

Ideological dissonances in Singapore's national campaign posters: a semiotic deconstruction

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ABSTRACT

This article probes into the semiotic construction of three posters used in Singapore's national campaigns: the 1983 Productivity, the 1996 Speak Mandarin and the 1995 Courtesy Campaign posters. By unpacking the verbal messages and visual images encoded within these three posters and, more importantly, the interplay between them, the article aims to uncover possible ideological interests, meanings and implications woven into the semiotic fabric of the posters. Employing Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1990 and 1996) framework of 'reading images', the three posters were analysed along the Interpersonal and Ideational dimensions of meaning-construction. The analysis reveals a series of dissonances, discontinuities and disjunctures both within the visual imagery itself and between the visual and the verbal texts, reflecting a substratum of tension existing among the various socio-political and socio-economic ideologies projected by the posters.

KEY WORDS

ideology • national campaigns • posters • semiotics • Singapore

INTRODUCTION

Whether regarded as the art gallery of the high street or eyesore on the highway, poster advertising is a ubiquitous phenomenon in most modern societies. A poster can be considered as the oldest and, in some ways, purest form of advertising because a poster represents what someone has to sell, put up on a wall (Myers, 1999: 96). Whether the object being 'sold' is a car, lifestyle, policy or ideology, posters, because of their high degree of visual impact and visibility, represent perhaps one of the most preferred, and hence prevalent, modes of mass advertising and communication in modern society. Although to many people the most striking aspect of a poster is either the visual element, which is usually the most eye-catching aspect, or the verbal

element, when it occupies a salient position, the essence of a poster is, in fact, the message(s) which it embodies and expresses through an interplay of *both* the visual and verbal elements which enter into its construction. This integration of image and words is more than mere linkage; it is fusion, as 'a true poster will not allow you to remove one element without damaging the design – and the effect' of the other (Bernstein, 1997: 143). A poster aims to arrest, hold, persuade, implant an idea and give specific information. Pictorial elements may achieve the first ends, but text is almost always necessary for the latter. Thus, in judging the poster, there are three considerations: how eloquently do the pictorial elements make their point; how efficiently does the text deliver the specific information; how well are these integrated to create a successful design entity (p. 154)?

This research undertakes to analyse three different posters that have been used in Singapore as part of its government's series of national campaigns to cultivate various practices, attitudes and values among its people. The three campaigns are the Productivity, Speak Mandarin and Courtesy Campaigns. Specifically, my aim is to deconstruct the posters in a bid to unravel the interactions between the verbal messages and visual images in order to uncover possible ideological interests and meanings woven into the semiotic fabric of the posters.

The article is divided into three main sections. The first provides a general background on Singapore and its government's use of national campaigns as part of its nation-building efforts, and describes the theoretical and analytic frameworks that inform and underpin this article; the second and main section focuses on the semiotic analysis of each of the three posters; the third and final section discusses the ideologies implicit within the posters to provide a perspective for understanding the complex socio-political processes involved in the discursive construction of modern Singapore.

BACKGROUND

Singapore and national campaigns

Singapore is a small island-nation in Southeast Asia which gained independence only in 1965. Made up of a largely immigrant population originally from countries like China, Malaysia and India, Singapore is a multiracial, multilingual and multicultural society. Its government, represented by the People's Action Party (PAP) since 1959, has had a major role in moulding and shaping Singapore into what it is today – a modern, efficient and bustling city-state with one of the highest standards of living in Asia. As part of the PAP government's approach to and philosophy on nation-building, national campaigns in Singapore represent one of the most consistent and salient socio-political instruments employed by the government to cohere its pluralistic peoples. In the context of Singapore, a national campaign has been defined as 'a government initiated and inspired movement which has an

organized and formal course of action, used with the intent of arousing public awareness and influencing public behaviour' (Tham, 1986: 41). National campaigns can, therefore, be seen as representing politically motivated strategies for changing behaviour, in the belief that it is in the individual's, society's or the nation's best interest (MITA, 1995: 2).

Over the years, the sheer number, frequency and visibility of national campaigns and the extent to which they have been used to regulate social behaviour in Singapore has led one writer to dub Singapore as a 'campaign country' (Lazar, 2000: 374). The ubiquity, frequency and salience of campaigns become even more incongruous when seen against Singapore's small size and short history. Since it gained independence, there have been numerous campaigns targeted at different aspects of political, social and economic life of Singaporeans. For instance, there have been campaigns aimed at engineering a large-scale language shift by getting over 70 percent of the population to switch from using dialects to Mandarin; campaigns aimed at fostering social values, like courtesy and kindness; campaigns that promote greater individual and corporate productivity; even campaigns that encourage people to get married and have more babies. Since 1959, over 200 national campaigns have been mounted by the various government bodies and statutory boards in Singapore. This averages about five campaigns per year, with some running concurrently over several months and some continuing for more than 20 years. This pervasiveness of campaigns is, I suppose, what makes Singapore a 'campaign country'.

The expansive scope and variety of these national campaigns and the vigour with which they have generally been promulgated reflect the government's commitment to building a society in terms of the values and ideals espoused by these campaigns, values and ideals which every Singaporean is expected to embody and uphold. At the same time, they also reflect the government's conviction of the efficacy of these national campaigns as a medium by which these ideals and values can be valorized, propagated and reinforced. It is, therefore, interesting to look at Singapore's national campaigns as a social practice, unique in the way it has permeated every crevice of life in Singapore. I will accomplish this by examining three of the posters¹ that have been used in the campaigns. Specifically, I am interested in exploring the complex ways in which the verbal messages in the posters interact with the visual imagery, and how these interactions might reveal an underlying tension among the various socio-political and socio-economic ideologies that the Singapore government wants to project through these posters. Before doing that, it is important to explain briefly the theoretical impetus which drives this research and the analytic method chosen to unpack the three posters.

Theory and method of analysis

In this article I undertake a semiotic analysis of the various elements used in the construction of the posters. Semiotics or semiology has been defined as 'A

science that studies the life of signs within society' (Saussure, 1974: 16). With remarkable succinctness, this definition captures the expansiveness of the notion behind the term as well as the vitality and dynamism infused in it. In more specific terms, semiotics is the study of 'semiosis', which refers to the 'processes and effects of the production and reproduction, reception and circulation of meaning in all forms, used by all kinds of agents of communication' (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 261). In this regard, semiotic analysis concerns the communication of meaning as a dynamic and fluid process which transcends the linguistic sign, bringing together the agency, process, reception and effect of meaning and, in this way, offering 'the promise of a systematic, comprehensive and coherent study of communications phenomena as a whole' (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 1).

The value of semiotic analysis also lies in its potential to offer a perspective into the construction of ideology. The term 'ideology' typically alludes to a configuration of beliefs and values ascribed to a particular social, political or cultural sub-group. However, within critical social theory to which the analysis in this article is oriented, the term specifies 'distorted ideational and linguistic representations of economic reality and social relations that have their sources in, and disguise, political and economic functions of class domination' (Luke, 1994: 1642). Hence, within critical social theory, the concept of 'ideology' moves beyond the popular view of it as merely a set of ideas, beliefs or worldview that describes and, perhaps, defines a group of people, to one that sees ideology as a mental framework of preconceived ideas that distorts people's perception and interpretation of the world, concealing, hiding or otherwise obfuscating the truth for the reproduction of power relations in society. 'To study ideology,' writes Thompson (1984: 4), 'is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination.' So what is the link between ideology and semiotics? According to Volosinov (1973: 9–10), the link is quite intimate and intrinsic:

Without signs, there is no ideology ... A sign does not simply exist as a part of reality – it reflects and refracts another reality ... The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Wherever a sign is present, ideology is present, too. Everything ideological possesses semiotic value. [emphasis in original]

Volosinov sees society as actively engaged in a continuous process of struggle and contestations, constantly negotiating and re-negotiating its relations with agencies of power, which in turn assert, affirm and reaffirm their ideological positions through linguistic and other semiotic channels. These dynamic processes of struggle, negotiation and assertion of power and their means of enactment and reproduction are what semiotic inquiry can potentially uncover and unravel. Specifically, the main ideological issues at stake in this article, which I hope to uncover through my analysis of the three

posters, include language, culture, ethnicity, gender and, more broadly, the way in which the government asserts its power and authority over the people of Singapore.

Traditionally, the visual sign has been seen as subordinate to the verbal message. For instance, in his essay, 'Rhetoric of the image', Barthes (1977) argued that the meaning of images (and other semiotic codes) is always related to and, in a sense, dependent upon verbal text. He considered (p. 39) that images are too 'polysemous' and indefinite by themselves – 'a floating chain of signifieds' – and to properly understand them, language has to come to the rescue. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1990), on the other hand, argue against this tyranny of the verbal over the visual and reject the notion that the various semiotic codes, including images, are necessarily impoverished or diminished versions of the 'mastercode', namely verbal language. In fact, it has been argued that modern texts are becoming not only increasingly multimodal but also increasingly visual, as new technologies make it possible to bring visual forms of communication (photographs, book covers, videos, etc.) into contact with traditional print media (Goodman, 1996: 39). Visual literacy will thus become increasingly important and necessary in order for people to process and comprehend the vast and varied information which is becoming available to them and may eventually become 'a matter of survival, especially in the workplace' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996: 3).

Using a framework of analysis grounded in Halliday's (1978 and 1985) theory of language as a social semiotic, Kress and Van Leeuwen present a model of 'reading images' along three dimensions of meaning-making based directly on Halliday's metafunctions. The 'Ideational Metafunction' embodies the representation of ideas and experiences; the 'Interpersonal Metafunction' focuses on the enactment of social relations and the 'Textual Metafunction' probes into the structural organization and positioning of ideas within a text. At the heart of Halliday's systemic-functional theory of language is his view of language, or any semiotic system for that matter, as a system of choice, which allows users to select one particular way of realizing meaning over other potential realizations. In my subsequent analysis of the posters, I shall be using Kress and Van Leeuwen's model, first articulated in their 1990 work and further developed in 1996, as the basis for my analysis and interpretation of the sorts of choices which have been made to communicate the multi-layered meanings manifest in the campaign posters. I shall be focusing primarily on the Interpersonal and Ideational meanings and, following Kress and Van Leeuwen's (re)interpretation of visual imagery as something that can be 'read', I shall be using 'reader' to denote what is more conventionally referred to as the viewer of the pictures in the posters under analysis.

ANALYSIS

The 1983 Productivity poster

First launched in 1981, the National Productivity Campaign was aimed at creating an environment conducive to productivity improvement at the national, industry, company and individual levels in Singapore. In the early 1980s, the world economy was becoming increasingly competitive as more countries tried to plug into the global economy. With an economy which was highly dependent on world trade, the government felt that Singapore had to sharpen its competitive edge in order to keep up, by adopting a strategy of restructuring the economy towards capital, skill and technology-intensive, high-value-added industries. This gave birth to the National Productivity Movement or Campaign. In its early stages, inculcating positive work attitudes and educating the masses on the concept and benefits of teamwork and productivity took top priority, while the later stages of the Campaign aimed at translating 'awareness' into 'action' by focusing on how to make productivity a way of life to encourage 'ownership' of the Campaign.

We shall now examine in some detail a poster which was used as part of the Productivity Campaign in 1983. In this poster (see Figure 1 below), a



Figure 1 The 1983 Productivity Campaign poster. Reprinted with the permission of the Singapore Productivity and Standards Board.

group of 10 people is depicted against a black backdrop, smiling broadly and showing the thumbs-up sign, with the first part of the slogan: '*COME ON, SINGAPORE*' emblazoned in big, red letters and the remaining part: '*TOGETHER WE WORK BETTER*' in smaller, white letters at the top of the poster, with the Mandarin equivalent of the slogan at the bottom of the poster.

Simply reading the 'content' of the visual elements (i.e. what's in the image) obscures the interaction among what Kress and Van Leeuwen refer to as the 'represented participants' (the subjects in the image) and the 'interactive participants' (including both the reader and the image-maker). The nature of this interaction is regulated by the interpersonal relationship that exists among the reader, the image and the image-maker, which is expressed, in part, through the angle from which the image is shot. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1990: 40), if a represented participant is seen from a high angle, then the (implied) relationship between the represented participant and the interactive participants is one in which the latter has power over the former; the reverse is true if the represented participant is seen from a low angle. Looking at the Productivity poster, we realize that the represented participants are depicted from a high angle, which forces the reader to look down at them. At one level, this may appear odd in that the poster is about Singaporeans and targeted at Singaporeans and, therefore, one would expect the image to be created at eye-level to reflect this equality of status rather than from a top-down position, which suggests that the reader is somehow at a higher position than the represented subjects in the image. At another level of interpretation, the high angle elevates the reader's perspective to a high-ground, thereby empowering the reader while diminishing the subjects, making them seem smaller and less significant in relation to the reader's position. This enhanced power can have the effect of creating positive affect in the reader who is then more likely to respond positively to the message(s) communicated by the poster. The use of the high-angle shot is, after all, a common persuasive tactic used by advertisers to portray their products as easily accessible by the empowered potential consumers in order to lull them into accepting and buying the product.

The unequal power structure in the Productivity poster is balanced by the fairly close proximity at which the represented subjects have been depicted, bringing them physically and interpersonally close to the reader. In Kress and Van Leeuwen's terms, the depiction is between a 'medium close' (cutting off the subject approximately at the waist) and a 'close-up' shot (showing the heads and shoulders of the subjects). This narrows the social distance between the reader and the subject, constructing an imaginary affinity and solidarity, and invites the reader to identify with the various individuals depicted in the poster. Because the visual in the poster is shot in rich, saturated colours and is sharply focused, it looks life-like and credible. This parallels the system of grammatical modality which expresses the writer's judgement on the truth or 'credibility' of the representation(s)

contained in a clause. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, the way a visual is presented can also encode this variance in commitment to the truth-value of what is represented in the visual sign. If a painting is depicted in rich, natural tones, it can suggest that the painter is committed to the reality of the painting, while one painted in more muted tones may steer the reader towards a more surreal or stylized reading. Likewise, if a photograph is taken in strong light and is sharply focused, it may mean that the photographer wishes to present the subject in the photograph in as natural and life-like a manner as possible, instead of using soft-focus to create a more dream-like state. Since the people depicted in the Productivity poster are cast in strong light and rich, natural colours, we may infer that this is intended to communicate a strong commitment to the 'reality' presented in the poster. However, the fact that the people in the poster are depicted in a contextual vacuum, appearing to emerge from a black backdrop without any indication of their physical environment, undermines this sense of reality, though the starkness of the black background does make the people stand out more clearly, thereby creating a greater visual impact on the reader.

We turn now to the ideational meaning created by the poster by examining the *visual* system of transitivity, which, like its grammatical counterpart elaborated in Halliday (1985), focuses on the representation of participants, processes and circumstances. Beginning at the level of process types, one observes that the visual image in the poster can be classified as a 'portrait' rather than a 'snapshot'. Portraits are 'conceptual' and 'timeless' while snapshots are 'presentational'. The former is about 'being' and tries to capture some timeless essence, whereas the latter is about 'doing' and 'happening' and tries to capture specific moments in time (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1990: 74). This is an important distinction as, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen, it is analogous to the distinctions among the various process types outlined in Halliday's theory of transitivity, namely 'Material', 'Behavioural', 'Mental', 'Relational', 'Verbal' and 'Existential' processes. The represented subjects in the Productivity poster are all depicted as smiling broadly and showing a thumbs-up sign, which can most easily be construed as 'Behavioural' processes since they represent a physical manifestation of some inward, psychological state. However, they are also depicted within the larger process of representing a cross-section of Singaporeans in a state of felicity and harmony. In this sense, the poster exemplifies a 'conceptual' (classificational) process (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996: 79–81), in which the participants are to be seen as members of the superordinate category of 'Singaporeans'. (See analysis of the participants below.) The dark, contextless background from which the participants emerge further accentuates the timelessness and stability of this 'portrait' of happy Singaporeans. The smiling faces and thumbs-up gestures send a highly positive signal to the reader about the affective state of mind of the people. The smiles create a tenor of friendliness and interact with the interpersonal features discussed above to create a sense of intimacy and solidarity with the reader, while the

thumbs-up signs allude to something good or positive, though what this is is not exactly clear from the poster.

Apart from the *processes* of 'smiling' and 'showing' the thumbs-up sign, one of the first things we notice about the *participants* depicted in the poster is that they are not randomly selected; they are representative of people from various occupations. The more readily identifiable ones, because of their distinctive uniforms, are a nurse (at the bottom of the picture), an army soldier (on the extreme right), a traffic policeman (at the top-left corner) and a civil defence officer (with the yellow helmet). The others are pictured in non-distinctive attire and could thus represent a range of occupations such as teachers, clerks and factory-workers. There is only one man, at the top-right corner, who, with his shirt and tie, appears to represent the white-collar office executive. Interestingly, there is also a student in the picture (the young boy at the bottom of the picture carrying a backpack). The inclusion of a student in a poster which is ostensibly targeted at working adults in Singapore appears incongruous, unless it is to be assumed that the early stages of the Productivity Campaign which this 1983 poster represents were aimed at Singaporeans in general rather than exclusively at the working population.

It appears, then, that the over-arching imperative in this poster is to create a representative cross-section of Singaporeans rather than workers in Singapore per se. This is supported by the observation that the people in the poster are not only representative of people from different occupational backgrounds, but also cut across gender and ethnic lines. Although both males and females are included in the poster, what is striking and disturbing is the under-representation of the female gender (two females as opposed to eight males). Moreover, they are both positioned at the lower portion of the picture, suggesting, perhaps, their lower status relative to that of the males. Although the male soldier is also located at this lower position in the picture, he stands out more than the rest because he is directly illuminated by the light (interpretable as a kind of 'vector', in Kress and Van Leeuwen's terms) which is shining from the right of the picture to the left. In contrast to the lower, marginal position occupied by the females, the man in the shirt and tie can be said to occupy the more privileged, higher position in the poster. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 193–4), the upper constituent elements in a visual composition can be interpreted as the 'idealized', more 'salient' components while those at the bottom are the more 'down-to-earth'. A hierarchy of importance in terms of information value can thus be established in a visual representation comprising different elements distributed along the vertical axis. Following from this, it could be argued that the men in positions of power (traffic policeman) and privilege (man in shirt and tie) are portrayed in a more salient and idealized position than the women (and child) in the poster. This raises questions about possible sexist ideologies being embedded within the poster.

Moving to the ethnic representation, the poster appears to reflect

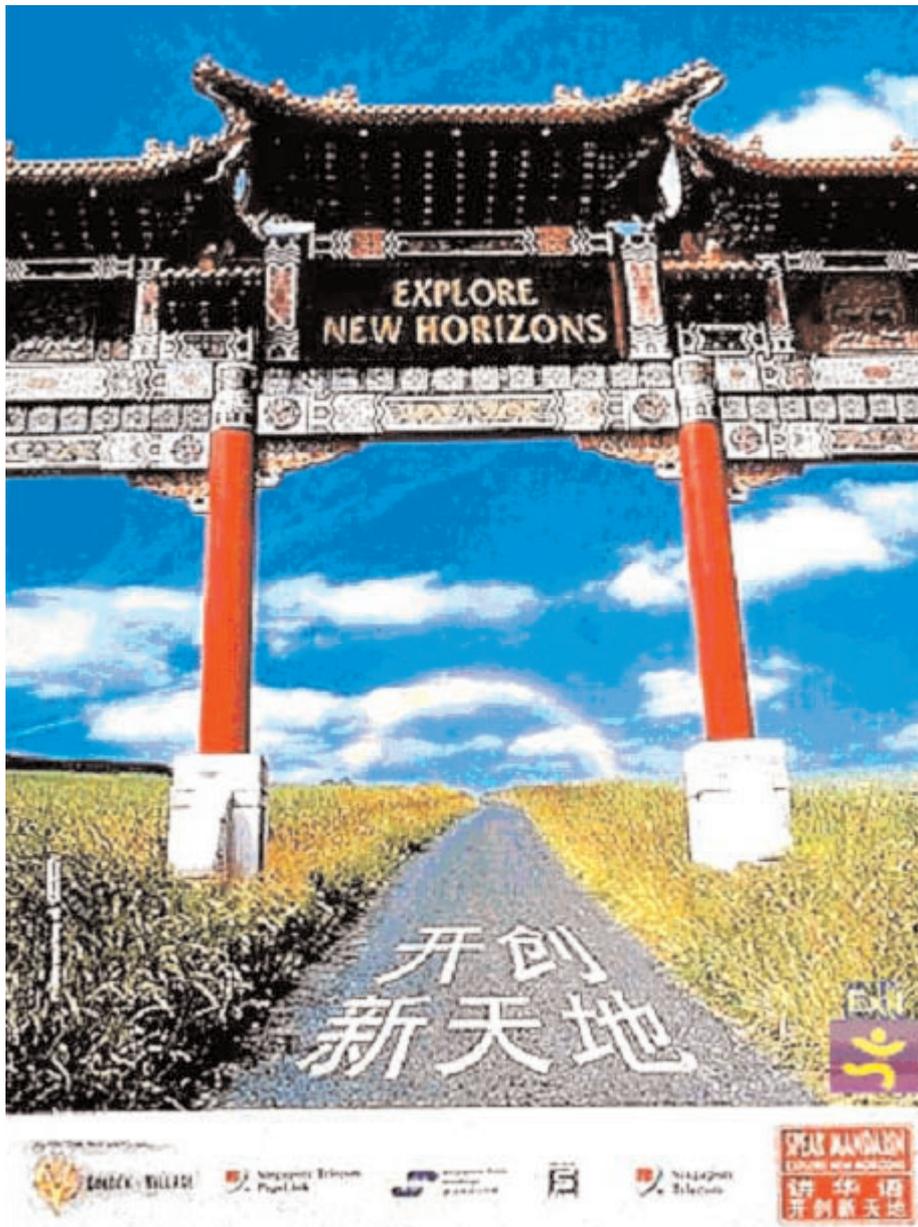
Singapore's ethnic composition rather accurately. Apart from the boy, nurse, soldier and traffic policeman who are all recognizably Chinese, which constitutes the majority ethnic grouping in Singapore (about 70%), there is at least one Indian (the civil defence worker) and possibly one Malay (the man pictured above the Indian man), which together represent the minority (about 30%) in Singapore. The ethnic identities of the others are not self-evident. This strongly suggests that the represented participants in the Productivity poster have been carefully chosen to represent a microcosm of Singapore society.

Turning now to the verbal sign in the poster, the first thing we notice is the big, bold letters, 'Come on Singapore' emblazoned across the top of the poster in striking red. This vocative collaborates with the relatively close-up shot and the natural, life-likeness of the visual image to create a strong appeal which reaches out to the readers in an almost palpable way. It is interesting that the main message, 'Together we work better', is subjugated to this rally call directed at Singaporeans by the use of a smaller font size, reflecting, perhaps, a precedence and primacy of the interpersonal meaning over the ideational. Then again, the main purpose of the poster may well be to rally the people together to promote a more cohesive Singapore, rather than simply getting them to work together. In this respect, rallying the people together becomes the message proper rather than merely a means of drawing attention to the message. As the (English) slogan is placed in the upper section of the poster above the picture, we could interpret (following Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996: 193) the verbal message as making an emotive appeal to the reader, symbolizing 'what might be' while the picture below shows the reader 'what is'.

The 1996 Speak Mandarin Campaign poster

Singapore's immigrant population and multiracial composition make for not only a culturally rich and diverse society, but also one with many potentially divisive lines. The dominant Chinese community is itself made up of a heterogeneous mix of peoples whose forefathers came from different parts of China and spoke a multiplicity of dialects, many of which are mutually unintelligible. A need, therefore, was perceived by the government of Singapore to unify the various Chinese dialect-speaking groups via a common language – Mandarin – which can cut across dialect barriers to make for easier communication. The desire to promote Mandarin as a kind of social glue to unite the Chinese community prompted the government to launch the Speak Mandarin Campaign, which has become an annual fixture in the calendar of campaigns in Singapore since its inauguration in 1979.

Looking at the 1996 Speak Mandarin Campaign poster (Figure 2), the reader will immediately be struck by its use of strong, saturated tones of red, blue and green. The represented participants in the poster comprise a Chinese-style arch spanning a country road with green fields on either side leading towards the horizon framed by a bright, blue sky with some white,



puffy clouds and a rainbow where the road meets the sky. The English text appearing at the top on the arch reads 'Explore New Horizons', with the corresponding Mandarin version etched on the road at the bottom of the picture. The slogan '*Speak Mandarin, Explore New Horizons*' (together with its Mandarin version) appears at the bottom right-hand corner of the poster.

In contrast to the Productivity poster, the point-of-view here is from the bottom up rather than top down. The wide-angle view taken

Figure 2 The 1996 Speak Mandarin Campaign poster.

from a low angle creates the perspective of a person standing in the middle of the road looking up at the arch and the horizon beyond. In this way, the picture diminishes the stature of the reader in relation to the represented participants. The Chinese arch, in contrast, appears to loom above the reader, creating an imposing presence and dominance and rendering the reader as caught in an insurmountable determinism. The effect would be quite different if the picture were taken from a high angle, as seen by a person looking down at the arch or even at eye-level where the person looks straight at the arch. The high angle would enhance the stature of and empower the reader relative to the represented participant, while the eye-level perspective would suggest an equal, symmetrical power relationship between the two. Insofar as the arch is supposed to represent the Speak Mandarin Campaign, the low angle from which the image is taken would then symbolize an imposition of the 'Speak Mandarin, Explore New Horizons' imperative on the reader. Here, the government is apparently speaking from the standpoint of an authoritative 'expert' who knows the benefits of speaking Mandarin and is therefore urging the reader to speak Mandarin in order to partake of these benefits. In this sense, the visual imagery conspires with the verbal message to create a message of power and domination over the reader.

Apart from the angle from which the picture is taken, the 'depth of field' of the picture, referring to the way the picture leads the reader's eyes far and deep into the horizon where the road meets the sky, also encodes interpersonal meaning. A short depth of field, in contrast, would have focused only on what is in the foreground (the arch), blurring out the background (the farther end of the field and the rainbow), thereby dimming out the promise of reward symbolized by the rainbow. By having a long depth of field which brings the rainbow into focus, the visual image also creates a sense of infinite space through the seemingly endless road. The bright, expansive pastoral vista is presumably meant to appeal to Singaporeans living in a congested, urban environment. However, the fact that there are no friendly, smiling faces – in fact the total absence of any human agency or activity in the picture – could engender a sense of isolation and bleakness for the reader, who is constructed as someone standing in the middle of some country road in the middle of nowhere with no one in sight, with only the imposing Chinese arch in the immediate foreground. The green fields which the country road traverses is also an experientially remote piece of contextual oddity, something which land-scarce Singapore does not possess and is therefore a vista with which few Singaporeans can identify. Thus, despite the bright, strong colours, the interpersonal message created by the picture could be interpreted as one of distance, isolation and alienation.

Speaking of colour, the reader is immediately struck by the fact that the image is bathed in warm, strong sunlight, which reflects the warm hues of the main represented participants in the picture – the arch with its red pillars, the green grass in the foreground and the blue sky in the background. This creates a very strong sense of the reality and credibility of the subjects

for the reader and, at the same time, suggests a strong commitment by the government to this reality which has been constructed for the people of Singapore. The strong vector lines created by the country road lead the reader's eyes towards the rainbow at the horizon while the intersection of the two red pillars along the vertical axis and of the arch across the horizontal axis draws the reader's attention to the space occupied by the slogan – 'Explore New Horizons'. Colours and vectors hence collaborate to produce a very vivid and 'realistic' image which the reader is not only drawn to but is encouraged to buy into. Although the strong, rich colours may make the represented subjects look real at one level, the image is unrealistic at another: a Chinese arch appearing in a country road in the middle of nowhere is an incongruity that jars with people's common knowledge and experience of the real world. While such arches certainly evoke a strong symbolism of Chinese culture, they are not usually found in the middle of some bucolic landscape. Apart from places like Chinese temples or, perhaps, some traditional and grand Chinese building, such arches are also typically found at the entry and exit points of the china-towns in big, western cities like London, New York, Sydney and San Francisco. Such china-towns and their symbolic arches are a form of commercial fabrication, artificially erected and exaggerated to showcase Chinese culture to people from a foreign culture.

Like the Productivity poster, this Speak Mandarin poster can be classified as a portrait symbolizing opportunity. The expansive wide-angle shot complements the verbal sign, 'Explore New Horizons', rather well as the spatial expansiveness is symbolic of the boundless opportunities which would purportedly be made available to those who could (or would learn to) speak Mandarin. That it is the English words that are superimposed over the Chinese arch while the Chinese script is etched onto the road beneath is a little surprising, however, as one would expect the reverse to be the case so as to maintain the unity and consistency of the symbolisms evoked by the Chinese arch. Unlike the Productivity poster which depicts people with smiling faces showing a thumbs-up sign, there is no action or behaviour depicted in the Speak Mandarin poster. It merely locates the reader at the threshold of a journey that has yet to begin, looking upwards at the inviting vista, contemplating but not quite taking the next step. The rainbow on the horizon, in a rather overt way, symbolizes a promise, an invitation to the reader to go under the arch and embark on a journey that will lead him or her towards the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Interestingly, there is no reference to 'Mandarin' or 'Chinese' in either the English or the Mandarin text (except in the slogan which appears 'outside' the poster proper, alongside the list of sponsors and their logos). In fact, the idea of 'Chineseness' is communicated only via the rather stylized Chinese arch in the foreground. There is certainly no reference, direct or indirect, to people speaking or using Mandarin. Thus, although the slogan for that year's campaign was '*Speak Mandarin, Explore New Horizons*', one could be forgiven, in looking at the poster alone, for assuming that it is not speaking

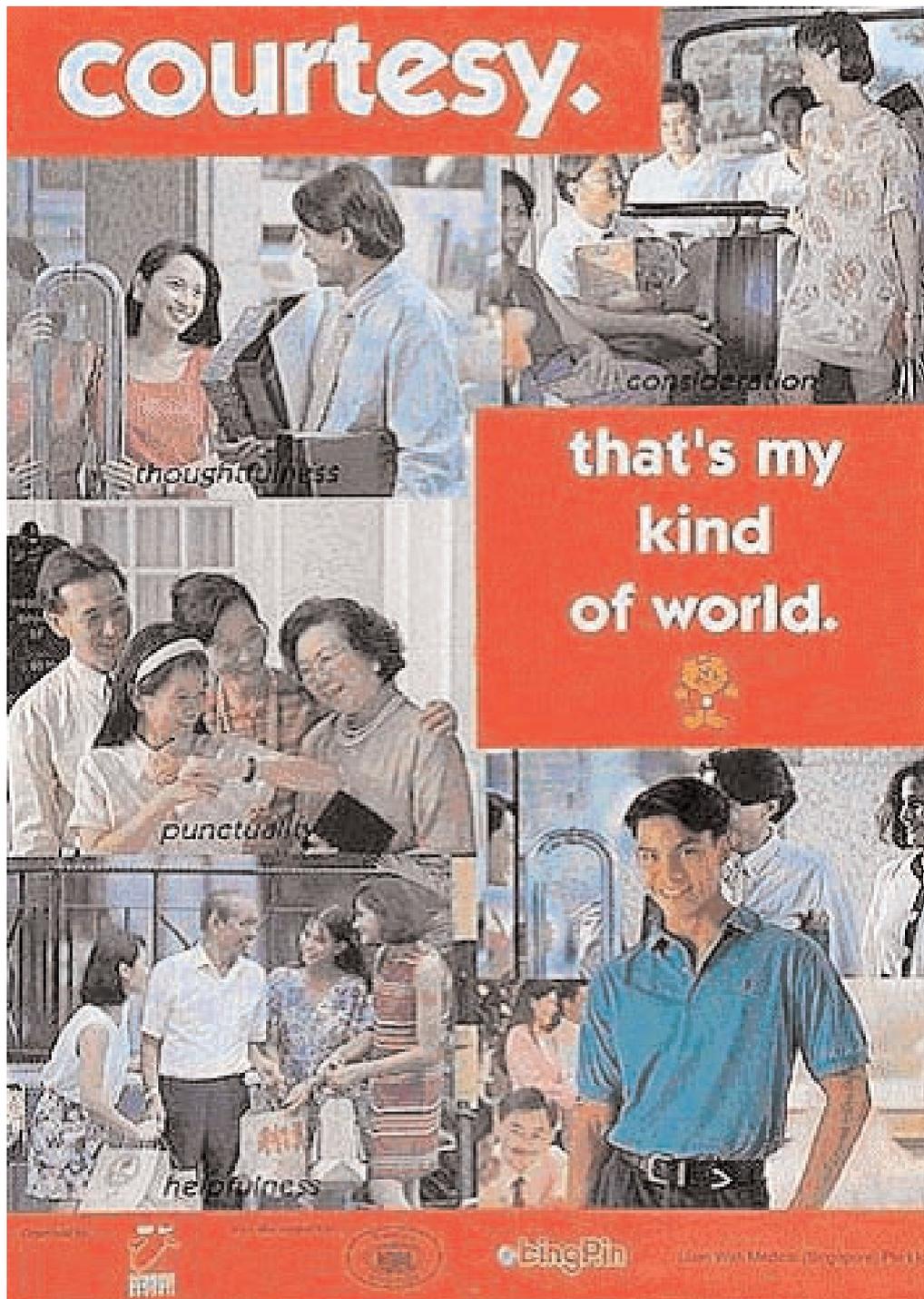
Mandarin that is being promoted but being or even becoming a Chinese as symbolized by passing through the Chinese gateway. Instead of a promotion for the Mandarin language, the poster could be read as a celebration of the Chinese culture. That the Singapore government has been promoting Mandarin on the basis of its connection with the 'rich' Chinese cultural heritage only reinforces this ethnocentric reading, which might bristle minority ethnic sensitivities in multiracial Singapore. Since there is no overt activity, physical or verbal, in the visual text in terms of transitivity processes, the picture would probably have to be classified as representing an 'existential' process, depicting a state of being rather than an event or 'happening'. But it is a state of existence that is pregnant with the promise of action, as the reader is invited to take the first decisive step. The Chinese arch in the foreground represents a kind of gateway through which the reader, as a participant in this semiotic landscape, must enter before he or she can embark on the road towards some promised prize symbolized by the rainbow in the background.

The 1995 Courtesy Campaign poster

The third and final poster to be examined is taken from the 1995 Courtesy Campaign. The Courtesy Campaign was conceived as a result of the government's desire to create a pleasant social environment to improve the quality of life for Singaporeans. First launched in 1979, the Courtesy Campaign has been running every year without fail or even showing signs of waning. The objective of the Campaign is: 'To help Singaporeans become more considerate to each other and thoughtful of each other's needs.'² The visual element of the 1995 Courtesy poster (Figure 3) comprises a montage of snapshots showing people with smiling faces in various social settings. The words 'consideration', 'thoughtfulness', 'punctuality' and 'helpfulness' are superimposed in black print over the snapshots. The slogan '***Courtesy. That's my kind of world.***' is printed in bold white letters against a bright red background, and appears above the image of a youth sporting a winsome smile.

Looking at the poster as a whole, it is clear that the visual elements in this Courtesy poster are designed to exude a sense of warmth and cordiality. Apart from the portrayal of people with happy, smiling faces, this sense of warmth and cordiality is also partly expressed through the short social distance between the represented participants in the visual and the reader. This is achieved through the 'medium-close shot' with which two of the components in the visual (the 'thoughtfulness' and 'punctuality' ones) are taken, though not quite close enough for the reader to be able to hold or grasp the participants (which would imply an intimate relationship in which one is able to influence the other) but close enough for the reader and the participants to touch fingers if they extend their arms out to one another. This simultaneously allows the reader the option of either standing at a near

Figure 3 The 1995 Courtesy Campaign poster.



but objective distance to observe passively, or of reaching out and become actively involved with the participants and with the social activities depicted. In this sense, the interpersonal stance adopted by this poster is less intrusive and more open to negotiation than is the case with the Speak Mandarin poster discussed earlier, which assumes a non-negotiable, imposing stance. While four components in the visual depict participants who are looking towards one another and hence away from the reader, the one at the bottom right-hand corner depicts a smiling youth looking directly at the reader. This foregrounds him above the other represented participants and draws him closer to the reader, making him the central protagonist through whom the reader interprets the 'world' and with whom the reader is supposed to relate. The smile on this protagonist's face invites the reader to enter into a relation of social affinity with him not only to 'see' the world in the way he does but also to buy into it. In this way, there is a subtle transferral and extension of the personal '*my* kind of world' to the collective '*our* kind of world'. The strong light and natural colours in which these sharp images are presented imbue them with a sense of realism and further draw the reader closer to them. This, as mentioned previously, also suggests a strong commitment on the part of the image-maker to the 'reality' presented to the reader. In terms of modality, the image-maker is presenting to the reader 'what is in the real world' rather than 'what *could* be' or 'what *might* be in a better world'. The interpersonal meaning expressed by the visual text complements the verbal text, in that the casual, colloquial '*Courtesy. That's my kind of world.*' echoes the friendly and cordial feeling generated by the images.

Turning now to the ideational meaning of the poster, we observe that, unlike the two previous posters examined, the Courtesy poster is a snapshot or, more accurately, a montage of four snapshots, depicting various 'happenings' located in various settings. For the sake of convenience, I shall refer to these individual snapshots by the 'captions' which appear at the bottom of the images. Moving anti-clockwise from the top right-hand corner, we have, firstly, the 'consideration' scene which shows a seated man in a bus pointing ('Material' process) to a vacant seat next to him, presumably inviting ('Material') a lady who is standing to have the seat. The 'thoughtfulness' scene depicts what looks like an office setting where a lady is smiling ('Behavioural') at a man, presumably in appreciation for helping ('Material') her with some files. The 'punctuality' scene portrays what one can only presume to be a family, comprising grandmother, parents and daughter, who is looking ('Mental') and smiling ('Behavioural') at a watch on her wrist. The fourth scene, entitled 'helpfulness', depicts three ladies who seem to be helping ('Material') an elderly man with some bags.

What this visual transitivity analysis shows is that most of the processes embodied and frozen by the visual elements are about *doing*, with most of the represented participants depicted as doing something or behaving in a particular way. Since all these little snapshots are supposed to represent various manifestations of courtesy, as indicated by the word

'courtesy' positioned at the top of the poster which inevitably frames and orients our reading of the images, it would appear that courtesy is a quality construed largely as a Material process, rather than, say, a Mental or Verbal process. In the poster, there is only one instantiation of a (perceptual) Mental process in the 'punctuality' snapshot with the girl *looking* at her watch, a process which is somehow linked to 'punctuality'. Based on the visual image and the accompanying caption, one can only speculate that one of the family members (perhaps the grandmother since she is in the foreground and can thus be assumed to be a main participant together with the girl) has just presented the girl with a watch as a gift, perhaps to impress upon her the value of punctuality.

'Punctuality' and, for that matter, 'consideration', 'thoughtfulness' and even 'helpfulness' are abstract concepts which are rather difficult to depict in a visual, concrete manner, especially through the medium of a static poster. To illustrate, let us attempt to read off what Kress and Van Leeuwen refer to as the 'actional processes' embodied by the represented participants in the 'consideration' scene. In this scene, the more salient of the two represented participants is the man sitting down because he is partly facing the reader, while the other represented participant, the lady, faces away from the reader. Thus, it is the gaze of the man that the reader first meets, even though he is looking at the lady and not the reader. Furthermore, the light that falls on him makes him more prominent and foregrounds him in relation to the lady. The 'Material' action of an outstretched arm pointing at the vacant seat next to him constructs him as the 'Actor', motioning to the lady (the 'Beneficiary') to take the seat ('Goal').³ In this way, the reader is led to interpret the act of the man directing the lady to a vacant seat next to him as a gesture showing consideration, when one would have thought that depicting the man as giving up his seat in a crowded bus to a more needy person, for instance, would have better depicted this idea. Similarly, for the other snapshots in the poster, it is difficult to 'read' the actions depicted in such a way as to relate them to the abstract qualities they are supposed to embody, without referring to their respective captions. This is where the verbal elements within this poster play a crucial role in disambiguating the meanings behind the various images. Without the words superimposed on the snapshots, the scenes would be 'polysemous' (Barthes, 1977), open to multiple meanings and readings which may not have anything to do with courtesy at all. The verbal elements in this poster, therefore, form an integral and indispensable part of the composite meaning of the poster.

Finally, the portrait of the male youth who fulfils the role of the protagonist in this enactment of courtesy is depicted to be almost thinking aloud because of the positioning of the second part of the slogan – 'that's my kind of world' – directly above him. The first-person possessive pronoun 'my' thus makes sense only when we relate it to the youth and, once again, points to the close association between the visual and the verbal texts. Perhaps, in an attempt to situate the youth in a 'real' context to enhance his

credibility, he is portrayed amidst a background of more smiling people in various situations, who collectively represent the 'world' in the slogan, presumably. The choice of a male youth to represent the main protagonist reflects the target audience of this particular Courtesy Campaign which is expressly youths, a point reinforced by the particular way in which the slogan is formulated, echoing the popular slang of teenagers and young people in general with the contraction in 'that's' and the colloquial 'my kind of world'.

DISCUSSION

The analysis in this article has unveiled a number of ideologies imbricated within the semiotic structure of the three national campaign posters. In the Productivity poster, the effort to include people from the three major ethnic groups in Singapore has the subtle but significant effect of highlighting Singapore's multiracial composition. This picture of racial harmony (the 10 people depicted are all smiling), with the various ethnic groups standing side by side in happy co-existence, is an ideology predicated on the government's need to forge a cohesive Singaporean identity among people from heterogeneous backgrounds. Carefully including people from the three main ethnic groups in the right proportions not only ensures that no particular ethnic group would feel marginalized (or privileged) but also projects a happy portrait of the Singaporean family. The visual and verbal signs interact to produce not only the overt message of the importance of teamwork in enhancing economic productivity but also a more subtle socio-political message that team spirit not only means working with people in general but also working with people of other races in particular.

While ethnicity is carefully managed in the poster, other issues are more problematic. The under-representation of females, for instance, could be seen as reflecting a fundamentally patriarchal society where the contributions of females to the Singapore workforce is still considered to be less significant than that of males. Also, all 10 of the people pictured in the poster are evidently *young*, without a single individual who seems to represent the senior or even middle-aged worker in Singapore. If the inclusion of a young boy in a Productivity Campaign poster is a little incongruous, then the *exclusion* of the senior person is even more puzzling. Is youthful enthusiasm valued above experience and seniority in the workforce of Singapore? Or could this mean that the target audience of the poster is young people because it is they, rather than the more senior management staff, who may not have imbibed the value of *esprit de corps*? These are disturbing issues which the poster raises but does not address.

Finally, another ideology perpetuated by the poster (this time much more explicitly coded) is the inclusion of the Mandarin version of the slogan at the bottom of the poster in fairly large print. Does this 'bilingual' poster assume a bilingual readership? If so, why does it assume that bilingual means English and Mandarin and not the other two official languages in Singapore?

Although there is another bilingual poster with the Malay version of the slogan at the top and the Tamil one at the bottom, the question is why isn't there an English-Malay or English-Tamil poster? Does the inclusion of the Mandarin version of the slogan in the 'English' poster and the exclusion of the Malay or Tamil versions suggest that Mandarin is somehow more important than either Malay or Tamil? And by extension, are the Chinese, as the majority ethnic group in Singapore, regarded as more important than the Malays or Indians in Singapore? More uneasy questions, for sure. The presence of an English-Mandarin poster and the absence of an English-Malay or English-Tamil one jars with the official policy of multilingualism in Singapore which ostensibly recognizes Malay and Tamil as official languages on a par with English and Mandarin. This contradicts and undermines the effort made to include at least one member of all three major ethnic groups in the poster.

Driven by the imperative to increase productivity in Singapore amidst global competition, the Singapore government senses the exigency of the situation which is expressed in the directive 'Come on, Singapore' and assertive 'Together we work better'. At the same time, however, the government realizes that it needs to avoid an overtly authoritarian stance and instead adopt a more friendly position in order to appeal to the people in Singapore to work together. Hence, it can be argued that the close interpersonal proximity as well as the 'image-act' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996: 122) of the smiling people showing a thumbs-up sign, coming together to endorse the idea of higher productivity through teamwork, are both calculated to modulate the force of the commanding speech-acts encoded in the slogan. The government's top-down stance is nonetheless betrayed through the high-angle perspective from which the image is created, which invites its citizens to view things not from their own level but from the government's elevated position.

And in its eagerness to project a socio-politically 'correct' image of Singaporeans in terms of ethnic composition, the government may have marginalized other groups of people. In this sense, there is a tension among the various socio-political and socio-economic imperatives in which the Singapore government is embroiled. This tension is dramatized on the canvas of the poster whose clear, bright and happy facade belies the undercurrent of competing demands pulling the government, and hence its messages, in different directions. In sum, the Productivity poster is marked by inclusions and exclusions interacting with one another in a complex way, sometimes collaborating and reinforcing and sometimes contradicting and obfuscating one another.

The semiotic picture that emerges from the analysis of the Speak Mandarin poster is a similarly chequered one. Individually, the Chinese arch, the country road and rainbow at the end are all quite rich in their symbolic meanings. However, as an integrated whole, they fail to gel. While the Chinese arch itself is an ostensible, albeit somewhat tacky, symbol of

'Chineseness', the rest of the represented participants – country road, green pastures, blue sky and rainbow – do not invoke a particularly or even recognizably Chinese schema. In particular, the association of the rainbow with some promised treasure is arguably more salient in western culture (with the proverbial pot of gold to be found at the end of the rainbow) rather than in Chinese culture where rainbows typically symbolize beauty. Thus, the picture is a pastiche of symbols, which are meaningful in themselves but collectively fail to create a culturally coherent meaning, especially to a Chinese living in Singapore. In fact, this patchwork of intrinsically disparate elements gives the impression that the arch and the rainbow have been transposed from some other source and digitally superimposed onto the vista of country road and green fields to create the rather unconvincing collage. To have a rainbow on a bright, sunny day is in itself a meteorological anomaly! In this sense, we might be able to interpret the pastiche of symbols represented by the poster as a kind of simulation, in which the sheer spectacle created by the visual image is what fascinates rather than its propositional content. The world conjured by the poster, in this sense, can be said to evoke a Baudrillardian universe in which everyday life and reality itself become 'imploded' into the hyperreality of the spectacle (Baudrillard, 1983 cited in Lash and Urry, 1987: 289). While the image-maker (i.e. the government in Singapore) might argue that this poster was never meant to depict a real or actual scene in Singapore or elsewhere, I feel that, in order to create an effective poster – one that triggers the 'right' kind of mental associations – a certain degree of *realism* is important. If the represented participants in an image do not cohere and 'click' with the experience or worldview of its target readership, it is unlikely that the image would come across as realistic and hence succeed in conveying its intended message(s).

More important, this tension created by the interaction of the various ideograms in the poster may point, once again, to the conflicting interests and ideologies that the Singapore government is trying to articulate through this poster. In trying to promote Mandarin as a lingua franca among the Chinese community in Singapore, the government appears to have gone beyond the 'cultural' rhetoric of Mandarin as a 'superior' language with a long literary tradition. In this poster, the accent appears to have shifted to the more 'economic' or 'pragmatic' benefits of using Mandarin. While the arch conjures up an unmistakably Chinese cultural symbolism, the symbolic significance of the rainbow is arguably embedded in a more 'western' worldview; one symbol trying to evoke the richness of the Chinese cultural heritage, the other trying to entice with a richness of a quite different nature. This clash of symbolisms is symptomatic of the shifting, ambivalent ground on which the government's ideological position for the Speak Mandarin Campaign is erected. The shift away from the value of Mandarin as a 'social glue' to unify the heterogeneous, dialect-speaking Chinese community to more pragmatic and utilitarian values can be traced to changing economic circumstances and trends. As early as 1985, the government started to

recognize the huge economic potential in the Chinese market and the value of learning Mandarin not only in order to imbibe 'culture' but to facilitate business transactions:

...the Chinese learn and speak Mandarin not only because it is the common spoken language of the Chinese community, representing our roots, but also because the economic value of Mandarin is increasing, particularly after China has started its economic transformation and adopted the open-door policy. (Excerpt of speech by Ong Teng Cheong, then Second Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, at the opening of the 1985 Speak Mandarin Campaign)

The socio-political repercussion of this shift, however, is that the non-Chinese ethnic minorities may begin to feel sidelined and disadvantaged, especially when the ability to speak Mandarin is increasingly associated with social and economic opportunities like those implied by the 1996 Speak Mandarin Campaign poster. Over the long term, it might even have the effect of undermining the hard work that the Singapore government had put in to promote multiracialism and multiculturalism as the basis of Singapore's nationhood.

In comparison with either the Productivity or Speak Mandarin posters, the Courtesy poster seems to succeed better at articulating a more coherent and consistent meaning, minimizing the questions of representations and problems of coherence. However, the analysis also reveals that the Singapore government, in its attempt to cultivate a courteous, gracious society, might have overlooked the truism that courtesy consists essentially in an attitude of mind, heart and spirit rather than in actions or gestures. The tendency to construe courtesy in 'Material' terms, based on the observation that most of the processes embodied by the visual elements in the poster are about doing or behaving in a particular way, raises the issue of the dichotomy between the outward *forms* and gestures of courtesy and the inward *substance* of mindsets and attitudes from which courtesy springs. In an ideal situation, form and substance necessarily complement each other; form without substance rings hollow with hypocrisy while substance without form is inert with unactualized potential. This complementarity between form and substance is something that Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore and the principal advocate of the Campaign, has acknowledged during his speech at the launch of the Courtesy Campaign in 1979. He had made the observation then that the *forms* of courtesy, which comprise words and gestures, are important in themselves as they help to regulate social contacts and reduce awkwardness or friction. These words and gestures must, however, be motivated by a sincere consideration for the other person's right to self-respect, self-esteem and well-being. This balance between courteous forms and gestures and the sincerity and thoughtfulness which inspire them is evidently lacking in the way the Courtesy poster has been put

together, but this probably reflects the limitation of the *medium* of a static representation rather than the poster itself. Abstract concepts like courtesy, thoughtfulness and consideration are probably more difficult to convey through a static medium than are the economic benefits of speaking Mandarin or even social unity and harmony. Attempting to do so, as in the Courtesy poster under analysis, might result in an impoverished message that courtesy is mainly about performing an act or behaving in a certain way rather than about the sincerity of heart and benevolence of spirit which necessarily motivate it. While the goal of nurturing a courteous society of thoughtful, considerate people is, indeed, a laudable one, perhaps the *means* by which the Singapore government has chosen to materialize it is less than appropriate.

In general, what the analysis of the three national campaign posters has demonstrated is the instability and, indeed, the fragility of texts as a unitary meaning-making system and that communication of meaning is, in fact, a dynamic and fluid process transcending the linguistic or verbal sign, bringing together the agency, process and effect of meaning on the reader. The dissonances, discontinuities and disjunctions observed in the three posters, both between the visual images and between the visual imagery and verbal message, substantiate the Bakhtinian view (Bakhtin, 1981) that a text is always an intricate mesh of intersecting utterances, resulting in fluid, blurred boundaries which exist, in this case, between the visual and verbal intertexts. Furthermore, if we are to adopt the view, with Volosinov (1973) that 'the word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence' (p. 13), then the artifice of a unitary language would give expression to forces working towards ideological unification. It follows, then, that the incongruities and discontinuities uncovered in the semiotic deconstruction of the posters not only expose the myth of a unitary language, but also point to a crack in the ideologically vested practice of national campaigning in Singapore in its construction of preferred realities for Singaporeans. The multifarious, sometimes competing imperatives with which the government has to simultaneously grapple inevitably create a tension which is dramatically played out on the canvas of the posters in terms of the incongruous, inconsistent and even contradictory signals emanating from the semiotic fabric. This cacophony of messages produced by the interaction of the visual and verbal elements of the posters may well be symptomatic of the sort of struggles and contestations which, in Volosinov's view, is endemic of modern societies such as Singapore.

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NOTES

1. Space constraint makes it necessary for me to focus on only three posters, randomly selected from three of the best-known and longest-running national campaigns in Singapore. The choice of two of them (the Speak Mandarin Campaign and the Courtesy Campaign posters) was also predicated on their availability in digital format. The subsequent analyses and interpretations of these three posters are, therefore, aimed at uncovering particular insights within the posters rather than producing generalizable 'truths' about the campaigns as a whole. In other words, I make no claims about the posters' representativeness of their respective campaigns, which they merely instantiate, not represent.
2. Source: The Ministry of Information and the Arts website: http://www.mita.gov.sg/skm/courtesy/c_history.htm
3. These are terms employed within Halliday's theory of transitivity. For a definition and explanation of how these terms are to be used, readers are respectfully referred to Halliday (1994: 106–29).

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