

PERFORMING HYBRID: A REVERSAL OF COMMON SENSE

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Abstract

The paper examines three case studies involving performing to illustrate that an act has much to do with either reversing or conforming the isomorphic form-meaning pairing of cultural meanings. This discussion suggests that while meaning making may seem arbitrary in the interaction there is a conventional form-meaning relationship underlying basic verbal and kinesthetic communication. This is noteworthy to circumvent the confusion that new meanings may be produced with hand waving magic because an ethos of common sense in denotative communication serves as the viewing foundation for an audience to derive comprehension which may lead to pleasure and/or personal reflection. The semiotics of performance in all three cases points to isomorphism as the operating system underlying the convention of performing. Without such conventional mental apparatus as a standard reference in our communicative schema little ridicule or understanding is generated rendering humor and satisfaction a difficult achievement in performing.

Keywords: Spontaneous communication, Verbal and nonverbal communication, Performing sexuality, Semiotics of Southeast Asian performance

Introduction

Paulin G. Djité (2006) informs that individuals in a multilingual context have an incredible capacity to actively make informed language choices to one's social and cultural advantage. This point bodes well in stage performing for a multilingual audience predominantly sharing different first languages. In Southeast Asia, it is not uncommon for a person to claim English as the official first language and an Asian mother tongue as a heritage language. An official first language refers to a formal language with which one is educated within the formal national education system. This may be Standard English in Singapore, Standard Malay in Malaysia and Brunei, Bahasa Indonesia in Indonesia. The mother tongue, on the other hand, could range from Tamil, Malayalam, Malay, Boyan, Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew,

Hakka to Cantonese, among others, depending on one's linguistic inheritance, normally based on the father's native language.

The following discussion traces situational choices in performing sites, which portray interactivity in performance beyond monolingual or single intelligent development. The first performance demonstrates intricacies of styling one's interactivity as a strategy to blur the standard gender boundary (Bucholtz & Hall, 2008). Such cross-gender performing reconfigures gender essentialism with a constant reminder that gender is an act that one learns to achieve either aligning with or independent of the norms (Cameron & Kulick, 2003). Similar with fitting the act with normative expectation the discussion progresses to show that cross-cultural adult literacy relies on pairing sound with meaning.

Mismatches of sound and meaning are pruned to make way for an apt fit of sound and meaning in cultural-specific literacy. Learning patterns emerge with reinforcement from the gatekeeper in this case the host of a television show. The performing strategy ends with non-verbal display of semiotics which also reflects the pairing of dance moves with symbolic significance. Often times such open-ended pairing sequences require group repetition to develop cohesion in symbolic significance. All three areas of Southeast Asian performing of meaning points to a larger framework of matching the forms ranging from individual acts, language sounds to creative acts with the meanings of cross-gender political jokes, local socio-cultural pragmatics and artistic rhythmic semiotics (Sew, 2009).

In this discussion, *hybrid* is defined as a process of creating semiotic forms by combining existing elements imbued with unique cultural meaning. Inevitably, a hybrid entails identity invention amidst the existing semiotic environs. While the process creates new forms of representation, hybrid also reinvigorates the typical qualities of the existing elements that are invoked as contrasts, and augmented as the sub-qualities making the new representation at the same time.

Crossing Common Sense

Figure 1: A poster of Kumar



<http://www.timeoutsingapore.com/performance/Comedy/kumar-stripped-bare-standing-up>

Manifesting rather saliently in Southeast Asia is a commercially viable stage performance of using more than one official language, namely English complemented with Mandarin and Malay. Intelligently crafted performing interactivity similar with the American stand-up unfolds in a rich mix of standard and colloquial English on 21 Mar 2009 at 3pm. Kumar's stage show is an excellent achievement of cross gender performance by a local talent in Singapore. His performance is demanded by four sold-out shows at Esplanade Theater that has a sitting capacity of nearly 2000 seats per show. Garnished with Malay, Mandarin and Hokkien, Kumar stirs up a lively local English discourse, which is culturally intelligent to the viewers in his performance. Dealing with mature themes, the performance is rated as NC-18, which only admits patrons who are 18 years old and above.

The hallmark of a stand-up comedian is shown right from the beginning when Kumar walks into the performing hall from the entrance in black jeans and T-shirt greeting the audience in a casual tone. The butt of the joke begins with the management of the Esplanade as the target. The management of this premiere performing facility in Asia is said to call Kumar's manager because there was a 3-day gap in the schedule that may be filled with a performance. While the manager's reply is simply that there is nobody available to accomplish such a short notice the caller suggests Kumar's name, in the performer's words, as a possibly cheap alternative.

Accompanying the line above is a gesture of looking up at the cheapest circle seat and waving his hands, insinuating that the view from the cheapest price is much smaller. This is where Kumar makes another timely joke on the need to switch off mobiles because the environment is a top-notch classy venue. Kumar confesses that reminders are normally broadcasted via state of the art audio recording the manual feat to make the announcement, however, is due to a low production budget which would not be possible without the kind assistance of the theatre management. Laughter fills the hall incessantly.

In swift moves, Kumar disappears into the curtains only to appear in a red-and-white glittering gown strapped on the shoulders with plunging neckline. Spotting silky long black hair Kumar stands up to a roaring crowd. Working on the ferment response he jokes that there should be crescent somewhere down there in the gown, which he promises to show the audience, whom will definitely see stars after the exposure. Standing in front of his mounted name, he informs of his exuberance seeing his name adorned with bright lights that aglow in grand fashion. At this juncture, Kumar jokes that he has not found a stage name that is comparable to RuPaul or Dame Edna. Kumar asks for more suggestions while refusing the short form, Kumz.

"No, not KUMZIE!" he responds in an accentuated tone imitating the British English accent.

The next stage name heard from the audience is Kumari, which results in a prolonged brow-raising stare at the audience from Kumar before asking, "Are you racist?"

Contagious laughter follows infecting pockets of the audience sequentially.

"Why not Siti Nurhaliza, the renown Malay diva?" Kumar asks.

At the end of the naming saga, he settles with his own name Kumar. This return to one's identity becomes a symbolic acceptance of oneself of which the audience is transported back to Kumar's childhood year through his narration. The narrative on his adolescent years informs that it is as much his father's responsibility as it is his, for who he has become presently. Growing up with an alcoholic father is portrayed as a terrifying experience according to the disclosure. Kumar imitates his father's drunken gaits upon entering the house when he is under the influence of alcohol. Hilariously, Kumar recalls that there was a nude female tattoo on his father's arm while he was watching male-to-male wrestling in their under wears on television. Male wrestling is a regular butt of the joke in Southeast Asia, which also surfaced in *Betrayed Babies* on 17 Jan. 2009 when the wheelchair ridden grandma turned to televised male wrestling as her viewing pleasure.

Funny re-enactment resumes with his medical check-up before his National Service, which entails compulsory basic military training. He mimics the face-look-to-the-left-and-cough sequence suggesting to the audience as a valid means to check on their partner's health for specific purposes. New linguistic meaning emerges from this performance, whereby a drag queen is defined as investment chief responsible for the financial loss that drags the value of the company deep down into the pit. The line has the audience bursting with laughter. Intentional word play with Malay strikes a laughing cord with the local audience when he jokes about the attire of a particular profession he wishes to work in. The phrase *sarung kebaya* that refers to a particular cut of Malay traditional fashion is transformed with morphological restyling into *sarung ke babi*, which means wear it on the pig.

With close to twenty years of experience performing talk show, Kumar leaves no topic intricate to the locals unexamined. In perceptive reflection, Kumar observes that the local airport has no Tamil labels in terms of signage language. This is in contrast to the existing written English, Mandarin, Malay and Japanese in use as mediums of signatory. In jest, he cautions against the wrong assumption that Indians do not need the written instruction since they built the airport because it was actually the Bangladeshi who did the construction work hence a genuine linguistic oversight has indeed occurred. Kumar pokes fun on the fact that *Thaipusam*, an Indian celebration, not being accorded with the status of public holiday in contrast to Good Friday. He finds the practice of piercing human body as a means of purification in the celebration too dramatic. He suggests for the use

of spokes from BMX, a brand of mountain bike, so the performer could cycle home after the celebration.

The Malay word *atas*, which means top, is used to refer to the socialites with Kumar's hands flipping up and down upwards. He chides the platonic relationship that he had to put up with the high society, which he meets once a year but gets little out from them for charity. Kumar illustrates the greeting ritual in a high but flat tone of "Hi" followed by a left and right peck or lick (when drunk), or simply nudge over the shoulder. Following which, he quivers:

"Now you know why they are the *Hi* society."

At the end of the performance a video montage was mounted on screen showcasing his past. Snippets of interview with his step-mother, sisters, nephews, niece and close friends are included. The montage indicates that the entertainer has a strong support behind him. It is amazing how Kumar finds inspiration and courage to convert precarious challenges in his life into a winning strategy to make a decent living by capitalizing on the confluence of two basic gender roles essential to common sense. Behind the linguistic twists and witty spoofs there is definitely talent and strength as the road of stand-comedian delivered in cross-dress fashion is still very much an uncharted territory in the local entertainment scene. Indeed, with witty words and defying demeanor Kumar *bursts out of the boxes the straight world tried to grow him in* (cf. Mottier, 2008, p. 112).

Kumar's performance creates contemplation on Freudian's primary process thinking, as a viable concept of psychoanalysis. It is necessary to note conscious and subconscious thoughts are not separable, but a continua (cf. Holt, 2009, p. 9). That Kumar's story lines are filled with sexual innuendos, extraordinary catchphrases and punchy puns is indicative of the ego seeking immediate gratification by an assortment of current and personal affairs in each of us. It may be explained that his semiotic and linguistic expressions are symptomatic of cathexis discharges, i.e. energetic display of a suppressed libido (ibid. p. 7). In this sense the debate on whether one's sexuality is more of identity or desire may be framed as a complex emergence of varying saliency between the two according to the site of interactivity (cf. Queen, 2007, for a suggestion to test the validity of the existing assumptions on sexuality).

The audience was there for a variety of stimulating ideas. Some viewers might find certain jokes repulsive and remain silent when their secondary process dominates the linguistic intelligence. In broad stroke, the hedonistic response may be assumed of the select audience. The primary thoughts were pressed into forging instantaneous association with, either general libidinal references or specific socio-cultural familiarity (Cameron, 2007). The joy from making the mental effort to frame the performing of verbal jokes implied a rekindling of our primary process thinking. Robert Holt points out that we are normally expected to monitor our thoughts to produce words that avoid overtly arousing expressions, libidinal excitement, or aggressive tension in accordance to rational intelligence (cf. Holt,

2009, p. 37). Kumar's performance did the exact opposite in serving the audience's desires to connect with their primary process thinking. The effect is a magical power that tickled the hearts and minds of those present.

From the cognitive perspective, the connection with Kumar's story lines may be described as recognition of deep narratives we are comfortable with as tools of comprehension. George Lakoff provides Rama, Wonder Woman, Superman among others as the idealized models of deep narrative structure. What is currently lacking is models of diverse narrative that we are conditioned to suppress and banish in accordance with heteronormativity (Butler, 2004). Kumar brings them back in a concordance of performatives that would not be acquainted with in daily mainstream discourse. The verbatim of banishment is almost irrecoverable, had it not been a primary process associable with the narration triggering comprehension in the audience. The connection is via mirror neuron circuits, which, among other things, integrate sensory information arising in the visual, auditory and somatosensory regions. In other words, primary process thinking is retractable with the mental stimulations generated by Kumar's semiotics of performing:

Mental "stimulation" is the technical term for using brain areas for moving or perceiving. Imagining, remembering, dreaming, or understanding language. It is mental stimulation that links imaginative stories to lived narrative. (Lakoff, 2008, p. 39)

Localizing Global Citizens

The discussion contrasts the live performance with a television series on Tuesday evening from late May to Aug 2009, entitled *It's a Small World*. The program hosted by a local comedian Mark Lee is intended to familiarize foreigners with local culture and language use. A group of regular participants played the role of students of an international school under the tutelage of Lee who doubles as the Principal as well as the cleaner. In the first episode a segment on Singaporean Mandarin is presented in Question-and-Answer format. In education discourse the format may be likened with the IRE approach, namely *Initiated* response from the teacher followed by *Response* from the student and *Evaluation* from the teacher. A good illustration of such exchange in the classroom is recorded by researcher in London (Rampton, 2006). This format has been criticized as a controlled learning format with the vertical teacher-student status quo fossilized in the educational setting squeezing out creative exchange of ideas horizontally.

What is of interest here is the use of Malay words as part of Singaporean colloquial Mandarin spoken in everyday interactivity. *Ponteng*, which means playing truant in education discourse, is invoked by the host as part of the lexicon of local Mandarin through an IRE simulation on television. More interesting are the mistakes made by the learners. The participant from Hong Kong makes a sound

symbolic association by mapping the syllables into Cantonese lexicon through cross-linguistic framing of sound and meaning. It is thus understandable how *ponteng* which means *skipping work* in local Mandarin is mistaken as *hitting a dead end* if the Malay syllables [pon] and [teng] are sound symbolically associated with [pun] and [tian] in Cantonese phonetics, activating a mnemonic reference of *knock* and *nail*, respectively. Knocking the head on the nail is a metaphorical expression in Cantonese that designates an idiomatic meaning of failure or unsuccessful attempt.

Sound symbolism seems to be the operating mechanism in the localized language learning game. The colloquial Mandarin terms in the second question is actually *gila* Malay word for mad. The localized meaning refers to an irregular behavior uncommon to daily interactivity. However, the answers offered by the two foreign participants are very spicy and pretty girl respectively. The first answer has a symbolic association with *lak* which is spicy in Mandarin. The third word used in this session on local terms is *salah* which means wrong in Malay. The Scottish on the show thinks that the word means salad, which again is an association with the English equivalent. *Salah* is an extension from the original meaning of wrong to inaccurate decision-making in local Mandarin communication. In between the interactivity, the American participant recounts his funny experience asking for pineapple fried rice at a Chinese restaurant. Pineapple is known as *por lo*, or *feng li* in Mandarin. His accidental linguistic swap germinates *po li*, which is glass hence his puzzling request to the Chinese waitress becomes fried rice with glass instead.

The above examples are interesting in two counts. There seems to be a local brand of Mandarin brewing among the Chinese speakers not different from the local version of English much to the anxiety of language purists. The other notable hybrid is the flourishing of sound symbolism as literacy mechanism basic to language learning and word comprehension innate to human verbal interactivity. These examples of sound and meaning association among the foreign speakers continued throughout the learning of local Mandarin variety segment in the shows until its very last episode in mid August 2009. Sound symbolism is a common pragmatic strategy in many parts of the world, especially in Southeast Asia. Native Malay speakers, for example, are found pairing final syllables to create poetic effect and reiterating the first syllable to capture sound sense in the lexicon of Malay. These sound strategies are studied under alliterative and non-alliterative pair words in Malay relatable further to the topic of phonetic symbolism (cf. Tham, 1977; Sew, 2005).

Semiotics of Late Modernity

The third form of performing is the choreography of Jecko Siompo at Theatre Studio Esplanade, Singapore on 27 May 2009. The dance infusion entitled *Terima Kost* (Room Exit) is an interesting mix of modern dance by young Indonesian and

Papuan dancers. The choreographer Jecko Siompo is a native Papuan who studied dance in Jakarta, Germany and New York. What is obvious in the presentation of the local city migrants' life in the city is the used of English. Amidst native and natural sounds and expressions interspersed in the physical movements, phrases such as: "Hello Baby" "Muack, muack" "Yes, Yes, Yes....Oh Yes...." "What is it? (repeated serially) Where is it?" (repeated serially), "Good Evening" (Repeated reciprocally), "Hello" are heard.

Figure 2: Portraying the nocturnal faunas



http://www.newasia-singapore.com/travel_information/events/terima_kost_20090505944.html

The female dancers Andara F. Moeis, Ajeng Soelaeman, Nurhasanah and Nina Marthavia together with the male dancers Boogie Serra, Ricky Welkis, Bian, Stanley Daniel Patty, Gregorius Diaz, and Justine manage to bring out the thrill and tribulation experienced by tenants living in Jakarta. *Kost* means a little rented room in Indonesian. The plot performed through theater dance revolves around the bustle hustle of a metropolitan encounter by those living in rented rooms. The rhythmic fusion is wide in range including hip-hop, modern dance, daily physical swings, Papuan dance and tribal dance showing animal-like moves. The dance steps transform rapidly in successive and reciprocal fashion capturing the fast pace and ever changing city living. Using a dark setting this choreography symbolizes a dire situation among city migrant from rural areas. The day and the night harbor different kinds of city drama affecting city dwellers, respectively. The change from one to another is depicted with varying moves in progression.

A beam on stage guides the focus of the audience not dissimilar from the eye contacts and facial gazes of the listener in daily interactivity. Those remain in the peripheral of the bright circle remain dancing in the shady stage. The steps change between rhythmic unison group displays to individual performing of independent kinesics denoting one's meaning. The coherent performing captures a series of systemic daily living modes while the independent moves reflect individual life styles.

Commoners' stories, as it were, resurrect in between the tension of coherence and non-conforming styles. The male dancers are agile climbing up and down of the wooden structure since the beginning of the performance imitating the faunas of the night that attack and scavenge the belongings outside of the rented abode in the middle of the night. The opening in the middle of the structure represents a window view of insiders staring out as much as the outsiders looking in. The outer area of the opening becomes the compound area spacious enough for mingling with friends or new acquaintances of visiting strangers. The outside area becomes a convenient place for a female dancer to signal with inviting hand-wave with seductive smiles on one occasion before breaking into a chorus of gyrating dance moves backed by three others. At the same time the call of "Hello!" with naughty tone charges the intended semiotics of dance to its full. A series of animal-like moves follow the transformation augmented further with prolonged cackling offering a ripe imagination to the audience.

Objects of performing are important in the construction of semiotics in this choreography. Some of the popular articles include telephone as a means of communication to quench the feeling of loneliness. Clothes are closely related to the semiotics of moving, renting and living. The upbeat steps in tune with modern music rhythms include washing personal clothing with feet by means of stomping and twisting the wearable in alternate ways. The phrase "Good evening" is uttered successively in hip-hop mannerism indicating the part time job of waiting by the tables in the evening as a means to support one's education and living expenses. English is a sign of international social interactivity in a metropolitan filled with tourists all over the world.

Globalization is indeed a bilingual phenomenon with English being a predominant language in Southeast Asia. Excerpts of English peppered with spoken and written Malay discourse performances in daily interaction are recorded as part of the current verbal representation. Post-modern living is a challenge to all youths around the world in a humongous city is part of the meaning signaled by the choreography. The harsh realities of big cities are often invisible in the narrative of success in the city but depicted vividly with rhythmic moves in upbeat melodies tuned to the bodily semiotics of metropolitan.

Conclusion

The discussion on various expressions of performing illustrates that gender performing, local spoken language literacy, and choreography thrive on the divergence of the performers from existing cultural semiotics. The conventional meaning established in forms of expressions verbal and non-verbal is a prerequisite for new semiotics to occur. Each semiotic category in cross-gender performance, idiosyncratic cross-linguistic references and choreography of fusion dance moves capture the constant flux of meaning hybrid less commonly observed in the cognition of the target audience.

The tendency to view hybrid meaning as divergence from cultural norms is contingent to isomorphism between semiotic forms and cultural meanings that has been stabilized through time (Sadowski, 2009). The meshing of forms and hatching of diverse meaning is morphing against connections of secondary thinking process, which holds the sequential order of cultural cognition. As a result, primary thinking process is invoked to allow for a hybrid understanding of the emerging new meaning less common to comprehension.

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