages, namely Mandarin Chinese, Malay, Tamil (representing the three dominant ethnic groups), and English, which is de facto the national language. English has permeated every domain of communication, as it has been the compulsory main medium of instruction in schools for many years, resulting in a growing majority of English-speaking bilinguals. Unreservedly, English is the socio-political and commercial language and is used for gate-keeping in education and jobs (cf. Cavallaro and Serwe, 2010; Ong, 2011; Ong and Zhang, 2010). French, on the other hand, is a foreign language limited to a small pool of speakers in Singapore.

In what follows, we present photographs of shop signages accompanied by a close analysis of shop

names which are mostly English-French blends and their inferred meanings. We also aim to recover the meanings of the source words from English and French, orthographically and phonemically. This study adopts the Linguistic Landscape (LL) framework (e.g. Backhaus, 2007; Gorter, 2006; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009) as the theoretical lens to analyze the shop signs.

## Findings and discussion

One conspicuous French-English blended shop name which we discovered is *Saybons French Food Factory* (see Figure 1). On the shop's website, an explanation for the coinage *Saybons* is offered as follows:

Saybons is inspired from the French phrase – C'est Bon which means 'it's good' in French. To make it a little easier and unique, we anglicized the phrase and added a 's' at the back. Most people should be able to pronounce this one we guess (Saybons French Food Factory, 2011).

We can agree that *Saybon*, sans the *-s* suffix, is the English homophonous mapping of the French expression *c'est bon*, as explained on the shop website. This is in alignment with Ben-Rafael's (2009) principle of the 'presentation of self', which states that a major motivation underlying shop names is to emphasize difference. Using anglicized French sets the business apart from other businesses, which typically use English names. We also agree with the shop's explanation that the phonemic overlap is exploited to render the French expression in a form that can be easily pronounced by most patrons, who are non-French

speakers. This satisfies the principle of good reasons (Ben-Rafael, 2009), which states that diversity must be constrained by local taste and tendencies. However, the addition of the English plural suffix *-s* may not be an anglicized form, as claimed on the shop website, but a non-idiomatic form that is ungrammatical in English and French. The translation of the French expression with the *-s* suffix would be *It is goods*. But the subject complement or adjective *good* cannot be affixed with a plural suffix in English or in French. The apparently frivolous attachment of the suffix *-s* can be construed as both a visual and phonemic marker of linguistic exclusivity or piquancy. This could be seen as a localization of the anglicized French expression. The plural suffix can be seen as adhering to the principle of good reasons (Ben-Rafael, 2009). The Singaporean clientele are English speakers who are familiar with affixes but are unfamiliar with the French expression, so that they do not know that the name is rendered ungrammatical by the *-s* suffix. Furthermore, the plural inflexion of the shop name could be a way to avoid possible trademark infringement, as a web search gleaned a Canadian confectionery business called *Allan Candy Company Limited*, which registered *Saybon* as a trademark.

Figures 2 and 3 present instances of French lexemes paired with an English-French portmanteau *beautiful*. *Belle* is the French adjective for *beautiful*, while *femme* is the French noun for *woman*. *Beau-* in the portmanteau *beautiful* can be seen as an onset syllabic abbreviation or back clipping of the word *beautiful* or the abbreviated French word *beauté*. The second syllable *-ti-* in *beautiful*



Figure 1. Shop name of a French food eatery, Saybons French Food Factory



Figure 2. Shop name of a beauty salon, Belle Beautique

and *boutique* represents a partial phonemic overlap. However, we argue that *beau-*, as used here, is rather associated with the French word *beauté*. *Beauté* is a recurring word in several beauty shop names in Singapore, such as the non-idiomatic French *De Beauté la Salle*, *De Beaute*, *Face a Face: Salon de Beaute*, *Chez Moi: De Beaute*, *De Belle Beaute* and *Point D' Beauté*, and English + non-idiomatic French *Pro Beaute* and *S. Point Beaute de Aesthetics*. The second element *-tique* is the coda syllabic abbreviation or fore-clipping of the word *boutique*, which is etymologically French. Figure 4 shows an English word *devotion* (with an iconic female figure hieroglyphically representing the letter *t*) paired with the same portmanteau *beautique*.

Another notable English-French portmanteau paired with an English word is *Cellnique Paramedical*, a beauty salon for women. Notably, this is a case of a whole word being fused with a fore-clipping, i.e. the English noun *cell* is combined with *-nique*, a coda syllabic abbreviation of the French word *clinique*, to form the portmanteau paired with *paramedical*. We found several shop names which feature the use of *clinique*, such as *Nail Clinique* and *Clinique D'Esthetique*.

*TecLique* is a hybrid restaurant-cum-bar-cum-arcade located along Neil Road, which serves western food with alcoholic drinks,

including French liquor, and has a video game arcade. '*TecLique*' is an unusual blend involving *tec*, an initial syllabic abbreviation or back-clipping of the English word *technology* that noticeably omits the final *h* as in the more common abbreviated form *tech*. *Tec* is coupled with a game control icon hieroglyphically representing the letter *c*, which alludes to the arcade section, and *Lique*, which may be seen as an abbreviation of the French word *liqueur*, in reference to the liquor sold at the bar, by omitting the coda vowel and consonant, which also appears to resemble the letter *L* combined with the French suffix *-ique*. On the visual dimension, the outline of a poured wine bottle on the shop sign suggests that *Lique* is intended as more of an abbreviated form of *liqueur* than as a combination of the letter *L* and the French suffix *-ique*. The latter is devoid of denotational meaning because the *L* combination with the French suffix *-ique*, which is only used to convert nouns into adjectives (the English equivalent is the suffix *-ic*), yields no indexical meaning. Notably, both the former and latter interpretations retain the symbolic association with Frenchness. On the phonemic dimension, *lique* is pronounced very similarly to the coda syllable *-lic*, probably taken from the word *alcoholic*, which can be argued to be the combination of the consonant *L* and the French suffix *-ique* or the English counterpart *-ic*. The syllabic shortening of *alcoholic* also alludes to the sale of alcohol at the restaurant. Notably, the pronunciation of *TecLique* can suggest a person who is addicted to technological games and alcohol, which are the two mainstays of the business. The recombinant view is that the hybridization of technology and French alcohol/liquor is deducible both visually and phonemically.



Figure 3. Femme Beautique, a beauty salon for ladies





Figure 4. Shop front of Devotion Beautique



Figure 5. Cellnique Paramedical's shop signage

*Erabelle* is an English-French exocentric compound which consists of the noun *era* and the French adjective *belle*, to allude to the beauty shop's conceptual theme of 'beauty in an instant' or 'instant beauty', as stated on the parent company's website (ErabellePte Ltd, 2011). It is paired

with the word *prestige*, which is both an English and French lexeme. *Erabelle* as a code-switched or hybrid word is strictly a compound and not a blend as it involves whole words being conjoined as one. Nevertheless, it is classified as a type of English-French coinage found in this study.



Figure 6. TeLique's shop signage



Figure 7. Erabelle Prestige, a beauty spa for women

## Conclusion

Lexical blending is defined by Gries (2004) as a morphological synthesis. However, our brief discussion shows that French-English blends are not entirely morphologically based. Blends can consist of syllabic abbreviations or clippings with or without inter-phonemic overlap (similar sounds of phonemes in two languages). Also, there are partial blends in the case of *Saybons* and *Cellnique* which are whole words conjoined with a suffix and fore-clipping respectively. Novel names of commercial entities can be formed from the fusion

of French/pseudo-French and English – catchy French-inspired neologisms that stand out in the crowd of commercial signages as predicted by the principle of self-presentation, but are moderated by local considerations in alignment with the principle of good reasons. Our findings are consonant with the French linguistic fetish documented in other countries as being tied predictably to the food and beauty industries. French, pseudo-French and French-English shop signs are not limited to upscale districts as in the case of Taipei (Curtin, 2009), but are also found in

residential heartlands, suggesting an increasing competition among businesses to appeal to patrons who are deemed increasingly sophisticated regardless of location in highly urbanized Singapore. The shop names are bidirectional indexicals ipso facto which indicate a global French linguistic fetish in beauty and food industries and a local Singaporean prestige and quality that is attuned to the needs of the local clientele. ■

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