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The enregisterment of Putonghua in practice

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic research, this article explores how a once alien and unsophisticated language has enregistered as a national linguistic standard through the mediation of metadiscursive practices in everyday social life, and how its indexical values associated with speaker attributes and social personae are reproduced in mass circulation of metadiscursive standard. It shows that the standardization of Putonghua has been a deliberate institutional effort closely related to the making of the nation; it is however, part of a more general and more tacit ideological process – enregisterment – through which the symbolic dominance of Putonghua is accepted as natural and normative.

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1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the ‘enregistering’ process of Putonghua (普通话 literally ‘common speech’) – the Chinese national language standardized upon the variety of Mandarin used in Beijing – and the way in which the symbolic power of Putonghua is being accepted as natural within a largely monoglot language ideology (Dong, 2009; see Silverstein, 1996, 2003, for the notion of monoglot ideology). Based on ethnographic observation and metapragmatic discourse analysis, this research describes how a once regional dialect, of which the linguistic features used to be perceived as unsophisticated and stigmatized, has become standardized as the national model for pronunciation (and to a less extent, for literacy), a form of semiotic capital, associated with linguistic ‘correctness’, and socially recognized as indexical of speaker attributes such as social status and advanced education backgrounds. Drawing on the notions of enregisterment (Agha, 2003, 2005, 2007) and symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991), the paper demonstrates that the standardization of Putonghua is more than a deliberate institutional practice, but part of a more general and more tacit enregistering process – an ideological process through which the symbolic dominance of Putonghua is accepted as natural and normative, as institutions are never immune from the rest of social life.¹

Putonghua, or ‘common speech’, is the standard language on mainland China. It is spoken, together with phonetically related *guoyu* (国语 national language), *huayu* (华语 Chinese language), and its various ‘paralects’, by more than one billion people² from all Chinese-speaking regions including mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, and Chinese diasporas (Li, 2002, 2004). ‘Paralects’ are quasi-related varieties that are socially valued and that differ not just in pronunciation but in perceptions of stereotypical images of people (Agha, 2003, 2007; Honey, 1989). Within mainland China, it is reported that 53% of the Chinese people

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² From a sociolinguistic perspective, standard language as an ideology should be distinguished from standard language as an identifiable dialect for which we can enumerate speakers. Moreover, *guoyu* and *huayu* are close-related to Putonghua in a phonetic sense, but the metapragmatic ideologies associated with them in Taiwan and Singapore may be significantly different.

are able to communicate in Putonghua or near-Putonghua (China Daily 26/12/2004³). Although this figure is not confirmed by sociolinguistic research, and it is not clear what are the speech practices of the other 47% (most probably vernaculars, dialects that are unintelligible to Putonghua speakers, and minority languages), it does sketch out the scale of Putonghua and its quasi-equivalent paralects within China and beyond. The linguistic features of Putonghua and its gradual evolution have been described in a number of studies (e.g. Bradley, 1992; Coblin, 2000; Chen, 1999; DeFrancis, 1984; Hashimoto, 1986; Hu, 1995; Kratochvil, 1968; Norman, 1988; Ramsey, 1987). Recent research also addresses Putonghua as a central concern of the monoglot language ideology in China, and explores its indexical values in individual and group identity making processes (Dong, 2009; Dong and Blommaert, 2009). Little research has been conducted, however, on the gradual assumption and recognition of Putonghua as the center around which revolves the monoglot language ideology. The present study therefore aims to bridge this gap of knowledge by evaluating three examples of metadiscursive practices to investigate Putonghua enregisterment – how Putonghua has come to trigger stereotypical indexical attributions – in contemporary social life of mainland China.

In order for us to understand the enregisterment of Putonghua, it is necessary to look at its history of institutional standardization. After that, I shall focus on empirical data collected between 2006 and 2010: the first two examples are produced by metadiscursive agents firmly centered in standard-setting institutions (the mass media, a Beijing primary school), which promote a monoglot standard; the third is from the periphery – an example of non-state/non-Beijing discourses. But before embarking on that discussion, I shall offer a survey of the key theoretical notions that will be essential for the data interpretation in the remainder of the article.

2. Enregisterment and symbolic power

In a study of Received Pronunciation (RP) in Britain, Asif Agha traces the processes whereby a once regional prestige variety is 'enregistered' as a supra-local standard and a status emblem in British society. The notion of enregisterment, in Agha's work, refers to 'processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms' (Agha, 2003, p. 231). Such processes, according to Agha (2003, 2007), are mediated by metapragmatic activities ranging from a 1920s cartoon to a newspaper article on the changes of Queen Elizabeth's English. Over the centuries, RP has not only become a socially recognized register, but also established itself as a national standard, and it is not so much a matter of institutionally imposed behavior; rather, it is sedimentation of gradual changes in speech perception and production by its speakers, and more often than not, by its non-speakers alike, through metadiscursive activities that circulate the indexical values which are 'stereotypical' and which project categorical labels onto people through the use of enregistered varieties.

Similar to RP, Putonghua is more than a socially recognized register – it is a national standard. It differs from RP, however, in that its formation as a national standard involves state institutions as an explicit and decisive player in imposing what Bourdieu calls 'the legitimate language' upon the individual linguistic habitus (Bourdieu, 1991). Drawing on the historical backgrounds of French society, Bourdieu describes the establishment of Parisian French as the legitimate language of the state. Parisian French is institutionally codified as the legitimate language, a process closely related to the formation of France as a modern nation-state. Its 'uptake' as a correct linguistic form, however, is more than institutional practice; rather, it is an ideological process through which the symbolic power of Parisian French is taken for granted. Symbolic power is 'a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 170). It is a subordinate power that reconstructs people's perception of social reality. It functions only when it is misrecognized (in the sense of Bourdieu (1991, p. 142–143)), and when it functions, it is capable of achieving what has to be achieved with physical or economic forces (but see Agha, 2007, p. 228–232 for critical remarks on Bourdieu's theorization of 'legitimate language' and his 'top-down' approach).

The historical and ideological processes of the enregisterment of Putonghua are similar to, but are also clearly different from RP and Parisian French. At the most elementary and observable level, they are different in part because of the scale of China, the nature of Chinese written and spoken languages, and because of the distinct trajectories of historical development, among many other factors. Moreover, while both RP and Putonghua are concerned with the historical emergence of a prestige national standard, Putonghua has a 'grassroots' origin – being alien and unsophisticated – from which it gradually evolved into an emblem of social status. And while both RP and Putonghua are once regional vernaculars that have been de-localized, the two stand in very different state ideologies driving standardization, and Putonghua enregisterment involves more salient institutional standardization than that of RP. As for Parisian French and Putonghua, both were born out of revolutions and were closely related to the making of a new nation; however Parisian French, as Bourdieu puts it, was the language of the local bourgeoisies who achieved their social positions due to their mastery of the dominant language – the language that gave the bourgeoisies *de facto* monopoly of politics and thus of communication with the central government of the state (Bourdieu, 1991). Putonghua, as we shall see in the next section, emerged out of a proletarian revolution in the first half of the twentieth century which means a significantly different era from the eighteenth century France. Putonghua, thus, was in a different sociolinguistic position than Parisian French at the outset of the process of becoming a standard.

³ China daily 2004. Greater numbers speak Mandarin. Online documents at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-12/26/content_403419.htm last viewed on 30/01/2010.

Such observable differences however do not define Putonghua enregisterment as an essentially distinct process. Rather, I suggest that Putonghua enregisterment invokes basically the same process with that of RP, and the institutional imposition of a standard is part of the ideological process of enregisterment – the institutional imposition itself is fundamentally ideological. However, the observable differences do call for careful and critical application of such notions as Bourdieu's 'symbolic power', as demonstrated by the empirical part of this paper, in addition to the conceptualization of enregisterment. In what follows, I shall first address the Putonghua standardization with a brief historical account, and second, look at three meta-pragmatic discourses that bring register-dependent stereotypic images into wider circulation in social life.

3. The emergence of a standard

The established view holds that there was no unified pronunciation in China until the early twentieth century (e.g. Norman, 1988; Ramsey, 1987). The linguistic standard prior to that is said to be the written Classical Chinese which, perhaps one of the oldest scripts in the world, has been in unbroken use for over two thousand years. Unlike the European alphabetic languages, Chinese characters do not resemble sounds, so the reading of a written text can vary greatly, and how it is read depends on various factors such as the reader's place of origin, social class, age, and gender. Recent voices from Chinese historical linguists maintain that as early as Zhou dynasty (about 1046–256 BC), there was a unified pronunciation called *yayan* (雅言) serving as the standard language (Chen, 1999; Guo and Gao, 2003). *Yayan* meant 'correct language' or 'standard language' in the Classical Chinese of that time. It is believed that *Yayan* was the common language of the officials in the court and the language standard of intellectuals. Guo and Gao (2003) argue that *yayan* was actually the language of Confucius himself. The historical evidence Guo and Gao (2003) provide indeed points to a linguistic standard, but it is too early to conclude that such a standard governed the *spoken* (as opposed to written) language of the time, and to claim, as do the authors, that the current Putonghua is a descendent of *yayan* of two thousand years ago. It is more reasonable to argue that *yayan*, as well as its later equivalents '*tongyu*' (通语) in Han (202 BC–220 AD) and '*guanyun*' (官韵) of Sui (581–618 AD), Tang (618–907 AD), Song (960–1279 AD) dynasties, was the language of the literate ruling class. People who had the ambition of upward social mobility had to master it, and mastering such a prestige language could create a sense of 'distinction', in Bourdieu's term (1984), a distinction between the refined 'high-culture' language and the vulgar 'low-culture' vernacular.

The most widely known name for the Chinese language is probably 'Mandarin', a term modeled on early European missionary expressions and referring precisely to the literate ruling class (Coblin, 2000). It is believed to be the 'language of the officials' of the Yuan (1260–1368 AD), Ming (1368–1644 AD), and Qing (1644–1912 AD) dynasties, the so-called 'Mandarins'.⁴ The prevalent view among both linguists and lay persons is that Mandarin has been closely similar to, if not exactly identical with, the regional vernacular of Beijing over approximately eight centuries. However, recent research challenges this view and argues that 'for most of its history standard Mandarin had little to do with Pekinese' (Coblin, 2000, p. 537). It is argued that the Beijing-based pronunciation was rejected as 'Altaicized' Chinese, a stigmatized variety possibly due to its reduction in phonological sophistication and its absorption of the northern languages such as Mongolian and Manchurian. Instead of Beijing Mandarin, the Nanjing-based pronunciation was the standard form of Mandarin until at least the late eighteenth century (Chen, 1999; Coblin, 2000). Although the political power had been centered on Beijing for several centuries, the Nanjing-based Mandarin was seen as the 'elegant' language of the high-culture for much of this period.

How was a once alien and stigmatized language gaining ground, eventually replacing the then dominant pronunciation? It is safe to say that the two varieties of Mandarin i.e., the Nanjing-based and the Beijing-based, co-existed and competed against each other for some time before the late eighteenth century, and Beijing Mandarin finally prevailed in a gradual but dramatic phonological shift. It is important to note, for this paper, that Mandarin is neither a singular entity nor a language with linear development. Rather, it was and is polycentric and multifaceted. Its enregisterment as the official language of the Mandarins in the late eighteenth century testified not only to the competition between the two varieties but also to the power relations between political groups.

This polycentricity is also evident in modern Mandarin – a covering term referring to *guoyu* in Taiwan, Putonghua on mainland China, and *huayu* in Singapore. Although it is arguable that linguistic standards existed, on and off for centuries in China, none was a 'national language' in the sense of full linguistic hegemony – clearly defined, actively promoted, deliberately learnt, and extensively used (Chen, 1999). The search for a national standard at least started in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, an era of social and political transition from an 'old', 'backward' feudal China to a new and 'modern' state.⁵ The connection between a unified national language and national strength was convincingly presented by the colonial powers that then occupied China: France, England, Germany, Russia, Japan all had well-defined national languages (Ramsey, 1987, p. 4), although the formation of truly hegemonic national languages was only a nineteenth century process. This connection was keenly felt and expressed, and *guoyu* was a direct response to the Nationalist victory over the last feudal dynasty and to the awareness of the call for a national language if China was ever to become a strong and modernized state (Ramsey, 1987). In 1926, *guoyu* was defined as 'the pronunciation of educated natives of Beijing', or of elite Beijing accent (Li, 2004, p. 103). The Beijing-based Mandarin, though 'unsophisticated', eventually had its way and became the national standard.

⁴ The rulers of the Yuan dynasty were the Mongols, and those of the Qing dynasty were the Manchurians, which led to not only biological but also linguistic hybridity.

⁵ That era was the era of nation- and empire-building all over Europe as well. Germany and Italy became nation-states in that period, and there was the Meiji Revolution in Japan.

The definition of *guoyu* is largely shared by Putonghua which was ‘modeled on the pronunciation of Beijing’ in 1955, 6 years after the formation of the People’s Republic. Note that the word ‘educated’ in the 1926 definition disappeared here, due to anti-bourgeois sentiments following the success of a proletarian revolution. Instead, the language of grassroots ‘ordinary people’, or common speech, characterized the new standard pronunciation and gave it a democratic aspiration. In this sense it is a similar case to Swahili as ‘the language of the people’ in Tanzania (Blommaert, 1999). The enregisterment of Putonghua as the national standard is processual and dynamic, and this did not cease at the point when Putonghua was announced as the legitimate language. As Bourdieu describes, ‘... the legitimate language is a semi-artificial language which has to be sustained by a permanent effort of correction, a task which falls both to institutions specially designed for this purpose and to individual speakers’ (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 60). For Putonghua, efforts of correction such as legislation, dictionary composition,⁶ the sanctions of the educational system as well as of the labor market, were and are effectively and meticulously made to sustain the language as the national standard for linguistic purity and correctness. In the domain of political life, it is striking to compare, for example, the language spoken by the first generation of the Chinese Communist Party leaders such as Mao Zedong – whose speeches were largely unintelligible to many Putonghua speakers – with that of the current government, and there we see that Putonghua has been enregistered as the language of the Communist Party as well.

As for sanctions in the educational system and the labor market, a remarkable example is the National Proficiency Test of Putonghua launched in 1994. The Test is administered by the National Working Committee of Chinese Languages (NWCCCL), a central authority responsible for the instruction and inspection of Putonghua popularization, and it is devised to produce proficiency certification for the entrance of such professions as teacher, civil servant, and news-reader. Moreover, the NWCCCL finds a major ‘battlefield’ in primary and secondary schools. The involvement of educational systems in the imposition of linguistic standards is almost universal in the modern world, and it is no exception in the Putonghua case. On the one hand, Putonghua is imposed as the language of instruction in schools. Acquiring proficiency in Putonghua is more or less perceived to be a means of increasing one’s value on the educational and the labor markets, and in that sense Putonghua is ‘up-scaled’ to be a prestige linguistic resource which indexes a prestige identity (cf. Dong, 2009; Dong and Blommaert, 2009). On the other hand, the ‘up-scaling’ of one language variety almost always scales down the other varieties. Although there have been government initiatives to protect and preserve the use of regional dialects and minority languages, there has not been any other language or language variety gaining currency comparable to that of Putonghua.⁷

So far we have traced the historical contexts of Putonghua back to *yayan* of two millennia ago; we have also looked at its more recent predecessor Mandarin in the Ming and Qing periods, as well as a co-existing standard *guoyu*. It is not my intention to show that Putonghua has one ‘single ancestor’ – it is rare for any linguistic register to have a ‘biological-like’ ancestry (Agha, 2003). This historical account of Putonghua is to identify its main source varieties, and to illustrate the institutional reconfiguration and re-codification of a linguistic standard through power competitions between language varieties at various times. Institutions, however, do not stand apart from the rest of society. Rather, institutional activities are periodically re-shaped by external discourses, and the effects of these activities are dependent on forms of uptake in social life, which respond to factors – remarkably ideologies – wider than those institutions. My concern in the remainder of this paper is with the ideological process of Putonghua enregisterment in social life and linguistic practice. I shall embark on the empirical data extracted from my ethnographic fieldwork in Beijing between 2006 and 2010, with a view to exploring the recognition and acceptance of Putonghua as a ‘correct’, ‘accent-free’, ‘de-localized’ linguistic norm.

4. The enregisterment of Putonghua in metapragmatic activities

The process of enregisterment, as Agha shows in the RP case, operates via various channels and instruments, and penetrates through every layer of reflexive activities in social reality. As for Putonghua, examples of enregisterment can be found in many types of (meta-)discursive practices ranging from microscopic accent shifts to stereotyping discourses on pupils’ performance appraisal and service encounters. In what follows, my attention will be focused on the empirical data of Putonghua enregisterment mediated by typifying metasigns of everyday utterance evaluation, which will be organized in this sequence: the first example is a public sphere discourse that disseminates register-based images of persons and reproduce the enregisterment of Putonghua in the press. The second example involves an interview with a primary school teacher on the language use of her pupils. It is a reflexive typification of Putonghua articulated by a local Beijing inhabitant – the school teacher – who is at the same time part of the educational system. Whereas the first two examples are concerned with

⁶ Government initiatives, campaigns, and bills include the 1955 *Actively Promote the Beijing-based Putonghua as the Standard Pronunciation*, which focuses on primary and secondary schools (Ministry of Education); the 1984 *Strengthening Putonghua Training of Primary and Secondary Teachers* (Ministry of Education) stresses that ‘the key task of promoting Putonghua is to ensure the mastery of Putonghua among teachers’; and the 2005 *Further Emphasis on Using Standard Language in TV Programs* (State Administration for Radio, Film and Television) calls for restricted use of dialects and sub-standard Putonghua in TV programs. These efforts reach the peak in the legislation of the *Law of the National Common Language for the People’s Republic of China* in 2000, which stipulates that Putonghua is the working language of newsreaders, anchor-persons, actors/actresses, teachers, and civil servants.

⁷ Minority languages have official status in their autonomous regions. The Chinese policies encourage the use and development of minority languages in their minority areas (Zhou, 2003). The 1954 Constitution says that every nationality has the freedom to use and develop their languages, and the freedom to preserve or reform their tradition and custom; the 1984 Autonomous Regions Law says that the minority language has the priority when the autonomous government is dealing with ethnic minority people in the area, although the minority language and Putonghua are co-official languages of an autonomous area. In an ethnic minority area, these policies are materialised, for example, through bilingual (i.e., the minority language and Putonghua) primary education, through bilingual TV programmes, broadcasting, and publications.



Fig. 1. Cartoon of Example 1.

the enregisterment activities of Putonghua in the 'center' – the mass media, Beijing primary schooling – the third example is an evaluative activity from an ethnic minority and dialect speaking region, a peripheral space socially and linguistically.

4.1. Public sphere metadiscourse

The first example we shall consider is an extract of a short article accompanied by a cartoon (Appendix A). The article appeared in a monthly periodical called *Nongmin Keji Peixun* (Science and Technology Training for Farmers, 2005, issue 1, p. 18), published by a training center of the Ministry of Agriculture.⁸ This periodical has a readership of rural residents and people who work in agriculture-related sectors. The title of this article is *Jincheng wugong qian lianhao Putonghua* (Practicing Putonghua well before entering the city and searching for jobs), published in the section *Nongmingong Zhi Jia* (A Home for Migrant Workers). The term *nongmingong*, or 'migrant workers', refers to farmers who leave their farming land for urban employment. They collectively become the center of a remarkable social phenomenon – the mass labor migration within China. In general, the phenomenal rural–urban migration is a result of China's social and economic reform started in the late 1970s, which gives rise to an increase in cultural and linguistic exchanges among different communities (see Dong, 2009; Dong and Blommaert, 2009 for fuller contextual discussions of the Chinese rural–urban migration). The author of this article is unnamed (see Fig. 1).

Example 1

Translation of the periodical article:

1	...it is extremely urgent (for migrant workers) ^a to practice and
2	to achieve a good level of Putonghua proficiency before entering
3	cities and searching for jobs; otherwise it would be very difficult
4	for them even to move around in the urban areas. It is evident
5	that Putonghua is a barrier to rural redundant laborers finding
6	jobs in cities. If you speak good Putonghua, you will not only
7	give a good impression (to others) in job interviews and thus
8	increase your employability; you can communicate with people
9	effectively, express yourself clearly... so that you can find a
10	good job and settle in the city. If what you said could not be
11	understood by others, even if you might be excellent in your job,
12	you could not communicate with those around you, others would
13	feel that you were not trustworthy, and this would therefore
14	diminish your competitiveness. Meanwhile, the language barrier
15	prevents you from communicating with others, and hence makes
16	you isolated...

(My translation; JD).

^a Unless otherwise specified, the contents between brackets are my own additions or comments.

⁸ The table of content of this periodical is available at <http://www.cqvip.com/qk/86404X/200501/index.shtml> last viewed on 25/02/2010.

This periodical article is a multimodal document combining visual and textual signs (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996) circulated in the public sphere. It targets rural residents who have not yet migrated but intend to leave for cities, and stresses the importance of Putonghua in their job hunting, in raising their chances of eventual settlement in cities, and in enhancing their quality of life. The most striking feature of the discourse is the visual cartoon illustration which immediately grabs the reader's attention. The cartoon depicts the social encounter of a couple and a young man. The couple, on the left-hand side, is in old-fashioned tops with traditional Chinese style collar and rag shoes; they have their sleeves and trousers folded as if they are ready to work; they carry a good deal of luggage; they have an innocent smile and an optimistic look in their faces – these visual cues imply that they are on the move from their country-side home with a hope of a better life in the city. The rural couple is on the boundary of a city – they are standing against a flat landscape of plants, whereas the background on the side of the young man is filled with high-rising buildings, factories, and skyscrapers. The young man, shod in leather, dressed in lapel jacket, is talking to the couple while pointing toward the city. Note the different facial expression he has as opposed to that of the migrant couple – this is a confident look, related to a voice of authority which can tell the country couple what they should do and where they can go in the city, if they don't speak Putonghua. The reader could hence imagine a linguistic dimension of this metasign – the young man speaks the legitimate language of the urban space whereas the migrant couple does not.

This visual representation parallels the text, which reflexively formulates Putonghua as a tool of communication. In lines 1–6, it establishes the importance of acquiring Putonghua ('it is extremely urgent', lines 1 and 2), and this claim is reinforced in lines 4 and 5 that migrants will be unable to move around in cities if they do not speak Putonghua. The urban areas, uniformly defined as opposed to 'the rural areas', are practically guarded by the legitimate language, and people who do not speak it are reduced to being dysfunctional or functionless in cities. In terms of employment, the text suggests, Putonghua is self-evidently a 'barrier' (line 5) for migrant workers: people who master this 'tool' well can impress a potential employer in a positive way and thus increase their employability (lines 7 and 8), because it enables them to 'communicate with people effectively', and to express themselves clearly. People who do not speak Putonghua well, however, are negatively qualified in various ways – 'he could not communicate with those around him', he is untrustworthy, he is not competitive although he 'might be excellent in his job', and finally, he may feel 'isolated' in cities because he cannot talk with others (lines 12 and 13). Note the dense clustering of characterological features indexed by 'poor' Putonghua: untrustworthy, uncompetitive, isolated, marginalized, in contrast to an image of the ideal urban subject. Here, linguistic contrasts are converted into contrasts of social personae and social identities in an ideological process, and the connection between the linguistic and the social dimensions are disseminated in the public sphere.

This periodical article shares a stance with most public sphere discourses on Putonghua – to stress the importance of using Putonghua as a common tool of communication and urging those who are not yet proficient in speaking Putonghua to 'improve' and to 'correct' their language for the sake of their own wellbeing.⁹ This stance assumes that Putonghua is a 'neutral' means which is equally accessible for everyone and which is employed by people for their own benefits. The reader could easily receive the earnestness of the text in offering 'practical' advice to young farmers. Given the enormous sociolinguistic diversity of China, it would be difficult for someone who speaks only his regional vernacular to communicate with others to whom the vernacular is unintelligible; there is undoubtedly a practical layer of Putonghua being elevated to the position of lingua franca in its function of providing a common platform for communication. Beneath this observable layer of 'function of communication' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 170), however, this discourse articulates the 'function of division' of Putonghua being the legitimate language of the public social space: the text (and the cartoon) depicts an ideal urban image of being capable, reliable, sociable, smartly dressed, mentally healthy, physically mobile, etc., and contrasts this image sharply with that of a migrant worker. Notice also how the example draws on *stereotypical* indexicalities (cf. Agha, 2007). It is the stereotypical nature of indexicalities that betrays the power of enregisterment, the fact that everyone recognizes the image as a 'normal' and correct social scenario. Here we encounter a question of what the language does *for* people and what it does *to* people: it divides people into two categories based on perceived variation of sounds, and it reaches beyond the linguistic domain of social life to the indexicalities of the speaker's social attributes and persona. This demarcation is portrayed in the visual sign as well as in the text. The function of division is explicit in this text, but it still hides behind a 'function of communication' of the legitimate language, such as the emphasis on the practical difficulties of lacking Putonghua competence, and the earnest advice about the value of Putonghua in the labor market. The function of communication reproduces the symbolic power of Putonghua being the legitimate language of the social space, a power that acts ideologically below the level of consciousness. Consequently we observe that the spread of Putonghua is more than an institutional activity (such as the periodical article published by the central government); it is part of an ideological process of enregisterment – a process through which Putonghua is disseminated as the linguistic norm, the values of accent are reconfigured into matters of social identity, and the symbolic dominance of Putonghua is perceived as natural.

The ideological process of enregisterment is not found merely at the level of public sphere discourses. It shoots through every layer of reflexive and metadiscursive activities in social life. Let us turn to some of these data.

4.2. Classroom metadiscourse

Example 2 is a discourse of 'correctness' produced by an exemplar speaker of Putonghua – a Chinese language teacher and 'native' Beijing resident (a point that will be elaborated in the data interpretation). This example is an audio-recorded

⁹ Relevant regulations and policies can be found from the official website of the National Language and Literacy Working Committee (NLLWC) <http://www.china-language.gov.cn/> The NLLWC is part of China Ministry of Education.

interview taken from the data of my ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a Beijing public primary school over a semester [field recording 2007-04-22_V044]. The school is located in central Beijing. As an increasing number of migrant families reside in the neighborhood, the school is populated with both local children and migrant children who bring different linguistic and cultural backgrounds into daily encounters. The interviewee, Teacher Zhao, is a Chinese language teacher of grade one (pupils aged about seven). I had been an observer in her class for a few months by the time of the interview. The interview took place during class break in her office. It was triggered by my observation of Teacher Zhao spending one third of a class session (a class session is 45 min) ‘correcting’ the pronunciation of a migrant girl prior to the interview. The ‘she’ in the transcript refers to the migrant girl.

Example 2

Translated transcript^a

1	T Zhao:	...and she can't adjust herself in a short time. . .
2	JD:	Hmm.
3	T Zhao:	And... also the boy who was here just now, he had so much
4		difficulty in pronouncing those few words!
5	JD:	Yeah... and the girl?
6	T Zhao:	Her problem (with pronunciation) is serious.
7	JD:	Hmm.
8	T Zhao:	(lowering her voice) She is rather slow in other subjects,
9		too.
10	JD:	Hmm. . .
11	T Zhao:	The key thing is, what we have here, her problem in accent,
12		that is very serious.
13	JD:	Hmm, hmm.
14	T Zhao:	There are words she <u>just can't get right</u> . And it is <u>useless</u> to
15		correct her.
16	JD:	She just does the same = thing next time doesn't she. . .
17	T Zhao:	= Yeah she just does the same thing
18		next time. It is the time now to correct (their problem in
19		pronunciation) if it's successful it's successful, if not, they
20		will take a long time to correct (their pronunciation).
21	JD:	(Do you mean) this influences their other subjects?
22	T Zhao:	(There are) definitely some impacts.
23	JD:	Such as... their math?
24	T Zhao:	Math, yeah... sometimes they don't understand, our
25		Putonghua is different from their home dialect, they don't
26		understand us, they are slow in learning other subject, this
27		sort of pupil has difficulties (in learning other subjects).
28		And slow. If I always spend so much time on them, the
29		teaching couldn't be finished on time according to the plan,
30		and other pupils (who don't have problem in accent) would
31		complain. (My translation; JD)

^a Transcription conventions: = interruption or next utterance following immediately. (.) omitted part in the utterance.

Multilingual and multicultural classrooms resulting of immigration in West Europe have been a focus of scholarly attention (e.g. Bezemer and Kroon, 2006; Rampton, 2006; Spotti, 2008); but the language use of migrant pupils in mainstream urban schools in China has been rarely explored (but see Dong, 2009; Dong and Blommaert, 2009). This transcript shows a local teacher's evaluation on her migrant pupils' linguistic features and school performance. The teacher is an exemplar speaker¹⁰ of Putonghua in two ways. First, she is a Beijing local person. Putonghua is standardized upon modern Beijing Mandarin, as we have seen earlier, and being the original form of the linguistic standard, the Beijing dialects enjoy a prestige status, sometimes being taken to be Putonghua itself¹¹ (Dong, 2009). In the folk-view, the Beijing resident is usually thought to speak 'more correct' Putonghua than the dialect speaker, noticeably in mastering the distinction between dental sibilants (z, c, s) and the retroflexes (zh, ch, sh, r) – as Ramsey (1987) observes, the retroflex distinction is the mark of 'elegant Peking pronunciation... [but] great majority Chinese living outside of the capital itself are unable to pronounce this sound... and most do not even try to imitate it' (1987, p. 43). Second, the interviewee is a primary school teacher of Chinese language. The educational system is always

¹⁰ But note that the actual phonetic forms that count as exemplary pronunciation have been changing all long, thus re-positioning social groups in highly consequential ways.

¹¹ As we shall see next, it was very likely that the teacher did not distinguish Beijing pronunciation from Putonghua. Moreover, it remains an interesting question of when one is speaking Putonghua with a regional accent or a local language dialect. They tend to merge into each other.

a key institution which imposes the symbolic power of a legitimate language. In Bourdieu's discussion of the French case, the school system practically devalues dialects and establishes Parisian French as the legitimate language among pupils. As for Putonghua, similarly, schools are a major 'battlefield', and the mastery of Putonghua among teachers is 'the key task of promoting Putonghua' defined in the 1955 and 1984 bills.

Being an exemplar speaker who teaches Chinese language as a subject, Teacher Zhao is one of my key informants who regularly give comments on the pupils' communicative competence. In the transcribed interview, she points out that the migrant pupils' lack of Putonghua competence is a 'difficulty' (line 4) and a 'problem' (line 6). The reader of this paper might immediately interpret Teacher Zhao's comments as discrimination against migrants. A more cautious reading, however, is to contextualize the comments in the specific social backgrounds. Unlike teachers in some Western European countries who are aware of the increasing tension between the local pupils and the immigrants, my informants (who are mostly teachers) are less euphemistic in expressing their disapproval of the use of non-standard accents at least within the school environment. This directness does not automatically suggest discrimination; rather, it can be interpreted as an example of the unquestioned position of Putonghua in the eyes of the teacher: Putonghua is unquestionably the 'correct' language that the pupils ought to learn, and the mastery of it is in the pupils' own interest; any deviation from the standard is a 'problem', a 'difficulty'.

By line 14 Teacher Zhao becomes mildly emotional, which is a mixture of frustration and anxiety, at the migrant pupil's Putonghua competence. She raises her voice to emphasize 'just can't get it right' and 'useless' (line 14), indicating that she is eager to help the pupil to acquire the 'correct' Putonghua, and has invested considerable amounts of time in 'correcting' her language, but these efforts seem in vain. Teacher Zhao believes there was a 'best time' of acquiring the 'right' accent, presumably biologically, and that is 'now' (line 18) when people are seven or so years old (grade one of primary school education). If they fail to manage it, as she says in line 19 and 20, they would miss the chance for quite a while, if not for ever. The sense of urgency can be interpreted as the cause of Teacher Zhao's frustration and anxiety shown in her tone, which may suggest that the teacher considers the task of making the pupils speak the 'correct language' her very responsibility. And as Bourdieu observes, school teachers are, by the virtue of their function, 'teaching the same clear, fixed language to children. ... [and by doing so. . .] inclining them quite naturally to see and feel things in the same way' (Bourdieu, 1991, p.49).

Recall that in elaborating what she means by 'difficulty' and 'problem', Teacher Zhao says that the migrant girl's lack of Putonghua competence coincides with her slowness in learning (lines 8 and 12). The flow of conversation turns back to this point in line 21. Teacher Zhao explains that the lack of Putonghua proficiency negatively influences the learning results of migrant pupils, as their home dialects appear to be an obstacle to their understanding of the teaching in Putonghua (lines 24 and 25). She further emphasizes that such pupils are 'slow' in learning (lines 8, 26, and 28). From the immediate context, it can be inferred that Teacher Zhao believes language differences result in the migrant pupils' unsatisfactory performance and 'slowness' in learning. Reading further into lines 27 and 28, however, I become less definite about this interpretation. It is obscure whether the 'slowness' in Putonghua points to a general 'slowness' in their cognitive ability of knowledge absorption. These comments immediately remind us of what Silverstein observes as standard indexical readings of Southern US accents '[the phonetic accents] of the Southerner bespeak mental slowness' (Silverstein, 1996, p. 297). It can be argued that, what the evaluative remarks show are contrasts of sounds, such as the supra-local Putonghua as opposed to regional vernaculars, being converted into contrasts of social identities, e.g. 'being normal' vs. 'being slow', and 'mainstream' vs. 'marginalized'.

In the institutional environment of schools, Putonghua is up-scaled to be 'accent-less' (Blommaert, 2005; Dong, 2009), and other language varieties are measured against Putonghua. Putonghua is therefore the 'code of invisibility': once you speak it, no one will notice your language anymore and you can function in the 'neutral', 'accent-less' code. Such an up-scaling process, through the diligent work of educational practitioners, is a concrete instance of enregisterment. Here we observe that institutional mechanisms such as schools anchor characterological constructs in the teacher's daily efforts of maintaining linguistic correctness and linguistic purity, and such daily efforts reproduce the symbolic dominance of Putonghua in a taken-for-granted manner.

4.3. Metadiscourse from the periphery

Now that we have looked at two examples from the 'center' – a periodical article published by the Ministry of Agriculture, an interview of a primary school teacher in Beijing, – the third example is engaged with the periphery: a metapragmatic discourse from an ethnic minority region of the middle-west China. It is an interview recorded by fieldnotes on 01 February 2010. The interviewee was originally from the ethnic minority community and lived there until she left for higher education. The ethnic minority is Tujia – a highly Sinified farming population living in the adjacent parts of Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan, and Guizhou. The Tujia language is a spoken language without a writing system. Linguistically it is believed to be a member of the Tibeto-Burman family (Ramsey, 1987). As the interviewee reports, very few Tujia people in her town are able to speak Tujia language, and the dominant language is the local Chinese vernacular – a variety of the Southwestern Mandarin. She speaks the local vernacular at home and in most other private occasions, partly because she is the first generation to whom Putonghua is the language of instruction at schools, and her other family members are not fluent in Putonghua. Over these years the dominance of Putonghua has been emphasized in the region, and there are such Putonghua campaigns as 'Promoting Putonghua Week', for which government officials are sent to schools, hospitals and other public sectors to inspect the use

of Putonghua. The interviewee describes her experience of service encounters with a local mobile and telecommunication service provider – a state monopolized industry¹² [field note 2010-02-01_01].

Example 3

Translated fieldnotes on the interview:

- 1 I (the interviewee) found it amazing when they (the service staff) insisted to use Putonghua with their customers. Some customers responded in the local dialect, but the staff member still stuck to Putonghua. I talked about my experience with my family. How
- 5 awkward that must be (for both of them)! I said. We didn't speak Putonghua to each other at home – that would be very awkward, very unnatural, that would feel like performing in a play. I spoke local dialect when I went to nearby grocery stores, but in big supermarkets and shopping centers, we had to use Putonghua.
- 10 Service staff there all spoke Putonghua. Actually the local vernacular could sound impolite, and Putonghua could make people feel being respected and at the same time was neutral and powerful. This I think was because Putonghua is closer to our written language, it is more standard. Using local dialect might cause conflicts and
- 15 Putonghua could avoid those impolite expressions in the local vernacular. There was 'Putonghua Promotion Week' each year and the state-owned service like this one was the focus of inspection.
(My translation; JD)

Similar to Examples 1 and 2, Example 3 is a locale-specific snapshot of metapragmatic discourses through which the indexical values of Putonghua are evaluated and reproduced. It differs from the first two examples, however, in that it is positioned in a geographically and socially peripheral space. Let us take a closer look at the text. The text can be organized into three units: unit 1 (lines 1–5), in which the interviewee described her observation of a service encounter at a local mobile phone service provider; unit 2 (lines 5–9), in which she commented on the choice of Putonghua and the local vernacular in different domains of social life; and unit 3 (lines 10–17), in which she evaluated the use of Putonghua and the local vernacular in the service sector.

In unit 1, the interviewee told a brief story of what she witnessed at the local mobile phone shop: a staff member spoke Putonghua while serving a customer, and although the customer replied in the local dialect, the staff member insisted on using Putonghua. The interviewee was 'amazed' by the communicative event, and evaluated it as 'awkward' when she discussed it with her family members. It was indeed unusual when a client – normally the more powerful party in a business arena – clearly preferred one language variety whereas a service staff member insisted on speaking another one. If we situate the episode in its various dimensions of context, we can start to make sense of the seemingly 'strange' sociolinguistic phenomenon. First, according to the interviewee, the local Mandarin vernacular was the dominant language, and people who were in their late thirties and older were not necessarily very proficient in Putonghua. It was thus not surprising that the local vernacular was ranked high in the customer's linguistic repertoire and that the customer opted for the local vernacular in the communicative event. The service staff member, however, worked for a monopoly employer which was essentially a state institution. In such an institution, as in other state institutions, Putonghua was the legitimate language, a language up-scaled to be the linguistic standard, a norm that had to be reinforced by official efforts such as 'Promoting Putonghua Week'. Here we observed what would happen when indexical orders collided – the indexical orders of the local vernacular and that of Putonghua failed to meet in between and hence an 'amazing' moment when one interlocutor used the local vernacular and the other responded in Putonghua.

Unit 2 was concerned with language choice the interviewee would make in various social settings. She qualified Putonghua as 'very awkward', 'very unnatural', and it would sound like 'performing in a play' in a family space and other semi-public spaces such as the local grocery stores. In unit 3, however, the interviewee took a 'U' turn and evaluated Putonghua rather differently. In line 9, it seemed that she was pretty reluctant to use Putonghua in shopping centers and other public sphere contexts – 'we had to use Putonghua... (the staff) all spoke Putonghua' – which implied that she would rather speak the local vernacular but all of the staff used Putonghua, and consequently she 'had to' use Putonghua. In line 10, however, she compared Putonghua and the local dialect and claimed that Putonghua sounded more polite, more professional than the regional dialect. Putonghua, according to her, sounded 'neutral', and it indexed a kind of authority, a kind of power, with which a service staff could treat customers with respect, and meanwhile being assertive, for example, in answering questions and in reminding customers to queue for service. Some expressions of the local vernacular, according to the interviewee, could trigger conflicts in handling such difficult tasks (line 14). These positive attributes of Putonghua were, the interviewee stated, because 'Putonghua is closer to our written language, it is more standard' (lines 12 and 13). It was clear now that Putonghua was perceived as 'neutral', 'polite', and 'powerful', since it was the standard, and moreover, it was ranked high as a result of one very peculiar thing – it was backed by the standard writing system and hence related to one's literacy level and educational backgrounds. Although the interviewee opted for local vernacular in private and semi-private occasions, and although she was reluctant to use Putonghua in some public sphere contexts, she perceived Putonghua to be the language of public social life, and ascribed it with various positive indexical values. Thus the deliberate institutional practices such as 'Putonghua Promotion Week' had been made their way into the

¹² China Mobile is one of the few telecommunication operators that monopolize the industry across the country. Its official webpage can be found at <http://www.chinamobile.com/en/> last viewed on 05/02/2010.

ideological processes of enregisterment and the symbolic dominance of Putonghua was not only accepted as natural but also reproduced in the metapragmatic discourse articulated by people from a geographically and socially peripheral area.

5. Conclusions

I have shown in this paper how a regional vernacular has been enregistered as a supra-local linguistic standard in modern mainland China. Drawing on Agha's notion of enregisterment and Bourdieu's 'symbolic power', the paper has explored the historical and institutional standardization of Putonghua in modern China, and moreover, it has demonstrated that such deliberate institutional practices are part of a tacit and ideological process of enregisterment, through which the symbolic dominance of Putonghua is being accepted as natural and normative.

The standardization of Putonghua is addressed with a historical perspective covering unified pronunciations of *yayan*, the debate on Beijing/Nanjing-based forms of Mandarin, and contemporary *guoyu*. As for the establishment of Putonghua as the national standard, I have studied the institutional practice such as legislations and educational system imposing and sustaining the purity and correctness of the language standard. Agha contrasts the enregisterment of RP with Bourdieu's account of 'top-down' formation of Parisian French, and argues for a different understanding of linguistic transmission and normativity (Agha, 2003, 2007); my research on Putonghua, however, has demonstrated a productive complication and combination of these two lines of arguments, and this combination has been testified by the three examples of metadiscursive practices. In the cartoon case, the symbolic power of Putonghua is accepted as natural and the function of division of the language standard is concealed beneath the function of communication – an enregistering process mediated by a public sphere metadiscourse. The teacher interview is an example of 'correctness' discourses which illustrates how the accent of a migrant pupil is measured against standard Putonghua and is disqualified as a 'difficulty' and 'problem'. This example demonstrates that the institutional efforts of disseminating Putonghua as a taken-for-granted linguistic standard are uptaken through everyday individual practices of the teacher. The third example instantiates Putonghua enregisterment from the periphery – an ethnic minority and dialect speaking region – and in this example we observe the collision of indexical orders in a communicative event in which one interlocutor spoke insists in speaking Putonghua whereas the other opts for local vernacular.

All three examples are blending of institutional mechanisms and ideological processes – state mass media vs. the function of communication stressed by the metasign, school vs. the teacher's diligent work, and the state monopoly vs. the local dialect speaker's evaluative remarks. Despite of an explicit involvement of institutional practices in the establishment of Putonghua as the legitimate language, the actual acceptance of its symbolic dominance in social reality is an ideological process of enregisterment, as we have observed in all three examples, remarkably mediated by typifying and evaluative remarks of its speakers and non-speakers alike. The investigation in this paper takes a historical and processual view and leads us to understand the macro processes of language enregisterment through microscopic observations of metadiscursive practices at a ground level.

Appendix A

农民工之家 就业指导



普通话是以北京语音为标准音,以北方话为基础方言、以典范的现代白话文著作作为语法规范的现代汉民族共同语。简单的说,就是我们平常在电视上看到的新闻报道,说的就是普通话。现在在全国大力推广普通话,绝大多数的城市都以普通话为主要沟通语言,而1997年召开的全国语言文字工作会议确定了新世纪我国语言文字的目标,要求在2010年以前,普通话在全国范围内初步普及,21世纪中叶以前在全国范围内普及。

对于北方农村的人来说,普通话一般不会成为进

进城务工前 练好普通话

城务工的障碍,但是对南方以及一些边远地区的人来说,如果自己家乡的方言与普通话相差甚远,自己的口音又很重,进城之前练好普通话就极为迫切了。否则,你在城市将寸步难行。大量的事实都证明,普通话是农村富余劳动力进城务工的一道门槛。

练好普通话,不仅能使自己在应聘时给对方留下一个好的形

象,增加找工作的成功率。同时,又能保证让别人理解自己所说的话,更好的表达自己的想法,让别人认识和了解自己,这样才能在城市立稳脚跟,找到自己适合的工作。如果一个人说的话别人都听不清楚,即使他工作干的很好,但不能跟人有效的沟通,就会给人一种无法信任的感觉,这无形之中就削弱了自己的竞争力。同时,语言上的障碍也会使自己不能与其他人交流思想、感情,这使自己显得很孤立,在情感的满足上存在着遗憾。所以,重视普通话训练是必要的。

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