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Language Relations on Shamian: A Study of Sales Aggression Triggered by Language in a Trilingual Community

Alexander Gamst Page*

This ethnographic study of a souvenir shop in China involves customers who typically use one of three languages: Cantonese, Mandarin or English. Arguably a triglossia, the languages have different connotations in terms of formality and intimacy. The language used positions the speaker within a cognitive map of sociability, affecting the treatment of the customer. This study finds that the speakers of the more intimate language tend to get better treatment. With speakers of Cantonese and, to a lesser degree, Mandarin, the priority is to remain on good terms beyond this interaction, whereas with English speakers the priority is to extract the maximum economic gain from the interaction.

Keywords: Triglossia; Chinese Languages; Linguistic Anthropology; Economic Anthropology; Reciprocity

Introduction

As well as its practical usage as conveyer of pragmatic meaning, language carries a host of unspoken information. The intonation, accent, vocabulary and figurative forms people use, convey a great deal of significance about a person, as well as the social context within which they find themselves. We might glean from this their place of origin, age, level of education, social class, even gender (see Coulmas 2005; Holmes 2013). Language is also a repository of symbolic meaning, and there are few places this is more obvious than within societies characterised by diglossia (Ferguson 1959; Fishman 1967; Hudson 2002; Li 2013; Su 2014) or triglossia (Mkilifi 1972; Youssi 1995). These terms denote situations where linguistic codes coexist in the same

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society and have been relegated to separate areas of usage. While the precise definition and inclusivity of the terms diglossia and triglossia have been a matter of debate (see Ferguson 1959; Fishman 1967; Hudson 2002), a central characteristic is the development of formal high and informal low languages. Certain situations such as formal occasions or rituals call for use of the high language, whereas the low language is used on a daily basis. Based on this, despite unclear definitions, I would argue that Chinese bilingual areas qualify as diglossia. Here we find a wide variety of regional, mutually unintelligible dialects used day-to-day, and a standardised national language whose use is mandated for certain situations.

This article is grounded in an ethnographic study of the sociability implied by the choice of language in an area within Guangzhou. One of China's largest cities and the capital of Guangdong Province, Guangzhou sits in the Pearl River delta. The small island of Shamian is located near the centre of Guangzhou. The quasi-colonial history of this island and the large number of consulates situated here, has led to it being a common place of residence for foreigners. As a result, in the tourist-centred area, English is habitually used as well as Cantonese and Mandarin, making it in a sense a triglossia. The focus of the study was financial interactions and the way code choice fundamentally frames the way in which such interactions progress. Of particular importance is the difference between Gwóngdùngyahn (Guangdong people) and the non-Gwóngdùngyahn.

The main part of fieldwork was conducted on Shamian in a family-run souvenir shop, which will here be called 'Karen's Place'. There I observed relations between employee and customer, paying special attention to the role of language in establishing the framework of the interaction. Linguistic discrepancy seemed to influence social behaviour, which was manifested through the ways in which the customers were treated at Karen's Place. That is, the language a customer spoke profoundly altered the way in which he or she was met, the degree to which they were allowed to browse unsupervised and the pressure that was mobilised in order to induce them to make purchases. Some of these interactions may partly be explained as rational, maximising behaviour (see Polanyi 1944; Armstrong and Yee 2001), while others appear to be the result of people being categorised, probably unconsciously, in terms of sociability. Sociability may here be seen as the level of cordiality, amicability and perceived closeness between people, in such a way that we exhibit high sociability towards friends and family, medium to acquaintances and low to strangers (Simmel and Hughes 1949). In the current analysis, sociability may be seen as opposed to profitability, which may here be understood as somewhat predatory economic behaviour aimed at maximising, or at least increasing, one's amount of monetary gain from a given interaction or set of interactions at the expense of sociability.

I observed three primary categories of customer relations, which fell into a continuum of high to low sociability, analogous to analyses such as Sahlins (1972). However, rather than sociability being defined by kinship, I argue that the classification is prompted by the language used, and is partly unconscious, partly an economic maximisation strategy.

This study is essentially about the symbolic dimensions of language and the capacity of language to bestow certain values onto the speaker. The financial aspect of the interaction is primarily mobilised as a way to view the effects of language, as each customer was met with a fundamentally different level of pressure from the shop assistants.

National Language, Local Language

Guangzhou is for the most part a bilingual community, which is quite usual in China. People here speak the national language, Mandarin, which is required in school and in interaction with various officials, although this requirement is subject to strong encouragement rather than force (Ikels 1996). Mandarin thus functions as a lingua franca in an otherwise linguistically diverse country. In addition, the locals speak Cantonese (*Gwóngiàuwá* or *Gwóngdùngwá*) a language in the Yue family, also spoken in Hong Kong, and until recently the primary language of most overseas Chinese. There is no accepted definition separating language and dialect (Coulmas 2005), but in everyday usage dialects are generally viewed as minor variations that are still mutually intelligible. Politically speaking, Cantonese is regarded as a dialect, with Mandarin being the standard. However, such local dialects actually belong to several mutually unintelligible linguistic families, of similar distribution as the European languages (Chen 2008). In this regard, Mandarin and Cantonese are of comparable difference to English and German, so in everyday usage they are different enough to be regarded as distinct languages. In this article, I will use both terms.

Most people in Guangzhou speak both languages, with two main exceptions. First, the elderly often cannot speak Mandarin. Second, the majority of those from outside Guangdong province cannot speak Cantonese. The basis for including China as a diglossia, albeit in the extended definition, is that the most salient predictors of language used are the social situation and the identity of one's interlocutor. Situations that are more formal require Mandarin, as do interactions with public officials and civil servants. Cantonese is used in more personal, less formal settings, and amongst people with whom formality is not mandated. The subject of private and official will be elaborated later in the paper.

Social Relations Through *Guanxi*

This paper concerns the symbolic insider/outsider dimension that a particular language can carry in a multilingual society. Diglossia and triglossia entails that each language has a different connotation, which cannot help but be carried over to the speaker and the social setting, even if the effect is not conscious. This study grew out of an attempt to find a setting where this effect might be reliably observed. A small retail business was eventually determined as the research setting, allowing observation of the impact of language on economic behaviour. In this setting, different forms of customer relations were observed and categorised in terms of a continuum from profitability to sociability, that is, whether the salesperson's behaviour tended

towards maximising good customer relations or maximising profits. This is analogous to the ways in which different forms of reciprocity can become dominant depending on the level of social relations (Sahlins 1972). It is useful here to examine forms of reciprocity in Chinese society.

Guanxi is a system of reciprocity that exists in Chinese communities. Such relationships are formalised through gift exchange and an obligation on both parts to do favours for the other when able. When two people have established such a relationship to each other, they are said to have *guanxi* (Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997). There are academically divergent views of this institution, which partly follow discipline and field of study. For instance, most studies focusing on business (for example, Seligman 1999; Kiong and Kee 1998) deal with it in mainly negative terms, showing how it promotes cronyism and nepotism, and creates a framework for gifts as ‘ceremonialised bribery’ (Walder 1986). Others compare it to the work of Bourdieu (1986) and see *guanxi* as a system for converting capital from one form to another (Hwang 1987; Smart 1993; Gold, Guthrie, and Wank 2002; Fan, Heberer, and Taubmann 2006). Another view of *guanxi* focuses on the social elements of the exchange of gifts and favours, the way in which social relations are established, maintained and expressed (Yan 1996; Kolm 2008).

In this latter view, *guanxi* may be seen as an expression of the level of expectation and obligation that people connected through social networks have to each other. People and households that are socially connected will attend each other’s events and exchange gifts, often cash. The number of gift exchanges one has with an individual, the grandeur of the gift and the types of favours that may be requested all vary in accordance with *ganqing*, or the strength of the relationship. Although these relationships are not enforced through any official means, they are maintained by *renqing*, a moral imperative to honour one’s relations (Kipnis 1997). This is reflected by the fact that *guanxi* relations, particularly close ones, involve not only an obligation to circulate monetary values, but also an emotional commitment and a time commitment (Kolm 2008). For instance, sending a gift to a wedding or funeral without attending is considered a serious snub, and maintaining relations between people who dislike each other is usually untenable (Yan 1996).

Because *guanxi* establishes a lasting relation, and because of the moral imperative to honour such relations, people will naturally attempt to create relations with people who can benefit them. There is a general tendency towards attempting to establish relations upwards and resisting them downwards, although ‘up’ and ‘down’ in this context is situational and fluctuates according to need (Yan 2009). The obligations of *guanxi* are naturally connected to one’s socioeconomic status, as this will determine the size of the gift one is able to give and the sort of favours one is in a position to perform. For example, an employee at a bank may feel obligated to approve a friend’s loan application, whereas a shopkeeper’s obligations to their network extend more along the lines of discounts and extending credit. Naturally, the kind of favours one may perform depends on one’s position.

Method

This ethnographic study is based on six months' participant observation at a souvenir shop on Shamian Island in Guangzhou. I had previously observed the situational use of language typical of diglossia and triglossia, and had made the mistake a few times of using Cantonese in inappropriate contexts. I had also observed that use of Cantonese could occasionally lead to a redefinition of the social situation and create an unexpected level of congeniality, to the extent that people who were formerly quite cold and distant would become friendly. Such observations had been situational, however, and would be hard to predict. The aim of this study was to identify a field setting in which the effects of language choice could be more reliably observed, enabling exploration of the effect on social situations, especially with regard to sociability. I selected this souvenir shop on Shamian because it was frequented by speakers of different languages, and because it would not always immediately be clear what language a customer would use before they spoke. This would allow the effect of language to be isolated from other factors such as apparent social class. Throughout the fieldwork, I observed and took part in the daily goings on at the field site—the souvenir shop—which allowed observation of the interactions between salespeople and customers.

Formal interviews were not conducted but, rather, frequent and lengthy discussions over tea and *jeuhng kái*, a type of chess widespread in China. Because of this, I could only take notes when the opportunity arose. In this article, direct quotes represent a verbatim transcription. At other times, paraphrasing indicates that a dialogue was written from memory after the fact. I do not consider this particularly problematic as the study is primarily concerned with the effect on sociability created by the customers' spoken language, and not with the exact words they used.

I had learned some vocabulary in the local language for the purposes of this fieldwork, but much of the interaction was carried out in English, as the owners' spoken English was better than my spoken Cantonese. Five people worked in the souvenir shop. The eponymous Karen and her husband Deng, who were the owners, and their three employees. The average number of customers is hard to determine, as this varied widely throughout the fieldwork. A good day would see a steady stream of foreign customers so that the shop was rarely empty, whereas a bad day could see two or three locals who just wanted cigarettes or soda.

A problem arose about my identity: no one who I met had the faintest idea what *yàhnleuihhohk* (anthropology) was, and identifying myself as an anthropologist caused confusion. After a while, I gave up and instead described myself as a kind of *séwúihohk-ga* (sociologist). This was not accepted either, 'No, no, you said something else before, tell me what you mean'. In terms of informed consent, while many did not quite understand what was being studied, I made sure that all participants understood that I was engaged in research and that what they said might end up in print, and obtained verbal consent for the use of field observations. They were further informed that they could revoke their permission should they change their minds at a later date, or ask for specific statements or observations not to be included.

All Chinese terms used, excepting place-names, are in Cantonese, using the Yale system of Romanisation. All personal names, and thus that of the shop itself, are pseudonyms.

Shamian and Karen's Place

Shamian is an artificial island in the Pearl River, about a kilometre long and three hundred metres wide. It was constructed by the British towards the end of the Qing dynasty, housing various British and French officials and merchants. It was built because the area was, at that time, outside the city walls, and Europeans were not permitted to reside within the city proper (Garrett 1995). However, urban spread has long since swallowed up the island, and it is now opposite the Liwan district close to the city centre. The quasi-colonial past of the island lives on to the present day, presenting a stark contrast to the island's European architecture, parks and verdant greenery. As one of the city's few green lungs, Shamian is a popular place for local couples to walk together, and is the most common location for wedding photographs. A number of consulates have been located on Shamian, including the American consulate, which opened in 1979. During the period of fieldwork, several American families in the process of adopting Chinese children were staying near the consulate. In addition, there were several adoptees of previous decades who had returned to Shamian to discover their roots. All these factors combine to create a heavily international milieu on the island, where foreigners, both tourists and those with business in the city, are a common sight compared to the poorer areas of Guangzhou.

This international community has led to the presence of a number of businesses, such as the one where this study was conducted. While I call it a souvenir shop, this may evoke a somewhat unrepresentative picture of the sort of business it is. The goal of the proprietors of Karen's Place appears, rather, to cater for anything a temporary visitor might need. In addition to selling tourist items, they wash clothes, sell groceries, rent strollers and computers—some of these services falsely advertised as free. One gets an impression of the variety of services offered by the sign above the entrance.

Good Laundry Service, Free Internet, Free Stroller usage, Small Bottle Inside Hand-painting, Carving in the Stone (Chop Stamp), Charcoal Drawing, Picture Engraving, Chinese Painting, Old Painting Restored, Portraits. **KAREN'S PLACE** (One Big Gift Store), Artwork Silk Tailor, Tea

Both of the owners have rural backgrounds, but now live permanently in Guangzhou. Born in the early 1970s, they occupy a somewhat liminal position with regard to China's generational divide. They are just old enough to have memories of Mao's China, but not old enough to have been active participants in it. Apart from Deng and Karen, there are three other employees. Lei, a middle-aged man also with a rural background, works full time at the shop. In addition, there are two local teenagers, Cheung and Mei, who work a few hours a week, depending on how much

there is to do, and how much time they can take away from their schoolwork. Deng and Karen's infant son Chen is also a frequent sight tottering among the shelves.

Three categories of customer frequent Karen's Place. The first category comprises foreigners—tourists, adoptive parents and those working nearby. Some of these are ethnically Chinese, either Chinese-Americans or adoptees. While the workers at Karen's could sometimes guess a customer's background from their clothes or body language, they were often first identified as foreigners when they spoke English. While the foreigner category is very diverse in many respects, it is amalgamated into a single group on account of similar purchasing patterns, and because these customers are treated as a single entity by the sales staff at Karen's. The second category comprises the non-Gwóngdùnyahn—Chinese from other parts of the country who are living in Guangzhou for any number of reasons. Their purchasing patterns are similar to local people, but here they are considered a separate group because they are treated as such by the staff, as we shall see. The third category comprises local people, the Gwóngdùnyahn.

Different Levels of Sales Aggression

These three categories are met by staff in very different ways from the moment they enter the door. Most notably, there is a great difference in the amount of pressure laid on the various customers, as well as the freedom granted to browse the shelves without supervision. One might suppose that in this kind of business, heavily dependent as it is on the tourist trade, race would be an important marker for categorising customers. While race is an important concept in China (Dikötter 1992), for the purposes of differentiating insider from outsider, functional rather than morphological criteria seem to be more relevant (see D'Andrade 1995). In this case, it is because the difference between the categories of patron is not always a simple matter of appearance. Locals look much the same as out-of-towners, and many of the tourists, particularly the American, are of Chinese descent. Therefore, what is the initial marker determining how someone will be met? The answer to this is language, as this was the factor that played the greatest role in determining the category into which a customer was placed. I observed a rather neat, tripartite division of customers based on the language used—English, Mandarin, or Cantonese.

Receiving Foreign Customers

Quite early in the fieldwork, I found it striking that each of these groups was received very differently by the shop staff, especially by Deng and Karen. When foreign customers entered the shop, the interaction was characterised by a remarkable level of pressure. These patrons were followed around the shop and given information on any item they happened to pick up, or even glance at, with suggestions that they should buy it. Deng was the most persistent in this. If the customer was of Caucasian appearance, or was otherwise revealed to be foreign, he would follow them closely

through the shop and suggest goods for purchase in his rapid-fire manner. The suggestions for purchase were made as the opportunity presented itself, but were often directed at the more expensive ‘touristy’ items. Even those customers who said they just wanted to browse were not left alone.

- Hello, how are you? Can I help you with something?
- Hi. Nah, I’m just looking around.
- Do you work for the embassy? Then you should get a statue of Guan-Yu [indicating the figurines in the corner]. He will bring you much power.
- No, I don’t work at the embassy, I run a business. I’m not looking to buy, just wanted to see what kind of place this was.
- You’re a businessman? Then you should get a chess set. It helps exercise your mind.
- I can’t play this kind of chess.
- No problem, if you buy a set now, you can come in tomorrow and I can teach you. Where are you from?

Deng was incredibly difficult to deter, even when some customers became rather agitated. A family from Arkansas who were in town to adopt a child grew quite angry at this treatment, making no effort to conceal their agitation. Deng was insisting that the medium-sized shirts, the largest they had in stock at the time, would fit the obese mother of the family, although it was clear that they were absurdly too small for her. She became indignant, apparently thinking Deng was making fun of her weight, and the family soon stormed out. Although other customers left the shop on other occasions, the latter was the most extreme case. Generally, the reactions on the customers’ side were mixed. The business owner in the dialogue above turned out to be from New Jersey and joked that he should offer Deng a job in his sales department. Some were persuaded to buy quite a bit more than they said they had intended, while others were annoyed into leaving, purchasing nothing.

Karen would generally remain seated when a customer entered, continuing what she was doing. If the customers appeared to be foreign, she would greet them in English and ask them where they were from. She generally would not physically follow them, but would keep an eye on them and would remain engaged with them, talking to them while they browsed. She too would offer information on the wares, along with suggestions to buy whatever item on which the customer’s glance happened to fall. When in the shop, she was most often behind the counter working on her calligraphy, and would ask a customer with whom she was speaking whether they would like their names spelled in Chinese characters or their portrait drawn. Lei, Cheung and Mei followed a middle road between the two owners. They spoke little English so were less able to engage foreign customers in conversation, but they kept a very close eye on them, generally following them at a few paces’ distance. The two youngest used what English they had to greet customers and urge them to make purchases. Lei was somewhat more reserved, even shy, and rarely engaged anyone he did not know. He also

kept an eye on English-speaking customers, but followed at a greater distance than did the others.

Categorising Chinese Customers

Chinese-looking people who entered the shop and were not known to the staff would be greeted in Mandarin. The sales pitch would be somewhat more relaxed compared to that experienced by foreigners, and the surveillance likewise. The prompts focused on cheaper items, such as cigarettes, tea, the local newspaper etc. The workers would also relent more quickly if these customers made it clear they just wanted to browse. However, a certain level of pressure persisted, and non-Gwóngdùnyahn were not permitted to roam the shop unsupervised.

If the person should be identified as a local, no pressure to buy whatsoever was exerted, and the person would be permitted to browse the shelves unmonitored. The way in which strangers could identify themselves as local was through language. The sales staff at Karen's usually assumed Chinese customers to be Mandarin speakers, and engaged them as such. Where a customer responded in Cantonese after this initial greeting, the intensity with which they were approached changed from the second to the third category. There is a significant rural/urban divide in China, and major cities such as Guangzhou have seen influxes of rural migrant workers. The latter meet significant discrimination, are often assumed to be troublemakers and frequently refused service (Pun 2005). I observed only two migrant workers enter Karen's during the period of fieldwork. These were engaged in maintenance work on the Shamian streets, and were both from rural Guangdong. They were treated like other Cantonese speakers in Karen's, without any apparent prejudice, possibly because Deng, Karen and Lei are from rural Guangdong themselves—their treatment of non-Gwóngdùnyahn migrants might have been different. In summary, it seems natural to distinguish between three distinct categories of response from the salespeople at Karen's. In this way, three different types of economic behaviour can be observed, depending on the language used by the customer.

The Continuum of Sociability and Economic Gain

People's behaviour differs in economic exchanges depending on the level of sociability towards the other party (Lee 1968; Essock-Vitale and McGuire 1980; Ingold 1980; Bird-David 1990; Hackman et al. 2017). This is also the case in China where depth of ganqing and level of guanxi relation will affect how people are treated. Generally, with high sociability, the priority is to maintain good relations, while with low sociability, the priority is to extract the maximum amount of profit. The three categories of customer treatment observed here resonate especially with Sahlins' (1972) tripartite division of generalised, balanced and negative reciprocity. Generalised reciprocity is gift exchange. Here, there is no explicit need for instant reciprocation, but an implicit assumption that this will happen at some point. This takes place between those closest

in a social network. Balanced reciprocity takes place with people who are more distant, but with whom cordial relations are important. This is the closest to what we regard as market economy. Exchanges are made based on what value the commodities are thought to have, and they are considered 'fair'. Negative reciprocity occurs with those at greater distance, and with whom good relations are not important. This involves attempting to attain the greatest value in exchange for the smallest possible reciprocation. It can involve swindling or even theft.

This tripartite division is in this paper viewed as largely analytic. Rather than a strict division based on objectively known kinship relations, what is postulated here is a continuous dimension of reciprocity and sociability based on symbolic or even unconsciously inferred social relations. In other words, those speaking the language associated with closer social relations may be unconsciously categorised in a more sociable position, despite having no pre-existing relationship. The perception of sociability is one element affecting whether the seller enters the interaction with the intention of pressuring for more sales or trading sociability in exchange for future reciprocation (Kankanhall, Tan, and Wei 2005). The situation met at Karen's Place perhaps more readily lends itself to a tripartite division as there are three languages used, each with a corresponding 'level of reciprocity'. This is not to say that anomalies were not encountered, especially when a given customer was known to the employees beforehand. Sociability also lies on a continuum and correlates with reciprocity; each reaffirms the other.

Thus, we see a clear linguistic partition into Cantonese, Mandarin and English where the user of each elicits a certain type of economic behaviour. This cannot be seen wholly in the specific interaction, but in the larger context of the relationship in which it exists. As social closeness rises, so too do the obligations and expectations that exist within the relationship; here we see that each language carries with it a symbolic value of social closeness, which is attributed to the speaker.

Sociability and Geographic Closeness

Phonetic discrepancy is generally indicative of geographic distance. In Guangzhou both Cantonese and Mandarin are used by most locals, those from Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, whilst for non-Gwóngdúnyahn, Mandarin was likely to be their only way of communicating with locals. It might be argued that the favouritism of certain speakers in Karen's Place is not a response to language per se, but rather a response to geographic nearness, of which language is an indication. Sociolinguistic studies, such as that by Kalmar, Yong, and Hong (1987), show that language affects our impressions of others and how we relate to them in manifold ways, but this does not exclude other factors nor mean that language is necessarily the most relevant.

What I am suggesting here is that as Guangzhou is a polyglot community, language served as a means of categorising the other if no other factors made themselves relevant. What directed interaction was the amalgamated quality of sociability, which included a number of factors, linguistic being the most instantly apparent. Depending

on which language is used, the speaker may be unconsciously treated as having a higher level of sociability than is the case. Reciprocal relationships, that is, gift giving and trade, change according to the distance between two actors. We may pose this argument another way: the closer two actors are socially, the more obligations they will have to each other, as well as the expectation that these obligations will be honoured. Here English speakers are the most distant and the group for which profitability becomes an appropriate tactic. Cantonese speakers fall on the more sociable side of the spectrum, while Mandarin speakers fall somewhere in between, although closer to the sociable extreme than the profitable. Outside Shamian the use of Mandarin does not seem to elicit any special treatment whatsoever, presumably because in most of the city Mandarin and Cantonese are opposed to each other, whereas on Shamian English is also commonly spoken, and Mandarin seems considerably closer when compared to this third language. In other words, Guangzhou at large is a diglossia with a high and a low language, whereas Shamian becomes a de-facto triglossia with high, middle and low languages. Alone, the two languages are opposed, but when English is added to the linguistic environment, the Chinese languages are in a sense brought closer together as they have more in common with each other than with English.

Profitability vs. Sociability

Social relationships are both highlighted and reaffirmed by economic interactions. Given the business setting of Karen's Place, can we view the treatment of customers within transactional analysis? According to Barth (1966), all social interactions are transactional in the sense of entailing flow of goods and services, as even spending an hour in amiable chitchat may be seen as a service of sorts. At some level, everyone constructs a mental 'ledger', on which are tallied the costs and benefits of a given action in order to maximise value. Similar to Bourdieu (1986), Barth implements an extended view of exchangeable value; his analysis seems to incorporate anything tangible or intangible that one may find desirable.

On the surface, it seems perfectly reasonable to exert extra pressure on certain customers. As the foreign patrons are far more likely to be temporary residents, repeat custom is less of a concern. In the context of foreign customers, the value of sociability may be seen as lessened compared with profitability. In this ledger postulated by Barth, exerting pressure on foreigners will be less detrimental given their limited stay in China resulting in the likelihood of no 'return' on social capital. In addition, they are more likely to have disposable income, as well as being more inclined towards purchasing the more expensive souvenir items. On the other hand, for each person persuaded to spend more money, at least one simply left the shop.

The conversation with the New Jersey businessman, presented in the dialogue above, provides an example of the possible return on a full-pressure sales approach. The conversation continued in much the same vein for about five minutes. It helped that Deng displayed impressive knowledge about America, even having some specific knowledge

about the man's hometown of Princeton. Amid his purchasing suggestions, Deng interspersed comments and questions about Princeton, which made it difficult for the New Jersey businessman to withdraw himself from the conversation. In the end, he complained that his head was hurting, whereupon a cup of ginseng tea was pressed into his hand and he was advised to buy a small supply of his own. The man ended up buying a few packs of tea, although he said that he had not intended to buy anything, and joked that he should 'Hire this guy for the marketing department'. Although the man did not actually end up spending much, he spent more than he otherwise would—an unambiguous instance of the maximum pressure approach being profitable. However there is no way of knowing the number of sales lost in other such encounters, such as how much was lost when the family from Arkansas left.

In Sahlins' terms, haggling is a form of negative reciprocity (1972, 201), and while he makes no mention of the high-pressure sales approach, it seems reasonable to assume he would also regard this as negative reciprocity. As all the goods have sticker prices on them, and the employees at the shop can hardly haggle upward from this, most of the wares are greatly overpriced to begin with. DVDs for instance, were sold for 50 Yuan apiece, despite the fact that on most mainland streets hawkers, who seemed to be kept off the island, were selling the same films for less than a tenth of the price. This overpricing allows considerable leeway to give discounts to more favoured customers—another variable whereby a given transaction may move to the more sociable end of the spectrum.

Acquaintances Modify the Three Categories

One observation supporting the idea that language use corresponds to levels of social closeness is that one might move up the 'hierarchy' of treatment by being known to the people at Karen's. For instance, some of the employees at the consulate were familiar faces, and met considerably less pressure than other English speakers. In another example, Zhou, a soldier from Beijing, was treated differently from the other non-Gwóngdùngyahn because he was a regular and attempting to learn Cantonese. He noted explicitly this difference in sociability inherent in the two languages.

I'm trying to learn Gwóngjàuwá, because if you speak this, the Guangzhou people will treat you better. If you speak only Mandarin, maybe they think 'You stay in Beijing when Guangzhou not doing well, but now we are rich, you come to take our fortune'.

For my own part, I could clearly see the way I moved along this continuum of reciprocity during my involvement with the field site, assisted by my interest in local language and culture. On my first visit at Karen's Place, I ended up spending over a thousand Yuan but was still assailed with questions: 'Do you have a gift for your father yet? Do you need any more tea? Do you have enough clothes?' The second time was much the same but by the third time, this started to abate. With each visit, more time was spent on talking and less on salesmanship, until I was able to visit without being asked to buy anything. Once I had become more or less accepted, most of the time at Karen's Place

was spent at leisure, drinking tea, playing *jeuhng kái* and talking until a customer came in. Throughout the course of my early visits, the declining amount of pressure exerted was an indication of how I was slowly being accepted, until one day I was asked to sit down for some tea, and there was no attempt to sell me anything. I suggest that by using the local language, one is in some way defining oneself as belonging to a more intimate sphere; the closer the customer comes, the more he or she moves towards the sociable pole on the continuum of reciprocity.

Flexible Prices and ‘Making Special Deals’

Another measure by which one may see the various levels of sociability besides sales pressure concerns the flexibility of prices. It seems to me that the flexibility of prices in this type of setting has been unfairly overlooked in academic writing. Dumont mentions briefly that in India, status may be expressed quantitatively in that the price of milk varies according to the caste of the buyer (1970, 104). Something similar may be seen in Karen’s Place, with social closeness taking the place of caste. The closeness between the customer and the seller could readily be gauged by the size of the discount offered. Almost all the wares in Karen’s were extremely overpriced, ranging between three to twelve times what one would otherwise expect to pay. Snacks and Chinese brands of cigarettes were the only exceptions, undoubtedly due to the fact that these were almost exclusively bought by locals. Imported snacks such as Oreo cookies were sometimes bought by foreigners, but such items are extremely expensive by Chinese standards at the outset, and can hardly be marked up much further. This overpricing means that for close friends, it is possible to charge a fraction of the sticker price without taking a loss. ‘I will make a special deal for you’, was said almost every time a sale was made, but for foreigners this usually meant knocking a Yuan or two off the total, which was partly symbolic and, I suspect, partly to make the total easier to calculate. The linguistic and network aspects of the situation were similar, but not convergent. For example, Cantonese met less pressure in sales technique and got a better deal than Mandarin speakers and foreigners, but one had actually to be a member of the insider category in order to obtain a substantial discount.

Hu (2009) places much emphasis on the countryman/foreigner dimension in the morality of economic behaviour. Utilising Hu’s account vis a vis my own material, it can be said that if anyone at Karen’s treated a countryman in the manner of a foreigner, and it attracted attention, it could effect a major loss of face; and the business would suffer greatly as few will have dealings with someone whose actions are considered immoral. There seems to be far greater leniency with regard to such immoral behaviour where foreigners are concerned. In many societies sin is defined by distance, sometimes explicitly so (for example, Kluckhohn 1959). Although Hu (2009) argues that the Chinese/non-Chinese element is central, in Guangzhou it seemed to be the insider/outsider category that often corresponded to nationality, but not always. When it comes to the fear of losing face for immoral conduct, however, this fear is more acute in relation to dealing with other Chinese, as they

are familiar with the mechanisms for mobilising public opinion. In other words, some behaviour is potentially immoral, but not automatically so. If one feels they are being unfairly treated in China, one has the option of creating a scene by gathering a crowd to shame the 'wrongdoer' into correcting their ways. If a party participating in a given transaction is not subject to public rebuke for being unfair, there is no loss of face.

Different economic behaviour may be described as stemming from economic maximisation, but there also seems to be an element of morality. Assuming a conscious effort to maximise value takes us only so far; it does not fit every case. However, if we take into account the position of the languages in Guangzhou, postulating that these are divided into a private and a public language, corresponding to the continuum of sociability we imagined earlier, then the pieces begin to fall into place. In this regard, the use of a language considered closer, subconsciously positions the speaker in a more intimate category. Those using the language associated with their private sphere in a sense become associated with it and are, therefore, likely to be treated in a more intimate manner.

Conclusion

Shamian Island in Guangzhou offers an example of a polyglot community, and the economic interactions at Karen's Place provide a way to measure the impact of various languages on an interaction. In such a landscape, each language becomes loaded with a certain symbolic significance, in which the speaker of each tongue partakes. This study has found language to be the greatest initial determinant for the way in which a customer is met, falling into a tripartite division of English, Mandarin and Cantonese. Other factors could affect the situation, networks being a major one. A Mandarin speaker who is a stranger to the sales staff would meet mid-level haranguing and surveillance, but a Mandarin-speaking customer known to the employees could receive preferential treatment in line with Cantonese speakers, or better. It would seem that the language used associates the speaker to a symbolic landscape of social spheres, but this will not trump pre-existing network relations. A hierarchical ranking of people according to geographic closeness is determined, according to linguistic proximity, where Cantonese, Mandarin and English become the primary determinants of perceived social distance. It is not suggested that the different symbolic loading of languages is isolated to small Guangzhou businesses. It is much more reasonable to assume it to be a general phenomenon brought to the foreground by the idiosyncratic traits of this specific field site. This shows that language is not only a tool for communication, but can also define the context in which communication takes place.

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