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Chinese and globalization

by

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This is a “post-publication” of a contribution with the same title to Joana Duarte & Ingrid Gogolin (eds.) (2013), *Linguistic super-diversity in urban areas: Research approaches*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, p. 275-296. As a consequence of serious editorial problems this text had quite some mistakes that make it hard to understand, especially in the choice and placement of the pictures. With permission of the editors, we therefore decided to reprint a revised version of the paper in the TPCS series, including one additional picture that supports our argument.

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Abstract

Globalization poses challenges to sociolinguistics. The main challenge is to come to terms with the phenomenology of sociolinguistic globalization. This phenomenology touches four domains: proper globalization effects on language, the effect of globalization on migration patterns and immigrant communities, the effect of globalization, notably of the spread of English as a global language, on language hierarchies, and the domain of remote communities that have serious doubts regarding their possibilities of successfully participating in the globalization process. The sociolinguistics of globalization can only be studied in the total, central as well as peripheral, global context where globalization processes happen and influence language structures, choices and uses. China is a case in point. On the one hand, China is one of the engines of economic globalization; on the other hand, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo brought globalized mega-events to China, spurring an already booming tourist industry. These developments have changed the sociolinguistic face of China. After an outline of some important issues in globalization and a provisional sketch of a program for the study of sociolinguistic globalization in China, this contribution gives an example of a sociolinguistic analysis of a sequence of bilingual Chinese English order notices that can be found in the micro-linguistic landscape of Beijing.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, globalization, linguistic landscape, Chinese English, Beijing

1. Introduction

Globalization poses challenges to sociolinguistics. The main challenge is to come to terms, theoretically and methodologically, with the phenomenology of sociolinguistic globalization. And this phenomenology, we contend, touches at least three domains.

First, there are, what we could call proper globalization effects on language. These include: (1) the emergence of the Internet as a major virtual social environment in which new discursive genres and patterns can be developed along with new practices (such as online gaming and blogging; Leppänen et al. 2009; Androutsopoulos 2006) and identities (as in life writing on Facebook and other virtual social networks); (2) the new force with which different

(and new) varieties of English get spread and adopted by groups all over the world; (3) the way in which a lot of this language spread and change is connected to the worldwide surge of popular culture formats such as hip hop music, computer games and so forth (Pennycook 2007); and (4) the way in which languages as a consequence of their globalization-related presence on the internet but also as a consequence of their use in linguistically superdiverse contexts, undergo changes in their appearance and structure, e.g. by using Latinized instead of the languages' original scripts on the internet or by using features of different languages in one communicative exchange.

Second, there is the effect of globalization on migration patterns and émigré communities. On the one hand, there are new forms of migration. Refugees and short-term or itinerant labor migrants have changed the face of large urban centers all over the world, leading to what Vertovec (2006) called 'superdiversity': a mixture of resident and non-resident migrants in urban centers, having different migration motives and purposes and displaying different patterns of organization of their migrations, including the rise of 'networks', 'global communities of practice' or 'supergroups' rather than 'language communities' as the dominant format of social organization (Castells 1996). On the other hand, and connected to this, there is the effect of globalization on the sociolinguistics of migration. There is more language diversity now in urban migration centers than ever before, and technologies such as Skype and mobile phones enable migrants now to remain in close contact with communities elsewhere in the world, usually in their home languages. Patterns of diasporic multilingualism have been changed and the discussion on language maintenance and loss is entering a new level in which language loss is becoming an obsolete concept.

Third, there is the effect of globalization, notably of the spread of English and other global languages within and between nation states, on language hierarchies, in particular on the position and predicament of linguistic minorities. Issues of language endangerment, minority language maintenance and loss have acquired a new dynamic in the context of the developments sketched above. Lingua franca use of global languages has acquired a new dimension, leading to new patterns of multilingualism among speakers of minority and majority languages and creating new opportunities for language survival (Mufwene 2005, 2008).

These three primary domains of the sociolinguistics of globalization are accompanied by a fourth domain, i.e. the domain of communities that, be it on the basis of experiences or expectations, have serious doubts regarding their possibilities of successfully participating in the globalization process and as a consequence turn away from the global level and its global language and opt for the regional level and its languages or dialects, thereby as it were

potentially ruling out the national level and its language. There is an emergent literature on all of these domains, reflecting a growing awareness among sociolinguists of the challenges of globalization. Works such as De Swaan (2001) referring to ‘a stampede towards English’ and Calvet (2006) have attempted to grasp the general patterns of language relations in the age of globalization, Fairclough (2006) has attempted to address the effects of globalization on discourse patterns, and Pennycook (2007) focused on the changing face of English in a globalized world of popular culture. Although the contributions in *The Handbook of Language and Globalization* (Coupland 2010) provide highly relevant and broad perspectives, a general synthesis of the phenomena of sociolinguistic globalization has not yet been provided. One of the reasons for this, we think, is that most work has so far concentrated strongly on globalization phenomena in urbanized Western societies. This, of course, reflects an old set of inequalities in the academic world; at the same time, it shows the need for research on other parts of the globalized world. The sociolinguistics of globalization (Blommaert 2010) can only be studied in the total, i.e. central as well as peripheral global context where globalization processes happen and influence language structures, choices and uses and accompanying language related identity formation processes.

China is a case in point here. On the one hand, China is one of the engines (if not the engine) of economic globalization; on the other hand, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the Shanghai World Expo 2010 brought a globalized mega-event to China, spurring an already booming tourist industry. These developments have changed the face of China, also sociolinguistically, and will continue to do so. This paper will first outline some important issues in globalization and then provide a provisional sketch of a program for the study of sociolinguistic globalization in China and finally give an example of a sociolinguistic analysis of a specific type of bilingual Chinese English order notices in Beijing.

2. Issues in a sociolinguistics of globalization

Hobsbawm (2007: 3) observed that “the currently fashionable free-market globalisation has brought about a dramatic growth in economic and social inequalities both within states and internationally.” He continues by noting that “the impact of globalisation is felt most by those who benefit from it least” (ibid.) and that “while the actual scale of globalisation remains modest (...), its political and cultural impact is disproportionately large” (id.: 4). These three observations, to Hobsbawm, are elementary for an understanding of globalization processes. Such processes have the strong and highly problematic effect of exacerbating inequalities

between individuals, groups, regions or states; they have winners as well as losers; and even if they directly affect relatively small populations, their indirect effects can affect everyone, including those who do not appear to be ‘globalized’. Sociolinguistic effects must be catalogued under the cultural effects mentioned by Hobsbawm, and they do share the characteristic that he identifies: they emerge as *general reorganizations of sociolinguistic environments* in globalized or globalizing societies.

Globalization phenomena change the whole sociolinguistic environment in which people move. Sociolinguistic globalization, thus, also for example affects the whole of the sociolinguistic ecology of China. The now generalized introduction of English (an estimated 350 million Chinese people are in the process of learning English, including the for this reason well-known Beijing taxi drivers in preparing for the Olympics (see however Walters, 2008, who claims that the city-wide campaign to encourage drivers to learn basic English was ultimately unsuccessful) is not an isolated phenomenon; it has effects on the role and function of Mandarin Chinese, as well as on those of dialects (*fanyan*) and other languages within China. The point is to understand China, in the context of a sociolinguistics of globalization, as a *multilingual* country in which (existing) delicate and socioculturally and politically sensitive balances between different languages and language varieties are being affected. This new multilingualism or linguistic superdiversity has as an effect, for instance, that the sociolinguistic repertoires of different social groups are being reshuffled, and that people now use (and enjoy the use of, or suffer from the use of) new languages, language varieties or language features in a variety of social contexts (Wang & Varis 2011). The emergent tourist market, for instance, will call for greater numbers of people proficient in English, and English will be an economically interesting instrument for those aspiring to make a living out of it. These processes are large-scale but at the same time they become visible at the individual level as can be shown by the example of a vendor that we saw selling drinks and food on the Great Wall and in doing so heard using some English to one of his foreign customers. This vendor’s use of some linguistic features (that belong to ‘English’) not only led to a positive economic exchange but also to a positive response of Chinese tourists visiting the Great Wall to the fact that the vendor apparently was able to speak ‘English’. This process, of course, has repercussions on the range of social identities that people can articulate, and various studies have already explored the effects of learning English on identities of younger-generation Chinese (e.g. Gao 2009; Gao et al. 2007; Qu 2005; Tan 2001; Li 1997). New social groups – think of the rise of a Chinese variety of yuppie-dom, or new elite ‘bobos’ (Bourgeois Bohemians; Wang 2005) – identify themselves by particular patterns of discourse, registers

and ways of speaking, and by doing so create new identities, also in the new Chinese middle class (Dong 2011).

Consequently globalization forces us to adopt a new vocabulary for describing sociolinguistic processes. Several such new concepts have been proposed (such as e.g. Blommaert 2007, 2010), and we will highlight one of them here. ‘Scale’ is definitely the keyword in any analysis of globalization. In the context of sociolinguistic globalization, we need to learn to see sociolinguistic phenomena as developing at, or across, particular scale-levels of social reality. The term globalization itself suggests a process of lifting events from one level to a higher one, e.g. from a global one to a local one, or vice versa, and a sociolinguistics of globalization will definitely need to explain the various forms of interconnectedness between levels and scales of sociolinguistic phenomena. The complexity and simultaneity we are facing is a challenge, not a danger. But we need to be more precise, and two qualifications are in order.

First, we need to move from a language or languages (as a countable noun) to varieties, repertoires (Hymes 1996: 67; Silverstein 1998; Blommaert & Backus 2011) and languaging or polylingual languaging (Jørgensen 2008; Jørgensen et al. 2011) as our focus of attention. What is globalized is not an abstract Language, but specific speech forms, genres, styles, forms of literacy practice. And the way in which such globalized varieties enter into local environments is by a reordering of the locally available repertoires and the relative hierarchical relations between ingredients or features (Blommaert & Backus 2011) in the hierarchy. Sociolinguistic globalization results in a reorganization of the sociolinguistic stratigraphy, a process which not necessarily leads to a new solid and lasting hierarchy but may best be seen as an ongoing, highly volatile process cross-cut, again, by matters of scale.

This point is convincingly made in Dong’s (2011) research on languages and identities in Chinese rural immigrants coming to Beijing. By using the sociolinguistic concept of scale for distinguishing between identity construction at the interpersonal, metapragmatic and institutional discourse level, Dong shows the different uses of and values attached to regional Chinese dialects and Putonghua respectively in Beijing, a city that attracted 150 million internal immigrants over the last ten years, all engaged in defining and being defined in terms of their identity through language. What Dong (2011) also clearly shows is that a sociolinguistics of globalization has to address questions about whose semiosis, meaning making, through among other things languages, features or genres is being globalized, by whom, for whom, when and how?

A second but closely related qualification is that we need to address the language-ideological level in globalization processes. In understanding the processes of ‘globalized’

insertion of features or varieties into newly stratified sociolinguistic systems, the key to an understanding is what such reorderings of repertoires actually mean and represent to people. There is ample evidence for the assumption that language ideologies affect language change, including forms of transformation now captured under the label ‘globalized’ (Kroskrity 2000; Blommaert 1999). The ideological, metapragmatic aspects of language usage lead us to an understanding of meaning and function of ‘new’ ingredients in repertoires: they allow us to understand which functions people assign to such items, and why. In practical terms, they may for instance offer us an understanding of why non-native English often meets considerable interpersonal tolerance for deviations from ‘standard’ English both in pronunciation, syntax, lexis and style, and can thus communicatively function quite adequately. This communicative adequacy, of course, does not prevent people from making identity judgments about those who speak with non-native accents. It also does not prevent educational institutions to not use the material reality of English but the institutionalized artefactual images of what accent-less English should be as yardsticks in judging “English” language proficiency.

Let us take both elements together: the fact that we have to deal with niched sociolinguistic phenomena related to the insertion of particular features of language in existing repertoires, and the language-ideological load both guiding the process and being one of its results. It is an important achievement if we manage to see sociolinguistic globalization in these terms: as a matter of particular language features entering the repertoires of particular groups, creating new semiotic opportunities and commodities for members of such groups and indeed constructing them as groups. We can now move on and focus on *mobility* as a key feature of sign complexes in globalization: the fact that language varieties, texts, images travel across time and space, and that this is a journey across repertoires and sets of indexicalities attached to ingredients of repertoires. A sociolinguistics of globalization is necessarily a sociolinguistics of mobility – something in which we see languages as offering (or denying) mobility potential for people, in which we see people as mobile by default, and in which we see people use language because of the mobility potential it offers them.

3. Sociolinguistic globalization in Chinese

Now that some of our theoretical bearings have been set, we can move to consider possible topics in a sociolinguistics of globalization in China. The range of actual topics is, of course, infinitely vast, but we will try to delineate two large complexes of topics. Both complexes have to do with the theme with which we concluded the previous section: mobility. As we said, a

sociolinguistics of globalization will have to be a sociolinguistics of mobility, and this means that we must look at language phenomena in which mobility issues are a key feature. The blocks of topics, consequently, could be defined as language for mobility and mobile people and language.

To start with the first topic, the leading question here is: what sort of mobility potential do particular languages, varieties and features offer to people? And it is clear right from the start that such mobility potential will be significantly different for different languages, varieties and features. And it is also clear that the generalized spread of English in China has clearly reshuffled the cards in this respect as well. While Mandarin used to be, in Chinese society, the language of widest mobility – given that the nation-state was the range of mobility for the overwhelming majority of the people – we now see that the growing social diversification of the population, with the rise of new globalized elites, creates a more chequered pattern. For some groups in the population, English has now become available as the language that offers global mobility. It does so by enabling physical relocation to most other places in the world, as well as virtual mobility through communication technologies such as mobile phones or the internet. Proficiency in English allows you to conduct your business in Mumbai and Rome, New York and Buenos Aires, and to contact people all over the world. The mobility potential of English is, seen from that perspective, virtually unlimited, be it that, of course, in most places outside the native English environments, English would be a language in which only a minority would be fully proficient. The fact is that English offers global mobility among English-proficient elites all over the world, and it occurs in more niches worldwide than perhaps any other language. (At the same time of course, English creates a new social division between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’, between those who engage in the global world through English and those who are excluded and cut off.

This means that Mandarin has now been firmly relegated as a language of mobility to China and the Chinese diaspora in the world. It has become, or has remained, a national language (be it that this language is spoken by a quarter of the world’s population). Less people in the world will learn Mandarin than people who learn English. The fact is, however, that Chinese is gaining currency as a modest globalized language. The export of Chinese goods all over the world makes, for instance, Chinese writing something which has now become part of almost anyone’s household in the West – in the form of printed product labels, user manuals of appliances and so forth. But while the language has, thus, been spread over most of the globe, it has been spread without triggering communication. It has been spread, in short, as an empty sign system that for non-Chinese speakers does not communicate meanings (other than “this is from China”).

The national sociolinguistic order in China, however, has effectively been reorganized due to the rising importance of English. While Mandarin remains unthreatened as the language of all forms of social communication across the nation, elites now use English speech, they insert English in Mandarin speech in the form of code switching, and they consume more English cultural products now than ever before (Dong 2011). The global mobility potential of English, thus, has also effects within the national sphere, and it is not unlikely that we will witness the emergence of elites who identify themselves by means of particular forms of the use of English. Globalized mega-events further underpin the mobility potential of English, and the emerging tourist industry will doubtless become its major socio-economic anchor. And, as said above, such events affect everyone: one of the very common experiences of Beijing people during the Olympics must have been that of being addressed in English and not being able to answer. This experience of globalization – an experience of impotence and disempowerment – is disconcerting and new, and it also deserves attention. How do non-English-proficient Chinese experience their contacts with English? As for the other languages of China, their mobility potential is comparatively very low. They appear to be firmly established as languages of local or regional communication, and the fact that they have persisted in spite of the dominance of Mandarin suggests that they will also withstand the emergence of English as a language of China.

This, then, could be a first range of topics for a sociolinguistics of globalization in China: the different ways in which people gain or lose mobility potential by using the different languages and varieties that are available to them. The second complex of topics addresses, as mentioned earlier, mobile people and language. Populations are no longer locked in space; people migrate and new technologies allow them to move across vast spaces from behind their desks or from within their internet cafés. The issue of migration is a crucial one in China, with hundreds of millions of internal migrants trekking from rural areas to the industrialized heartlands of the country as an effect of the global economic power of China. Such people bring along their languages, dialects and accents, and relocation from the ‘margin’ of the country to one of its ‘centers’ again creates new sociolinguistic hierarchies and new forms of societal multilingualism in these big centers (cf. Dong & Blommaert 2009; Dong 2011). The metropolitan character of such centers also entails cosmopolitanism: urban populations are an intense mixture of people from everywhere, and very often the really ‘local’ people become a minority among a majority of migrants.

Another aspect of people’s mobility in globalization is the rising numbers and size (and social visibility) of Chinese expatriate communities. Here we have to distinguish between the older Chinese immigrant communities that, e.g. in The Netherlands arrived in the early 20th

century as labor migrants, and contemporary migrants. For the latter expatriates (often highly educated and qualified people, and often accompanied by their families) new communications technologies add to an already existing infrastructure of international schools, shops, bars and restaurants. They can now remain in close contacts with relatives and friends back home – a factor which keeps their native languages alive in a home context where there is much pressure to turn to English or other international languages (Li & Juffermans 2011; Dong & Dong 2013). The sociolinguistic repertoires of such expatriate groups are interesting. It would, for instance, be worth knowing to what extent Mandarin is acquired by expatriates, and for what specific purposes (for business, shopping, education, because of bilingual families, just for fun or out of respect for the host culture?) An interesting field of research would be the appearance, form and functionality of Chinese and English in the Chinese diaspora (see e.g. Blommaert & Huang (2010) on London Chinatown and Dong & Dong (2013) on a Chinese restaurant in the Dutch city of Tilburg).

Global as well as national developments with respect to Chinese pose interesting questions for a sociolinguistics of globalization to answer. Elsewhere we have given a first sketch of a research program focusing on what we have provisionally termed as the emergence of new platforms for Mandarin Chinese. This program includes the following projects: (1) Confucius Centers and the globalization of Mandarin, (2) Mandarin on the internet: investigating the politics and practices of internet Chinese courses, (3) Popular media as informal language learning environment, (4) Transformations in the sociolinguistics of the Chinese diaspora and, (5) Mandarin for migrants in China (see Blommaert, Kroon & Dong 2010).

4. A ‘fire extinguisher box’ as a case in point

As an example of the sociolinguistics of globalization in China in this section we want to go into a series of observations and analyses that we started during an October 2008 field trip to China and continued in consecutive trips. In doing so we will combine the two perspectives distinguished in the above: language for mobility and mobile people and language. In our fieldwork, we were especially focused on the presence of English in the Beijing public space. We could have gone into many public signs in the Beijing linguistic landscape here (see Kroon, Dong & Blommaert 2011; Kroon, Dong, Van Bochove, Blommaert 2011) but we decided to concentrate on one specific example in our data, i.e. the pictures that we took of a rather mundane object in public spaces, such as tourist centers. Visiting the Forbidden City and slowly walking through the various magnificent buildings, we noticed the repeated

announcement of the availability of fire extinguishers: every building had a number of red painted wooden or metal boxes that, on top of their internationally meaningful color, connected to the semiotic complex of danger, alarm and fire (fighting) also showed the clear message that the box contained a fire extinguishing device (of whatever sort). The fire extinguisher boxes were the objects we encountered repeatedly in our fieldwork trip to the Forbidden City and therefore we chose them into the data analysis of this paper; another reason had to do with the fact that the original fire fighting equipments – the giant bronze containers with water in them – were still in their original places along with the modern ones, even though the former failed to put down the big fires in 1421 and in 1597.

The message on the red boxes was conveyed to the Chinese as well as the international visitors in four Chinese characters as well as in English, printed beneath these characters. This presence of English in the Forbidden City, like in many other public places, at first sight mainly has to do with the wish to not only provide Chinese visitors but also the large numbers of foreign visitors with information that can be decisive and life saving in case of fire. English in other words appears here as a consequence not so much of the growing knowledge of English by the Chinese population but mainly as a consequence of touristic globalization movements into China. A closer look at the many fire extinguisher boxes, however, made clear that they show remarkable differences regarding their use of English. The English concept of a ‘fire extinguisher box’ in standard UK or US English consists of three separate words ‘fire’, ‘extinguisher’, and ‘box’. The manually printed or painted English texts on the red boxes, however, showed different versions of these words. Where the four Chinese characters read (in Pinyin): *mie huo qi xiang* (literally: kill-fire-device-box), we noticed: ‘fire extinguisher box’, ‘fire exting uishr box’, and ‘fireextinguisherbox’.

The bilingual signage on the box in figure 1a, Chinese characters with a translation in English underneath, shows that both Chinese and foreign tourist are addressed. The way in which equivalent bilingualism is effectuated in this sign is remarkable. The Chinese characters are neatly aligned and the English glosses are coordinated with the characters reading FIRE EXTING UISHR BOX, awkwardly separating the word ‘extinguisher’ and with a typographic error (UISHR).

On a similar fire extinguisher box presented in figure 1b, just a few meters away from the one in figure 1a, the awkward spatial correspondence between the Chinese characters and parts of the English words has been replaced by an entirely conventional spatial organization of unit boundaries and the typographic error has been corrected.



Figures 1a and 1b: Fire extinguisher box

The characters in figures 1a and 1b are printed in a slightly different style. To the eyes of a non-native speaker of Chinese, figure 1b seems to represent a more recent production than figure 1a and accordingly also the characters in figure 1b look more modern, i.e. stylised. Or at least the box in 1b has a newer appearance and is less worn out than that of 1a, suggesting that it probably is a more recent one. Still another fire extinguisher box in the Forbidden City seemed to escape the difficult task of splitting up the words ‘fire extinguisher box’ into units that in one way or another match the Chinese characters. The result is a message that does not contain a single typographic error but represents the English without any spatial distinction: FIREEXTINGUISHERBOX (see figure 1c).



Figure 1c: Fire extinguisher box

In producing these signs the ‘writer/printer/painter’ not only made small spelling mistakes (UISHR for UISHER and FIRF for FIRE) but also showed limited knowledge or awareness of the meaning and form of the English words: English words are split up in a way that does not follow the conventions of English, but that does match the number of Chinese characters in the sign, and they are put under the Chinese characters without matching their meaning.

Two other examples of a fire extinguisher box were found on both sides of a door at the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing (pictures taken August 2011). The characters in figures 2a and 2b are both more stylized than the ones in figure 1 but at the same time they differ: figure 2a appears to be more stylized in the sense that it paints in a more hand-written way which suggests a higher level of sophistication. Figure 2a shows yet another solution of the mismatch between four Chinese characters and three English words that was solved until now by introducing non normative spatial writing of English (‘fire exting uishr’ and ‘fireextinguisher’) by simply adding ‘of’ leading to BOX OF FIRE EXTINGUISHER. Figure 2b on the other hand represents conventional English writing. Apart from the unnecessary hyphen in all figures, figure 2a contains a typographic error: FIRF ALARM.

A final observation here relates to the multimodal character of the boxes. We already referred to the color red that is a universal reference to a semantic complex of danger, alarm and fire (fighting). Two of the boxes in addition contain an image of a (meanwhile) almost archetypical phone, off the hook in figure 1b and on the hook in figure 2b. We already

mentioned the differences in the way the Chinese characters were printed. Also the English text shows different fonts: classical letters with serifs in figures 1a, 1b and 2b, and more modern sanserif letters in 2a (which also contains the most stylized characters).



Figures 2a and 2b: Box of fire extinguisher

A similar example of using non conventional spacing in English to make Chinese characters and English words match, is shown in Figure 3 (taken in the Guest House of Beijing Language and Culture University 2008). Here the three Chinese characters (in Pinyin) *xiao huo shuan* (literally: kill-fire-plug) are printed two times (one with a multimodal sign, an arrow, indicating that the device is behind the white door) and accompanied by the English 'words' FIRE HYD RANT neatly put under the three characters. Interestingly here is the English word 'hydrant' that seems to refer to 'water' as the hidden material to be used in case of fire, and it is split into two parts 'HYD' and 'RANT' in order to match the two characters 'huo' and 'shuan'.



Figure 3: Fire hydrant

The fire extinguisher and fire hydrant boxes analysed thus far can be considered semiotic artefacts in which specific resources are being blended in an attempt to make sense to mobile people, i.e. foreign tourists to whom ‘English’ appears more accessible than Chinese. As such they point backwards to their producers and their conditions of production, i.e. a public authority (government) that wants to convey meaning in English without having full access to the language. At the same time they also point forward, towards their intended audiences, i.e. foreign non-Chinese speaking tourists, and their intended consequences.

In addition to the above bilingual signs, we also found a somewhat different sign on a fire extinguisher box (see figure 4a). The Chinese characters are the same as in the above examples. They are however not accompanied by English but by the Pinyin¹ equivalent of the message in Chinese characters: MIE HUO QI XIANG (literally: kill-fire-device-box). In case of the Chinese-English signs it is clear that Chinese and foreign, English proficient, visitors of the Forbidden City are the intended audience. The combination of Chinese characters and Pinyin, however, seems to suggest that it is necessary for a certain audience to explain the way in which the characters have to be pronounced. For Chinese speakers however this information seems to be rather superfluous since they know how to pronounce the characters

1 Pinyin is the Roman alphabetic representation of standard Mandarin Chinese, which was put in place in the 1950s.

whereas for non-Chinese speakers the ‘translation’ in Pinyin is not necessarily very helpful since it only helps them to be able to read, i.e. vocalize, the Chinese sign but they still would not know what it means. They only have the colour red and an emergency phone number as clues to create meaning and act accordingly. It is highly possible that the ‘translation’ in Pinyin is only added because it introduces Latin alphabet to the sign and as such conveys an international, western image of the sign to its Chinese readers. It might be no English, but it is close enough. It might also be a result of the national movement of promoting the use of Pinyin across the country since the 1950s. A similar sign (figure 4b) was found at Beijing Foreign Studies University. The sign reads XIAO HUO SHUAN XIANG (literally: kill-fire-material-box) without any multimodal indication of what is hidden behind the white door.



Figures 4a and 4b: ‘Mie huo qi xiang’ and ‘Xiao huo shuan xiang’

We observe this specific use of English in the public space of Beijing systematically, which shows that the introduction of English as a language of and for mobility in China is not totally unproblematic. In most cases, it can be considered English with a Beijing accent. Mobility of signs and sign users involves complex processes of decoding and interpretation. When signs travel, their shape moves in a rather unproblematic way, whereas other features – meaning, indexicals, social values etc. – do not travel too well. We distinguished three different types of Chinese accents in English signs (Kroon, Dong, Van Bochove, Blommaert 2011). First, there is English with a Chinese accent that is related to existing local resources. These include self-evident orthographic and linguistic features but also cultural modes of speech. Examples of the latter occur when existing Chinese modes of speech are used as a

blueprint for English expressions that make good sense in Chinese but sound strange in English. Secondly there is also English with a Chinese accent that originates from (total) absence of access to resources, i.e. standard English being beyond reach of most or many people. This leads to attempts towards English, resulting in unfamiliar expressions such as misnomers, cluttered orthography and syntax and English translations that result in a ‘soup of words’, each closely or remotely equivalent to the Chinese text but hardly making sense when put together in what is at first sight conventional English orthography and syntax.

The fire extinguisher box can be considered a semiotic artefact in which specific resources are being blended in an attempt to make sense to mobile people, i.e. foreign tourists to whom ‘English’ appears more accessible than Chinese. It represents, we would argue, problems at the level of English orthography, i.e. the rules for ‘writing English correctly’. As we have seen, these rules are violated in two ways. First, the English writing contained spelling errors (the missing ‘e’ from ‘uishr’, the ‘f’ instead of ‘e’ in ‘firf’ and the unwarranted hyphen in ‘fire-alarm’). Second, the English words were also graphically ordered in a way that violated their conventional morphosyntactic boundaries (‘exting-uishr’ and ‘hyd-rant’). The addition of ‘of’ in figure 2a is interesting here because although it does not violate the rules of English its equivalent cannot be found in the Chinese characters. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to fully analyse these examples in detail here. We for example do not go any further into the possible underlying meaning of the different versions of the simplified Chinese characters that are printed on the boxes.

We argue that what we see here is the emergence of a distinct Beijing or even Chinese dialect of the supervenacular English, a dialect that is part of the Beijing sociolinguistic profile. This dialect emerges out of the local sociolinguistic environment and can only be understood within this environment. Treating it as just English does not account for its local features nor for its local function. The emergence of a Chinese English accent reflects on a micro scale the patterns of spread of English as a supervenacular that we see on a global scale as well. It also reflects worldwide patterns of inequality in a local context. English with a Chinese accent in the Beijing linguistic landscape might be perceived as valuable in its local context and its use can be analysed as indexical for Beijing’s increasing participation in the global world, in the United Kingdom or the United States it may be perceived as indexing low levels of education and migrant identity. This is what a sociolinguistics of globalization should and can account for.

5. Conclusion

We have sketched some general issues of globalization, a number of theoretical premises for the study of sociolinguistic globalization, and a complex of topics that could contribute to our understanding of sociolinguistic globalization in China. The fire extinguisher examples show the various ways of organizing Chinese and English in the public spaces of Beijing, and the diverse meaning making processes through hybridity of linguistic features in globalization. The unconventional use of English throughout the examples instantiates our arguments laid out at the beginning of this article: we are forced to move from language to varieties and repertoires, to understand the reorderings of such varieties and repertoires at a language ideology level, and to study mobility as a key feature of a sociolinguistics of globalization.

Our research is explorative in nature, particularly for a comprehensive understanding of sociolinguistic globalization in China. It points to a number of directions in studies on Chinese and globalization. In further studies, it will be good to see who acquires language varieties that offer great mobility potential, such as standard English literacy, and who doesn't, and how they acquire it (as a lingua franca or as a second language). The importance of informal learning environments in all of this cannot be overestimated, and so questions can be asked about how, for instance, access to global popular culture products such as music, games or movies become vehicles for acquiring particular varieties of English which are often seen as 'cool' varieties in youth culture.

Moreover, it would be highly interesting to see how China-internal globalization processes of migration and relocation, with their effects of new elite formation and new proletarianization, lead to reorderings of locally or regionally valid sociolinguistic hierarchies: whose languages or language varieties effectively prevail, and why? Does, for instance, Putonghua become the language of China-internal mobility? Or do we see regional languages such as Cantonese play a role in these processes? And what about minority languages? Do they die in these new cosmopolitan environments, do they survive or do they even get new currency (in niched environments)? Answers to these important questions are just in the process of being formulated.

It would also be worthwhile knowing how overseas Chinese perceive Chinese society sociolinguistically: how they experience communication in China, what obstacles they encounter, how they adapt (or fail to adapt) to the Chinese communicative environment, and so forth. The rising economic profile of China, and the expansion of a Chinese middle-class, is also expected to attract large groups of service workers from other countries – African traders in Guangzhou, Filipino domestic workers in Beijing, low-wage contract workers – and such groups, too, deserve attention. Often they enter the country with relatively low educational or

other qualifications, and they find themselves in the lower ranks of society. Processes of sociolinguistic adaptation among such groups, too, may inform us in very significant ways about the changing nature of the Chinese sociolinguistic landscape. Studies along these research lines are far from being exhausted. On the contrary, it is an emerging school of scholarship and the study of Chinese and globalization will shed new light on China's transforming society as well as the globalizing process of Chinese in motion.

Before leaving this paper to the judgment of the reader, we should underscore one major point. A sociolinguistics of globalization, ideally, looks at the total picture, not just at aspects of it. As mentioned earlier, it would be wrong to just focus on the new global elites, on the rise of the internet and of popular culture, and on English as a world language. We need to keep an eye on all the different objects and actors in the field, because globalization changes the whole of society, not just some visible parts of it. It changes, in effect, the whole of the world, even if in most places in the world one would not see any direct evidence of globalization processes. China is not immune to this process of change, is in fact a very central agent in the worldwide process.

This reminder of the holistic nature of a sociolinguistics of globalization, of course, means that sociolinguists must work in teams, preferably in large and international teams, operating in different parts of the world and willing and able to share and to engage with each other's work. The work is important scientifically, because we will be compelled to innovate our theoretical and methodological frameworks. It is, however, also practically important because globalization is, at heart, a very unfair process that creates (apart from a small category of winners) many losers. A child who does not learn English now is a child that risks being barred in the future from important roads towards upward social mobility. We have a responsibility towards such potential and effective losers as well. If in taking that responsibility we also refine our theoretical apparatus and become better scientists, so much the better.

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