

# Beautifully lost in local lingo

► *Agak-agak, boleh, wayang*: Malaysian slang enters Oxford dictionary

**I**N Malaysia and Singapore, language is not just spoken. It is lived. Step into a bustling hawker centre or a neighbourhood cafe and conversations unfold in a lively mix of English, Malay and Chinese dialects. Now, some of these everyday expressions have found their way into the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), marking a cultural moment for the region.

Currently in its third edition, the OED is an ongoing digital revision updated quarterly rather than in print. Its March update introduces new Malaysian and Singaporean English words, such as *jialat*, *wayang* and *boleh*, adding to a growing database of more than 600,000 entries that reflect the evolution of the English language.

## **Agak-agak: Art of instinctive cooking**

One of the most distinctly local additions is *agak-agak*. Used as a noun and a verb, it refers to estimating or guessing. In Malaysia, it is most often heard in the kitchen, where recipes are guided less by measurement and more by instinct. It is a style that shapes beloved dishes such as *assam laksa*, a tangy, spice-laden noodle soup from Penang, and *ice kacang*, a colourful dessert layered with syrups and toppings. For visitors, *agak-agak* captures a broader cultural approach. Things do not always need to be exact to be just right.

## **Boleh: Small word, big meaning**

Few words are as versatile as *boleh*. It can mean “can”, “yes” or simply signal agreement. Whether you are ordering food, asking for help or confirming plans, *boleh* fits effortlessly into conversation. Its popularity was amplified by the phrase “Malaysia boleh”, which grew into a widely recognised expression of national spirit. Today, it remains a word travellers will hear almost everywhere.



A typical hawker scene, where travellers can pick up words such as *boleh* and *agak-agak* alongside their meals.

## **Wayang, play play: Reading between lines**

Some expressions reveal more about behaviour than language. *Wayang*, once used to describe traditional performances, now refers to actions that feel exaggerated or insincere. It is often used to call out something that seems a little too showy. Then there is *play play*, a phrase used to describe doing something without seriousness. It can refer to joking around or not fully committing to a task. For travellers, these phrases offer insight into tone and context, adding another layer to everyday interactions.

## **Jialat, kaypoh: When things get messy**

Borrowed from Hokkien, *jialat* is used when situations turn difficult or troublesome. It can describe anything from minor inconvenience to a more serious problem, often delivered with a hint of humour. *Kaypoh*, on the other hand, refers to someone who is overly curious or prone to meddling in other people’s affairs. It is commonly used in a teasing, light-hearted way. Together, these words reflect the playful honesty often found in local conversations.

## **BTO: More than just housing**

In Singapore, BTO, short for Build to Order, refers to a public housing scheme managed by the Housing and Development Board. Over time, the term has taken on a deeper cultural meaning. Among couples, applying for a BTO flat is often seen as a major relationship milestone, signalling commitment and long-term plans. It is, in many ways, the opposite of doing things play play.

## **Language shaped by culture**

The update also includes terms such as *mat salleh*, commonly used to refer to Western foreigners, alongside revised entries such as *lah*, *sarong* and *tunku*. Each word reflects the region’s layered identity, shaped by history, migration and everyday life. For travellers, picking up these expressions is not about mastering slang. It is about connecting with people in a more genuine way.

Because in Malaysia and Singapore, language is more than communication – it is flavour, humour and a shared understanding of how life is lived and sometimes, all it takes is one word. *Boleh*.

## **Full list: From street slang to dictionary status**

**THE** latest update also formalises a broader list of words that reflect how language is shaped by everyday life across Malaysia and Singapore.

### **New words**

1. *assam laksa*, n.
2. *agak-agak*, n. and v.
3. *boleh*, v. and int.
4. BTO, n. and v.
5. *degazette*, v.
6. *ice kacang*, n.
7. *jialat*, adj.
8. *kaypoh*, n., v. and adj.
9. *mat salleh*, n. and adj.
10. *play play*, v.
11. *wayang*, n. and adj.

### **Revised entries**

1. *Bahasa*, n.
2. *ikat*, n.
3. *kavadi*, n.
4. *kongsi*, n.
5. *koyan*, n.
6. *lah*, int.
7. *langsuir*, n.
8. *sarong*, n.
9. *saronged*, adj.
10. *sedekah*, n.
11. *tetampan*, n.
12. *towkay*, n.
13. *tunku*, n.
14. *Yang di-Pertuan*, n.
15. *Yang di-Pertuan Agong*, n.



*Mat salleh* is commonly used to refer to Western foreigners. – ALL PICS FROM 123RF