“Isn’t it enough to be a Chinese speaker”: language ideology and migrant identity construction in a public primary school in Beijing

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Schools, and the educational system in general, are among the key institutions that embody dominant social values and reproduce social hierarchies in a seemingly neutral form. In schools pupils from diverse social and linguistic backgrounds enter into interaction with one another and with practitioners on a daily basis. The microscopic linguistic differences that occur in such interactions often index cultural and metapragmatic factors at a language-ideological level and serve as a ground of the dialogical process of identity construction among pupils. In schools, as well as in other social context, diversity is an increasingly salient feature of China’s linguistic and sociolinguistic landscape as the mass internal migration results in rapid linguistic exchanges among members of various communities.

Since the early 1980s rural Chinese have relocated to the urban areas in search of jobs and of better life opportunities; the past two decades witness an intense migration in scale and speed. It is facilitated by the rapid economic and social changes both from inside China, and with China’s participation in the globalisation. Urban public schools that used to admit mainly local children are now populated with both local and migrant children who bring in different social, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. When ‘big’ identity features such as nationality and ethnicity are ascribed a migrant identity, and performance. Their language is emblematic of being a migrant, what Hymes calls a ‘one language-one culture’ assumption which argues that ‘the ethnographic world can be divided into “ethnolinguistic” units, each associating a language with a culture’ (1968:25). Notice that it was perceived as natural, by a migrant pupil, rather than a dominant one such as a local pupil or teacher in the social space. The move towards a homogeneous ‘national’ identity layer is, as Bourdieu (1987) argues, an example of the social structures internalised in people. Thus ‘even the most disadvantaged, tend to perceive the world as natural and to find it much more acceptable than one might imagine’ (Bourdieu 1987:520).

The taken-for-granted disposition takes the shape of an orientation towards Putonghua in the first example, and this is echoed in the second and the third examples, both of which are metapragmatic discourses on migrant pupils’ language and identities. The second example showed how a migrant child’s language was evaluated and disqualified, and how she was ‘grouped’ into a community of ‘non-Beijing speakers’ which therefore ascribed a migrant identity to her on the basis of her local peer group criteria through a metapragmatic discourse on her language. Her provincial accent indexed and was emblematic of her identities of being rural origin, migrant to the city, unsophisticated and less intelligent. It is an ‘abnormal’ accent, bespeaking an ‘abnormal’ identity.

The third example examined a teacher’s comments on her pupil’s identity, language, and performance. Here we saw small features of language again becoming markers of individual and group identities, and such identities have an impact on the appraisal of migrant pupils’ performance at school. Within the monoglot ideology, all the indexical values of migrant pupils’ language are not made explicit; they simply take the form of being ‘incorrect’. Their language is ‘incorrect’, and therefore their performance is negatively influenced by their ‘incorrect’ language if they are not able to adjust to the ‘correct’ form. The evaluation of the migrant pupil’s performance was done in a seemingly neutralised way, with positive comments on her cognitive ability; however, her language played a role in the appraisal and as her teacher pointed out, she could be a ‘better’ student if she spoke the ‘correct’ language. It is clear that school institutionally supports the language ideology with Putonghua at the centre and

often emphasising linguistic uniformity and homogeneity. (Blommaert & Verschueren 1998).

In the first example I observed a drawing class at a Beijing primary school during which a migrant pupil articulated a metapragmatic discourse on her and her peer’s identities. It was clear that she was aware of her rural origin and of the negative images it projected. However, she overlaid this migrant identity with a national identity by ‘isn’t it enough that we are all Chinese? See we all speak Putonghua’; this utterance pointed to a stable identity category through the claimed belonging to a homogeneous language community. This identity is bespoken through the language – Putonghua, what Hymes calls a ‘one language-one culture’ assumption which argues that ‘the ethnographic world can be divided into “ethnolinguistic” units, each associating a language with a culture’ (1968:25). Notice that it was perceived as natural, by a migrant pupil, rather than a dominant one such as a local pupil or teacher in the social space. The move towards a homogeneous ‘national’ identity layer is, as Bourdieu (1987) argues, an example of the social structures internalised in people. Thus ‘even the most disadvantaged, tend to perceive the world as natural and to find it much more acceptable than one might imagine’ (Bourdieu 1987:520).

To explain how linguistic features function as identity markers in a Beijing public school, the paper draws upon the concepts of indexicality, ethnolinguistic identity, and speech community, and posits the arguments in the theoretical frame of language ideology (Gumperz 1968; Silverstein 1996, 1998; Rampton 1998; Blommaert 2005, 2006). On the basis of ethnographic observation and metapragmatic interviews, three examples were presented to demonstrate how small features of language become emblematic of individual and group identities, and such identities can be an impact on the appraisal of migrant pupils’ performance at school as well as in frames of a macro-political order invoking homogeneity within the dominant language ideologies in education which
at the same time reproduces the dominant social values and hierarchies.

What I hope to show in this paper is the construction of migrant identities through metapragmatic discourses of migrant pupils, their local peers, and teachers in the context of linguistic complexity and population movement in China. Despite the remarkable sociolinguistic diversity, ideologies of homogeneity and uniformity penetrate public discourses as well as institutional discourses such as in schools. The monoglot language ideology in China often revolves around Putonghua — an association that feeds into the ‘one language—one culture’ assumption and results in an imagined singular, clear and stable ethnolinguistic identity. In the actual linguistic exchanges, however, the one-to-one relationship is blurred when we observe that multiple ‘languages’, ‘dialects’ or ‘accents’ are deployed as a linguistic repertoire of migrants, that various speech communities share one ‘language’, and such communities are defined in relation to the sharedness of indexical values. The concepts of speech community, ethnolinguistic identity and indexicality allow me to look beyond established categories such as ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ into the real linguistic occurrences and their effect on school pupils’ individual and group identities. The three examples presented in the paper demonstrate the application of such a linguistic anthropological approach in attempt to address the real social impact of linguistic diversity. In spite of the dominance of in a largely egalitarian ideology of China, where the informants of the three examples do not acknowledge the social distance between the migrant and the local in the school, the migrant pupil’s self-claimed identity in the first example is denied by the local pupil and the local teacher. The observation in this paper leads us to study the population movement at the macro level from a perspective of ‘small’ linguistic features and individual identity at a micro level, and to gain an insight of the social structure that is produced and reproduced through practices such as interactions at school.

References


