Language and Interaction among Newly Arrived Migrants in a Multiethnic Youth Centre in Hong Kong

Hong Yee Kelvin Lui

King’s College London, United Kingdom

By drawing on the East Asian case of Hong Kong, this project intends to expand the current theorisation on heteroglossia and style-shifting practices among late-modern youth in European urban centres, such as London (Rampton, 2006) and Copenhagen (Jørgensen, 2005). Whereas the linking of ”a country” with ”a language” and ”a people” has been key in the imagining of modern nation-states, in post-colonial Hong Kong, a semi-autonomous city, there is a constant equivocation between Cantonese, the de facto language of the majority, Mandarin, the national language, and English, the language of commerce, legislation, and higher education. This study studies the everyday peer talk among eight 10-15-year-olds of mainly Pakistani, Nepali and Indian descents in a government-subsidised multiethnic community youth centre that runs programmes catering to mainly working class newly arrived immigrants. The participants were audio- and video-recorded in three non-formal learning and recreational contexts: introductory Cantonese classes, interest classes, and break-times.

Combining an ethnographic approach with 'nose to data' linguistic analysis, I identified the participants’ repertoires of resources the separate competencies developed for each language, such as Cantonese, English, Punjabi, Hindi, and Nepali, and the way the different resources constitute an integrated competence. I will discuss how they deploy features in their orchestrated construction of meaningful identities and relations within the constitutive space the youth club.

I also consider how these young speakers draw on their metapragmatic knowledge of sociocultural associations in renegotiating enregistered understandings of the relation between larger social processes and linguistic styles. They are shown to be capable of constructing metalinguistic commentaries and played with language and its social connotations. For instance, in their mockery of stylised Cantonese accented English, they subverted the social stratification that places them under their Cantonese-speaking peers.

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