

# Working Papers in Language Diversity

Paper 6.

## **Dissecting Multilingual Beijing: The Space and Scale of Vernacular Globalization**

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## 1. Introduction:

The central issue the paper focuses on is how regimes of language are organized in the context of globalization in Beijing. With the stance that the international discourse flow to China not only produces horizontal linguistic diversity but also engenders the ‘vertical scaling’ of domination and subordination, the paper advocates a ‘space and scale’ perspective to analyze the phenomenology of non-nativeness in language usage in public in Beijing. It examines how the occurrence of standard and non-standard multilingual patterns in the streets of Beijing, a fast globalizing city, reflects people’s unequal access to global linguistic resources and marks social stratification and power disparity that operate at various scales. The paper posits that the linguistic globalization in Beijing is a product crucially connected with the social, political and ideological processes.

This paper starts from a theoretical exploration of the notions of “space” and “scale” initiated by Wallerstein (1997; 2001) and enriched by Blommaert (2005; 2007a); then it sets the scene through a discussion of globalization and multilingualism in China. The session that follows is an analysis of the different multilingual patterns discovered. The argument is based upon a theoretical reflection on the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in downtown areas of Beijing from July to September 2007. Though the examples used are by no means exhaustive, it aims to unearth the social inequality and uneven power distribution demonstrated by these multilingual signs. The final session summarizes the arguments.

## 2. The Point of Departure: Space and scale

The paper employs sociolinguistic notions of “space” and “scale” (Wallerstein, 1997; 2001; Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck, 2005; Blommaert, 2007a) as its theoretical toolkit to analyze the multilingual patterns in Beijing – a city in transition in the context of globalization. The traditional sociolinguistic paradigm adopts a ‘language-in-place’ point of view, claiming that globalization causes/accelerates the movement of linguistic resources across *horizontal spaces* (usually described by ‘the spread, flow or distribution of a particular language to another neighbourhood, region or country’ etc.)(Blommaert, 2008). To complement this horizontal perspective, it is argued (Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck, 2005; Blommaert, 2007a) that language distribution could metaphorically be seen in *vertical spaces* based on the understanding that the aforementioned processes of distribution and flow are, more often than not, accompanied by processes involving hierarchical ordering at different scales, on which the phenomena under study would present themselves not in juxtaposition, but in layered forms. The value and validity of such phenomena would similarly vary, depending on the particular scalar order at which they operate. Hence, *vertical spaces* can be seen as layered, stratified and power-invested. It is further advocated (Blommaert, 2008) that every horizontal space (e.g. a neighbourhood, a region or a country etc.) should be seen vertically in which all kinds of socially, culturally and politically salient distinctions occur. Therefore, the movement of language across space would of necessity involve negotiating, both *horizontally* and *vertically*, such distinctions closely linked to the norms, expectations, and conceptions of what counts as proper and normal language use and what does not counts as such, in turn

termed by Blommaert as “orders of indexicality”(2007b). Linguistic mobility, therefore should never be viewed as a mere spatial shift in full autonomy, but a much more “difficult”, abrasive and percolated process through different stratified, controlled and monitored spaces with indexical distinctions.

The vertical spatial metaphor brings in the notion of ‘scale’(Wallerstein, 1997): an image of a continuum on which spaces are hierarchically stratified and ordered from local to global, from micro to macro with intermediary scales between the two extremes (Blommaert, 2007a). The notion of space and scale should always be linked together, as a shift across space entails a shift across different scales of social structure incurring distinct indexical value which subsequently endows significance to individuals and situated acts(Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck, 2005).

Scales and scaling processes are exemplified comprehensively in World Systems Analysis (WSA), which views the world in a system of capitalist production and exchange between structurally different parts/scales of the world: center, semiperipheries and peripheries. Occupying the high end of the value chain, the *centers* comprise capital intensive countries or regions in higher orders of development (e.g. Europe, the United States and more recently, Japan) in polar opposite to the labor intensive, resource dependent *Peripheries* whose function is limited to providing raw materials and market for end goods. *Semiperipheries* are parts ‘in between’ centers and peripheries (Wallerstein, 1983; 2000; 2001). Though the relations among different scales are primarily described economically in WSA, it is extended to include immaterial goods such as cultural or linguistic goods (Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck, 2005). This is much in keeping with Abram (2001) and Calvet’s (2006) metaphorization of the world linguistic system into a vast galaxy in which each language is considered as a constellation occupying either a relatively central or a relatively peripheral position in the hierarchical order.

Under the above framework, it should come as no surprise that English would occupy a central position in the world linguistic systems, towards which other languages, including Chinese, orient. In the same way, a more central position and a higher value is attributed to Chinese Putonghua when it is compared with other local / regional Chinese dialects such as Hakka, Wu or Yue. The above example also demonstrates that every space could be, at the same time, central, peripheral and semiperipheral. Each space is orienting towards some centering institution which is regarded as ‘norm’ (order of indexicality) and at the same time it could be a target for orientation. In other words, all social spaces are polycentric with a wide range of centers to which orientations need to be made (Blommaert, 2005). But this polycentricity is stratified in the sense that not every center has equal range, scope, and depth and therefore does not have equal value (Blommaert, 2007b).

The social world is therefore organized along different hierarchically ordered scales. Though various scales operate with some degree of autonomy, they are not static but interconnected and allow relative upward or downward mobility. For example, in a multilingual context, a shift in language deployment occasions a shift in scales. If it is a

shift from a local language to a transnational language, the move is a scale jump from the local and situated to the translocal and general, from a more peripheral to a more central position. This upscaling process usually invokes practices that have validity beyond the local normative validity (Blommaert, 2007a). Notwithstanding, more significantly, some people or groups have scale-jumping competence while others have not; or discursive linguistic resources that are empowering at one scale-level can be disempowering at higher scale levels (Conley and O'Barr, 1990). Hence, scale jump is an indexical shift as it entails particular dynamics of power and access and may bespeak inequality.

### 3. Vernacular Globalization in China

Globalization gives rise to intensified movements of objects, people, images and languages either intra-nationally or internationally. Such mobility apparently facilitates broader contacts and offers unprecedented opportunities among peoples, nations and the international community with the 'world language' phenomenon as one of its outcomes. The world language *par excellence* is English, and in many parts of the world, English is indeed semiotized as symbolic capital: an emblem for international mobility, success, and prosperity. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that globalization by no means creates worldwide uniformity or McDonaldization. It is, on the contrary, marked by highly unequal localization processes. Taking the international flow of English as an example, it not only brings about horizontal linguistic diversity of a region, viz "multilingualism", but also results in the 'vertical scaling' of social stratification, power disparity and inequality, as when the linguistic resources (often seen as 'superior') are 'taken out' of their original indexical frames, normative forms (a process of *dislocation* of globalized resources) and get inserted into local economies and orders of indexicality, it involves the *reallocation* of value and the *localization* of function (Blommaert, 2004). Simultaneously, the 'global' formats and resources will affect the 'local' speech economies and have impact on the locally valid patterns of functions, value-attribution and distribution of resources (Blommaert, 2005) and thus generate unaccustomed, problematic or even more muddled forms of 'locality'. This new forms of locality is defined by Appadurai (1996) as "vernacular globalization".

China has long been seen, especially by external observers, as a self-sufficient world characterized by cultural, social and linguistic homogeneity. This homogeneity, actually, can be very misleading in hinting at a nation-state comprising a single nationality sharing a single language. In fact, the apparent homogeneity is often the result of hegemonic processes operating in service of a central ideology: despite the shifting of dynasties, the state apparatuses, with minor variations, have generally succeeded in propagating an ideology of a unified "Middle Kingdom" ruled by a "Son of God" entrusted with the "Mandate of Heaven". Based on three closely related institutional pillars: *Hanzi* (the Han written language), the doctrines of Confucius and the bureaucratic establishment, the highly centralized system of governance gave rise to the hegemony of *Hanyu* (*Han language*), the language spoken and written by the dominant Han nationality, over other minority and foreign languages. *Hanyu* was identified as "Chinese", the official, standard language of China, while all minority and foreign languages were marginalized. The language regime in China could therefore be defined as a monoglot one (Silverstein,

1996) that centers around a standard form of Chinese, while minorities and foreign languages occupy peripheral positions.

However, tides turned since the late Tsing dynasty (the middle of 19th century), when China fell from the center of the world stage economically, technologically and militarily and became a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society. Foreign language education was eventually introduced, albeit with much resistance and reluctance, primarily as an instrument for “self-strengthening”. However, to maintain the ‘Chineseness’ identity, the formal access to and control of linguistic resources, especially in terms of foreign language acquisition, had been strictly regulated by the state through a hierarchical system centered on knowledge impartation rather than communication enabling. Foreign language forms were generally imparted removed from their social, cultural and ideological indexicalities. The instrumental purpose of institutional foreign language education was summarized by Lu Xun (an influential Chinese writer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) as a filter to “absorb the essence (viz. linguistic forms) and discard the dross (viz. the values indexed)”. Similarly, the policy following 1949 was to “make foreign things serve China”, as advocated by Chairman Mao Zedong.

Thus with the focus predominantly on the instrumental side, historically very little effort was made in China to promote the distribution of foreign languages outside the arenas where their use was mandatory. Consequently, the distribution of such a resource is limited: there has been a historical and quite often purposeful negligence on the promotion of public usage of English. Individuals, even those who had gone through formal education, are often left alone to decide how to deploy their repertoire in the absence of referential linguistic norms, resulting in “aberrant” regimes of language use. Furthermore, the status of foreign languages was seldom stable as one quickly lost favor to another due to the ever changing political and economic patterns of international power regimes. Foreign languages often fell from grace when nationalistic fervors reigned supreme, only to rise again for the convenience of political and economic agendas.

However, the monoglot regime of China is becoming increasingly challenged as the effects of globalization gradually penetrate China, especially since the 1980s following the open door and reform policy and the ever-accelerating international exchange. The influx of translocal semiotics, has generated a “reordering of local repertoires”, not so dissimilar to what has been often observed elsewhere. What is unique about such occurrence in China, however, has to do with the impact and reaction dynamics between such semiotics and Chinese dominated speech communities that are undergoing dramatic social re-stratification and polarization out of a society that has long been ideologically homogenous. On the other hand, these translocal semiotics, as they traverse horizontal spaces of communities and countries into China, are invariably subject to China specific conditionings from vertical scalar orders in forms of access, flow control and selective distribution: first actively by the state apparatus at the “point of importation”, which is often particularly stringent from an ideological perspective, then passively by the social, cultural and economic realities etc of the locality. The end results are therefore layered forms of speech economies that index the norms and expectations of such newly created

social strata. Thus a world system of these speech economies comes into being, complete with centers and peripherals and semi-peripherals in between as well as all the usual dynamics of power, hierarchy and inequality.

In the world system of such local speech economies, some locally produced multilingual patterns (particularly in the form of English) conform to normative linguistic paradigms and are “endorsed” by international communities. Of all its local peers, it could be regarded as the purest, highest and “elite” form of linguistic resource deployment, as it conveys authority, instructiveness, international lifestyles and potential for upward social mobility. To be able to produce such linguistic form, particularly in China, entails years of learning effort and by necessity a good grasp of indexical dimensions beyond mere lexical, semantic and syntactic coherence. Producers and distributors within such a speech economy are, therefore, invariably well educated individuals, including celebrity academics, famous cultural figures, returnees from overseas, managers in multinational companies, or successful entrepreneurs, etc., who constitute the *de facto* modern “upper society” of the officially “classless” China by virtue of the social, symbolic and economic resources they have access to. The linguistic resource circulating within this speech economy is a highly mobile one, being an accepted international medium of communication and exchange, and as symbolic capital, it transfers this mobility to its producers and distributors in forms of expanded social circles, access to translocal and transnational resources and even further upward potentials in societal hierarchy. In the localized world system of speech economies, this one undoubtedly occupies the central position.

In fact, a more frequent local occurrence of multilingual patterns in Beijing is the non-standard local productions of English, sometimes in hybrid forms of Pinyin-English or coined forms, etc. These instances of language use offer particular insight into how translocal linguistic resources are accessed, absorbed and reproduced. In the economy of local multilingualism, even though these non standard forms vastly outnumber the standard ones, they only enjoy a much peripheral status, as they are highly localized and have hardly any exportation value, namely, a product of vernacular globalization. The peripheral position and low mobility of these multilingual patterns, which often manifest themselves on shop names, menus, promotion posters, clothes etc. are clear features of stratified, layered and unequal phenomena that reveal systemic features of the unequal social structure in China. As will be illustrated below, in more cases than one, the local production of English actually becomes means by which attempts are made to “upscale”, to transcend such social inequalities. Features of such scale-jumping attempts, as we will see, include identity shifts, dislocation and relocalization of translocal resources, distortion in spatial and temporal indexicalities and reordering of semiotics. In this process, the intermingle of transnational linguistic patterns and intra-national ones often result in forms of localities in which the places no longer look like the ‘traditional’, “Chinese” ones and thus even unfamiliar to the locals due to interactions among various scales, viz the local, national and transnational. We argue that while some of the “muddled localities” may be committed by simply projecting locally valid functions onto the ways of speaking of people who are involved in transnational flow, others occur due to power differentiation, as access to and control over scales are unevenly

distributed (Blommaert, 2007a). One of the paper's aims, therefore, is to unpack the different power scales of the vernacular globalization phenomenon by studying the multilingual patterns exhibited in public sphere in Beijing, a fast globalizing city.

#### **4. Dissecting Multilingual Beijing**

A review of Beijing's geography would help here. Modern Beijing is an extension of old Beijing whose layout closely mirrored a world system operating locally: the Forbidden City, the power base of the Emperor, occupied the very "centre", encircled by residences of high ranking governmental officials, the "semi-peripheries". The "Old Hundred Surnames" (commoners) lived on the outer stretches of the city, making up the peripheries. From a syntactic perspective, direction and order were paramount in Old Beijing: all buildings in the Forbidden City are aligned in a strictly southward facing pattern, and a dominant north-south axis runs across the center of the Forbidden City, dividing the city in two. This axis serves as the directional norm for all streets and roads in the city, culminating in a chess board layout with strict rectangle crossings. This horizontal layout is then fortified vertically with three concentric rings of magnificent city walls, which lock up, divide and classify different quarters of the city, with gates operating at fixed time to regulate the flow of people and goods. It can be argued that these emphases on clear demarcations of structure and power through direction and layout are close mirrors of the hierarchical methods of governance employed by the state. The architectural/planning language of old Beijing is therefore no longer "civil" but one imbued with ideological indexicalities, and bespeaks the "monoglot" voice of the hegemonic power of the Forbidden City. The hierarchical arrangement of walls and roads of Beijing lead to the divisions of spaces and people from one another, resulting in speech communities with salient societal distinctions. Such distinctions are often captured in ways people relate themselves to the space they occupy in such long-standing saying as "Affluent East, Noble West, Lowly South and Wretched North". "Affluent East" refers to the concentration of warehouses and merchants in that region in older time. "Noble West" is derived from the fact that many government officials used to be housed there. "Lowly South" implied that the southern areas of Beijing were populated by the poor. "Wretched North" was largely due to the fact that the North, at that time, was very remote from the populated inner city areas and was characterized with inconvenient means of transportation and communication. In this way the "directional" symbols, by virtue of identification with particular social classes, became "ideological" ones that indexed power, wealth and social status.

The post 1949 transition from old Beijing to modern Beijing as the capital city of "New China" was of great significance in its radical reordering of social norms and discourses. The introduction of a socialistic egalitarian ideology brought about major changes to China's social strata, with certain layers relabeled, absorbed, or eradicated altogether. The same homogenizing processes were applied to local communities and their speeches as well, with an aim to create a single proletariat class that speaks in a unified voice. However, such attempts achieved somehow qualified success in Beijing due to the legacy of Beijing's communal diversity as a capital city. This diversity was further intensified in the late 1980s following introduction of the reform and opening up policy, whose

enactment resulted in shift in the focus on language away from ideological to instrumental potentials, marking the end of a long standing ideological hegemony over language. In the ensuing decades, greater and more diversified economic and linguistic exchanges brought about greater occurrences of multilingualism in Beijing. Rapid urban development in the past two decades has brought sea changes to Beijing's landscape. As old city quarters are torn down and new ones erected almost the next day, the communities in Beijing also underwent dramatic changes. Large numbers of inner city dwellers moved or were relocated out of their often century-old communal homes in Chinese traditional courtyards into newly formed high-rise living quarters. Compounding the changes is the relentless influx of out-of-city talents and migrant workers, who had been attracted to Beijing by promises of wealth and prosperity. The overall effect is unprecedented social mobility at all levels and continued shifts in pre-defined societal boundaries, which jointly contribute to the constant redefinition of norms and expectations in the urban setting. Multilingualism, as a concomitant to such translocal social movements, thus became a salient marker of the extent and depth of the changes in the social strata where such changes occur.

Modern Beijing, as an extension of old Beijing, is divided into eight major administrative districts, comprising four original inner city districts and four outer ones. Inner city districts include Dongcheng (the eastern half of the inner city), Xicheng (the western half of the inner city), Chongwen (the eastern part of Beijing's outer section), and Xuanwu (the western part of Beijing's outer section). The remaining districts, all located in outer Beijing, are Chaoyang, Haidian, Fengtai, and Shijingshan. Of all the districts, Chaoyang district witnessed the most rapid development. As the venue for both the 1990 Asian Olympic Games and 2008 Olympic Games, as well as the location for the majority of hotels, foreign companies, embassies, and exhibition centers in Beijing, Chaoyang District is undeniably considered not only as the most modernized and internationalized area in Beijing, but among all the other Chinese cities. Northern Chaoyang made its name as the main venue for the 1990 Asian Olympic Games, following which its property prices soared, turning the area into a well-known posh "upscale" living area for a burgeoning "middle class" composed of the "first riches" who benefited from the economic reform. Eastern Chaoyang was famous as the location for most of the foreign embassies and more than half of the luxury hotels in Beijing and it was also where foreign diasporas in Beijing concentrated. The area further developed from the 1990s as the venue for Beijing Central Business District (CBD), where 60% of multinationals in Beijing have subsequently chosen to set up office. By now, three business circles have been developed around CBD: Chaowai, Jianguomen and China World Trade Center Business Circles in which three shopping areas and one pub street (Yaxiu Market, Silk Street Market, Panjiayuan Antique Market and Sanlitun Pub Street) flourished, where members of foreign diasporas and those of Chinese elite class frequent. It comes as no surprise that it is in this district that the greatest concentration of multilingual signs is found, in keeping with the combination of wealth, communal diversity and social mobility. At the same time, multilingualism as an occurrence, however, is not evenly distributed across all districts. Actually a clear asymmetric pattern is identifiable. While Chaoyang District offers the highest concentration of multilingual phenomena, the more one moves westward or southward, the fewer and less standard the multilingual



phenomena become. While in Haidian District (in north western part of Beijing with a reputation as Beijing Silicon Valley and University area) multilingual signs are still observable, in Xicheng District where most of Chinese government administration offices are located, fewer multilingual signs are seen in public and the language regime turns almost strictly monolingual. The exceptions seem to be in commercial “hot zones” like Xidan Shopping Area where multilingual signs are employed more for promotion than communication. Quite often, the same sign that would appear bilingually in Chaoyang district would become monolingual in Xicheng district. Similarly, in the southern parts of Beijing, multilingual phenomena are less visible and where they do occur, appear in a very non-standard manner. The asymmetrical pattern in multilingual distribution offers interesting parallels to that of economic and social dynamics across different districts in Beijing, in that a relationship between multilingualism and the local societal structure is clearly identifiable.

The first type of speech economy involves local representations of translocal linguistic resources in a strictly monologic form, where the preferred code of communication is restricted to one foreign language, in particular English. In Beijing, such occurrences are typically found on billboards by international brands of fashion, jewellery or other luxury goods. Illustration 1 and 2 are two such examples:



Illustration 1: Folli Follie



Illustration 2: Levi's Copper Jeans

Folli Follie is an international group headquartered in Greece that specializes in jewellery, watches and accessories. It is interesting to note that no Greek imageries or symbols are shown in the ad, linguistically however everything is in English. The focus of the ad is two watches priced respectively at RMB2805 and RMB2995, around 10 times the price of an ordinary watch in China.

The Levi's jeans ad lays great emphasis on the brand name on the left. On the right a rather esoteric image is displayed, in which a young man and woman, both Caucasian, are shown digging in a cave. The new Levi's Copper Jeans series is introduced on the bottom right hand corner, together with a three word tag line – "AN ORIGINAL, UNEARTHED". It is to be noted that to appreciate this ad the locals would necessarily require a rather high level of English at least from two angles: the ability to correctly decipher the linkage (copper mine – copper – copper jeans) between the brand and the image, as well as correct reading of the tag line (an original treasure that is unearthed from under the ground). Throughout the ad not a single Chinese character is found.

It can be argued from the study of these two examples that the omission of Chinese characters, far from being a result of negligence, is actually a deliberate linguistic act that indexes deeper ideological implications. With the removal of Chinese, the local code, an "authentic", transnational space is created. Transnational imageries and symbols in their "unblended", "original" forms are deployed in junction with English texts, to convey associations of higher value, better quality and internationally recognized prestige. The validity of such associations is backed by the central positions of both the foreign code and the world system they operate in.

In the meantime, the monologic code results in dramatic shifts in focalization from the general public to a particular social stratagem in its creation of a special, exclusive, one-to-one space, the entry to which depends on the reader's ability to qualify as a member of an "elite" group in three aspects: Firstly, an international repertoire to be able to transcend the purposefully created linguistic barrier; secondly, a compliant value attribution system must be in place to align with the central-peripheral ideology proposed; and last but maybe most critically, a relatively higher level of wealth to actually make possible the final purchase, which is often an act imbued with various symbolic and ritualistic connotations closely related to the spatial and scalar dynamics involved. There is nothing less ideological about the whole process as it invokes ideas of class, wealth and social status. It forces "choosing sides" – you either belong to "us", the "elite", the "international", or you are just one of "them", the "ordinary", the "local". It can therefore be argued that realization of the existence of stratification and layering in the local social structure in China is exactly what this speech economy wants to achieve.



Illustration 3: Café London

Unlike the previous two examples, the next example shows how a local speech economy deploys a dialogic approach to language use in urban Beijing. Situated on Silk Street (close to embassy area and central business district of Beijing), a well-known and visited locale by foreigners, Café London in illustration 3 models itself after a typical London café with its careful layout of table and chair, menu stand, and neon lights etc. The Café's logo is a direct emulation of the London Underground sign, which could also be found behind the glass pane by the door. A photo of Tower Bridge is clearly visible on the wall, together with two flags of England featuring St George's Cross. But perhaps most important of all is the all too English menu, listing three varieties of sandwich: Bacon, Bacon & Egg and Tuna, completing the elaborate local reconstruction of a translocal space. The attention to detail and proper deployment of translocal resources jointly index the café owner or the café designer's relatively good level of education, his cultural understanding of England and international mobility (as it tells us that either the café owner or the café designer may have lived in London).

One distinguishing feature of Café London to the previous example of Folli Follie is Café London's dialogic approach to language use. Unlike the previous examples of Folli Follie and Levi's, there seems to be no artificial imposition of communicative barriers in this case. Both English and Chinese appear in the shop's name and menu, though Chinese characters take a peripheral position from the visual grammar perspective (Kress and Leeuwen, 1996; Scollon and Scollon, 2003): the Chinese name is to the right while on the menu Chinese is down below. The Café seems accessible to all customers, either locals or international tourists. However, there is no denying of the social stratification embedded here in this dialogical space and its accompanying central-peripheral value proposition.



First, the design of the shop name “Café London” classifies its audience by resonating primarily with people sharing similar “London Experience” – foreigners, returnees, and a small number of better off Chinese who had traveled to London. Second, the Chinese displayed on the shop sign, in its explicit emphasis of the “Englishness” of the Café in a language intelligible to locals, fortifies the “translocalness” of the space in the local mind and raises issues of identity and belonging in questions like “Is this place for me?” or “Do I fit here?”. Hence, multilingual signs are power-invested as a seemingly innocent sign may be a distinct encouragement to a particular, often elite, group, but simultaneously a discouragement to those who are unable to share similar value traceable to their spiritual or materialistic shackle.



Illustration 4: BARSMA

Illustration 4 offers particular insight into the space and scale dynamics and how a locally oriented “scale jumping” is achieved. Turning a blind eye to an adjacent Sichuan food court, a drab bicycle parked right in front and a grounded electricity modulator to the right that jointly create a trapping, highly localized space, the fashion shop makes an audacious breakaway attempt by asserting its non-native identity with the gargantuan foreign name of BARSMA in English letters, immediately invoking translocal associations. However, as these combinations of letters *per se* provide little indexical guidance apart from its foreignness to the locals, a communicative conduit is

purposefully constructed through its footnote-like Chinese translation - French BA SI MAN (note the insertion of the extra “French”), which is annexed to the foreign name in much humbler fonts, to bridge the readers’ situated, localized space contextualized in Chinese language to the shop’s transtemporal and translocalized space of French high fashion with all its associated images and narratives of grandeur and romanticism. It is clear that the asymmetrical reordering of two linguistic codes, foreign and Chinese, is intentionally suggestive of the inequality between the respective spaces, and consequently the value, quality and validity indexed. As for the shop, after sliding in a costume woven in foreign fabric, it achieves identity shift from a local clothes discount outlet to a branded international boutique, finishing the scale jump with flying colors. However, it is to be noted that despite the elaborate deployment of linguistic and semiotic devices, the fashion shop’s scale jumping remains seriously restricted due to repertoire deficiency and scalar incoherence. On the linguistic front, to people with a reasonable command of French, BARSMA can hardly pass as proper French name due to the phonetic challenge it poses. The absence of French diacritics further argues for a case of contrivance by an English dilettante with no French competence whatsoever. Secondly, having just deliberately scale jumped into the world of high fashion, the fashion shop’s image engages in a rather incongruent downward spiral with its massive clearance sale, with posters saying, all in Chinese, respectively ‘clearance shoes – 49 yuan’, ‘the biggest discount shoes – 68 yuan’, ‘seasonal sales’, ‘stock clearance: wallet – 78 yuan, trousers – 29 yuan, T shirt – 29 yuan’, etc. On two of the posters one can see huge downward pointing arrows highlighting the price reduction. All these lead us to one inevitable conclusion: the whole thing is a sham aimed at selling more cheap clothes to locals. Unfortunately, it is to be noted that such a revelation will likely elude most of the shop’s targeted audience of low income earners, who suffer the same repertoire deficiency and, due to economic constraints, generally have too practical a value attribution system to concern themselves with the shop’s identity claims. Elements of make-believe may also come into play here, whereby locals see themselves participating in the upscaling process through the act of purchase, with symbolic and ritualistic connotations not so dissimilar to the folli follie and Levi’s examples, only at a more affordable and personal level.



Illustration 5: Tian fu wineshop

In illustration 5, the Chinese identity of the restaurant is beyond dispute: the restaurant's name "Tian Fu" is derived from a well known poetic appellation for Sichuan Province. Housed under a somewhat disproportionate roof in traditional design, the restaurant appears firmly fixed in locality. There is an outpouring of communicative devices about the restaurant. However, a systemic imbalance between Chinese and English uses is clearly identifiable. On the Chinese side, such devices include traditional metrical couplets at both sides of the entrance, the right-to-left text vector of the Chinese name on top, and the ubiquitous festive red lanterns. In addition, four big Chinese characters "Huan Ying Guang Lin" (welcome) are seen on the glass door, inset with four smaller characters saying "Leng Qi Kai Fang" (air-conditioning open). In contrast, the restaurant's English name appears in much smaller font below its Chinese counterpart and is incorrect both in form and meaning. "Jiu Lou" is direct translated into "wineshop" as a fused single word. No capitalization is given either to "fu" and "wineshop". Similarly, on the windows English seems "squeezed" in between Chinese lines. A closer look will reveal that only 3 dish names are actually in English, respectively "Fruit salad", "Fried Rice Yangzhou Style" and "Braisedbeefservedin cold". All the rest are in Pinyin, a system for transliterating Chinese ideograms into the Roman alphabet, which visually resembles English but semantically makes no sense to either English speakers or Chinese locals. All these demonstrate a clear linguistic deficiency in English and it would appear that the restaurant's deployment of translocal resources ends in a total disaster.

However, to understand the case properly, it is important that we keep in mind that sociolinguistic resources are space bound – they are only visible, hearable and understandable to those who are located in spaces where these resources circulate and



have value. The critical point is that the values themselves are fluid and mobile – they change when the resources cross spaces, either horizontally or vertically, and due to the particular situations of the locality these resources land in, may take on totally different meanings. In this spirit, if we shift our referential frames to that of locality and pay closer attention to the social setting in which the restaurant resides, we will see a rather different picture. The restaurant is in Da Zhalan, a narrow stretch in south Beijing that once enjoyed a downtown status from the Yuan dynasty to the Tsing dynasty. However, for the past three decades, as urban development in Beijing has mainly centered on the northern and eastern part of the city, the conditions of Da Zhalan has experienced significant deterioration. Typical dwellers usually occupy lower social strata with all the typical characteristics of low income, poor education, limited access to resources, and very limited social mobility. To them, foreign languages, in particular English, are highly ideological in their poignant reminder of the existence of a stratified world and social structure, in the bottom end of which they inextricably find themselves. Foreign things are seen as residing in a higher social layer, “beyond” their reach and indexical of particular values. In this spirit, the value of English symbols is not necessarily the content it signifies, but quite often the very fact that these symbols are in English. Coming back to the restaurant’s treatment of English, it becomes evident that all the errors in form and meaning are no longer relevant in the localized context as the locals are not in possession of relevant repertoire to judge the validity of the restaurant’s language use. The deployment of English or the emblematic English like Pinyin symbols, therefore, becomes a linguistic as well as ideological act to signify, to and only to the locals, the restaurant’s access to such a translocal resource, which in turn pushes the restaurant to a higher social order, to which the locals are supposed to orient and aspire.



Illustration 6: a shop at Liulichang Cultural Street

This photo is taken from Liulichang Cultural Street, an area in south Beijing close to the South 2<sup>nd</sup> Ring Road. This area is renowned for its culture related businesses in traditional Chinese literature, paintings and the “Four Treasures of the Study” (i.e. writing brush, ink stick, ink slab, paper), etc. Businesses in this area traditionally catered to elite Chinese intellectuals, who in old China wielded significant power over other social classes. Correspondingly, a great level of emphasis is laid on the form and use of language, whose access itself was a symbol of social status. The shop’s sophisticated deployment of Chinese repertoire is exhibited by its elaborate choice of words and their prominent symmetric four-character layout that conveys order, authority and authenticity. The exemplary use of Chinese language forms a sharp contrast to its English counterpart, which is not only featured much less prominently in miniscule fonts, but also in an asymmetrical layout with a number of orthographic errors. In this case we see a reversal of the pattern identified in previous cases of Folli Follie/Levi’s and “Café London” in the subordination of the “translocal” to the “local” in a highly localized space. Such subordination process occurs not only on the plane of forms, but also on the plane of

indexicality in that symbols and meanings in Chinese take precedence and command over their translocal counterparts. Translocal semiotics are no longer regarded as an “agentive force” capable of space creation, but a mere extension of their local counterparts to bridge the understanding gap faced by foreigners, namely, mere translation. The local semiotics, not the translocal ones, are considered “original” and “authentic”. Hence, it is the purity and perfection of the local semiotics, not the translocal ones, that are matters of concern here. For example, we could in the photo see efforts of English word-matching for its Chinese equivalents, such as “cultural relic appreciate” and “skill of painting”; Other examples include disregard for basic English singular/ plural rules (‘seal cutting by famous expert’ instead of ‘experts’, ‘reference book’ and ‘Buddhist painting’), spellings (‘cataloguse’, ‘in scription’) and irregular hyphen use (‘famo-us’, ‘s-cription’, and ‘recor-ds’). It is interesting to note that these errors are revealing in two ways in that they not only show how the subordination of translocal semiotics could end up in forms, but also indexes the existence of a layered local social structure involved in the production of such forms. It is revealing to observe how the same translocal resource, while being passed from residents on one layer to those on another, is perceived and treated differently, often ending up in forms miles away from that initially intended. For example, the production of the English forms on the window actually entails an assembly line type of labour chain through different stages of production, namely, translation, printing, and assembling where different people engage at different stages. The translator may be the English-learning son of the shop owner’s friend, the printing would be done by a roadside printing shop nearby, and the assembly could be done by a clerk in the shop itself. Thus while the linguistic integrity is still maintained at the translation stage, it quickly de-contextualizes into “neutralized” combination of “symbols and numbers” to laborers down the production line, who, more often than not, as “blue collar workers” with limited multilingual competence, would recognize the material they receive as mere graphic shapes more than language in any real sense. The same goes for the final assembler, who sees no problem in putting “s” before “u” in “cataloguse” or adding a space between “in” and “scription”. The point to make here is that the validity of translocal resources are “bounded” to the social strata in which they can be recognized and failures in multilingual communication is not merely an issue of competence but are rooted in the local social structure and speech economy.

## **5. Conclusion:**

The paper so far has advocated a 'space and scale' perspective and argued that the regime of language in Beijing is a product of social stratification and power disparity that operate as concomitant of the globalization process. The international discourse flow to China not only produces horizontal linguistic diversity but also engenders 'vertical scaling' of domination and subordination, upon which language economies, which are essentially world systems operating locally, are constructed. In many of the language economies, translocal spaces are created, scale jumping attempts are made, as reactions to break the constraints imposed by the "situatedness" of locality, albeit quite often in varied forms and with different targets in mind, and with differing degrees of effectiveness. These acts are all ideological as they invoke associations with a layered, stratified, and increasingly

polarizing social structure, upon which meanings and validities are projected, evaluated, and judged.

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