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Sound, subtitles, and the politics of audibility in Singapore

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Abstract. This article examines the politics of audibility in multilingual Singapore through three case studies: Tan Pin Pin's *Singapore GaGa* in 2005, Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen's *TalkingCock: The Movie* in 2002, and Kuo Pao Kun's *Mama Looking for Her Cat* in 1988. Bringing Sinophone Studies into conversation with Global Anglophone Studies, linguistic citizenship, sound studies, and theories of translation and multilingual communication, it argues that Singapore's official multilingualism camouflages unequal conditions of power and recognition between different languages. Standard English and Mandarin are privileged as legitimate and readily intelligible forms, while Sinitic dialects, Singlish, and other vernacular or hybrid forms are subjected to mediation, correction, censorship, or translation. Through *Singapore GaGa*, the article develops the concept of "acoustic curation" to show how documentary recording, transcription, and subtitling simultaneously recover and reshape marginalized sounds. *TalkingCock: The Movie* subverts the hierarchy between standard and non-standard languages through play of subtitles. *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, by contrast, interrogates the limits of translation by foregrounding the affective charge of body language as a medium of communication. Taken together, these works demonstrate that audibility is not merely a matter of whether voices can be heard, but of the conditions under which they become intelligible, legitimate, and socially recognizable. The article ultimately argues for a multilingual politics that gives voice to minoritized subjects.

Keywords: politics of audibility, acoustic curation, Singapore, subtitling, linguistic citizenship

1. Introduction

In Kuo Pao Kun's *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, the idea of a "mother tongue" becomes an epistemological problem before it becomes a policy category. Mama's Hokkien is the language of intimacy, memory, and maternal authority, yet it is not the language that her children have been able to fully comprehend or recognize as their official mother tongue. The mother's voice is present and affectively powerful, but it does not automatically produce communication. This scene turns a family miscommunication into a national linguistic question in multicultural Singapore: in a multilingual society, why can a mother's tongue remain audible and still fail to become socially or intergenerationally intelligible? The paradox is a dialectic between intimacy and alienation, manifesting both at the private and the national level: the language that should name the closest familial bond can, under state multilingualism, become a marker of intergenerational distance.

Singapore's official language policy is organized around a state-administered model of multilingualism built upon four designated official languages: English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. Designed to align with the state's rigid "Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other (CMIO)" multiracial framework, this institutional model

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projects an image of orderly state-managed linguistic harmony. However, this top-down policy obscures a far more heterogeneous acoustic reality. State initiatives such as the Speak Mandarin Campaign (launched in 1979) systematically suppressed non-Mandarin Sinitic "dialects"-including Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, and Hainanese-from public broadcasting and mass media. Concurrently, the Speak Good English Movement sought to discipline Singapore English (Singlish), framing this multilingual vernacular as an impediment to the island's global economic competitiveness and national modernization. These campaigns do more than regulate speech habits: they establish a hierarchy between state-endorsed standard languages and the dialectal, creolized, and hybrid forms through which many Singaporeans actually conduct everyday life. In this hierarchy, Standard English and Mandarin become publicly legitimate, developmentalist, and future-oriented, while Sinitic dialects and Singlish are rendered backward, excessive, or in need of correction. The symbolic violence of language policy therefore lies not only in suppressing certain sounds but also in teaching citizens which voices deserve to count as proper speech. Yet these minor and nonstandard forms also convey the dense texture and affect of everyday life, preserving modes of intimacy, memory, humour, and community-building that exceed the developmentalist framework of nation-building.

This article examines the politics of audibility through three cultural works that put different mediating arrangements under pressure: Tan Pin Pin's *Singapore GaGa* in 2005, Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen's *TalkingCock: The Movie* in 2002, and Kuo Pao Kun's *Mama Looking for Her Cat* in 1988. Its central research question is: How do documentary curation, satirical subtitles, and theatrical non-translation determine who must perform the work of making multilingual speech intelligible in Singapore? The object of comparison is not simply linguistic diversity as represented in three works, but the distribution of interpretive authority between speakers, institutions, media, and audiences. Each case tests a different mechanism by which a voice becomes audible without necessarily becoming equally recognized.

The approach draws on linguistic citizenship, the political economy of sound, screen translation, and multilingual performance. Rather than treating these as separate theoretical perspectives, it examines three comparable questions in each work: who controls the interface between voice and audience; which features of speech are preserved, transformed, or withheld; and who bears the resulting burden of interpretation. These shared questions connect the three case studies while allowing for differences between documentary film, cinematic satire, and live theatre. The cases are organized as a progression through these questions: Section 2 examines who controls the interface between voice and audience in the documentary, Section 3 examines which features of speech the subtitle preserves or withholds in the satire, and Section 4 examines who bears the burden of interpretation when the theatre withholds translation altogether.

More broadly, this article situates Singapore's soundscape at the intersection of Sinophone Studies and Global Anglophone Studies. Singapore is not simply a Sinophone case placed beside an Anglophone one; it is an intermediary space in which Sinitic languages, colonial English, state bilingualism, and everyday creolization continually reshape one another [1]. Shih makes the relational premise explicit: "the Sinophone does not work in isolation" and "is always in relation" [2]. This convergence matters because the hierarchy between standard and nonstandard language operates across both fields: the marginalization of Sinitic dialects and the disciplining of "bad English" are parallel but intertwined processes within the same social soundscape.

This article contributes to Sinophone Studies by treating Singapore not as a peripheral Chinese-language community but as a site where Sinitic sounds are reorganized through English colonial legacies, state bilingualism, and everyday creolization. It contributes to Anglophone Studies by showing that English in Singapore cannot be understood only through the spread of Standard English, because Singapore English is hybridized through Sinitic dialects, Malay, Tamil, and local modes of address. Singapore thus makes visible a contact zone with layered history of colonialism and diaspora in which Sinophone and Anglophone formations

interrupt, reshape, and expose one another, collectively revealing the hegemonic structure of the standard while opening alternative forms of linguistic and social belonging [2].

The analysis moves through three distinct responses to linguistic hierarchy: curating audibility, exposing normalization, and redistributing the labour of comprehension.

2. Preserving or curating? Acoustic curation in *Singapore GaGa*

Tan Pin Pin's *Singapore GaGa* is an essayistic documentary organized around the everyday sounds of Singapore rather than around a conventional explanatory voice-over. The documentary creates a diverse soundscape that interlaces public announcements, dialect broadcasts, street performance, experimental music, songs, and fragments of ordinary speech as materials through which Singapore can be heard differently. The film therefore should not be approached only as a record of a disappearing soundscape; it is also a study of how sound is selected, framed, and made legible.

The film's polyglossia exceeds the state's four-language schema because institutional voices and vernacular speech occupy the same acoustic field without settling into a single hierarchy. In Bakhtinian terms, polyglossia names this coexistence of socially differentiated voices rather than a unified national language [3]. *Singapore GaGa* does not reproduce that multiplicity naturalistically. By placing marginal sounds in sustained relation to official ones, it makes their prior exclusion perceptible. Curation becomes political at precisely this point: the film changes what receives attention, even as the cinematic apparatus continues to determine how that attention is organized.

2.1. Recording, selection, and documentary authority

The concept of acoustic curation describes the deliberate selection, duration, sequencing, recording, and textual mediation through which documentary sound becomes publicly recognizable. *Singapore GaGa* does not offer access to an unfiltered national soundscape: its microphones, editing, transcription, and subtitles frame which sounds can be attended to and by whom. Its political intervention therefore lies in putting institutional announcements and vernacular voices into shared circulation without claiming that their mediation is neutral.

The making of such a sonic archive is a laborious undertaking. Therefore, the film's official production page makes the labour behind this archive visible. It lists Brian Lim, Rafi Dean, and Michael Lee as sound recordists; Nigel Woodford as sound designer; Andy Lam of Yellow Box Studios as sound engineer; six transcribers-Daniel Tham, Low Chun Foon, Hazel Ngiam, Priya Balraju, Renee Chua Hui Ling, and Wang Zineng-and Tan Dan Feng and Interlexis for subtitles. Each stage performs a distinct interpretive operation: recording fixes an ephemeral event, sound design establishes relations among otherwise dispersed noises, transcription converts accent and rhythm into lexical units, and subtitling selects a written register through which those units become publicly legible. These credits do not reveal every decision through which languages were identified, translated, or standardized, but they establish that the film's acoustic archive is not produced by a transparent documentary ear. It is produced by a collective post-production apparatus that converts unstable sound into legible text.

The official production page also identifies Juanita Melson as the speaker behind familiar MRT, civil-defence, and elevator announcements. Giving this infrastructural voice a name and a body interrupts the neutrality that usually surrounds it: what sounds like part of the environment is revealed as produced speech with a history of labour behind it. Once that voice is placed beside dialect broadcasters and street performers, official sound no longer occupies a separate acoustic order. The film asks listeners to hear institutional and

vernacular voices within the same social world. Khoo's notion of "ventriloquial cinema" is useful here because it draws attention to the relationship between voice and authorship. Ventriloquial cinema can be understood as a cinema that gives space to marginal voices while also speaking through them. The concept therefore prevents a romantic reading of documentary recovery: the film amplifies minor voices, but that amplification is still organized by choices of framing, editing, sequencing, and translation. Khoo describes Tan's filmmaking as "allowing other Singaporean citizens to speak in and through her cinema" [4], In *Singapore GaGa*, this structure is audible whenever minor voices enter the same documentary space as the authoritative sounds of public infrastructure. Their difference is not erased; instead, the hierarchy between them becomes easier to hear because both are granted sustained attention.

2.2. Listening to 4′33″ in the HDB void deck

Aside from these diverse everyday sounds, the documentary further introduces a spectacular performance that makes the politics of curation unusually visible. The performance of John Cage's 4′33″ is especially revealing. Because the fixed frame neither cuts away from the passing footsteps nor amplifies the bird calls, the scene refuses the usual audiovisual hierarchy that would make the piano the event and everything else its background; the viewer must listen across the whole soundscape to locate the performance at all.

Attali frames sound as a political form when he writes that "sounds and their arrangements ... fashion societies" [5]. His formulation matters here because it shifts attention away from noise as an inherent acoustic property and toward the social act of classification: a sound becomes noise when an existing order treats it as disturbance. *Singapore GaGa*'s use of 4′33″ makes that process perceptible. By withholding conventional musical performance, the sequence allows the ordinary sounds of the HDB void deck to occupy the space normally reserved for music. What the scene unsettles, then, is not simply the distinction between music and noise, but the authority that makes that distinction appear natural.



Figure 1. Leng Tan performing John Cage's 4′33″ in an HDB void deck (*Singapore GaGa*)

The scene locates the performance in an HDB void deck, treating an ordinary passageway rather than a concert hall as the site of listening. The setting of the performance-the HDB void deck-should therefore be treated as more than a neutral background. HDB estates and their common spaces are central to the state's project of public housing, social interaction, and managed community life. The void deck is an everyday

architectural form through which the Singapore state imagines proximity, neighbourliness, and inclusive public life. Yet this same space is also a regulated common area in which different residents, uses, and noises must be managed. By placing Cage's 4′33″ in this space, the film creates a tension between the state's aspiration to organize communal harmony and the artwork's challenge to the hierarchy between sound and noise (see Figure 1).

This tension is crucial. The void deck appears as an ordinary, open, and state-produced communal space; Cage's music, by contrast, unsettles the very categories that make sound socially governable. The space suggests an ideal of social inclusion, while the performance reveals that inclusion is never acoustically neutral but is mandated by the power of the state. Some sounds are treated as art, some as background, some as disturbance, and some as voices requiring translation. The scene therefore brings together two forms of classification: spatial classification, through public housing and its common spaces, and sonic classification, through the distinction between music, speech, and noise.

This reorganization of listening also changes the terms of belonging. *Singapore GaGa* departs from a developmentalist image of citizenship in which linguistic competence and social usefulness appear to determine whose presence matters. Khoo notes that Tan's cinema foregrounds people pushed to the margins of official narratives of progress [4]. The documentary does not replace that narrative with a single counter-image of the nation. Instead, it lets belonging emerge from the fact of shared audibility: people who rarely occupy the centre of official representation become part of how Singapore can be heard.

2.3. Transcription and the subtitle interface

The documentary's English and Chinese subtitles widen access to its multilingual speech, but they also turn local voices into written forms designed for audiences who may not share the same linguistic experience. The turn to subtitles should therefore be understood as the next stage of sonic curation rather than as a separate issue. In addition to revealing Singapore's polyglossia, the documentary has to make its sounds intelligible to viewers who do not share the same linguistic repertoire. Subtitles intensify this tension between recognition and mediation. Tan Pin Pin's interview with Asymptote directly articulates the difficulty: if spoken Singapore English is transcribed exactly, non-local audiences may not understand it; if it is translated into "proper English", filmed subjects may appear to say something different from what they actually uttered. Chinese subtitles create another layer of difficulty when English speech follows Malay or Chinese syntax. The translator must decide whether to translate the standardized English already imposed in the first subtitle layer or to work from the speaker's original syntax.

Transcription is the point at which unstable sound begins to become text. Before a subtitle can appear, the film must decide where an utterance begins and ends and what, within it, counts as meaning. That decision inevitably leaves something behind. A written line can convey the propositional content of speech, but it cannot reproduce the full social force carried by accent, timing, overlap, or hesitation. *Singapore GaGa* makes this loss visible by setting dense, situated voices against the comparatively settled text through which non-local viewers are asked to understand them.

This script-sound tension also reveals a hierarchy between languages embedded in the very decision of what requires subtitles. When English is allowed to appear without explanation while Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hainanese, Hakka, Hockchew, Arabic, or other sounds are translated or labelled, the subtitle can implicitly position English as transparent and dialect as marked. The film's English and Chinese subtitle channels therefore increase circulation while reorganizing a dense multilingual field into two dominant textual systems.

Singapore GaGa therefore establishes the first mechanism of this article's comparison: acoustic curation broadens the range of recognized voices while retaining editorial authority over their presentation. The juxtaposition of the void-deck performance, infrastructural announcements, and translated vernacular speech draws attention to both inclusion and mediation. In answer to the article's central question, the documentary locates the labour of comprehension in the curatorial apparatus itself: it makes more voices audible, but the work of making them intelligible remains with editors, transcribers, and subtitlers rather than with the speakers whose sounds are curated. The question carried into the next case is what happens when the supposedly helpful textual interface itself becomes an object of critique.

3. Correcting the voice: subtitle satire in *TalkingCock: The Movie*

TalkingCock: The Movie[1] presents Singapore English (Singlish) not merely as a medium for character dialogue, but as the primary organizing principle of its cinematic world. The film consists of four main narrative strands-a university graduate attempting to "dot-com" his father's illegal loansharking business, a banker losing his mobile phone and sanity, a bao-shop worker pursuing a customer, and a Malay heavy-metal band forced to transform into a commercial boy band-interspersed with mock advertisements, historical parodies, satirical songs, and animated interludes. Across these episodic vignettes, Singlish and multilingual code-switching construct a continuous sonic thread, displaying the overlapping linguistic competencies of everyday Singaporean life.

The playfulness of the film hinges on its disruption of the hierarchy between standard languages, creolized language, and dialects. Where *Singapore GaGa* reveals the mechanisms that organize audibility, *TalkingCock: The Movie* deconstructs the authority of state language politics through play. Its comedy depends on the viewer's enjoyment of mismatch: between Singlish and "proper" English, between Hokkien profanity and sanitized subtitles, and between the state's corrective impulse and the film's refusal to sound correct. The film therefore does not simply oppose a dominant language with a marginal one; it turns the unstable distance between "good" and "bad" language into the very space of comic invention.

3.1. Singlish and the authority of the standard

In official state discourses, Singlish is frequently framed as deficient Standard English. Groppe cites Goh and Woo's description of Singlish as "a polyglot of English, Malay, Tamil, and various Chinese dialects" [1]. Creolization is central here because Singlish is not simply English mixed with local mistakes; it is a contact language produced through colonial history, migration, education, and multilingual everyday use. To describe it merely as "bad English" is already to adopt the viewpoint of a standard-language ideology that misrecognizes hybridity as deficiency. In *TalkingCock: The Movie*, Singlish operates through rich indexical meanings: pragmatic particles, accent, rhythm, and dialect vocabulary position speakers within specific grids of generation, ethnicity, class, and local intimacy.

A Global Anglophone perspective is crucial here because this section is not only about the survival of Sinitic dialects within English; it is also about how English itself becomes local, creolized, and unevenly valued. Here, "Global Anglophone" names an analytic frame for examining English beyond the assumption that Standard English is its natural or neutral form. From this perspective, "bad English" is not merely failed

[1] Singapore International Film Festival. (2002). TalkingCock – The Movie [Festival programme]. https://sgiff.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/SIFF-2002-1.pdf

English but a category produced by institutions that attach intelligence, employability, education, and civic respectability to standard usage. *TalkingCock: The Movie* contests that hierarchy by making nonstandard English inventive, excessive, locally meaningful, and difficult to separate from the Sinitic and other linguistic resources through which it has developed. Singapore therefore makes visible a convergence between Sinophone and Anglophone formations: the same everyday utterance may be English in grammar, Sinitic in rhythm or pragmatics, and socially judged through both colonial and postcolonial standards of linguistic legitimacy.

The film links language hierarchy to sonic hierarchy by showing that a locally intelligible utterance can become "noise" once it is judged by an institution committed to standard speech. Stroud's account of linguistic citizenship [6] and the distinction between voice and noise is useful here because the problem is not whether Singlish communicates; local speakers plainly understand it. The problem is who has the authority to recognize that communication as legitimate. *TalkingCock* turns this act of judgment into comedy, especially when subtitles and censorship expose the effort required to make vernacular speech conform to an official standard.

3.2. Mr Censor and the subtitle as a joke

The film opens with "Mr. Censor", who satirically advises viewers to "turn off the volume and just read the subtitles". As an opening instruction, the joke sets spoken and written language in direct competition. Turning down the sound would erase pronunciation, sentence-final particles, Hokkien idioms, and multilingual puns—the very features that establish local address—while leaving the presumably authoritative subtitle in place. The film thus makes the standard-language interface visible before its episodic narratives begin. The instruction is itself staged as an audiovisual contradiction. The censor's advice arrives as written authority, telling viewers to trust the subtitle over the soundtrack, while the film makes that soundtrack the very source of the joke's local meaning.

In film translation theory, Abé Mark Nornes observes that conventional subtitling seeks to conceal the "linguistic violence" of translating the materiality of spoken vernacular into smooth, target-language text [7]. *TalkingCock: The Movie* reverses this concealment by foregrounding the jarring mismatch between the soundtrack and the subtitle, executing what can be termed "parodic standardization". The collector's edition DVD even advertises "Grammatical English Subtitles" as a special feature, turning linguistic correction itself into a comic selling point that highlights the state's framing of spoken vernacular as "illicit".

Within the audiovisual medium, subtitles possess a distinct materiality and discursive operation. Far from being invisible captions, subtitles occupy screen space as independent visual objects with specific shapes, fonts, and registers, frequently providing reflexive commentary on the narrative. The duality analysed in Section 2.3 returns here in a self-mocking form: Singlish's circulation expands while the speech itself is marked as something to be "trimmed and corrected" for public legibility. What is specific to this film is that the correction becomes a visible comic object rather than an invisible editorial operation.

3.3. eAhLong.com: corporate English and linguistic privilege

In the eAhLong.com segment, a university graduate attempts to rebrand his father's illegal loan-sharking (ah long) operation as a modern "dot-com startup". The comedic effect relies on framing local criminal practices within the prestigious vocabulary of global corporate English, information technology, and entrepreneurial innovation. During the ensuing confrontation, Hokkien profanity is repeatedly replaced by bleeps, while the subtitles recast the same speech in sanitized or absurdly formal English. Corporate English does not alter the

illegal substance of loan-sharking; rather, it clothes it in a rhetorical layer of rationality, progress, and professional legitimacy.

The son's linguistic mobility illustrates what can be described as "translation privilege". Debates over Singlish enregisterment show that access to Standard English and the social meanings attached to code-switching are uneven and contested rather than reducible to a simple class binary [8, 9]. In the film, the university-educated son can deploy Singlish as humor and local authenticity while retaining access to corporate English; this cinematic contrast should not be treated as evidence that vernacular speakers are uniformly monolectal or socially immobile.

3.4. The bao-shop sequence: bleeps and incongruous captions

The bao-shop segment sharpens this contrast between spoken sound, censorship, and printed translation. Mandarin dialogue, Hokkien profanity, and Bollywood musical parody intersect while bleeps puncture the soundtrack. The script is reported to render some profanities as anatomical expressions and others as innocuous objects. These version-specific subtitle examples should be checked against the precise cut cited before publication; the analytic point is that an interrupted utterance can acquire several incompatible written identities.

The interaction between sound, text, and institution can be mapped across three distinct audiovisual dimensions in this scene. First, on the level of the soundtrack, spoken Hokkien profanity and multilingual code-switching are overlaid with high-pitched audio bleeps. Functionally, while the raw dialogue displays working-class emotional intensity and vernacular authenticity, the audio bleeps mark direct state intervention and institutional censorship on the public soundscape. However, for local multilingual viewers, this censorship fails to erase meaning; instead, such viewers automatically reconstruct the suppressed profanity in their minds, enjoying the additional satirical layer produced by the overt bleeping. This is the pleasure of listening to censorship: the bleep announces the state's intervention, but it also exposes the incompleteness of that intervention because local audiences can still hear, remember, or imagine what has been removed.

Second, on the level of standard subtitles, profanity is rendered either as formal anatomical terms such as "Vagina" or replaced with innocuous items like "Lunch Box" and "cheese bun". This textual dimension executes a process of register correction and moral sanitation, disciplining "vulgar" oral speech into sanitized, respectable written text. As a consequence, monolingual or subtitle-dependent viewers are stripped of the scene's rich class and ethnic nuances, receiving only a flattened and normalized message.

The scene's three simultaneous registers—spoken Hokkien, censoring bleep, and sanitized or incongruous subtitle—produce different forms of access. A viewer able to reconstruct the suppressed vernacular may hear the censorship as an additional joke, while a subtitle-dependent viewer sees a different, standardized utterance. Neither experience is universal. Instead, the mismatch makes the labour of linguistic correction audible and visible, extending the film's broader satire of the privileges attached to "proper" English.

Re-evaluating Alison Groppe's question—"Can the Sinophone speak Singlish?" [1]. Groppe's question asks whether a Sinophone framework can account for an English that has been transformed by sustained contact with Sinitic speech. *TalkingCock* stages that problem inside Singlish itself: the language is English, yet its local intelligibility depends on histories that exceed an Anglophone frame. The film's Sinophone character is manifested not through occasional Mandarin interruptions, but through English itself having undergone structural and pragmatic transformation via multilingual contact. Subtitles attempt to reduce this hybridity back to standard written English, exposing the limitations of monolingual models.

Singlish in *TalkingCock: The Movie* is neither total submission to English hegemony nor a self-conscious political weapon; rather, it operates through "playful deployment". Through exaggerated caricatures and

comedic mismatches, the film turns Singlish into a vibrant local resource while simultaneously exposing the regulatory apparatus that seeks to discipline it.

The key mechanism in *TalkingCock: The Movie* is therefore not merely pleasure in Singlish, but the playful exposure of correction. Documentary subtitles in *Singapore GaGa* make the audience aware of the constraints of transcription; here, the collision between speech, bleep, and written captions transforms those constraints into the comic event itself. Yet this exposure still depends on unequal linguistic competencies: some viewers recognize the absent utterance while others cannot. In the terms of the central question, the film shifts the labour of comprehension onto the audience itself: the joke presumes a spectator who can hear what the subtitle has erased, so the burden of recognizing the suppressed vernacular falls unevenly on differently competent viewers. The third case asks what happens when the theatre declines to supply a uniform translation at all.

4. Withholding translation: unequal audibility in *Mama Looking for Her Cat*

Kuo Pao Kun's *Mama Looking for Her Cat* should be situated within Singapore's multilingual theatre history [10], where language on stage became a way to question the state's tidy equation of race, language, and citizenship. As a theatrical work, it is especially useful for this article because it tests what happens when the mediating technology of film subtitles is replaced by live bodies, shared space, and uneven audience comprehension. If *Singapore GaGa* and *TalkingCock: The Movie* ask how subtitles make minor voices visible while disciplining them, *Mama Looking for Her Cat* asks what happens when translation is withheld and spectators must encounter multilingualism as partial comprehension. The play does not overcome linguistic difference by replacing language with universal bodily expression. Instead, it stages communication as an uneven process distributed across speech, gesture, space, spectatorship, and informal acts of interpretation.

Primary production records situate this critique in a specific historical conjuncture. Esplanade's Kuo Pao Kun timeline identifies Kuo as the writer and director of the 1988 production and describes *Mama Looking for Her Cat* as Singapore's first multilingual play. Other historical accounts identify the work as a collaborative theatre practice involving performers from different linguistic backgrounds and languages familiar to Singaporeans, including English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew. The play therefore emerged not as a neutral celebration of diversity but as a response to the uneven effects of bilingual education, Mandarinization, and the marginalization of Chinese dialects [11].

4.1. The mother-tongue paradox

The analysis now turns to the opening moment: the mother tongue is not only a policy category but a failed or partial relation between bodies, generations, and memories. Taken literally, "mother tongue" designates an intimate bond formed within the familiar space of family; institutionally, however, it can designate a standardized language that a mother herself may not speak. The conflict between Mama and her children reveals this paradox. Under Singapore's bilingual language regime, Mandarin has been standardized as the designated mother tongue of people of Chinese descent, yet the language actually spoken by a mother may be Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, or another Sinitic variety. The children's acquisition of English and Mandarin provides access to education and public life while simultaneously increasing their linguistic distance from their Hokkien-speaking mother. The affective force of "mother tongue" therefore lies precisely in the tension between maternal intimacy and institutional alienation.

Yasemin Yildiz's critique of the monolingual paradigm helps theorize this tension. Yildiz's "monolingual paradigm" names precisely this expectation that a person or community should possess one natural mother

tongue. Kuo's play unsettles that expectation by placing an officially multilingual state beside a family whose lived linguistic history cannot be reduced to the language assigned to it institutionally. Even a multilingual state can imagine language, identity, and belonging through singular and standardized forms. The category of "mother tongue" appears natural only when one forgets the plurality of actual mother tongues in lived family histories. Kuo's play makes this forgetting theatrical: Mama's voice is present, insistent, and emotionally central, but it no longer occupies the language that her children have been taught to recognize as socially valuable [12].

E. K. Tan's account of Kuo's multilingual theatre helps situate this dynamic within the concept of "open culture" [11]. Tan uses "open culture" to describe Kuo's resistance to fixed cultural boundaries. Theatre gives this idea a material form because linguistic difference is encountered in real time: no single code can organize the whole event, and the audience must remain inside that incompleteness rather than having it resolved in advance. Here, open culture can be understood as a theatrical and political practice that refuses to close identity around one official language, one ethnic category, or one state-authorized form of citizenship. It does not mean that communication becomes effortless; rather, it keeps the stage open to partial, uneven, and embodied encounters across linguistic difference. Kuo's multilingualism moves beyond the state's fixed racial and linguistic compartments by creating a situation in which no language is sufficient for every participant. Communication therefore becomes relational and uneven: meaning is distributed across speakers, listeners, bodies, and partial acts of interpretation [11].

4.2. Embodied comprehension and the tamil-speaking stranger

Unlike the material, visible form of film subtitles, theater demands a different way of listening and viewing. Kuo does not confine linguistic disconnection to the characters. The multilingual structure of the performance also distributes different degrees of comprehension among spectators, so that the mother's experience of partial linguistic exclusion is reproduced, although never identically, at the level of spectatorship. A viewer who cannot understand a particular utterance must attend to gesture, facial expression, repetition, vocal intensity, rhythm, spatial movement, and the responses of other characters [13].



Figure 2. A theatrical encounter in *Mama Looking for Her Cat*

A particularly revealing reported scene pairs the Hokkien-speaking Mama with an elderly Tamil-speaking man who is also searching for a cat. According to Corrie Tan's retrospective account, the exchange takes place without surtitles and relies on charades, indications of size and shape, imitated meows, and shared comic

uncertainty. The interaction does not produce a word-for-word equivalent between Hokkien and Tamil. Its rhythm instead allows provisional mutual recognition while leaving the semantic gap intact. The reported staging makes comprehension visible as labour: the characters indicate size with their hands, repeat the meow until the cat is recognized, and laugh together at the failure of literal equivalence. Meaning arrives through these visible and audible efforts rather than through any shared word, which is why the scene can produce mutual recognition without producing a translation. Because this description comes from a retrospective account rather than a performance recording analysed here, its details should be understood as reported staging rather than independently verified shot-by-shot evidence (see Figure 2).

4.3. Spectatorship and informal translation

Theatre space is central to this effect. In a film, subtitles can be layered onto the image and standardized for every viewer. In the theatre, by contrast, spectators occupy a shared room in which comprehension remains uneven and visibly social. The absence of surtitles turns the auditorium into a field of uneven listening and interpretation: some spectators understand a line immediately; others infer from gesture; still others depend on the laughter, hesitation, or whispered explanation of people nearby. The stage therefore does not merely represent multilingual disconnection. It produces a multilingual event in which audience members experience different distances from the same utterance.

This politics of partial comprehension becomes especially visible/audible in the 2012 restaging by Paper Monkey Theatre[2], which was staged at the National Museum of Singapore Gallery Theatre and advertised as multilingual with no English subtitles, mixing English, Malay, Mandarin, Punjabi, Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew. The production record matters because it shows that non-translation was not only a feature of the 1988 play-text but also a curatorial choice in later performance. By withholding English surtitles, the restaging temporarily interrupted the expectation that every non-English utterance should be rendered for an English-reading default spectator.

From this perspective, non-translation does not simply create incomprehension; it redistributes the responsibility for communication and engenders a form of "body language". The dialect speaker is no longer the only person required to adjust. Part of the burden shifts to the spectator, who must wait, infer, observe, and accept that meaning may arrive only partially. This is politically significant because it unsettles the assumption that linguistic minorities must continuously translate themselves in order to participate in public culture.

Audience reception shows, however, that removing institutional subtitles does not remove translation. A spectator at the 2012 production recorded that a mother seated nearby whispered translations of the Hokkien dialogue to her daughter. This small anecdote deserves more attention because it makes interpretive labour audible inside the audience itself. Translation moves from the official stage apparatus into the auditorium, where it is performed informally through family knowledge. The older spectator becomes an improvised subtitler; the younger spectator depends on inherited dialect competence for access. The moment also reverses, however briefly, the play's central pattern: an older speaker's dialect knowledge becomes a resource rather than a deficit.

This anecdote also clarifies why the play should not be romanticized as a simple celebration of multilingual community. Communication occurs, but it is unevenly distributed. Spectators with Hokkien or other Sinitic-language knowledge may possess forms of access unavailable to others; spectators without those competencies may experience exclusion as a condition of watching. The play's politics lies not in making everyone

[2] Paper Monkey Theatre. (2012). *Mama Looking for Her Cat*. https://www.papermonkey.com.sg/mama-looking-for-her-cat/

understand the same thing, but in making the unequal labour of understanding visible. The audience becomes part of the performance's multilingual ecology.

Nevertheless, withholding English surtitles should not automatically be interpreted as resistance. Refusing English-centred translation and refusing accessibility are different practices. A politically productive multilingual performance could decentre English without eliminating captions altogether-for instance, by identifying the language being spoken, preserving code-switching, and marking where gesture, vocal quality, or non-speech sound carries meaning that cannot be reduced to propositional content. Such an approach would distinguish semantic access from linguistic normalization.

Mama Looking for Her Cat offers the third mechanism in the comparison: rather than editing or parodying the translation interface, it makes uneven audience comprehension part of the theatrical event. The reported whispered translation between spectators shows that the absence of surtitles does not eliminate translation; it relocates interpretive work into relationships among audience members. This relocation can decentre the expectation of an automatically intelligible English text, but it can also limit accessibility. Where *Singapore GaGa* left comprehension to the editorial apparatus and *TalkingCock: The Movie* exposed its uneven distribution among viewers, the play relocates it into relationships among audience members. The political question is who is willing—and who is required—to help another person understand.

5. Conclusion

This article has asked how media distribute the labour of making multilingual speech intelligible. In all three cases, a voice can be acoustically present yet remain subject to unequal recognition. *Singapore GaGa* assigns editorial authority to documentary curation: its juxtaposition of institutional announcements, vernacular sounds, and the void-deck performance expands the field of listening while its subtitles necessarily reshape speech. *TalkingCock: The Movie* reveals the same operations through satirical mismatches between Singlish, bleeps, and grammatical subtitles, turning correction into a visible and audible joke. *Mama Looking for Her Cat* tests a contrasting arrangement: without a uniform surtitling interface, characters and spectators negotiate meaning through gesture, timing, and intermittent acts of interpretation. Read together, the cases form a cumulative argument: curation in *Singapore GaGa* exposes who controls the sound archive, parody in *TalkingCock: The Movie* exposes who corrects the vernacular, and non-translation in *Mama Looking for Her Cat* exposes who is left to infer meaning. The comparison thus shifts the object of analysis from three separate works to a single question of who performs the work of understanding.

The comparative result is that translation and non-translation are not intrinsically emancipatory or exclusionary. Both can increase access, and both can shift costs onto speakers or spectators. Acoustic curation names one crucial site of this asymmetry: the power to decide which sounds receive attention and which textual form counts as their publicly intelligible equivalent. Subtitling can help audiences encounter a multilingual work without requiring vernacular speech to imitate Standard English; conversely, it can erase registers, accents, and pragmatic differences when legibility is equated with normalization. The question for cultural institutions is therefore not whether to subtitle, but how to make mediation accountable to linguistic difference.

The comparison yields three constructive implications for cultural policy and creative practice. First, multilingual archival projects should document the editorial and translational decisions that shape recordings, rather than presenting them as transparent preservation. Second, captioning and subtitling practices can support accessibility while retaining language identification, switches of register, and salient non-speech sounds instead of silently standardizing every voice. Third, theatres and festivals can experiment with multiple

access modes and contextual materials so that decentring English does not simply exclude audiences unable to follow a particular language. These proposals are interpretive implications of the three cases, not claims about existing policy implementation. Future research could compare audience responses across linguistic groups, subtitle versions, and live performances to test how these competing arrangements affect understanding and recognition. For Sinophone and Global Anglophone Studies, Singapore shows that linguistic hierarchy operates through shared institutional practices across Sinitic varieties and English. A more equitable politics of audibility would redistribute the work of understanding without demanding that every voice sound the same.

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