



Language commodification and indigenous resistance

Shorter Article

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Framing the issue

Usually focusing on linguistic/semiotic signs in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, linguistic landscape (hereafter LL) has appeared as a methodological paradigm for the investigation of the representation and visibility of languages across geographical contexts (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Highlighting the informative and symbolic functions of languages, this paradigm enables the combination of a quantitatively distributive lens with a refined ethnographic perspective to generate insights into the ethnolinguistic vitality of a given territory and the spread of international lingua francas – in most cases English – in localized settings (Backhaus, 2007; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Li, 2015).

As China plays an increasingly significant part in this globalizing world, English, a global language, has been recognized as a valued linguistic resource that adds to the complexity of China's sociolinguistic profiles (Dong, 2017). The global status of English is secured as a result of the negotiation between consumerism and the hegemonic order of neoliberalism dominated by Anglophone countries (Phillipson, 2008). This negotiation process not merely assigns market values and identity orientations to English but impregnates this language with 'the indexical potency of prestige' and reproduces its privilege over other languages and semiotic commodities in global markets (Wang, 2018: 204). Of note is that the global flow of English, ideas, or ideologies, more often than not, engenders resistance, interrogation and innovative practices from people at the periphery of globalization. These indigenous responses embodied in LL figure prominently in understanding the ways in which English colludes in perpetuating its dominant and hegemonic status and attenuates the vitality of indigenous languages and identification by rendering hegemonic ideologies common sense (Massey, 2013; Tian & Dong, 2011). Also in this sense, it is argued that LL opens up sites of ideological contestation shaped by global and local forces.

Scholarship on LL has disclosed a bias towards the production and consumption of signage in urban settings (Backhaus, 2007; Li, 2015; Yuan, 2019). Specifically, little is known about how the English language is contested and appropriated to expand its reach in the margins of globalization. It also remains unclear about the extent to which the intrusion of English as an exotic and symbolic commodity in traditionally monolingual spaces reverberates the construction of LL in rural places where the material and cultural conditions are rather different from metropolitan territories (Banda & Jimaima, 2015). As such, it necessitates a sociolinguistic inquiry and critique of the tensions between English in the neoliberal globalizing world order and how new and creative ways of meaning making are enabled in rural marginal contexts. To this end, this article concentrates on the LL of a rural township – Wucheng in China – and poses two questions:

- 1) In what ways is English manifested in Wucheng township?
- 2) How does the presence of English act upon the consumption and construction of rural spaces at the periphery of globalization?

Why Wucheng township?

Located in central China, Wucheng is a rural township under the jurisdiction of Tongbai county, Henan province. As a centuries-old agricultural area, Wucheng mainly specializes in growing low-end peanut, paddy rice, and chestnut. The local floundering

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economy makes Wucheng a typical source place of rural migrant labor in coastal developed manufacturing hubs such as Shanghai. Since 2017, the implementation of China's national initiative of rural revitalization has begun to bring winds of change and signs of growing commercialization to this traditional rural town.

As a Han-dominated township, Wucheng accommodates a population of around 32,000. Central plains Mandarin, a regional variety of Mandarin Chinese (or *Putonghua*), is mainly spoken in Wucheng. Coming into effect on 31 December 2000, *The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* (PRC, 2000), is strictly followed by the Wucheng government, which requires that the standard Chinese characters should be used as the preferred or at least the primary code in all public signs. These realities combine to outline the socioeconomic and sociolinguistic profile of Wucheng as a marginal, mediocre, monolingual place of struggles between tradition and commercialization, and thus an epitome of thousands of quotidian rural townships in globalizing China.

Methodology

This study was ethnographically entrenched, and digital cameras were utilized to gather photographic data between October 2021 and June 2022 in three discernible streets of Wucheng: the old street, the new street, and one street along provincial highway No. 206 (Figure 1). Photos were taken from public notice boards and facilities, shop fronts, billboards, posters, and graffiti, moving objects (e.g., vehicles). To triangulate data sources, we also conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with passers-by on the three streets to better elicit the intention of sign-creators and the interpretations of sign-readers. Among these interviewees, ten are shop owners, and seven are local residents. The rest are local middle-school teachers or administrative staff working in Wucheng government (see Appendix for more demographic information).

Drawing upon previous quantitative-oriented LL research (Backhaus, 2007; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006), all collected signs were statistically coded in terms of the following patterns: types of signs (e.g., monolingual or bilingual); language combination patterns (e.g., Chinese-English); top-down or bottom-up signage. What follows is an iterative process of locating recurrent themes emerging from the LL signs. We conducted a contextualized qualitative analysis of each sign as discursive and situated practices by interpreting the interactions between passers-by and sign-designers enabled by code preference and the whole semiotic system. All interview results kept in fieldnotes were utilized to help to make sense of individual signs and understand how 'meaning is structured within our visual fields' (Scollon & Scollon, 2003: 11).

Findings & Discussion

Statistical results

As demonstrated in Table 1, there are a total of 286 signs collected in Wucheng of which 27 (9.4%) are top-down

signage erected by governments or other public institutions, whereas the vast majority (N = 259, 90.6%) are bottom-up signs that are unofficial and created by individuals or commercial bodies.

While Chinese monolingual signs (N=183, 64%) take the lion's share, there are still 102 bilingual signs emerging in the combination patterns of Chinese-Pinyin (N = 9, 3.1%), Chinese-English (N = 91, 31.8%), Chinese-Japanese (N = 2, 0.7%). There exists merely one multilingual sign (0.4%), with Chinese, English, and Korean inscribed on it (Figure 2). These results confirmed the dominant status of the Chinese language in this rural township. Additionally, it bears noting that albeit there is no English-only monolingual sign, English is, in fact, taking a role in the daily and commercial life of Wucheng residents, which is evident in the stark contrast between Chinese-English top-down signs (N = 16, 5.6%) and bottom-up signs (N = 75, 26.2%).

English as a symbolic commodity in rural spaces

Qualitative findings revealed that English in the focused rural site played an essential role in the multimodal semiotic composition of local brands that 'enacts the global trend of visual merchandising' (Wang, 2018: 213). By way of illustration, a close look at Figure 3 may reveal the nature of this sign as a multimodal ensemble (Manning, 2010). A medium-sized icon of a slice of orange is placed on the left to visually indicate the function of this commercial place as a fruit-tea café. On the right are images of some best-selling products such as milk tea, hamburger, and clay pot noodles supplemented by their corresponding annotations in Chinese. At the top centre lies the restaurant name 全橙热恋 coded in bold and white font, which is a four-character wordplay that can be interpreted in two ways: 'falling in love with oranges' when the literal meaning of '橙' (oranges in English) is communicated, or, 'the entire city is in love' when the implicature of '橙' (as a homophone for the Chinese word 城 which means city) is followed. The manifestation of its English brand name 'Any time love in orange' is in quite a small font and placed at the bottom left of the signage, which may be ignored at the first glance but does enrich the indexical and semiotic details of this brand in large measure. Also noteworthy is the orange-coloured code of the shop sign. Given this sign is emplaced at the end of the old street near the only bus stop in this rural township, the specific colour chosen reiterates the functional meaning of this place as a hectic local-style café serving specialty drinks and food through symbolizing vitality and energy. The other example is taken from a restaurant signboard on provincial highway No. 206 (Figure 4). The restaurant brand is called 欧冠披萨 [Ouguan Pizza], which is manifested in bold white Chinese characters on the top of the board. To complement the Chinese brand name, the capitalized English text 'SNACK STATION' in the centre serves to reveal the self-positioning of this restaurant, which is a station selling western snacks of various kinds (e.g., fried chips, hamburgers, fried chickens, cheese balls) other than simply pizzas. What is inscribed on the bottom is the promotional slogan 让味蕾感受美好生活 [let



Figure 1. The crossroad of Wucheng where the old street, new street, and provincial highway 206 meet

good life wander around your taste buds]. The sign background is dominated by a shade of saffron yellow that can create a clean and modern look and contribute to a relaxing and comforting vibe in the rush of traffic and noise.

In Figures 3 and 4, the interpretation of the two commercial brands is primarily concerned with understanding how the English language is drawn upon and collaborates with other semiotic modes (e.g., colour, image) to meet the need for commodification. A Bourdieussian take usually frames language as a source of symbolic capital that are unequally distributed and convertible into power in other forms (Bourdieu, 1991). In the eyes of Manning (2010), branding or the design of a brand serves as an

act of capital circulation and accumulation through reconfiguring semiotic resources to enable new ways of meaning making and value assignment. The procedure central to generating added value to the semiotics of a brand or commodity lies in the appropriation and integration of the symbolic values of languages into brand design. In Chinese consumerist culture, the ubiquity of western brands (e.g., luxuries) and marketing strategies has assigned extra linguistic and cultural connotations to global English and turned it to be a symbol of exoticism and modernity (Tian & Dong, 2011). English has thus been often taken up in localized branding practices in order to fulfil Chinese customers' pursuit of authenticity and

Table 1. Statistical results

Type of signs	Linguistic pattern	Top-down		Bottom-up		Total
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	
Monolingual (N = 183)	Chinese	10	3.5%	173	60.5%	64%
Bilingual (N = 102)	Chinese-Pinyin	1	0.3%	8	2.8%	35.7%
	Chinese-English	16	5.6%	75	26.2%	
	Chinese-Japanese	/	/	2	0.7%	
Multilingual (N = 1)	Chinese-English-Korean	/	/	1	0.3%	0.4%
		27	9.4%	259	90.6%	100%



Figure 2. New life cosmetics store

aspirations for a global future, which will be further explored in detail in the following part.

Figure 5 shows the sign of a local rural bank. The bank name is 桐柏农商银行 which is printed in block Chinese characters on the top of the sign. What lies underneath is its verbatim English translation ‘Tongbai Rural Commercial Bank’ in small and inconspicuous font size. Evidently, Chinese is the preferred code that informs passers-by of its function in this top-down sign owing to its attention-getting position and hierarchical ordering (Chinese over English). English appears to be less informative in this case because it is hardly used as a communication medium in Wucheng. The absence of informative function of English signs can also be found in Figure 6 which displays the shop-front of a cosmetics store on the new street of Wucheng. The store name is written in English as ‘Beauty Scenes’. Underneath is its complementary Chinese line which reads 美颜秘笈, 美容养生 [open sesame to beauty and health] and makes explicit the store’s orientations. A close inspection of the bottom-left section of this sign can gain details about its primary products and services including 护肤品 [skincare products], 彩妆 [make-up], 韩式半永久 [Korean style eyebrow tattooing]. What also appears at the bottom is

the shop owner’s mobile number for business communication. In contrast to Figure 5, noticeably, English in Figure 6 occupies a salient position, and such salience conveys a direct message about the relative status and importance of English attached by the sign producer. Specifically, the use of English, even of little informative value, maximizes its symbolic significance and works closely with Chinese texts to add an air of modernity and internationalization to this place. In so doing, these linguistic and symbolic practices create enabling and suitable conditions for growing modern commercial activities in the margins of globalization, which transforms the cosmetics store from a rural grassroot space to an imagined front of fashion.

Figure 7 depicts the Goodride franchise store in Wucheng next to provincial highway 206. English can be assumed to be the at least equally prominent language in this sign, but for the majority of sign-readers, the indexical function is realized through Chinese captions such as 好运轮胎 (the Chinese brand name) and 汽修保养 [automobile repair and maintenance]. This tyre store sign also serves to explain how rural spaces are subject to the tide of globalization. As a subsidiary tyre brand of the domestic top 500 manufacturers 中策橡胶 [Zhongce Rubber], Goodride enjoys great popularity



Figure 3. A fruit-tea restaurant



Figure 4. Snack station

among inter-provincial truck drivers in China and has also gained currency with local consumers in recent years. In an interview with the shopkeeper, it is found that although many of his patrons did not read English, they believed that the English word 'Goodride' represented international standards and high quality, and thus they would pay for it rather than other alternatives. In this connection, despite its minor linguistic significance, English in this shopfront is consumed as an important, valued, and emblematic commodity that bears symbolic values of high reputation. This is reminiscent of Tian and Dong's (2011) emphasis on the point that the interactions between English brands and consumers open up possibilities for new modes of commodification and identity negotiation and thus constitute part of the processes of imagining internationalism and engaging in the global consumerist economy.

Wang (2018) cautions that the fact that English appears in Chinese marginalized areas does not represent the wide use of this language as a medium of communication in these territories but reflects new ways of consuming global

English in localized settings. Likewise, English is almost exclusively confined to limited classroom use in local schools and unrelated to the daily and authentic communicative situations in Wucheng as a monoethnic Han-populated rural place. The presence of English in public and commercial signs seems not to realize its informative function that gives local residents information about the linguistic characteristics of English (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Rather, it is emplaced as an abstract ideological instrument that caters to and symbolically represents globalization and internationalization. Altogether, Figures 5, 6, and 7 confirm that as a scarce resource in Wucheng, English is charged with symbolic and economic values that come along with the commodification of rural spaces. As Blommaert (2012: 64) puts it, the utilization of language in globalization does not necessarily rest upon 'knowledge of its linguistic system . . . [the language] can lead to a busy and successful life as an emblematic object of great social significance'. Therefore, as globalization marches on, it has been inevitable that English occurs in traditionally monolingual



Figure 5. Tongbai Rural Commercial Bank



Figure 6. Chinese-English cosmetics store

Chinese rural spaces and exerts influence on the consumption practices of local residents and their ways of relating to the neoliberal world.

Indigenous resistance through creative linguistic practices

In his position paper elaborating on the relationship between English and globalization, Pennycook (2003: 516) refutes the deterministic view that English linguistic hegemony gives rise to the homogenization of world culture in that indigenous people's 'sense of agency, resistance, or appropriation [of the English language]' should also be considered in the wider socio-political context of global Englishes. Back to the present study, it is tempting to end here and conclude that English brings along cultural hybridity in Wucheng and invites local residents to celebrate new ways of participating in the global consumerist economy. However, the presence or invasion of English, in a sensitive

tone, does give rise to indigenous struggles and resistance in different forms, which further shapes the complexity and dynamics of rural spaces in globalizing China.

Although Mandarin has been institutionalized as the preferred language in Wucheng, for some local residents, the growing visibility of English seems to impose a threat to the status of Chinese and the linguistic purity of rural spaces. In the words of the principal of the only local secondary school:

It makes little sense to see English in rural public spheres because there is hardly any person who can read and write it. . . It is the language of Western countries, not ours, and we Chinese people should use the Chinese language.

This belief is fleshed out in the signboard of Wucheng township secondary school (Figure 8). The school goes by 吴城镇初级中学 [Wucheng township secondary school] in



Figure 7. Goodride tyre store



Figure 8. Signboard of Wucheng township secondary school

Chinese. In lieu of an English translation, the Chinese text is phonetically transcribed in pinyin (the standard and official romanization system for Mandarin Chinese) and reads 'Wucheng Zhen Chu Ji Zhong Xue'. It is noteworthy that, as the principal underlines, when the signboard of this

secondary school was erected, the school name was allowed to be manifested bilingually (usually Chinese and English), but a pinyin version also containing Romanised alphabets was finally opted for the performance of local identity. Similar results can be found in Yuan's (2019) investigation of the LL of two Chinese cities. As she points out, the adoption of Chinese phonetic alphabets as a source of translation strategy is usually defined as transliteration that diverges from semantic translations that render the source text into the target language. Also, transliteration is usually chosen through negotiating 'the relation between submission and subversion in multiple facets' and can function to express regional identities and construct solidarity with local passers-by (Yuan, 2019: 9).

The other example of indigenist resistance is manifested in the shop name of a nail salon. As demonstrated in Figure 9, the Chinese brand name 欧奈尔 in the lower centre of this sign is accompanied by its explanatory notes: 美甲 [nail painting], 美睫 [eyelash beauty], 皮肤管理 [skincare]. What occupies a conspicuous position in this sign is the English-looking logo of this salon in a fancy font and its proper name 'OUNAIR' as an English homophone of its Chinese counterpart 欧奈尔. The incorporation of English elements in the sign not only delivers a sense of flow and beauty, but also, as it were, leaves an impression of trendiness and internationalism on sign-readers. This is echoed and further explained by the salon owner:



Figure 9. Shop sign of a nail salon

English in the signboard renders our salon more tasteful, but it [the English name] is not given randomly. I paid someone online for such a name that can reflect the features of our salon.

The English language in Figure 9 is commensurate with lookalike English conceptualized by Blommaert (2012: 62) as a language with little semantic meaning and created by those whose 'linguistic knowledge of English is nil'. Such seemingly fake English holds great emblematic potential to create distinction in places where English rarely appears, but it is also the case that this kind of language situates the ownership of English to people in the margins of globalization as an indigenized product. Thus, both transliterated language and lookalike English in Figures 8 and 9 serve to expand the 'identity repertoires' upon which indigenous people can draw to subvert the hegemony of global English and claim their belongingness to rural spaces of globalizing China (Pennycook, 2003: 517).

Conclusion

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings in this study bespeak that as a global language with prestige and power, English is spreading its influence on the LL of an ordinary rural township, Wucheng, at the periphery of China, and English features in the consumption of rural spaces where imagination for a global future and participation is allowed. Taking a step further, it is highlighted that English is de facto a symbolic commodity in neoliberal conditions of existence. Such symbolic elements are mobilized and embodied in the branding practices of rural quotidian commercial activities to promote their products and services among local consumers in times of globalization. In this respect, the integration of English in the LL of Wucheng is the exemplary enactment of banal globalization that is embedded in our everyday trite but not trivial textual practices (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011), and thus contributes to creating an air of openness and internationalism in rural spaces.

The rising significance of English in the traditional and rural township, meanwhile, brings about scenes of struggle. By using transliteration and lookalike English as creative linguistic practices in making bilingual signs, the voices of local residents can be heard and brought to the fore. The LL of Wucheng is able to transform into a site of contestation between the spread of English and indigenous resistance, which function, as it were, as an embodiment of the sociolinguistic complexity and dynamics of rural spaces in globalizing China.

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