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'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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Abstract

This paper explores the establishment of migrant identities through linguistic and sociolinguistic exchanges in a Beijing public school. Drawing on the data from ethnographic observation and interviews, the research demonstrates how small features of language become emblematic of individual and group identities, and how such identities have an impact on the appraisal of migrant pupils' performance at school as well as in wider frames of macro-political order which often invoke homogeneism within the dominant language ideologies, emphasizing linguistic uniformity and homogeneity.
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1. Introduction

Schools, and the educational system in general, are among the key institutions that embody dominant social values and reproduce social structure in a seemingly neutral form. In school pupils from various social and linguistic backgrounds interact with each other and with educational 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 for the dialogical process of identity construction among pupils. As in many parts of the world, diversity is increasingly a salient feature of China's linguistic and sociolinguistic landscape, particularly as mass internal migration results in rapid linguistic exchanges among members of different communities.

Since the early 1980s rural Chinese have relocated to the urban areas in search of jobs and better life opportunities and the past two decades have witnessed an increase in the scale as well as the speed of this internal migration. Whereas current migrations in the European context mainly involve refugees and asylum seekers from abroad (Butler and Robson, 2003; Reay, 2004; Jaspers, 2005; Maryns, 2005), the migration pattern addressed here are the recent population movements from rural to urban areas, from western inland to eastern

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coastal regions, within China's national borders. It is facilitated by the rapid economic and social changes driven from both inside China, and China's participation in globalization. Urban public schools that used to admit mainly local children are now populated with both local and migrant children who bring with them different social, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. When 'big' identity features such as nationality and ethnicity are shared, often as a result of political or ideological processes, 'small' differences such as accents and dialects become salient features that allow peers and teachers to differentiate between 'us' and 'them' (Blommaert et al., 2006). Difference is often converted into inequality, which in turn leaves marks on migrant children's identity as well as on their performance evaluation at school (Dong and Blommaert, 2009).

To explain how linguistic features function as identity markers in a Beijing public school, this paper draws upon the notions of indexicality, ethnolinguistic identity, and speech community, and posits the arguments in the theoretical frame of language ideology (Gumperz, 1968; Silverstein, 1996, 1998, 2003; Rampton, 1998; Blommaert, 2005, 2006). On the basis of ethnographic observation and metapragmatic interviews, I will demonstrate how small features of language become emblematic of individual and group identities,[1] and how such identities have an impact on the appraisal of migrant pupils' performance at school as well as in wider frames of a macro-political order which often invoke homogeneism within the dominant language ideologies in education, emphasizing linguistic uniformity and homogeneity (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998).

In what follows, I shall first introduce the key theoretical notions and contextualize these notions against the linguistic and social backgrounds of China; secondly, I will present empirical data collected and analyzed between 2006 and 2007 in Beijing as an illustration of the dialogical practice of migrant identity construction through metapragmatic discourses of Beijing local pupils, local teachers, as well as migrant pupils themselves. In the final section, I shall summarize the research and reflect on the theoretical discussions at a language ideology level demonstrated in the observation.

2. Key concepts in the China context

The notion of speech community has an intellectual history of more than a century. It runs from Herder's assumption of the automatic relationship between language and community (i.e. a people, nation, ethnic group), to de Saussure's collective 'mass of speakers', and Bloomfield's frequency of communication – a behaviorist definition of speech community (Bloomfield, 1933). The linguistic anthropological approaches have increasingly provided arguments for revising the definition of speech community. In this current of changes, Gumperz' fieldwork in a North Indian village and a Northern Norwegian town demonstrates that the quality of interaction is as important as the density of contact, if not more so, in language convergence and differentiation; and speech community is defined by Gumperz as 'a field of action where the distribution of linguistic variants is a reflection of social facts'. This definition emphasizes multilingualism and linguistic repertoires more than presumed uniformity (Gumperz, 1968, p. 383, 2003; Gumperz and Hymes, 1972).

The rise of language ideology as a separate field of inquiry in linguistic anthropology facilitates the understanding of speech community by drawing in key insights from the social-scientific study of ideology. In a language ideology approach, Silverstein (1998) distinguishes speech communities from language communities, arguing that language communities are ideological constructs that entail people's allegiance to a shared denotational code of language known by names (e.g. English, French, Chinese); by contrast, speech communities are practical constructs, comprised of speakers that display joint orientations towards 'presupposable regularities' and such sharedness of indexical values can result in the construction of identities and communities (Silverstein, 1998; see also Blommaert, 2006). Therefore language community is a specific kind of speech community, in which people display a shared orientation toward the presupposition of normative usage and claim ethnolinguistic identities associated with the denotational code, e.g. 'I am a native speaker of Chinese', or 'I speak Mandarin'.

Ethnolinguistic identities such as 'I am a native speaker of Chinese' are often taken for granted, but when we look into the so called 'Chinese language' closely, the situation becomes more complex at ground level.

[1] See Cavanaugh (2005) for an argument of 'things in the world' and 'detachable figures' linked with accents, rather than 'being reducible to "identity" (p. 13). See also Coupland (2007) for a general overview and discussion of the issues involved here.

Linguistic diversity, rather than uniformity, is the rule in China, a nation which has at least 56 officially categorized ethnic groups. Many groups traditionally speak their own languages, such as Mongolian or Korean, and the name 'Chinese' (*Zhongwen* or *Hanyu*) customly refers to the language spoken by the Han Chinese. But even this term is too singular to define the language because of the many varieties it represents. Linguists often categorize the varieties into seven major dialects (*fangyan*[2]): Gan, Guan (Mandarin), Kejia (Hakka), Min (including the Hokkien and Taiwanese variants), Wu (including Shanghainese), Xiang and Yue (Cantonese) (Ramsey, 1987; Hu, 1995). However, this generalizing approach has its defects: it notably overlooks intra-linguistic differences. It is difficult to count the varieties within Min dialect, for example; a Min speaker once reflected that the local vernaculars varied so greatly that she could hardly understand people of another village 10 miles away from her own [Fieldnotes 2006-03-01-01].

In the actual practice of social life, people link language varieties with particular places (as the term *fangyan* itself refers), e.g. *Dongbei* dialect (the dialect of the north-east regions), *Henan* dialect (the dialect of Henan province). This usage is also problematic, as an informant whose place of origin was Henan province pointed out to me. His own accent was closer to that of his Anhui classmate than the Henan ones because his home village was close to the borders of Anhui province [Fieldnotes 2008-04-11-03]. Here we see that language community is an ideological construct based on *imagined* linguistic boundaries, and the practical alignment in actual communicative activities has little to do with language names. The group identity constructed through such communicative activities is not as homogeneous and static as ethnolinguistic identities would suggest: the informant is a speaker of Henan dialect using the definition of ethnolinguistic identity and he believes that he is a native speaker of Henan dialect, but the actual identities articulated by his linguistic practice are multiple – talking in Henan dialect with those who were from the same province would project a regional identity; using his particular variety of 'Henan' dialect with his friend, the Anhui classmate, would signal a shift in orientation towards shared indexicalities of that specific locality; moreover, the Henan informant told me this story in Putonghua (literally 'common speech') which enacted his newly ascribed identity – well-educated and of high social mobility. As speech communities are unstable and multiple, so are identities.

In the linguistically complex land that is China, Putonghua represents yet another layer of complexity. It is a standardized form based on Beijing Mandarins[3] (Ramsey, 1987). People acquire Putonghua through formal education, as it is the language of instruction in schools across the country, as well as the official language in the state's other institutions. Being a language for public life, Putonghua is a translocal linguistic resource and affords social and geographic mobility, whereas dialects are mostly local and for private or small-group occasions. The ideology of homogeneity and uniformity is centred on the use of Putonghua and thus often overlays the actual diversity – Putonghua and dialects can be seen as an agglomerate of different varieties that operates and can be deployed as a repertoire (Silverstein, 1996; Dong and Blommaert, 2009). In this polyglot repertoire the linguistic varieties are not equal; some of them are ranked higher than others, in relation to the orders of indexicality they are oriented towards (Blommaert, 2005; Blommaert et al., 2005). An extract from my fieldnotes may illustrate this well:

> Extract 1
> I had a chat with my friend Xiao Li this afternoon. She complained that her boyfriend Xiao Liu asked her to look for a job for his brother who came to Beijing from their hometown a while ago. When she talked to Xiao Liu's brother, she couldn't even understand a word he spoke – "what kind of education did he have if he couldn't even speak Putonghua?" she commented [Fieldnotes 2007-01-26-02].

Xiao Li was a local Beijing person who had a higher education background. Xiao Liu was from Hubei province in the middle of China where the local vernaculars are linguistically labeled 'Southwestern Mandarin'; he received his first degree in Beijing. Xiao Liu's Putonghua was near-native, with a slight trace of southern accent; his brother, however, could only communicate in his local vernacular. This restricted command of Putonghua constrained both his geographic and social mobility, and projected a stigmatized identity of being

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[2] The Chinese term *fangyan* literally means 'regional speech'. Although translated as 'dialect', this term 'was used rather indiscriminately to refer to anything different from the speech of the imperial capital' in the imperial times (Ramsey, 1987, p. 32). Languages such as Korean, Manchu, and Vietnamese were labeled *fangyan* in the official glossaries compiled in late imperial times.

[3] Note that Li (2004) argues the Nanjing dialect was the standard pronunciation until late 18th century.

rural and poorly educated. As such, ideologies of homogeneity and uniformity overlay the societal diversity that characterizes every real social environment (Silverstein, 1996, 1998).

The growing pace of population movements such as described in extract 1 gives rise to an increase in linguistic exchanges among various communities in China, and as a result the multilingual/multidialectal nature of the 'Chinese language' and the unequally ordered indexical meanings become increasingly prominent. Official figures[4] indicate that the migrant population was 147 350 000 by 2005, which counts for more than 10% of the nation's total population. In Beijing alone, it is estimated that the migrant population was 3 570 000 by 2005, which is some 20% of the total population of Beijing, and this figure is increasing by 40% per year.[5] Migrant children move into Beijing city with their parents and attend city schools where they mix with local pupils, interact and exchange indexical orders. To explore the identity construction of migrant children in the context of linguistic complexity and population movements, I will deploy the above-discussed notions of speech community, indexicality, and ethnolinguistic identities; these notions will allow me to look beyond the established language names and categories such as 'language' and 'dialect' into real language usage and it social meanings (Dong and Blommaert, 2009; cf. Hymes, 1996). In the next section, I will present metapragmatic interviews from ethnographic fieldwork in a public primary school in Beijing that will instantiate such a sociolinguistic analysis.

3. Language ideology, speech community, and identity

3.1. The school

The data I draw on here is the fieldwork conducted over a semester in one primary school in Beijing. Data collected comprise observation, audio recorded group and individual interviews, and audio recorded class sessions. The school, Beili Primary School,[6] is located in an old narrow lane of central Beijing; the area used to be inhabited by local people but gradually many of them have moved to newly built complexes on the outskirts of Beijing because the property price in central Beijing keeps rising and the old single storey houses are uncomfortable and inconvenient (usually lacking a private bathroom, washroom, running water). The area is now largely occupied by the urban low-income households who originally lived here, and migrant families who rent rooms from those who have moved out. Often migrant families rent rooms/flats in the area because they do low skilled jobs in and/or offer service to the neighborhood, working as cleaners hired by the neighborhood committee (*juweihui*), or as fruit and vegetable sellers in the nearby markets. The rental may be less on the outskirts of the city, but transport costs are considerable, and many of their jobs require an early starting (for the vegetable sellers the day begins at around two in the morning). The children of these migrant families are therefore admitted into Beili Primary School, which is subsidized and managed by the district educational authority.[7] There are around 200 pupils in the school, of which about half are migrant children. They were mostly born and raised in Beijing, although without Beijing *hukou*.[8] I observe that the migrant pupils almost always use Putonghua, and sometimes with Beijing local accent. All teachers are local people. I, the researcher and classroom observer, am a native Beijing speaker.

3.2. Monoglot ideology and ethnolinguistic identity

As discussed above, ideologies of homogeneity and uniformity overlay the societal diversity that characterizes every real social environment. Often such ideologies – monoglot ideologies (Silverstein, 1996) – are

[4] Data source: the China National Statistics Bureau, available at http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/t20060316_402310923.htm, last viewed on 2 September, 2008.

[5] Data source: Beijing Statistics Bureau, available at http://www.cpirc.org.cn/news/rkxw_gn_detail.asp?id=6574 last viewed on 2 September, 2008.

[6] The school's name and all informants' names are kept anonymous.

[7] There are 8 administrative districts in central Beijing and 10 on the outskirts of the city.

[8] *Hukou*, or household registration, groups people into agricultural/rural or non-agricultural/urban *hukou*-holders at birth, and transgenerationally, as children depend on their parents' *hukou* status. Possessing a local *hukou* means one is entitled to local resources and social services.

dominant in the public and institutional discourses, and school is dominated by and at the same time reproduces such ideologies. To understand the work of such ideologies, let us examine data from fieldwork observation noted down on 14 June 2007. The episode runs as follows:

> The setting was a drawing class; the pupils were asked to draw their friends in groups of three or four. I joined one of the groups and one of the pupils drew me; another one commented that what she drew didn't look like me because of the hair style – it was the hair style of a countryside girl and mine was not. The girl who drew me was not pleased with this comment and said, 'So what? We are all from the countryside. Aren't you a rural girl too? Don't forget you came from the same place as me.' I felt the debate getting heated so interrupted them and, in an attempt to ease the tension, asked, 'Is there any difference between countryside and city?'; the pupil who had drawn me replied, 'Isn't it enough that we are all *Chinese*?[9] Look, we all speak *Putonghua*.' Then we changed the subject and commented on the drawings [Fieldnotes 2007-06-14].

The pupil who drew me was one of the migrant pupils and the pupil who commented on the hair style came from the same province. They were both about 10 years old. It was amazing to see a 10 years old being disturbed by identity comments and articulating a clear discourse on language and identities. There were several layers of identities displayed in the event. First, the girl who commented on the drawing distinguished me from the rural population and ascribed me an urban identity. Here the way in which people dress, move, and talk together served as identity markers. The comment was made in a friendly and innocent way but it triggered the dialogical practice of establishing group and individual identities. The pupil who drew me reacted with a series of provocative questions that needed no answers. This can be seen as the second phase of the identity discourse: her questions pointed to an awareness of the rural–urban divide – that the pupil who drew me as well as the pupil who made the comments were from a rural area that ranked low in relation to Beijing, whereas I, the fieldworker, was someone from 'here'. From talking with their teacher at the beginning of my fieldwork, I learned that the school and teachers were actively promoting an egalitarian ideal in which there was no difference between migrant and local pupils, in order to protect the migrant children from being alienated or discriminated against. As a consequence, the teacher concluded that the students had no knowledge of who were urban and who were rural. It is a well-intended action to neutralize the rural–urban divide. Such a divide, however, is a social construct that exists at various levels of social structure, and the school (pupils as well as teachers) does not function in a social vacuum. From this episode, it was clear that pupils as young as 10 years old had a good understanding of their identity categorizations which were firstly of rural origins and second, rural people relocated to cities – migrant identities – both of which were likely to be stigmatized.

The pupil's final comment was most informative. Recall what she said: 'Isn't it enough that we are all *Chinese*? Look, we all speak *Putonghua*.' Immediately prior to this utterance, I interrupted the two pupils and asked whether there was any difference between countryside and city, which implied a negative answer – no difference between the two. This interruption was intended to ease the tension, as noted in the field diary, but it brought the rural-urban divide explicit in this interactional event and unexpectedly triggered the pupil's final comment. Although the migrant child was aware of her (and the other pupil's) special identities, she blurred the rural and urban identities and overlaid them with a national identity – being Chinese people. This identity is bespoken through the language – Putonghua – with the kind of linearity of language and identity which 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, p. 25)). Here Putonghua is assumed to be the medium of the 'Chinese culture' which is seen as a homogeneous whole, and through this language people acquire the membership of the community – the ethnolinguistic identity.

The monoglot ideology is prevailing, and the unquestioned status of Putonghua is at the centre of this ideology. Once I noted down conversations between a couple in the tube:

> Extract 2
>
> Woman: isn't Putonghua better (than dialects)? People from everywhere (of the country), the north or the south, all understand Putonghua; but when you speak your dialect, I can't understand a word.

[9] She emphasized the words 'Chinese' and 'Putonghua' with a noticeable effort in her voice, as the fieldnotes 2007-06-14 show.

Man: it is not because Putonghua is better, but because we learned Putonghua when (we) went to school; you didn't, you grew up with it.
(Note: The woman had a Beijing accent and the man a slight accent of perhaps Shanghai and its nearby areas. They were both in their early twenties.) [Fieldnotes 2006-11-17]

It is clear here that Putonghua, although once a regional variety, is now accepted as a neutral and inherently 'better' (superior) form within this monoglot language ideology; it is no longer a vernacular, but has been enregistered as a supra-local linguistic repertoire (Agha, 2003). The enregisterment of Putonghua deserves a separate paper; here I focus on the imagined homogeneity it has gained through the monoglot ideology and the image of singular ethnolinguistic identities that it projects. In the school observation described above, the migrant pupil who drew me claimed that Putonghua unifies people who (believe they) speak it and this belonging to a language community results in uniform and stable ethnolinguistic identities. Is the ethnolinguistic identity, however, as stable as it is claimed to be? What is the impact of actual linguistic diversity on communicative practice and identity construction of the migrant pupils? The next section will present metapragmatic talks of a local pupil and a local teacher on the linguistic features of migrant pupils; it will demonstrate how linguistic features become emblematic of individual and group identities, and how such identities can affect the evaluation of a migrant pupil's performance at school.

3.3. Metapragmatic talk

Metapragmatic talk – talk by pupils and teachers on how migrants talk – makes indexicals explicit, and discursively links migrant pupils' linguistic features (e.g. accents) to identity categories. By describing their perceptions about and evaluation of migrants' language, the pupil and the teacher exercised an 'othering' process, in which 'we' produced and shared similar indexical values, whereas 'they' (the migrants) did not and they were seen as a homogeneous whole. As such the 'migrant' identities were ascribed to the pupils by others and left marks on their performance appraisal.

Extract 3
Interview with Jun, a local boy, during class break on 12 June 2007 [Field Recording 2007-06-12-V049]. JD refers to me, the fieldworker; Xing is Jun's migrant classmate. [Abbreviated transcription][10]

1 JD: Do you share a table with Xing?
Jun: Yeah.
JD: How is her Chinese, her pronunciation?
Jun: Pronunciation, **very** bad.
5 JD: Is her (pronunciation) unclear?
Jun, Yeah, like, we say '***cuo***', she says '***chuo***'.
JD: Does she have an accent?
Jun: She is a **migrant** child.
JD: So (that's why) she is not very clear (in her pronunciation)?
10 Jun: **I** am from here.
JD: I know you are from here {with a smiling voice}. But do you think that (her accent) influences her performance in Chinese lessons?
Jun: Yeah. **People from other places** (**provinces**) are always unclear.
JD: Do you help her with her pronunciation?
15 Jun: **Yeah I do correct her**, but she just **can't make it right**! She (is) a **migrant** and **can't** get it right.
JD: Do you feel (there is) any difference between her and us?
Jun: (I feel that) they migrants speak differently; very often I **can't figure out what she is saying**.
JD: Difficult to communicate?

[10] Transcription conventions:Words in bold refer to speaker's emphases. '{ }' transcriber's comments.'()' omitted part in the utterance. '=' the interlocutors speak at the same time.

> Jun: Yeah. Once I was sitting and doing something, she came to me and said, "XXXXXXX" {unintelligible talk}.

Let us take a close look at what is happening. The interview was taken during a class break period after several weeks of non-participant observation in the class. There were 21 pupils, 12 girls and 9 boys, 5 local and 16 migrants. Most of them were eight years old; the classroom was organized in rows, with two pupils sitting in pairs so that they could work together. There was a blackboard at the front of the classroom and the teacher stood between the blackboard and the pupils. Jun was a local boy who sat next to Xing. They had a lot of interaction both in and out of class. However, it is the quality, not the frequency, of interaction that matters: the lesson immediately prior to the interview was a Chinese class (*yuwen ke*) when Xing stood up and answered a question from the teacher with 'incorrect' pronunciation. Almost everyone in the class shouted to 'correct' her but Jun was the loudest. They shouted because they had all volunteered to answer the question: Xing got the chance to do so but she did not make good use of the opportunity. She was embarrassed and her facial expressions showed a clear sense of inadequacy.

This episode triggered my interview with Jun, a local Beijing boy who spoke with a marked Beijing accent. I started the interview with a few casual questions and then asked him to comment on Xing's language. In line 4 he assessed Xing's pronunciation to be '**very** bad', and emphasized the 'very'. This statement made in a clearly identifiable Beijing accent and with the particular emphasis meant something more than 'very bad'; it was 'couldn't be worse', hopeless. Then I pushed him for more details and he gave an example that what he pronounced as 'cuo' ([ts'o4], meaning 'wrong') Xing would pronounce as 'chuo' ([ch'ro4], meaning 'quit'). Many dialects do not distinguish the dental sibilants (*z*, *c*, *s*) from the retroflexes (*zhi*, *ch*, *sh*), and as Robert Ramsey demonstrates, the distinction is a mark of standard Putonghua and the mastery of such subtle differences is much admired by people living outside of the capital; they are often unable to pronounce these sounds in the standard way and most do not even try to imitate the 'correct' forms. In practice people get along without the distinctions (Ramsey, 1987, pp. 43–44).

However, this small linguistic feature indexes a big identity issue. Immediately after his description of how Xing talked, Jun pointed out that Xing 'is a **migrant** child'. This didn't answer my question 'Does she have an accent?' Instead of commenting on her language, Jun stuck an identity label of 'migrant identity' straight onto Xing, linking her accent directly with identity. This direct link between accent and migrant identity is a classic example of indexicality, in which an accent *points to* an identity. I kept on asking Jun about Xing's way of talking: 'So (that's why) she is not very clear (in her pronunciation)?' but once again Jun put the question of linguistic features aside and focused on identity: '**I** am from here' in line 10. This comment is interesting in several ways. First, Jun dodged my question for the second time, which indicated that the idea that Xing was a migrant was strong enough to make him ignore the questions of a class observer who was seen as powerful as his teacher. Second, there were jumps in his answers: in line 8 what was missing was probably 'She is a **migrant** child, and therefore she speaks with an accent', and in line 10 he seemed saying '**I** am from here, and my way of speaking is *the* right way and that puts me in a position to judge her accent'. In this sense, Jun answered my questions by relating linguistic features with identities again, and the identities were not equal – Jun was a local boy and therefore had access to the prestige resource of a Beijing accent (Beijing accent is not exactly Putonghua but many people, local and non-local alike, do not distinguish between the two). Xing's identity was ranked lower as the semiotic resources she had access to and deployed were stigmatizing. Therefore, the two identities – migrant identity and local Beijing identity – are organized unequally in relation to access to the identity-building resources – a regional dialect and a Beijing accent – and as the semiotic resources are stratified, so are the identities.

In line 13 he said '**People from other places**[11] are always unclear' – everyone who was not a local Beijing person was grouped as *others*. Compared to the entire country Beijing is a tiny place; the enormous diversity of the country was ignored and overlaid by the idea that all others spoke in a way that was 'always unclear'. The Beijing 'native speaker' generalized his perception of one migrant's linguistic features to all 'non-Beijing'

[11] The term '*wai di ren*', literally 'other place people', refers to anyone who comes from places other than a speaker's locality within the country.

people and artificially distinguished 'Beijing speakers' and 'non-Beijing speakers' as two language communities, as if the latter group share same indexical complexes. In line 15 Jun again assumed the right to assess Xing's language and indicated that it was difficult to 'correct' her and this again evoked the predominant orders of indexicality – she enters a space where 'central' accent dominates, i.e. Putonghua; her communicative ability was misrecognised (in the sense of Bourdieu, 1990), and she had to adjust and adapt to the rules of the dominant. The dominant ones, in contrast, have no obligation to reciprocate this accommodating move.

Next, I asked Jun to describe the linguistic differences he perceived; once again he responded in a generalizing way – '*they migrants* speak differently...I **can't figure out what she is saying**' in line 17. By referring to 'they migrants' he was no longer commenting on one person's language, but on a whole community that he considered difficult to communicate, and who were therefore disqualified as 'language- less'[12]. In line 19, Jun imitated Xing's language by unintelligible talk which echoed his 'language-less' comment – it was gibberish rather than language. Xing's accent, a probably comfortable marker of in-group identity in her home area became a symbol of rural, unsophisticated, and probably less-than-intelligent identity in Beijing. Hers was an 'abnormal' accent, bespeaking an 'abnormal' identity. We have to take into account that Jun was just a eight-year-old child, and to trust that he did not give the comment out of an unfriendly intention and needed not disguise his feelings; I did observe that the pair generally got alone well with each other. However, throughout the transcript, we can see how Xing'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.

3.4. Teacher's evaluation

Having examined how a local pupil perceived the language and identity of his migrant classmate, let us look at a teacher's evaluation of her migrant pupil's identity and linguistic forms, and its impact on her performance appraisals. The following extracts are taken from a feedback interview with Miss Zhang, a Chinese language (*yu wen*) teacher and a native of Beijing, on a questionnaire about her students' language and performance distributed to her and her colleagues at the beginning of the fieldwork. In the feedback interview she was invited to elaborate on the comments she had made and to give examples where necessary.

Extract 4

Interview with Miss Zhang in the staff office on 21 June 2007 [Field recording 2007-06-21-V044]. Hong, eight years old, was a pupil of Miss Zhang.

JD: Oh so Hong is a migrant child; but when I chatted with her, she said she was local, so I had thought that she was a local...

Miss Zhang: **They**, well, they, **they have all grown up** in Beijing, they **think** they are Beijing people, but actually they are not. They are grade 1 (aged 7–8), they **have no idea** who they are; they think that because they live in Beijing, they are Beijing people but they are not.

I went through the questionnaire with Miss Zhang and was surprised that she marked Hong as a migrant child. A few days prior to the interview Hong and I had a talk in which she said that she was a local child and she went to a local kindergarten[13] before attending this school. I had no doubt about what she told me as to my ear she spoke with a local accent. But here her self-ascribed local identity was denied and she was ascribed a 'migrant identity' although she grew up in Beijing and acquired a near-local accent. In line 3 Miss Zhang emphasized 'they', in the same way that Jun did in extract 3, and extended her comment to the migrant population as a homogeneous community. Being a local person and a teacher, Miss Zhang assumed a position to judge Hong's identity and to decide that she was not a local although she thought of herself as one. On Hong's language and performance, Miss Zhang's evaluation was:

[12] Similar examples can be found in Blommaert et al. (2005) that a Bulgarian immigrant woman who was labeled as 'speaking no language' by local mainly Dutch-speaking researchers.

[13] Urban kindergartens are often unaffordable to many migrant families because pre-school care is not part of compulsory education and does not receive government subsidy in the way that primary schools do. Kindergartens are mostly operated for profit in Beijing.

Extract 5 [Fieldwork recording 2007-06-21-V045]

1 JD: ...then does she have an accent?
Miss Zhang: She doesn't distinguish '*n*' and '*l*'. People from Sichuan all speak like this. ......{another teacher interrupted and told a story about her experiences in Sichuan}
5 JD: {pointing to the questionnaire} well, here, 'her accent has a big impact on her performance', did you mean the '*n*' and '*l*' distinction?
Miss Zhang: Yes. Her *Pinyin*[14], you see, tasks such as 'read *Pinyin* and write down words', she has never done well.
JD: = in Chinese lessons...
10 Miss Zhang: = she has difficulties in *Pinyin*.
JD: but her overall marks are average (pointing to the questionnaire item where Miss Zhang selected the middle one out of a five-point Likert scale) ...
Miss Zhang: yes average.
JD: so you meant her overall performance?
15 Miss Zhang: because pronunciation is only one aspect that influences her study; but other aspects such as her intelligence, her cognitive ability, are quite good and make up for it.
JD: otherwise she could do better (in the evaluation)...
Miss Zhang: exactly.

Having noted Miss Zhang's comments on Hong's identity in extract 4, I interviewed her about Hong's language. The remarkable linguistic feature of Hong that Miss Zhang mentioned was the lack of distinction between dental nasal [n] and dental lateral [l]. It was uncertain to me whether this mix-up was an influence of accent or a result of unclear enunciation,[15] particularly common among children of this age. However, Miss Zhang perceived Sichuan dialect speakers as a uniform community through this linguistic feature (the incapability of distinguishing [n] and [l]) 'People from Sichuan all speak like this' in lines 2 and 3. Later I asked Miss Zhang whether there were regional differences in the linguistic features among the migrant pupils in her class and she responded that she did not think there were salient differences – 'I didn't notice much difference' [Fieldwork recording 2007-06-21-V045]. Why did Miss Zhang on the one hand comment that all Sichuan native speakers shared the feature of not distinguishing [n] and [l], but on the other hand noticed little difference among the regional varieties? This is not difficult to understand if we look at it from a language ideology point of view: the information she gave reflects the language ideology that self-evidently marks Putonghua as the 'correct' language; people of this city speak 'correct' Beijing dialect which is the original form of Putonghua, therefore Beijing people speak 'correct' Putonghua; all those who do not speak in this way are migrants, and 'they' have accents, no matter what kind of accents that is. This is what Irvine and Gal (2000) call 'erasure': dominant ideologies making some features of reality invisible. In the teacher's eyes the overwhelming linguistic differences between varieties are invisible, and what matters is the difference between Beijing speakers and non-Beijing speakers.

Therefore, one small feature of language has become *emblematic of individual and group identities*, and we could not exclude the possibility that the migrant identity has amplified the linguistic feature – it might have gone unnoticed if this particular phonetic mix happened in the speech of a Beijing child, but here Hong was labeled as a migrant child and thus 'her accent has a big impact on her performance' in line 5. It was marked '4' on the five-point Likert scale. This option was next to the extreme end of the scale 'very big impact' (the five points are: no impact, small impact, some impact, big impact, very big impact), and therefore Miss Zhang's questionnaire answer to this item indicated that the 'impact' was considerable. Her interview elaboration on

[14] *Pinyin* is the Romanized alphabet system that represents Putonghua. It has been the official spelling system in Mainland China since 1958.

[15] My personal communications with various primary school teachers show that unclear enunciation of *n* and *l*, what we call *da she tou* in Chinese (literally 'big tongue'), is a common phenomenon among Beijing children; children later adjusted themselves.

the answer, however, showed that the negative impact was perhaps very limited: the lack of distinction between [n] and [l] might be a 'problem' in Hong's Chinese, but not in her other subjects; it was limited to the use of *Pinyin*,[16] and did not affect other aspects of her Chinese such as grammar. Even in the use of *Pinyin*, the damage of [n]/[l] was actually limited, because one character rarely stands on its own; a Chinese word often consists of two or more characters. If a pupil is uncertain about the consonant of one character, he or she still has a chance to get the word right because of the cue from the other character in the word. Nevertheless, a migrant pupil may have lower than average performance in those tasks which specifically test their mastery of 'standard' *pronunciation*; however, this should not be marked as having a 'big impact' on a pupil's performance, as Miss Zhang indicated in the questionnaire.

From line 11 to line 18 Miss Zhang commented on Hong's general performance and pointed out that Hong was intelligent and cognitively able to achieve good learning results: if she spoke 'better language' she would have received a better general appraisal from the school. It is safe to say from the interview that Hong's linguistic features influence the appraisal she receives: the migrant child is different because she speaks differently; the differences index identities of being rural, working class, and migrant. Within the monoglot language ideology, all these indexicalities are not made explicit; they simply take the form of being 'incorrect'. Her language is 'to be corrected'; she should have made efforts to acquire the 'correct' language. Therefore, her performance is negatively influenced by the 'incorrect' language given the 'fact' that she is not able to adjust to the 'correct' form. The evaluation of Hong's performance was done in a seemingly neutral way, with recognition of her cognitive ability, and indeed in many occasions I observed support and encouragements from both local teachers and pupils towards migrant children in the school; but this case demonstrates that Hong's 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.

4. Conclusion

What I have shown in this paper is the construction of migrant identities through the metapragmatic discourses of migrant pupils, their local counterparts, and teachers in the context of linguistic complexity and population movements 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 effects on school pupils' individual and group identities. The three examples presented in this paper demonstrate the application of such a linguistic anthropological approach in an attempt to address the real social impacts of linguistic diversity, and so to engage in a genuine sociolinguistics of diversity for a language region often perceived as overly uniform and monolithic.

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 own and her fellow-pupil's identities. It was clear that she was aware of her rural origin and most probably aware of the negative image such an identity projected. However, she overlaid this migrant identity with a national identity by 'isn't it enough that we are all *Chinese*? Look, we all speak *Putonghua*', and this utterance pointed to a stable identity category through the belonging to a homogeneous language community. Notice that it was perceived as natural by a migrant pupil, rather than a dominant one such as a local pupil or a teacher in the social space. The move towards a homogeneous 'national' identity layer is, as Bourdieu (1987) argues, an example of the social structures internalized in people.

[16] *Pinyin* is taught as a facilitator of literacy and pupils are trained to represent Chinese characters with *Pinyin* in their early stage of Chinese learning (usually in the first year of primary education).

The ‘taken-for-granted’ disposition takes the shape of an orientation towards Putonghua in this 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. Meanwhile, the blur of migrant and local identities in the first example was challenged in the second and the third examples. The second example showed the comments of a local Beijing pupil on his migrant fellow-pupil’s accent: the accent indexed her identities of being of rural origin, a migrant to the city, unsophisticated and less intelligent. The third example examined a teacher’s comments on her pupil’s identity, language, and performance. Here we saw small features of language again became markers of individual and group identities, and such identities had an impact on the appraisal of migrant pupils’ performance at school.

In spite of the dominance of the largely egalitarian ideology of China, where the informants of the three examples did not acknowledge the social distance between the migrant and the local, the migrant pupil’s self-claimed identity in the first example was denied by the local pupil and the local teacher. The observations in this paper lead us to study the population movements at the macro-level from a perspective of ‘small’ linguistic features and individual identity at a micro-level, and to gain an insight into the social structure that is produced and reproduced through practices such as interactions in schools.

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