



BOOK REVIEW

QING ZHANG. *Language and Social Change in China: Undoing Commonness through Cosmopolitan Mandarin*. New York and London: Routledge. 2018. 198 pp. Hb (9780425708074) £110.00, Pb (9780425708081) £29.99, eBook (9781315886251) £15.00.

Reviewed by HAILONG TIAN

This book examines the social change China has experienced since the 1980s and offers a convincing account of the role of linguistic variation as semiotic resource in making social distinctions. In this review, I will first summarize the research on language and social change in China, and then briefly discuss issues relevant to the topics raised in the book.

The summation may begin with the key term ‘Cosmopolitan Mandarin (CM)’, conceptualized as a new linguistic style that ‘orients away from the established norms of Mainland Standard Mandarin’ (p. 80), such as the collectiveness, ordinariness, and egalitarianism characteristic of the pre-reform period of China (p. 24). In contrast to this type of ‘commonness’, Zhang proposes the notion of CM for a social distinction. Thus the main argument of the book discusses social change in China through the lens of language, in particular this innovative speech style, which, she argues, shatters and transforms the hegemony of the Maoist stylistic regime (p. 24).

The main findings of this research are presented in Chapters 3 and 4, where the linguistic features that constitute this new speech style are examined in detail in terms of phonological variation and lexical innovation. Chapter 3 is devoted to the observation of phonological variations such as rhotacization (*r*), lenition (*sh*), interdental realization of (*ts*), and full-tone realization of a neutral tone. For example, rhotacization (*r*) and lenition (*sh*) are identified in relation with the characterological figure (i.e. image of personhood, see Agha 2007, p. 177) of the Beijing smooth operator (*Jing youzi*); while interdental realization of (*ts*) is identified in relation with those known as alley saunterers (*hutong chuanzi*), both indexing local Beijingers’ identities. In contrast, phonological variation in terms of full-tone realization of a neutral tone (for illustrations, see p. 74) is recognized as a superregional speech style of young and fashionable ‘yuppies’ who work for international companies. The yuppies, the author says, ‘are constructing an innovative, superregional linguistic style that is distinct from the conventional Beijing-Mandarin-based Standard PTH (Putonghua)’ (p. 80), thus the new term ‘Cosmopolitan Mandarin’ invented by the author for this new linguistic style. In Chapter 4, the lexical items of Cosmopolitan Mandarin are examined (p. 111), as well as trendy expressions from Cantonese and Taiwan Mandarin (p. 113), and

Mandarin–English code-mixing (p. 115), in addition to other features (e.g. de-rhotacization), to analyze the speech style the hosts of a trendy television program on consumption adopt, which bears the non-local cosmopolitan flavor and constructs a new middle-class consumer identity.

Clearly, the innovative speech style is identified in contrast to the Beijing-Mandarin-based Putonghua, but the author argues that this specific contrast is best understood in a wider frame, which is provided earlier, in Chapters 1 and 2. In Chapter 1, for example, it is stated that ‘style should be examined as a sociohistorical process’, and the ‘broad question of why a particular style comes to be at a particular historical juncture’ (p. 28) needs to be asked. To seek answers to this broad question and to other related, specific questions, the author discusses three conceptual tools in Chapter 1, namely, Levi-Strauss’ concept of bricolage (i.e. the use and/or reuse and combination of linguistic resources), the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism (e.g. dialogic overtones), and Agha’s concept of enregisterment (i.e. the sociohistorical process whereby particular linguistic forms come to be socially recognized as distinct and are linked to schemes of social meanings by a given group). These are applied to the investigation of style change which provides the empirical focus of the book: for example, in Chapters 3 and 4, the ‘dialogic overtones’ (the imbued cultural significance of the linguistic features) and their bricolage by the Beijing yuppies and TV hosts are analyzed to show how social distinction is created. The concept of enregisterment is also used in the analysis, but to reveal a dynamic, reflexive, and contested nature of this linguistic innovation (in Chapter 5). More broadly, the author argues that ‘common speech’ has become inadequate in the social-political context of China’s reform. Chapter 2 shows how the contemporary socio-political and historical context explains the emergence of a ‘white collar’ group of Beijing yuppies, with their knowledge about the differences between ‘foreign enterprise’ and the traditional state-owned enterprises. This specific account paves the way for the discussion of linguistic innovation by the yuppies (Chapter 3) and the TV program hosts (Chapter 4).

This analysis can be seen as falling into the ‘Third Wave’ of the sociolinguistic study of variation. According to Eckert (2012), the ‘First Wave’ established correlations between linguistic variables and the social categories of gender, class, age, etc.; the ‘Second Wave’ applied ethnographic methods in the exploration of the local categories and configurations that inhabit or constitute these broader categories. An earlier version of Zhang’s (2005) study of the yuppies’ linguistic innovation was referred to by Eckert (2012) as within the ‘Third Wave’ studies because ‘(t)hird-wave studies often begin with styles, seeking out what makes them distinctive, in an attempt to fill out the kinds of resources and meanings that give language its social life’ (Eckert 2012, p. 96). Zhang furthers this agenda by exploring how the emergence of style is fundamentally mediated by changing ideology, and how it is linked to broader socio-political issues (p. 135). Chapter 5 is devoted to this effort to go beyond co-occurrence patterns and even the construction of social meanings, to focus on the contested nature of this new stylistic innovation of language use.

Drawing on Silverstein’s (2003) ‘indexical order’, Zhang deploys the concept of enregisterment in the analysis of CM so as to foreground reflexivity, and treats

ideology as integral to the production, interpretation, and analysis of styles. In this chapter, for example, she observes such metadiscursive data as: (1) popular media and literary representations of the use and users of CM and its constitutive elements, (2) a metadiscursive label of CM as 'Hong Kong–Taiwan Accent', (3) government regulations on language use in the media, and (4) other public sphere metadiscourses from online sources and print media, as well as commentaries elicited in interviews from fieldwork. By looking closely at how these metadiscourses problematize CM's cultural values and its normativity vis-à-vis other relevant varieties, Zhang concludes that the emergence of this linguistic innovative style of CM is fundamentally mediated by the changing ideology about linguistic innovation. In other words, what makes CM distinctive is not only the salient linguistic features it bears, but the changing beliefs about sociolinguistic normativity and construals of those linguistic features. Zhang justifies this point by observing that CM and its constitutive features can index social meanings and serve as an alternative to Beijing-Mandarin-based Putonghua in the process of becoming enregistered as a supraregional Mandarin style. These features undergo a shift from an n -th order indexicality of geographical association, be it southern (China), Hong Kong, or Taiwan (as is discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 in terms of non-rhotacization, full tone, and lexical innovations from southern varieties), to a $n+1$ st order indexicality of social distinction (as is shown in Table 5.1 on p. 137). Thus, she argues that the distinguishing features that constitute CM do not pose a threat to the national standard language at the n -th order indexicality, which focuses on geographical association; CM comes to compete with Standard Putonghua and threatens to change the indexical field of the national standard language only when these distinguishing features are combined to form CM and take on an $n+1$ st order indexicality of supraregional social distinction (p. 137).

On the basis of discussion in Chapter 5, the compositional fluidity of CM is further discussed in Chapter 6, devoted to proposing a style-based approach to sociolinguistic change. Four points are stressed: (1) CM is not only a cluster of linguistic features, but also an *open-ended* process of meaning making; (2) the distinctiveness of CM depends crucially on the co-occurrence of its linguistic components and the contrast that results from such co-occurrence in relation to its counterpart; (3) similarity in patterns of linguistic variation is particularly important with regard to how CM sounds different from Beijing-Mandarin-based Putonghua; and (4) the difference between CM and its conservative counterpart is not categorical but rather frequency-based. Then in this chapter, the author illustrates her style-based approach by discussing changes in content (what is changed?), form (how is it changed?), and meaning. She stresses that, as stylistic resources such as CM emerge, new meanings about distinction emerge (p. 182). In particular, she makes the point that the emergence of CM involves change in the indexical meaning of existing linguistic forms, specifically shifting indexical orders and changing indexical field (p. 182), thus explaining her effort to carry to a 'new level' (p. 24) the 'Third Wave' (Eckert 2012) variationist approach to style.

This book is broadly useful for those who are interested in Chinese culture. The detailed descriptions of the Beijingers, the yuppies, and the TV hosts help the reader

to understand changing Chinese society in terms of local culture and fashion, as well as dialects. It is also useful for sociolinguists generally. The cited works and bibliography provided at the end of each chapter, as well as the richly documented notes on every page, offer an easy way to situate this study in the broader sociolinguistic literature. Needless to say, the book makes a unique contribution to the investigation of social change in China. Several books (e.g. Chilton, Tian, and Wodak 2012; Cao, Tian, and Chilton 2014) have been devoted to this project, but this reviewed volume is unique in the way that it fulfills the task not by examining written texts (as is done with the above-mentioned two books), but by observing actual talks that occur in the real daily lives of ordinary people. These 'production data' (p. 32, i.e. produced by the speakers under study), as well as those 'metadiscursive data' (p. 33, i.e. language being used to talk about linguistic and other signs), constitute the body of observation in the empirical study, and the detailed examination of the data in terms of phonological variation and lexical innovation firmly anchors it in no other field but sociolinguistics.

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