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New Questions for Chinese Discourse Studies: Language, Space, and Place¹

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Sociolinguists have always been concerned with place. Since in the 19th century, dialectologists have been cataloguing and mapping how language varies from place to place. Starting in the 1960s, sociolinguists turned their focus to “social facts” such as class, gender, and race as influences on talk, but they often continued to delimit their research sites as cities, neighborhoods, counties and, in the U.S., states. Place has also played a role in accounts of variation in more metaphorical and more abstract ways: people’s “locations” in social networks affect the likelihood of their being linguistic leaders or followers; changes move from centers to peripheries, or sometimes from peripheries to centers, be these physical or social. Studies of the spread of language change have sometimes used models of diffusion from geography.

More recently, place has again become central in sociolinguistics. Some sociolinguists are exploring how physical environments affect patterns of variation and change by shaping speakers’ social environments. Others are exploring the linguistic

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expression and construction of “place identity.” Others describe “linguistic landscapes” and “linguistic soundscapes,” exploring how patterns of signage and other visual and aural evidence of language shape attitudes towards speakers and varieties. Another strand of inquiry has to do with how places can be socially constructed through language or talk about language and how varieties of talk get mapped onto physical and political places through talk about talk. In what follows, I describe each of these lines of work in turn. Finally, I raise some questions about language, space, and place that might be of interest in the context of Chinese sociolinguistics.

Physical Environments and Social Environments

One influential line of work in sociolinguistics explores how speakers’ physical environment can shape patterns of change by shaping how people interact. Beginning in the 1980s, Lesley Milroy and James Milroy (L. Milroy, 1987, L. Milroy & J. Milroy, 1992) brought social network theory (borrowed from sociology) to bear on sociolinguistic issues. They explored how the multiplexity and density of speakers’ social relations (that is, how many people they interacted with and in how many different ways) could account for the degree to which local linguistic forms were maintained. People with relatively many contacts with neighbors (such that the people they lived near were also the people they worked, played, and worshipped with) and relatively few contacts with outsiders would be more likely to keep using the local forms their neighbors used, because they would be less likely to be exposed to innovative forms and more likely to be exposed repeatedly to local ones, in settings where sounding like an outsider would be disfavored. This points to how class-linked differences in physical

environment can shape patterns of variation and change. In Belfast, the working-class people Lesley Milroy studied lived in neighborhoods of densely packed row houses within walking distance of their workplaces. Sectarian violence between Catholics and Protestants meant that some neighborhoods were isolated by fences and sandbags, or by unmarked but clearly understood political boundaries. These facts about the built physical environment are conducive to the formation of tightly-knit social networks.

David Britain (2005) shows how physical geography, cultural landscape, and social location can come together to encourage linguistic differentiation. In the English Fens, there is a bundle of isoglosses that separate the area around Wisbech and the area around King's Lynn. The two towns are physically remote, and, in part due to the marshy physical terrain, the area between them is sparsely populated. Bus routes connect towns to the west of the dialect boundary with Wisbech and towns to the east with King's Lynn. Thus the built environment, reflecting human interaction with the physical world, also serves to separate the areas. Further, people think of the two areas as different. Residents of one area hold negative stereotypes of residents of the other, and the two areas are often rivals. Partly as a result of these patterns and partly shaping them, people's everyday activities -- shopping, or visiting, for example -- are oriented to one or the other of the two towns.

Place, Discourse, and Variation

Another strand of work on language and place focuses on the ways in which physical *space* becomes relevant and meaningful as human *place*. This research explores the dialectical relationship between physical space and meaningful place: spaces become

human places partly through talk, and the meanings of places shape how people talk. Some of this work explores how “place identity” is both reflected and claimed in the phonological details of talk. For example, Eckert (1996, 2000, 2004) showed how teens in Detroit (U.S.A.) can adopt a social persona that links them to the city rather than the school. This identity is linked with a style of talking and other modes of behaving that orient to the local environment rather than the larger world represented by the school. Thus the “burnouts” in the high school Eckert studied participate in activities that include both cruising the streets of Detroit and speaking with an accent associated with urbanness. Qing Zhang (2009) explores a new style of speech, circulated by a television show about shopping, which indexes cosmopolitan, supra-national Chinese-ness rather than sounding regional.

Other research has suggested that speakers confronted with social and economic change may use features associated with a traditional place identity as a way to resist change or reformulate its meaning. They explore how dialect leveling can appear to be counteracted by the reassertion of older speech variants, at least in relatively performed speech (Schilling-Estes, 2002), and how forms once associated with migrants’ place of origin can be repurposed as markers of their new locality (Dyer, 2002). Coupland (Coupland, 2001, 2008), Johnstone (1999), and others have explored how place identity can be evoked through the use of regional dialect features in more self-conscious, strategic ways.

Discourse analysts have explored how storytelling and other genres of discourse can evoke and shape the meanings of places and ways of speaking, encouraging people to experience them the same way and learn the same lessons from them. Johnstone (1990)

used a corpus of personal-experience stories by people from a Midwestern US city, together with newspaper reports about a disastrous flood there, to show how storytelling can create as well as reflect a sense of place-based community. Both the themes and the style of Fort Wayners' stories serve to reproduce and reinforce local norms for behavior and display appropriate local knowledge, and newspaper accounts of the flood shift from factual reports in which individuals figure as characters to highly dramatized, myth-like discourse in which the city is represented as the protagonist in a battle against the flood. Modan (2007) analyzed talk among neighbors and at meetings and written documents such as a grant proposal to explore the "senses of place" of residents of a multi-ethnic neighborhood in Washington, D.C. In this gentrifying neighborhood, conflicting ideas about proper behavior in various places (making music on the street, for example) feed into covertly political debates about who really belongs there, the older, poorer, immigrant population or the newer, wealthier whites. For Modan, "turf wars" are struggles over the right to define the meanings of places.

On a more micro-analytical level, Myers (2006) explores how participants in focus groups answer the question "Where are you from?" Myers finds that people often revise their answers in response to questions or comments from fellow participants; "formulating place" (Schegloff, 1972) is thus seen to be an interactive, rhetorical task, a process that is not well represented by the way place is treated in most social-science research. Pagliai (2000) shows how Tuscans use a speech genre they call "contrasto" – a kind of dialogue duel in song and poetry – to link people with places. As places are named, evoked in metaphors, and hinted at, places and place identities are constructed,

revised, linked, and displayed. Pagliai's work calls attention to the way place identity can be publicly performed.

As Modan's study makes clear, economic change and social processes associated with it make the meanings of place debatable. Gentrification, migration, colonization, urban redevelopment, and the like complicate the meaning of questions like "Where are you?" or "Where are you from?" Anna De Fina (2003) explores one effect of economic globalization in her research on undocumented immigrants in the U.S. Models of narrative like that of Labov and Waletzky (1997) are based on the assumption that people are typically able to "orient" their listeners to place and movement through it. But undocumented immigrants' stories of "crossing borders" are often characterized by *disorientation*, as the narrators characterize themselves as being out of place and time, out of control.

Returning to the topic of linguistic variation and change, recent work on the "enregistration" of dialects (Agha, 2003) explores how sets of linguistic forms that are hearable or visible in an area can coalesce, in people's minds, into "dialects," and how dialects get linked with cities and regions. In Pittsburgh (U.S.A.), economic decline starting in the 1960s and reaching its nadir in the 1980s caused people to become aware that they spoke with an accent. Pittsburghers travelling elsewhere for leisure or, increasingly, for permanent work encountered people who told them they sounded different and used different words. At the same time, demographic change caused people to look for new symbols of Pittsburgh place identity. Many members of the generation of working-class Pittsburghers coming of age in the 1980s were the grandchildren of immigrant steelworkers. No longer speaking the homeland language or identifying with

the homeland religion, they began to develop class and regional consciousness – and the features of local speech which they could hear were available as a way of indexing these new identities. Johnstone and her colleagues have explored how the links between local speech and local identity have been forged through discursive practices like newspaper feature-writing (Johnstone, Bhasin, & Wittkofski, 2002), the telling of travel stories (Johnstone, 2006), and nostalgic online chat (Johnstone & Baumgardt, 2004), and what is happening as a new generation of Pittsburghers, who no longer speak with strong local accents, begin to perform and refer to a subset of local speech features to evoke a new post-industrial urban identity (Johnstone, Andrus, & Danielson, 2006).

Experiencing Variation: Linguistic Landscapes and Soundscapes

Several strands of sociolinguistic research draw on the sense that people's experiences of place make a difference. One of these is research on "linguistic landscapes." Much of this research is based on a 1997 study by social psychologists Landry and Bourhis entitled "Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality: An Empirical Study" (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Landry and Bourhis define linguistic landscape (LL) as "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings" (p. 25). Landry and Bourhis administered tests and questionnaires in several bilingual areas. Analysis supported their hypothesis that "the more the in-group language is used on government and private signs, the more individuals will perceive the in-group to have high E[thnolinguistic] V[itality]" (p. 35).

Ben-Rafael and Shohamy (2006) suggest that linguistic landscapes can be seen in terms of the “symbolic construction of the public space,” where rational considerations affecting what languages are used must be balanced with self-presentational factors and considerations of power (see also Backhaus’s (2006) chapter on multilingual signs in Japan). Huebner (2006) studies private-sector signs as well as government-sponsored ones in a variety of Bangkok neighborhoods, exploring the effects of English even in Thai-language signs (which sometimes use the Roman alphabet, for example). Cenoz (2006) compares the representation of minority languages on signs in two places with different official policies with regard to these languages. Ron Scollon and Suzanne Scollon (2003) call their framework “geosemiotics,” or “the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world” (2). In other words, they are interested in how the particular geographical site of a message or an interaction and the particular time at which it happens affect its meaning.

Experiences of language and place also occur in the mediated environment of television. Jaworski, Ylänne-McEwen, Thurlow, and Lawson (2003), for example, examined the uses of languages other than English on British TV shows about travel. In general, they found, English was represented as a global language. Although reporters sometimes began conversations with foreign locals in the local language, they soon switched to English. Foreign languages were “reduced to the status of a handful of fixed phrases found in guide-book glossaries and exoticized linguascapes” (p. 5).

Findings such as these have clear implications for language planning and policy, since representations of the utility of languages affect people’s willingness to learn and use them. They also show, once again, that the relationship between language and place

is complex and multifaceted. Linguistic difference, the topic of sociolinguistics, is not just a result of physical distance or topography, as we once imagined. Rather, language is linked with place, or not, though ideas about what language, languages, varieties, and places mean, and these ideas are produced and circulated in talk and taken up in individuals' experience of the linguistic landscapes they encounter.

Language and Place in Contemporary China

I conclude by raising some questions that are being asked, and could be asked, about language and place in contemporary China. These questions overlap, and some research projects could combine several. I am not a China specialist and have not explored any of these avenues of study. Thus some of them may seem mis-mapped, or impossible to follow for one reason or another. I hope, however, that these suggestions will evoke others, and that at least some of them could lead to practical, productive lines of work for Chinese sociolinguists. A number of these avenues are already being explored, as is evident from papers presented at the New Discourses in Contemporary China conference in 2009.

One set of questions that come to mind (particularly given my own experiences as a tourist in China) have to do with discourses about place in the context of tourism. As Hailong Tian suggests (2009), myths about place are recontextualized in tourism discourse. How does this happen? How, for example, do places get “repurposed” and marketed? How are cities “branded” (J. Feng, 2009; Mao, 2009)? How are tourists' experiences of place shaped through such means as guidebooks, signs, and the words of tour guides (see, for example, Zhao, 2009)? How do national and local planners talk

about tourists and encourage other Chinese to think of them? For example, some of the traditional neighborhoods in central Beijing have been repurposed, in part, as tourist attractions. Guided pedi-cab tours take visitors through these neighborhoods, which are labeled “hutongs” in English, pointing out the significance of the number of beams above front doors and noting that, historically, each compound housed several related families around a central courtyard. What is included in these accounts, and what is left out? How does the representation of the hutongs presented to tourists correspond to how these neighborhoods are represented in Chinese discourse? What is the significance of the differences, if there are differences? Do Chinese tourists hear the same story as Westerners do?

Questions could also be asked about place and identity and how they are linked or de-linked through discourse. Zhu (2009) explores how the identity of *nongmingong* (a rural person who has migrated to the city) is represented and circulated in visual media in China (see also Wu, 2009). How do the identities people construct in virtual places on the Internet compare with their identities in the “real” world, and how does place enter in to the process? Some Korean students in the U.S. manage to live in an almost entirely Korean world, in large part through Korean-language social networking sites. Other international students find that their regional identities in their home countries move into the background, as appeals to national identity help them bond with others from their country. For example, Bhasin (2008) analyzed a conversation among several Indian students in the U.S. The students would not be thought to have much in common in India, coming as they did from different parts of the country and speaking different native languages. But faced with a shared experience of foreignness, they came together, in the

interaction, by comparing “American humor” with “Indian humor” and identifying with the latter. How do migrants, temporary or permanent, to China experience China as a place, and how does being in China come to serve as an identity resource for them, if it does? In general, how is increased geographical mobility, in the context of globalization, reshaping people’s identification with places (Sheng, 2009)? When and why do national and ethnic identities continue to matter, and when do they stop mattering?

Qing Zhang’s (Q. Zhang, 2009, 2005, 2006) research about new lifestyles and associated ways of speaking in contemporary China suggests other questions about how place, discourse, and language variation and change are related (see also H. Feng, 2009). As migrants from rural China bring their dialects and ways of talking to the cities, how do urban dialects change, if they do? As Western traditions regarding gender roles in the workplace meet Chinese ones, are females coming to speak more like males, or less? And what does metalinguistic talk about talk contribute to these processes? Do people notice dialect differences more than they once did, now that Chinese people are more mobile than they once were? Do they talk about these differences? What are the social and linguistic effects of such talk?

Chinese scholars might also ask research questions involving institutional discourses about places. How are places constructed and used in economic and social policy? For example, what are the ideological implications of official designations such as “rural” vs. “urban”? What are the effects of designating areas as “development zones” or, historically, “concessions”? Through what discursive practices do such designations get assigned? Are there counter-discourses about the meanings of places? In Pittsburgh, for example, the official discourse about the city, reflected in talk about economic

development, stresses the city's economic diversity, the quality of its universities and hospitals, its pre-eminence in high-tech fields such as robotics and biomedical engineering. Vernacular discourse about Pittsburgh, on the other hand, tends to be about the glory of the city's steel-producing past, Pittsburghers' working-class values, and the area's distinctive dialect and successful sports teams. In other words, what it means to be a Pittsburgher and what the city means to Pittsburghers is not of a piece and sometimes the topic of controversy.

We might also ask how places become reconfigured in the context of economic change. How is "China" represented in Chinese and non-Chinese media (Jin & H. Zhang, 2009; Liu & Hui Tian, 2009; Peng & H. Zhang, 2009)? As nation-states that were once opponents have to work together in the new economic climate, what kinds of talk serve to create and enforce entities like "Europe" or "Cultural China"? And despite increasingly international coalitions of this sort, how does the concept of "the East" (Said, 1978) continue to affect Western discourse, and how do ideas about "the West" color imaginations, texts, and interactions in the East?

Finally, discourse analysts and sociolinguists could ask questions about how material spaces become ideologically saturated places through language on a smaller scale – the scale of buildings and neighborhoods rather than that of nation-states and coalitions of nation-states. For example, Li (2009) has explored how new Chinese housing developments are marketed in part through appeals to the connotations of the word "villa" and the lifestyle it suggests. A new riverfront building in Tianjin is called "Ocean Centre". What does this name call up in Chinese? How does it function to transform material space – an office building – into a meaningful place? Does "ocean" evoke

spaciousness in Chinese, as it does in English? Does it evoke the history of international trade in Tianjin? Are there larger mythical discourses about the ocean that are drawn upon here?

All of the questions I have raised have answers that would be new and interesting in the Chinese context. Such answers could push Chinese sociolinguistics in some new directions and suggest some feasible, possibly useful avenues for discourse analysis. To the extent that might they push discourse analysis and sociolinguistic methodology in new directions (and advances like these of course need to be described explicitly), such answers would be of wider interest, too, to sociolinguists around the world interested in what research in China can add to our methodological tool chests and theoretical models.

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