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Course: LT 5408 Sociolinguistics

Assignment title: Research proposal on the media representation of language ideologies in Hong Kong and language attitude of the native Hong Kong Cantonese speakers towards the accented Cantonese spoken by the mainland immigrants.

Abstract

This paper aims at examining the media representation of language ideologies in Hong Kong and language attitude of the native Hong Kong Cantonese speakers towards the accented Cantonese spoken by mainland immigrants through an example of a commercial advertisement. The advertisement itself and related comments aroused in online forums will be used as data for discourse analysis. By exploring the content of the advertisement and stancetaking in the discourse of the commentators as well as the unique political, historical and social context in Hong Kong, I attempt to reveal the underlying language ideologies on standard and non-standard language and hence the power relations between this dichotomy. Due to historical factors, the categorisation of Chinese language in terms of language and dialects is quite different from the European languages. The study will then put the usual sociolinguistic concepts and categories into tests of their applicability.

Introduction

Being a former British colony, Hong Kong has always been perceived paradoxically as an English-speaking international city and an ethnically homogeneous Cantonese-speaking community. Yet, one cannot be satisfied with such a simplistic view as the political and demographic changes in the post-colonial time have contributed to the enrichment of the ecology of language in an unthinkable way.

Research on languages in Hong Kong has been mostly focusing on the education domain, namely the medium of instruction and English education, as these topics have always been recurrent and controversial. The hierarchy of languages in Hong Kong seems obvious and naturalised, with English as a global language and colonial heritage on top, Cantonese as the home language and an important part of the locals' identity in the middle and Putonghua as a new invasion and erosion of local identity comes third. It is worth

investigating the nuances in-between the mentioned hierarchies via other possible varieties like the accented Cantonese. More importantly, such hierarchies are certainly not as natural as general people think. Rather, it is the result of particular processes under specific political, historical, social, economic and cultural conditions that I attempt to investigate.

This paper will also try to interrogate the applicability of the concept of Standard language ideologies. As Coulmas (2013) suggested, sociolinguistics is a western science grounding in western tradition (p.21) and studies on Standard language ideologies are basically founded on the paradigm of English. The myth of Standard English has been constructed around British and American English, with these two varieties being the center to set the 'norm'. English language of the inner circle, in Kachru's term, has always enjoyed the prestigious status. Even though sociolinguists called for the idea of World Englishes and put emphasis on local usage and norms, the so-called local standard always has to make reference and compare to the center. Terms like Hong Kong English, Indian English or Singaporean English are indeed linguistically marked. The concept of world Englishes helps reveal the inequalities produced by such language ideologies, but at the same time perpetuates the hegemony of norms set by the center. Therefore it would be revealing to examine the applicability of such sociolinguistic concept to a non-western language like the case of Cantonese in Hong Kong.

The concept of standard and non-standard languages is closely related to the dichotomy of language and dialect. Definitions for the differences between language and dialect are either unclear or incomplete for the cases of European languages due to natural language evolution and political factors. For instance, the dispute on whether Catalan is a language or a dialect of Spanish is not easy to resolve. But the structure, categorization and organisation of Chinese language are quite different from those of European languages. Due to the unification of written Chinese language, there is a consensus or even unanimity among

the Chinese speakers that Chinese is a language and all the other spoken varieties are considered as dialects. In this case, even though the Beijing dialect was chosen as the norm of standard pronunciation for modern Chinese and renamed as Putonghua as well as being set as the national lingua franca, such variety is not enjoying the same prestige of being official and ‘standard’ as that of English, not to mention the hegemony of standard language ideologies. With written Chinese appears and represents as the ‘supra-language’, the Chinese speakers only look up to their spoken varieties and there is no necessity of making reference to Putonghua as the norm or default. Or it is rare to see linguistically marked terms for the Chinese language like ‘Hong Kong Chinese’, ‘Singaporean Chinese’ or ‘Shanghainese Chinese’. In the case of Putonghua, it demonstrates that not all the Standard language is perceived as ‘better’ than the other non-standard varieties. Standard Putonghua is a myth in the sense that no one can speak in a way that they are expected to speak. Such myth is ironically not that mythical since not a lot of Chinese speakers strive for such imagined perfection when no particular prestige and power are associated to such variety. It does not mean that it is not a cultural capital though. Standard Putonghua is not required even for politicians of high rank like the Macau Chief Executive Fernando Chui Sai-on who is famous for his strong Cantonese accented Putonghua, or his ‘Chui-style Putonghua’ which has been the stuff of jokes. Standard Putonghua is purely a political decision. Chinese people in different parts of the regions have indeed strong attachment to their local vernacular. For example, people in Shanghai speak Shanghainese yet Putonghua has been introduced, promoted and encouraged to be spoken as a lingua franca in modern China. Speaking Putonghua in Shanghai is an indication of being an outsider although it is widely accepted in Shanghai for political reasons. The fact of being local or native always carries a kind of covert prestige no matter if it is a native of a language or a dialect. Therefore, the politically substandard languages or dialects are in reality considered by their speakers as standard at the

social level. In other words, regardless of the politically set standard, people living in different regions still strongly attached to their own standard. Such scenario can be generalised to other parts of the greater China. The case of Cantonese in Hong Kong is similar but also unique. Cantonese, in spite of being another substandard vernacular, is the unmarked choice of code and an indication for being local in the Hong Kong society, which is ideologically prestigious. Someone speaking Putonghua in Hong Kong is considered as an outsider. Nonetheless, Putonghua is never introduced and encouraged to be spoken as a lingua franca in this special administrative region. Outsiders who want to integrate into Hong Kong lifestyle must learn how to speak Cantonese. Especially for outsiders with low socio-economic status, a Cantonese-speaking skill is empowerment to some extent, like getting employment. That is how accented Cantonese arises. On the contrary, having Putonghua as an available lingua franca in the mainland provide not much intentions for outsiders to learn the local vernacular. It is rare to describe people speaking accented Shanghainese or the accented version of other vernaculars in China. It would be interesting to explore the ideologies of a 'Standard' under a substandard because it does not exist in the case of European languages either. For instance, if the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is considered as a non-standard variety, there is no distinction on standard and non-standard under this substandard. There would not be something like accented or non-standard AAVE.

My first research question would be how language ideologies in Hong Kong are constructed and revealed through media representations and language attitudes expressed in online forums? Then I would like to ask if the concept of standard language ideologies is applicable in the Chinese-Cantonese case.

Background

In January 2018, a satiric online broadcast channel *TVMost* and a local chained noodle restaurant *Tam Jai* jointly made an advertisement in the form of a short movie which aroused different opinions and discussion on various online forums.

The story is about a Hong Kong native Cantonese university student called Understand Ma (the name itself is also a code-mixing pun of English and Chinese meaning ‘do you understand?’), looking for a part-time job at the mentioned local noodle shop. His first attempt to serve a client was a failure. The client looked confused and doubted if Ma understood what he wanted when he reconfirmed the client’s order in his perfect ‘standard’ Hong Kong Cantonese. Then an experienced waitress came and apologised for Ma, saying that he was new. She reconfirmed the client’s order with her accented Cantonese and the client seemed relieved and satisfied. Ma was later yelled by the manager of the shop and from then he decided to train himself to speak the accented Cantonese, or what they called *Tam Jai dialect* in the video, in order to fit into the language norm of that noodle shop.

The construction of a *Tam Jai* culture through language is, first of all, a marketing technique of branding. However, the video had aroused controversies because of the following reasons. First of all, it challenges the status of the Hong Kong variety of Cantonese which is considered as ‘standard’ in the wider social context. Secondly, the accented Cantonese is imposed on the local Hong Kong employee as ‘standard’ and norm of the noodle shop. Although the situation in the advertisement is fictional, it reflects the social reality of the linguistic situation in Hong Kong nowadays.

Like any other industrialised and economically developed societies, Hong Kong relies on immigrants to fill up the least-skilled jobs. Servers in catering industries are one of those and such occupation is usually filled up by female immigrants from the mainland. These waitresses who are characterised by their accented Cantonese with observable phonological

patterns are indeed making contributions to the emergence of a different variety of Cantonese. Conversion tables between the two varieties as a reference can be found on internet. The accented Cantonese creates misunderstanding but also sources of jokes. For examples, one Hong Kong actor recalled his catering experience in the mentioned noodle shop: the waitress asked the actor: 死得未? [sei2/tək5/mei2] (Are you ready to die?) but what she actually meant was 寫得未? [se2/tək5/mei2] (Are you ready to order?) Or they pronounced the food item 墨丸 (mak6/jyun4) (cuttlefish ball) as 罵硯 (maa6/ jin6) which sounds like 墨硯 (mak6/ jin6) (inkstone) in the Hong Kong vernacular. The mixed feeling of the locals towards the accented Cantonese reflects the competing language ideologies of the standard and non-standard.

Literature review

Bolton's (2011) research in language planning and policy from colonial and post-colonial perspectives provides comprehensive background knowledge for my studies. Also, he compared the power relations between English and Cantonese with the power relations between Putonghua and Cantonese. In the latter case, he demonstrated that the Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong express their support to the protection of Cantonese and the resistance against the imposition of Putonghua in mainland Guangdong area. As the fear of mainlandisation is one of the reasons for such actions, my study will provide another perspective for such fear of mainlandisation.

Standard variety is considered as the empowered dialect. People speaking a non-standard variety are usually judged as socially undesirable groups. Gu (2011) did similar research on a community of practice of the accented Cantonese in a local secondary school context from the speakers' point of view. She revealed that these speakers were considered as 'outsiders', their accent was always the laughing stock and they were disregarded by their

local counterparts when they talked. Her study wanted to show how different varieties (accented Cantonese and Putonghua) of the same language spoken by the mainland immigrant students were associated with negative social traits which led to the result of being marginalised and otherised, which in consequence affected their language choices and practices, pushing them to form a Putonghua-speaking group. Carlson and McHenry (2006) researched on how accents and dialects affect the employability of the speakers. Firstly, they made a distinction between dialectal differences and accent variation, which is going to help define the language varieties I am going to study. Their findings showed when the accent or dialect was in the maximally perceived condition, the speaker received a low employability rating (Carlson and McHenry, 2006, p.80). Nonetheless, both Gu's (2011) and Carlson and McHenry's (2006) findings cannot always be generalized. In my case, the accented Cantonese does not constitute an obstacle for the new immigrants to find employment. Leong & Hayes (1990) stated in their findings that some accents or dialects were associated with occupational stereotypes, which increase the speakers of these accents or dialects' employability (as cited in Carlson and McHenry, 2006, p.71). The accented Cantonese may be related to the stereotype of mainland immigrant waitress, and their employability in the catering sector seems to be enhanced and reinforced by such stereotype, giving an image of being an 'experienced waitress'. As a result, their non-standard variety is, on the contrary, a tool of empowerment to some extent. More, instead of being stigmatised as belonging to socially undesirable groups, some locals express their opinions on these accented Cantonese speakers in a welcoming manner, saying that they are making efforts to integrate into our society. Their accented Cantonese seems to be acceptable in the wider context.

Gao's (2012) research investigated how the mainland Chinese netizens protect the status of Cantonese through ideological discourses. Similar to what I intend to study, Gao wanted to demonstrate how the standard or official language was being challenged. Not only

did these netizens challenge the indisputable distinction of language and dialect in the Chinese language, for fear that the term ‘dialect’ would downgrade the status of Cantonese, they also gave reasons to justify the importance of Cantonese from a historical, cultural and social point of view. For examples, they argued that Cantonese retains the phonological, lexical and syntactic features of ancient Chinese language while Putonghua is the language of nomadic tribes (p.451), illustrating the dichotomy of ‘civilised’ and ‘uncivilized’. They also pointed out that a language associated with cultural products is more respectable and cited the Canton pop, films, literature, newspaper and magazines produced in the entertainment industry in Hong Kong (p.451). In this sense, a language needs to enrich itself with cultural capital in order to survive in the power struggle with the standard language. The scope of my study is going to be in a smaller scope but provides some more local insights.

Mariou (2017) researched an ethnography of a group of Pontian-Greek speaking people migrated from Russia and Georgia to Greece after the collapse of the Soviet Union. From the perspective of the participants, they returned to their imagined ‘homeland’ yet the locals considered them as outsiders because of their archaic forms of Greek. The author tried to explore the competing language ideologies of participants and multilingualism with Bakhtin’s (1981) heteroglossia framework in order to understand the variations within one single language (as cited in Mariou, 2015, p. 22). This framework will also be useful in my case – Chinese and more specifically the Cantonese varieties.

Kang & Chen (2014) analysed on how the negative image of ‘Hong Kong girl’ was shaped through stancetaking of the comment contributors in online forums. As they suggested, ‘stancetaking will provide powerful insights into how public discourse on language ideologies are shaped through communicative practices’ (p.206). My study is going to use the framework of stancetaking to analyse the comments in online forums in an attempt to explore the construction and reinforcement of standard language ideologies as well as the

complex relationship between participants in the virtual space and the social implications in the offline real world.

Methodology

Data will be collected in a few of the most popular online forums among the local Cantonese speakers. Holtz et al (2012) proposed a practical guide for analysing Internet forums. According to the authors, the advantage of getting data from online forums is that there is an abundance of ‘natural’ discursive data available, particularly with studies focusing on an ideologically sensitive topic. Cantonese has always been an ideologically sensitive issue in Hong Kong at political and social levels. Politically, Cantonese is considered as one of the defense line of Hong Kongers resisting the mainlandisation of Hong Kong through Putonghua, the official national language in the mainland. More, the relative anonymity of the Internet encourages greater openness for Internet users to express their opinion freely (Holtz et al., 2012, p56). Such lack of personal identification causes not much concern for the contributors about social desirability, cyberbullying or government censorship. Such method does not require users’ consent because the postings in these forums are made public and can be read by everyone. Hence the communications within these forums are considered as ‘public behaviour’ (Holtz et al., 2012, p57). I will not be able to do an ethnography and the participant observation in this case because the advertisement was just like a one-time event happened in January 2018. People had stopped commenting about it. I can only use the data which already exists and available in online forums.

The research will then follow the broad principles of discourse analysis and to examine the ideas and wordings in the advertisement so as to link the media representation of the language ideologies to the social values in the wider context. The comments collected from online forums will be analysed by the framework of stancetaking of commentators towards the object of interest – the accented Cantonese. One cannot get a well-rounded picture of language ideologies without the knowledge of the unique political, historical and social context in Hong Kong. The research will conclude with an implication of the analysis and findings from the perspective of critical discourse analysis to reveal the inequalities and power relations of the language ideologies.

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