The Semiotics of Multilingual Desire in Hong Kong and Singapore's Elite Foodscape

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ABSTRACT

This article considers a form of marketing strategy among upmarket food and beverage establishments in Hong Kong and Singapore involving the use of Chinese text in their decor. Although the two cities have a majority Chinese population, English is widely considered the language of social mobility and an unmarked language in the discursive construction of eliteness. In asking, "Why Chinese?" we consider how the indexical value of a vernacular language can be rescaled in upmarket commercial spaces for an emergent group of consumers known as "cultural omnivores." Through the process of indexical selectivity, the invocation of Chinese in these establishments taps into the unique disposition of cultural omnivores by feeding their multilingual desires, and more specifically their desire to consume relatively more or less prestigious languages omnivorously in indexing social distinction. Such alternative readings of the prestige value of the vernacular by a privileged group of consumers point to the ambivalent indexicality of language.

This article examines a specific case of linguistic commodification involving the strategic emplacement of Chinese signs in elite food and beverage outlets whose infrastructures are designed around the theme of place-based nostalgia in Hong Kong and Singapore. The question generated by this particular use of language resources is a geosemiotic one: our premise is that a feature of visual design such as a Chinese sign, while entirely interpretable in and of

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itself, acquires meaning on a different scale when considered in relation to where it is placed in the material world as well as how it interacts with other elements within the "system of meaning" in concrete geosemiotic zones (Scollon and Scollon 2003, 151). We consider that the invocation of Chinese, a "local" vernacular in Hong Kong and Singapore, in a material setting indexing a decidedly cosmopolitan lifestyle is a rhetorical move meant to produce what Scollon and Scollon (2003) call a transgressive semiotics. Transgressive semiotics is defined as any sign "which violates (intentionally or accidentally) the conventional semiotics at that place," hence leading to its being perceived as located in "the wrong place" (217); such semiotic transgression can, and indeed has become "itself a semiotic system" that can be put to symbolic use (151) in the marketing of specific lifestyles. In other words, what initially appears to be transgressive can be enregistered into an emblem of cultural identity and fetishized into a marketing tactic.

This characterization raises two interrelated questions. First, what kind of "conventional semiotics" is expected in upmarket food outlets, and which linguistic resources is it typically tied to? Second, what is the "right place" of semiotic resources deemed "Chinese" within the broader sociolinguistic economies where these food and beverage establishments are located, such that their deployment in these material spaces would constitute a marked choice? In investigating the meaning potential of Chinese signs in elite food shops, we conceive of these food and beverage establishments as sites of social action. This involves identifying the social actors indexically selected by the Chinese signs in question, focusing on the habitus—the "psychological and characterological states" (Scollon and Scollon 2003, 203)—of potential customers targeted by high-end food shops in Hong Kong and Singapore; the visual as well as place semiotics around the Chinese signs—in our case, the architectural design features of elite food shops; and also the overall commercial discourses that inform the operation of such establishments against which Chinese signs are interpretable as marked, nostalgic, and hence exotic. In probing these various aspects, we want to explore the commodification and fetishization of resources from vernacular languages within the microlandscapes of elite food spaces, which are in turn part of "the discursive production of eliteness in food discourse" (Mapes 2021, 5).

In what follows, we first outline the concepts of indexicality and enregisterment to help us explain the use of Chinese signs in elite consumer spaces. We then briefly introduce the sociolinguistic backgrounds of Hong Kong and Singapore, with a view to understanding the relative power relations between Chinese and English in the two cities. This is followed by an analysis of examples, focusing on the visual and place semiotics around the use of Chinese in coffee

shops. Finally, we unpack the problem by identifying the "cultural omnivore" as a key social actor in these settings and by using the idea of indexical selectivity to explain the appropriation of vernacular resources to index elite aspirations.

Indexicality and Enregisterment

At the heart of our argument is Silverstein's (2003) concept of indexical order, concerned with relating "the micro-social to the macro-social frames of analysis of any sociolinguistic phenomenon" (193) as well as Agha's (2007, 2011) theory of enregisterment, which accounts for social processes in which linguistic tokens accrue indexical value. Indexical order describes the uptake of linguistic features across tiers (n-th order, $n + 1$st order, and so on) measured in terms of "the degree of institutionalised engagement users manifest in respect of the n-th order indexical meaningfulness" (Silverstein 2003, 194). Each additional indexical order is a meaning value further detached from the original context of the token, where "n-th and $n + 1$st order indexical values are, functionally, in dialectic competition one with another" (194). Indexicality is concerned with pointing accompanied by a linguistic sign, and more specifically "pointing at some physically co-present object along with the gaze of the eye, attracting and then directing another's eye to that object" (Nakassis 2018, 286). The pointing index "is a familiar ur-gesture" (287), a communicative form that suggests an aspirational proposition. The dialectic nature of the indexical order gives signs an indexical value where the n-th order, "presupposed" indexical value gives rise to the "creative," $n + 1$st order indexical value (Silverstein 2003, 266) due to ideological properties associated with the n-th order. Silverstein explains the theory of indexicality through the process of ritualization, where its effect is that of "indexical iconicity, by which a ritualized text appears to achieve self-grounding in the (relatively) cosmic absolute of value-conferring essences" (203). In his example of wine-talk, or oinoglossia, Silverstein makes clear that a "proper" consumption of wine "iconically" points to personal characteristics of one who is able to speak about wine in the "right way": "As we consume the wine and properly (ritually) denote that consumption, we become, in performative realtime, the well-bred, characterologically interesting person iconically corresponding to the metaphorical 'fashion of speaking' of the perceived register's figurations of the aesthetic object of connoisseurship, wine" (226). This draws attention to the dialectic nature of indexicality, where persons point to objects and thus construct their indexical value, and where objects point back to ascribe values about sign producers.

The power, productivity, and, arguably, universality of a theory of indexicality is inherent, as Nakassis (2018) posits, in its *ambivalence* that is both an

"opportunity and invitation, a site for analytic and theoretical refinement." Pointing is ambivalent to both language and thought: it "doesn't just render the object present as an object; it serves it up to us as an image of itself, as something to be seen so that it can be more immediately and truly known, to the eyes if not the transcendental mind" (289). The vitality of indexicality "emerges from a foundational ambivalence within the category of indexicality: between, on the one hand, immediacy and presence and, on the other hand, mediation and representation" (281).

Taking up Nakassis's challenge to problematize the ground on which indexicality sits, we consider a case where iconized indexical relationships are turned around as a marker of distinction (Bourdieu 1984), or as part of a process of "linguistic differentiation" (Irvine and Gal 2000). This is where conventionalized indexical links are playfully and subversively called upon to index opposing values precisely different from links that are stereotypically accepted as true. This dovetails with Silverstein's criteria for an "illuminating indexical analysis," one that takes into account the "dialectical plenitude of indexicality in microcontextual realtime" (2003, 227) and that "situate[s] itself with respect to the duplex quality of language use, always already both 'pragmatic,' i.e., presuppositionally/entailingly indexical, and metapragmatic, i.e., in particular, ideologically informed" (227).

Yet as the $n + 1$st order formula does not take into account the sociolinguistic contexts in which the reanalysis appears, a theory of enregisterment is required in order to account for how linguistic tokens accrue indexical value. Agha (2007) defines enregisterment as "processes and practices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population" (81), where registers are "cultural models of action that link diverse behavioural signs to enactable effects, including images of persona, interpersonal relationship, and type of conduct" (145). In other words, registers refer to particular moments of formulation as part of the process of becoming metadiscursively stabilized, or enregistered. While on one hand there exists "stereotypic indexical values to performable signs" (81), the "same form can be enregistered in different ways to different individuals, at different times" (Johnstone 2016, 638), suggesting what Agha (2011) calls *indexical selectivity*. As part of the formulation of lifestyles, brands formulate expressions that allow them to reach their target audience through a process of personification. With the shift from single-product advertising to lifestyle advertising, "a new type of indexical selectivity emerges in advertising discourse, where a psychographic conception of consumer types is presupposed from marketing theory, and the

performative value project of lifestyle advertising seeks to incorporate more and more elements of social life into commodity-mediated registers of social conduct" (Agha 2011, 38).

As other work connecting forms of language with linguistic value have demonstrated (Stroud and Mpendukana 2009), different forms of marketing talk can be formulated resulting in a socioeconomically stratified indexical selectivity. One strategy that "elite" places of consumption use to differentiate themselves from their competitors is their employment of the vernacular in language objects emplaced in these establishments as a symbolic language. This is an authentication strategy (Bucholtz 2003) that Mapes (2018) notes as one of the rhetorical strategies of elite authenticities. In particular, she describes the strategy of historicity, defined as "a focus on origin, longevity and continuity, tradition" (26). Mapes writes that "nostalgia-producing narratives of origin and continuity serve as examples of the problematic ways in which producers and consumers construct authenticity" (33). The cultural omnivore achieves eliteness through their disavowal of privilege by hiding "behind the guise of anti-snobbery" (4) and thus not appearing explicitly elite. The disavowal of privilege is not a coincidence, but a performance that is "carefully—omnivorously—orchestrated" (159).

Linguistic Ecologies and Landscapes of Hong Kong and Singapore

Our argument does not seek to suggest larger trends in the linguistic landscape of the two cities, and neither are our examples meant to describe particular cities. Yet it is precisely sociohistorical conditions that allow the readings we suggest, and as such a discussion of the linguistic ecologies in Hong Kong and Singapore are necessary. Both places have in common complex multilingual situations while bearing several key differences in their linguistic ecologies. The coexistence of Singapore's four official languages—English, Malay, Tamil, and Mandarin—is complicated by the rise of a colloquial English variety known as Singlish. The prestige of English as compared to so-called mother tongue languages has been well explored in, for example, a study by Xu et al. (1998) that investigated Chinese Singaporean attitudes to English and Mandarin Chinese. The study found that English was valued for its power and prestige, while Mandarin Chinese was valued more for its solidarity functions. Kwan-Terry's (2000) study found that English-speaking families are associated with higher socioeconomic backgrounds, and Alsagoff's work on English in Singapore (2007, 2010) suggests that the English language is associated with cultural capital, where the use of Standard English among Singaporeans is correlated with a personal desire to succeed in the global marketplace. More recently, English has further risen in dominance: comparing

2015 with 2020 government census data, the percentage of households who speak English as the most common language at home had risen from 36.9 percent to 48.3 percent. Singapore's education system has been solely English medium since 1987 (Dixon 2005, 28), and English the primary medium of communication in the city. As part of its language planning policy, the Singapore government assigned separate functions for English and the Asian official languages: English was promoted as a neutral, working language, necessary for communication between different racial groups and with the outside world, while the other languages were meant to serve as carriers of culture and values (Wee 2003, 214). Correspondingly, the percentage of households who spoke predominantly Mandarin fell from 34.9 percent to 29.9 percent between 2015 and 2020. The instrumentalism of Chinese in Singapore (Wee 2003) has taken on a commodified dimension (Tupas 2015). Here the prevailing ideology of pragmatism in Singapore has resulted in Mandarin functioning not only as cultural ballast for Chinese Singaporeans but also as a means to facilitate trade with a fast-rising China. The complex relationship between Chinese and the other languages in Singapore is documented and discussed by Ng and Cavallaro (2021), who suggest that the promotion of Mandarin in place of Chinese dialects in the postindependence period has lent an increasing ambivalence to the status of Mandarin, especially as more (Chinese) Singaporeans adopt English as their first language.

On the other hand, Hong Kong's linguistic landscape is characterized by its Cantonese dominance and colonial past. According to a Hong Kong government survey conducted in 2018,[1] 87.6 percent of residents considered their Cantonese proficiency "good" or "very good," while only 29 percent of residents rated their English proficiency as such. The same survey also found that while 90–95 percent of Hong Kongers use Cantonese for day-to-day communication, only 11.0–23.7 percent, depending on age group, used English for a similar purpose. In light of a rising China, Cantonese has intensified in its function as a key marker of Hong Kong identity, with Leung and Lee (2006, 43) suggesting that "the predominance of Cantonese in Hong Kong is not a consequence of external threat to indigenous language but a cultural choice of the inhabitants." At the same time, Lai writes that "English has been successfully promoted as an instrument for upward and outward mobility" (2011, 261) and English-medium schools are commonly considered elite institutions relative to Chinese-medium ones. The relatively high status of English in Hong Kong can be attributed to the city's history as a British colony until 1997, and the Basic Law of Hong Kong holds that both

1. See https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B11302662019XXXXB0100.pdf.

English and Chinese are official languages. However, due to the predominance of Chinese in both spoken and written forms, the use of English is certainly a marked choice in the present-day context. The linguistic landscape today is also affected by the political climate in Hong Kong, which has been changing in the wake of the 2014 Umbrella Movement and subsequent events that evolved into a broader sociopolitical movement in the city. One effect of these movements has been the resurgence of an aggressive assertion of a "localist" identity (Moody 2020), expressed in part through a recentering of Cantonese (or traditional Chinese, in the written form) as a key and unique component of the Hong Konger identity. Hansen Edwards (2020) investigated the linguistic identity of Hong Kongers following the 2019 unrest and found that participants constructed an identity of the self in contrast to the national language identity of mainland China.

Method

Our approach to data collection and analysis draws from the tradition of linguistic landscape (LL) studies. This line of inquiry has developed from being a study of "the presence, preservation, meanings and interpretation of language displayed in public places" (Shohamy and Ben-Rafael 2015, 1) to one that also analyzes "images, photos, sounds, movements, music, smells, graffiti, clothes, food, buildings, history, as well as people who are immersed and absorbed in spaces by interacting with LL in different ways" (Shohamy 2015, 153–54), including "greater contextual (ethnographic) and historical understandings of texts in the landscape—who put them there, how they are interpreted, and what role they play in relation to space, migration and mobility" (Pennycook 2017, 270). The related term "semiotic landscapes" coined by Thurlow and Jaworski (2010) expands the scope of research beyond "merely" language to include a consideration of "the way written discourse interacts with other discursive modalities: visual images, nonverbal communication, architecture and the built environment . . . 'linguistic' is only one, albeit extremely important, element for the construction and interpretation of place" (2010, 2).

Linguistic landscape studies have been concerned with the theme of multilingualism, as evident from relevant work in the Singapore context. Tan (2014) considers top-down, official signs in Singapore, including a discussion of the visual layout of the different languages. More recent LL studies situated in the two cities discuss tensions arising from multilingualism. Focusing on a more specific case of a tailor's shop in the Chinatown area of Singapore, Hult and

Kelly-Holmes (2019) consider Scandinavian-related objects in an otherwise "local" shop alongside casual interviews with the shop owner toward an understanding of the "the interaction of local and global forces on the linguistic landscape" (79). This provides a perspective on creative "bottom-up" multilingualism and the "role of individual agency in shaping the linguistic landscape and commercial discourses" (86). Two coauthored papers also consider particular cases of Singapore's LL; Shang and Zhao (2017) conduct a quantitative analysis of code choice in low-end public housing estate shop signs, while Shang and Guo (2017) discuss issues associated with the multilingual situation observable from the LL, such as script choice, dialect names, and language vitality. Hiramoto (2019) considers the rise of Colloquial Singapore English in both government and private advertisements, illustrating a greater acceptance of the identity-building function of this variety.

Linguistic landscape work in Hong Kong has connected Chineseness with the idea of a "vernacular space," which in contrast to "non-places," is "the more vibrant, private, authentic and responsive form, when set against standard speech or formal, classical or monumental public architecture" (Hutton 2011, 166). Drawing out a dichotomy between vernacular spaces and more modern, "non-places," Hutton highlights the dynamic between different neighborhoods in Hong Kong, which stand in contrast against, but also exist in tension with, one another, as vernacular spaces are perpetually at risk of disappearance. Chinese signage is a perpetual feature of many such vernacular spaces in Hong Kong, and "the vernacular 'clutter' with Chinese signage can be seen as oppositional or complementary to the smooth commercial modernity, or both" (182). Other work supports Hutton's findings linking Chineseness with vernacular spaces. For example, Lou's (2017) work employing geosemiotic analysis of three different kinds of (food) markets in Hong Kong contrasted the predominant use of Cantonese in a neighborhood wet market with the majority English signs found in shopping malls and supermarkets, which had the effect of leaving one of her more elderly informants "feeling uncomfortable" (519). A study by Jaworski and Yeung (2010) of naming conventions of residential apartments in Hong Kong found a greater proportion of Chinese-only signs in low-end, working-class areas of the city; 34.6 percent of signs surveyed in the working-class residential area were exclusively in Chinese, compared with only 3.2 percent and 3.6 percent, respectively, in a middle-class and an upmarket residential area. In contrast, residential signs in the more upmarket areas were observed to be largely English-Chinese bilingual or featured European languages such as French, Spanish, and Italian to index a sophisticated and relaxed European lifestyle (165), demonstrating the association of Chineseness with downmarketness.

Case Examples and Analysis

Our four field sites are trendy, middle to upmarket food places frequented by a younger clientele. Two of them are located in Hong Kong. Our first example is Ping Pong 129 (fig. 1), a gin bar housed in a former ping pong parlor located in the Sai Ying Pun area, a once quiet district at the western end of Hong Kong Island that has become increasingly gentrified since the opening of a metro station in

Figure 1. Ping Pong 129. Photo courtesy of Samantha Ko @kokosamantha.

2015. Our second example is that of the Second Draft gastropub (figs. 4 and 5) in Tai Hang, Hong Kong, housed in the Little Tai Hang complex, which was completed in 2017 and is close to an important Chinese (Tin Hau) temple as well as other historic sites.

The other two examples are located in Singapore: Chye Seng Huat Hardware (fig. 2), an artisanal coffee shop located in a shophouse (a traditional building

Figure 2. Chye Seng Huat Hardware. Photo courtesy of Aidan Poh.

for both residential and commercial use) in Jalan Besar, a former industrial area known for its many hardware shops. Finally, we discuss the Marina One outlet of Waa Cow! (fig. 3), a home-grown Japanese beef and rice bowl (*donburi*) restaurant targeted at the white-collar lunch crowd in Singapore's Central Business District.

The four places all feature the use of Chinese script within their spaces. The Ping Pong 129 bar retained the original signage of the ping pong bar written in Chinese: 乒乓城 'ping pong city' (fig. 1). However, upon entering, one finds something completely unexpected: a gin bar with a large neon sign that reads 鍛鍊身體 'train (one's) body', once again alluding to the place's former use as a ping pong parlor. The Chinese script of the neon sign can be thought of as the co-option of vernacular practices in the styling of elite places. Writing in the context of Hong Kong, Hutton describes vernacular spaces as "those in which the non-standard is spoken, or which are framed by the vernacular, or which impart the affect of the vernacular" (2011, 166). The vernacular landscape of Hong Kong is typically characterized by Chinese script, as compared to English signage found at higher-end places. Hutton writes about this contrast as follows: "the visual 'noise' of the text-rich streetscape dominated by signage contrasts with the low-key text-poor interiors of the elite malls, with their shiny smooth interiors, minimalist window displays . . . in the most modern and expensive shopping

Figure 3. Waa Cow!

malls, there is scarcely a Chinese character to be seen in the commercial signage" (2011, 179). The use of Chinese script, together with the neon medium, in up-market bars can be interpreted as an ironic play on the conventional indexical relations associated with Chinese. Through the juxtaposition of contrasting minimalist design elements and Chinese characters, the conventional indexical associations of Chinese are subverted, creating a transgressive semiotic that imbues Chinese signs with an exotic value.

The image of Ping Pong 129 in figure 1 shows that it is located next to a neighborhood street food stall, whose "text-rich" signage is comparable to those in Brooklyn's "Old School Vernacular" style (Trinch and Snajdr 2017, 69), signs with such features as large typeface, nonstandard English forms, names bearing lengthy descriptions of the type of business and products offered, and non-English languages, as well as "sincere references to religion, ethnicity, national origin, race and class" (71). The street food stall immediately adjacent to the gin bar and visible in figure 1 is nearly completely covered in Chinese text, "sincerely" and exactly describing all the offerings of the shop and explicitly identifying it as a food stall. Some of the menu items pasted on the façade of the shop also align with other typical street food stalls in Hong Kong, including the top-to-bottom layout of the Chinese text, pictures of the food items, as well as advertisements for local beer. The much narrower façade of Ping Pong 129 however stands directly in contrast to the food stall, featuring only the original Chinese text of the ping pong parlor, with no indication of it being a bar or any suggestion of the drinks offered. Such use of "cryptic names" as are found in Brooklyn's "distinction-making signs" (75) stand in opposition to the "sincere" signage of its neighbors. The bar borrows from, or perhaps even appropriates the gentrifying character of the street resulting in and allowing for the alternative reading of the ping pong parlor signage. As such, it is because of what the bar stands in contrast to that allows it to combine seemingly similar resources as its neighbor, based around the Chinese script, with features of the globally mobile gentrifying semiotic, leading to alternative readings of otherwise similar linguistic registers.

A similar case can be found in Singapore's Chye Seng Huat Hardware, whose signage combines English text with Chinese characters, where the Chinese characters for the shop's name 再成發 literally translate to "fortune many times over" (fig. 2). The choice of "hardware" in its name shows that it is no longer necessary to describe the nature of the business in its naming; instead, the role of the name becomes symbolic as it references the hardware stores that were once commonplace in the area. The use of Chinese here can be easily thought of as a marked choice given that most signage in Singapore, especially

in high-end places, is in English. The use of retro styling can be attributed to both local and global factors. On one hand, it reflects a broader seeking of nostalgia in Singapore, where there is widespread, state-sanctioned use of nostalgia as a nation-building strategy (Tan 2016). This was evident, for example, in the 2015 "SG50" (the golden jubilee of Singapore's independence) celebrations, when government funding was made available for heritage-related projects as a means of depoliticizing the past. Such state-approved means of commodifying heritage have been appropriated by private enterprises, as is evident in this example. Chye Seng Huat Hardware is located in an area increasingly populated with hip cafes and bars. Around the area, including directly opposite the coffee shop, can still be found numerous hardware or building construction supply companies. These stores feature signage visually similar to that of Chye Seng Huat: one adjacent company, Hwa Hong Machinery Co. Pte. Ltd., has the company's name first written in Chinese, above its English name, lending the (arguably original) Chinese name prominence vis-à-vis the English translation. While Hwa Hong is likely a composite of the owner's name or family name, Chye Seng Huat merely borrows the form of this typical naming practice, replacing it with the relatively generic reference to fortune that can also be thought of standing in opposition to the more traditional names of neighboring companies. By adopting the Chinese form of the other shops as well as the semiotic practice of inscribing its name in both Chinese and Latin script, the coffee shop plays on the styling features of signage used by its neighbors.

The case of Waa Cow! features a large neon sign with Chinese script (possibly the only branch of the chain with décor in Chinese script) which reads 哇靠我要! (fig. 3). The name of the restaurant itself plays on a common colloquial exclamation, *wà kào* 哇靠, roughly translated as 'holy shit' or 'holy fuck,' replacing the second character with the homonym in English *cow* to denote the beef bowls offered by the restaurant. The neon sign takes this wordplay a step further, by prefixing *wo yao* 我要 'I want' to the shop's name so that it reads "Waa Cow, I want!" The use of Chinese is again unexpected; the restaurant is located in a modern grade-A office tower and caters to a largely white-collar or expat clientele. The restaurant does not serve Chinese food, and the sign has no denotational purpose. The neon sign can be considered part of the "spectacle" frame, signs that are "prominent, large and towering over the people in their proximity . . . relative to other signage in their environment" (Jaworski 2014, 224). Emphasizing the form of the sign, including its neon medium (cf. Theng 2021), rather than its content and the use of Chinese, suggests a fetishization of non-English languages (Kelly-Holmes 2014), a point we elaborate

below. The dialectical relationship between spectacularization and fetishization results in the increased desirability associated with the authentic local and as such allows linguistic tokens to index new values.

Despite the newness of the Second Draft gastropub, the bar is styled as if it has taken the place of a former industrial space. The centerpiece of the interior is a sign written both in English and Chinese that reads "Bright Apex Incorporated Ltd" (fig. 4). This is a reference to a Chinese naming practice that involves combining two separate characters together to form a name, in this case, the characters for "peaceful" and "light." This is often complemented with a loose translation into English of the idea in the name—in this case, "bright apex"—since both English and Chinese are official languages in Hong Kong. Upon further research one finds that Bright Apex is in fact the registered business name of the company behind the pub. The horizontal line 有限公司 (fig. 4) reads from right to left, typical of how shop names were styled in days past. This bilingual theme extends to other corners of the pub. One finds several pieces of bilingual text, with others simply in Chinese. These are written in a stenciled typeface resembling signage found in factories, industrial buildings, and other so-called low-end workplaces. Figure 5 is found by a cashier counter, and the sign reads 員工必須洗手 'Must wash hands', seemingly giving the impression that there was once a sink. In another part of the bar, the text "Fire escape path, please do not block" (fig. 6) appears only in Chinese; the corridor is ironically used as a storage area for barrels of beer that block any passage. Like the characters 康光 (fig. 4), the text is read top to bottom, right to left as with traditional Chinese writing. Figure 7 contains two

Figure 4. Second Draft

Figure 5. Must wash hands

pieces of text; the upper one reads 免費 WI-FI 網絡 (Free Wi-FI connection) in the same stenciled typeface, while giving away that *all* the text in the bar of this typeface is in fact newer than it appears, since a typical old-school industrial space would not contain such a sign. Unlike the example in figure 4, the reference to internet connection is read from left to right and thus also suggests in its form the somewhat less ironic, more sincere content of the message contrasted with those of the other messages. The use of Chinese text for these alternative purposes is surprising in a place where Chinese is supposedly the lingua franca; it appears that the lingua franca can still be employed as a marked choice in the context of its commodification.

The use of retro styling features is a consistent feature of the semiotics of gentrification, with work from different parts of the world suggesting that the semiotics of gentrification has become globally mobile. Lyons (2018) gives examples in her research from San Francisco's Mission District, where the semiotics of gentrification can involve the repurposing of old signage containing non-English script. Her example of the Lung Shan Restaurant, now Mission Chinese Food, illustrates nicely the parallels between such trends in the Global North and the Global South. Mission Chinese Food began as a pop-up store in an existing Chinese restaurant called Lung Shan. As it became increasingly popular, the owner of Lung Shan suggested to Mission Chinese Food owner Danny Bowein that he take over the store. Its modern take on Chinese food has resulted in its becoming an award-winning restaurant. As Lyons writes, "Despite the accolades and prestige—or perhaps because of them—the Mission street location

Figure 6. Fire escape

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Figure 7. WI-FI connection available

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of Mission Chinese Food maintains the same pre-pop up Lung Shan signage. . . . The awning, complete with the original (and no longer in service) telephone number does not just construct exclusivity through silence but subterfuge, the epitome of privileged semiotic choice" (2018, 74).

Retaining original features of buildings is certainly a common conservation strategy in adaptive reuse projects, such as in Tai Kwun in Hong Kong and at Singapore's National Gallery. These original features, including bits of text or signage, are left in situ or even restored to their original locations even if the purpose of the building has changed. In this way, the original character of the building is retained and connects the newly adapted place with its past heritage. In our examples, this same strategy has been borrowed as an elite practice in commercial spaces, where original signage makes the new space harder to find and, by extension, more exclusive. This is indeed the case for Ping Pong 129, which retains the original facade of the previous tenants, as well as Chye Seng Huat Hardware, which has kept elements of the original premises such as the metal grilles and windowpanes, allowing the shop to surreptitiously blend in with other businesses in the area.

The example of Second Draft, however, differs somewhat since it manufactures the look of the old in what is otherwise a new space, seemingly resolving the tension between vernacular spaces and nonplaces (Augé 1995). Yet it does in fact manufacture an authentic nostalgia, since it is now possible to create old spaces from scratch—and perhaps convincingly so—and the simulation of an old space, created through the use of retro design features, enables such eateries to style themselves as elite. Dai and Chen, writing on the impulse for nostalgia in a fast-developing China, describe well the effect of such a move: "Nostalgic atmosphere, in embellishing the vacuum of memory and in creating personal identities within the span of historical imagination, simultaneously accomplishes a representation of consumerism, as well as a consumerism of representation" (1997, 211). By tapping into the collective memory of old spaces, Second Draft recreates and refashions the historic vernacular into today's trendy, constructing a space both contingent upon and allowing for a reading of Chinese as a marker of nostalgia.

Discussion

As we demonstrated through our data, the politics of language (varieties) and the commodification of language are inextricably interlinked. Late modernity and high capitalism have increased the exchange value of language. Heller (2010) attributes this to several factors, including the increased interconnectedness

of global markets necessitating the management of linguistic differences; technologization that requires new language and literacy skills of workers; the rise of "language workers" (cf. Thurlow 2020); as well as the "increased use of symbolic, often linguistic, resources to add value to standardized products" (Heller 2010, 104) as saturated markets have required new, localized, and linguistic-specific approaches. With respect to the last point, which is most relevant to this article, Heller further observes that "older nation-state ideologies of language, identity, and culture are appropriated and mobilized in the commodification of authenticity, notably in tourism. T-shirts with linguistic forms indexing English are also popular items in many parts of the world, as are Chinese language tattoos or multilingual yogurt labels. (The mocking they engender is symptomatic of the tension between old and new discursive regimes.)" (104–5).

Like the Chinese-language tattoos noted by Heller, our examples of Chinese signs in elite food and beverage spaces exemplify the appropriation and mobilization of Chinese in commodifying authenticity. In this sense, these signs are distinction making in that they add symbolic value to their sites of emplacement by means of semiotic resources. They are a kind of luxury good "whose principal use is *rhetorical* and *social*, goods that are simply *incarnated signs*" (Appadurai 1986, 38). But even more so, the use of Chinese is an example of "everyday ventriloquation" (Agha 2011, 46) in which the cafes animated by their signs speak through vernacular registers as a way of disavowing that which is elite. Chinese thus functions as a kind of "sourced speech" where "the speech of one group is used to market commodities to a second target group" (45) and where the food and beverage establishments are the animator of the sourced speech. As a form of lifestyle formulation, Chinese writing becomes primarily rhetorical and social; their surface-level, semantic meanings become secondary to their signification and form, and it does not matter as much whether they are actually read or understood than it does that they are seen.

This calls to mind the notion of linguistic fetish, that is, the resemiotization of linguistic forms into visual resources for popular consumption. The idea of linguistic fetish (Kelly-Holmes 2014, 2020) shifts attention onto the semiotic, as opposed to the semantic, function of language. It places an analytical premium on visual multilingualism, revealing how linguistic resources are mobilized for their symbolic-visual rather than instrumental-communicative value, especially in contemporary consumer discourses. Take, for example, the Giorgio Armani perfume brand, whose product name comprises the ordinary Italian word *Sì* (yes), complete with the diacritic. From a marketing perspective, the literal sense of the word is beside the point; instead, the meaning potential of *Sì* lies in its

visual invocation of Italianness and, hence, in the context of this product, haute couture. Given that the perfume brand is marketed globally, that is, beyond the Italian market, *Sì* exemplifies *visual multilingualism* (Kelly-Holmes 2014) or, in alternative terms, *atmospheric multilingualism* (Cook 2013) wherein form is eminent: the piece of communication is meant more to be seen than to be read.

The question for us is why Chinese—the vernacular language with less symbolic as well as economic capital vis-à-vis English in both Hong Kong and Singapore—is fetishized as a visual resource for the marketing of elite food and beverage businesses. It is a commonplace practice that global languages are often mobilized in products or businesses to index cosmopolitan consumption regimes (Haarmann 1989; Cheshire and Moser 1994; Piller 2003; Martin 2007), reinforcing the linguistic stratification of urban landscapes along fault lines opened up by gentrification (Trinch and Snajdr 2017, 2020; Järlehed et al. 2018; Vandenbroucke 2016). In Japan, for example, French and English words or phrases are often appropriated as signifiers of chicness on advertisements, boutique chocolate stores, and phone cards (Blommaert 2010, 29–30; Kelly-Holmes 2014). Also relevant is Blommaert's (2016) example of "lookalike English" on T-shirts, sold in markets where English is not a dominant language. Lookalike English refers to a pseudo-language that taps into the orthography of English (or more generally Western languages), characterized by the juxtaposition of bits of regular English with random permutations of alphabetic letters. For Blommaert (2016, 17), lookalike English as a visualized language is inherently multimodal; and while it is not semantically English, "it locally *counts* as English, and bears the indexical load associated with 'English' in a globalized sociolinguistic environment." It is a "semiotic investment," a "powerful indexical" meant to appeal to the cultural ideology of target consumers for whom English indexes global modernity and coolness (17).

Yet "cultural omnivores" (Peterson and Kern 1996) among cosmopolitan types in Hong Kong and Singapore seem to be looking not just to global English as a marker of distinction but also to "local languages" (cf. Pennycook 2010) as part of their omnivorous consumption. Cultural omnivores are not those who like "everything indiscriminately" but rather are those who exhibit "an openness to appreciating everything" (Peterson and Kern 1996, 904). Omnivorousness arises from *readings*: "Criteria of distinction, of which omnivorousness is one expression, must center not on what one consumes but on the way items of consumption are understood" (906). A manifestation of the cultural omnivore can be found in the cultivation of "an ethos that values a sort of cultural democracy that embraces a familiarity with low-, middle-, and highbrow cultural objects

alike—that celebrates the idiosyncratic character of people and place, that is, an appreciation for the underdog" (Brown-Saracino 2009, 192). As a result, vernaculars too can be exoticized in marketing, as part of a commercial tactic that Kelly-Holmes (2020, 39) calls "linguistic colour by numbers . . . the very contained, prescribed parameters by which words from other languages are used in advertisements."

Some interventions in (socio)linguistics are thus perhaps in order, where notions of the contrasting global and local might be reframed in light of the processes of enregisterment of English and indexical selectivity for audience type. The ability for language varieties to produce bivalent readings even in a particular context well suggests that language is indeed a "local practice," where "languages are a product of the deeply social and cultural activities in which people engage" (Pennycook 2010, 1) and where common assumptions about both language systems and the notion of the local ought to be rethought. In the case of Hong Kong and Singapore, the complex "linguistic market" (Bourdieu 1977) brings to attention the metadiscursive regimentation (Makoni and Pennycook 2005) that lends legitimacy to linguistic practices. What is seemingly a question of marketing practice involved in the sale of lifestyles is in fact deeply embedded in social practices surrounding language use. As is well known, varieties of language gain indexical value not just through unidirectional processes of enregisterment that expand a single system of indexical values across a homogeneous population of language users. Instead, competing metasemiotic frameworks readily result in processes of reanalysis and reenregisterment—as in the rise of hybridized Estuary English across a class boundary during the "recessive phase" of mainstream Received Pronunciation (Agha 2007, 224–28)—whereby competing indexical values can coexist with each other and yield distinct forms of uptake and role alignment by distinct subgroups within the same language community. As such, by paying attention to sociopolitical circumstances of Chineseness in the two cities, considered in light of language attitudes of the global cosmopolitan upmarket consumer, we can see that linguistic tokens of Chinese can also become susceptible to multivariate construals across class boundaries.

Conclusion

Following Cameron and Kulick's (2003a, 2003b) call to study ways in which desires are discursively achieved, one might argue that the neon sign at Waa Cow! that reads ". . . I want," written in Chinese, does not merely denote a desire for beef bowls: what it really points to is the rhetorical desire to style the Other for consumption and ultimately a desire for fetishized varieties of language. It is

interesting, and important, to consider this desire in light of discussions in the field of TESOL relating to a desire for English in contexts where English is not the first language (Piller and Takahashi 2006; Kubota 2011; Motha and Lin 2014; Turner and Lin 2020): "At the center of every English language learning moment lies desire: desire for the language; for the identities that English represents; for capital, power, and images that are associated with English; for what is believed to lie beyond the doors that English unlocks" (Motha and Lin 2014, 331).

Desire in the Lacanian understanding is thought of as both a "lack" and an "energy," a lack that results in feelings of incompleteness and that drives us toward acting in a particular way. Desire is "a promise that necessitates a lack and the pursuit of that promise as giving energy" (Turner and Lin 2020). As we hope to have demonstrated with our data, desires in relation to language do not always pivot around English; they can also be directed toward varieties of local languages fetishized into symbolic resources for distinction making. As such, alternative indexical readings are significant in their pointing to shifting power relations between varieties of language. The desire for capital and power is not always realized by spectacular displays of English; instead, typically subaltern varieties of language have the same inherent ability to convey these same desires under felicitous circumstances. In this case, disavowal of what is explicitly elite (Thurlow and Jaworski 2017), the development of the semiotics of gentrification (Trinch and Snajdr 2017, 2020; Lyons 2018), and the productivity of signs that allow them to simultaneously index contrasting meanings via "grooves" between Firstness and Thirdness (Nakassis 2018, 299), thus allowing the taken-for-granted indexical links of the prestige value of languages to be challenged. Our theorization of values of (commodified) language calls for a consideration not simply of indexical readings that are most prominent and "common-sense," but more so, a refocusing on the productive ability for language to "do" (Austin 1962) that which we have not expected it to—in other words, to perform a transgressive semiotic. Indexicality theoretically points back to itself, where language is "fundamentally underdetermined, ambiguous, shifty, never quite, and thus deeply mediated" (Nakassis 2018, 287).

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