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## Truly Moving Texts

by

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**The problem**

In a globalizing world, we need to consider language as a complex of mobile resources, shaped and developed both *because of* mobility – by people moving around – and *for* mobility – to enable people to move around.[1] This assumption is central to what we call the sociolinguistics of globalization, and it is a paradigmatic shift away from an older linguistic and sociolinguistic tradition in which language was analyzed primarily as a local, resident and stable complex of signs attached to an equally local, resident and stable community of speakers. The paradigm shift compels us to reconsider many of the stock assumptions of linguistics and sociolinguistics, notably emphasizing permanent instability and dynamics rather than structural transparency and stasis, and thus constructing radically different notions of 'order' in the linguistic and sociolinguistic system. The order we now observe is no longer an order inscribed in stable structural (and therefore generalized) features of language, but an order inscribed in the trajectories of change and development within the system. *Change is the system*, and observed stability in the system is a necessarily situated snapshot of a stage in a developmental trajectory in which the current state is an outcome of previous ones and a condition for future ones (Blommaert 2010; Blommaert & Rampton 2011; Pennycook 2010).

In this paper, we intend to engage with an issue which is at the core of this paradigmatic shift: the question of meaning-making in a system which we see as intrinsically unstable and dynamic. Meaning is, of course, quite an exhausted topic in the study of language and signs (and in this paper we shall address signs that contain language). From this tremendous amount of literature and debate we need to select a small handful of basic items. The first one is the commonsense observation that meaning is inevitably based on *shared recognition* of signs as being meaningful for the parties engaged in interaction. If I use the word 'man', I assume that you recognize it as meaning the same thing for both of us. If not, there is a problem of

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meaning-making. Connected to this point, we see such recognition as being *normative* by definition: we recognize signs as being meaningful, because we share conventions (i.e. norms) for recognizing and identifying such meanings. The second thing we need to adopt from the literature on meaning is that meaning is inevitably connected to the *structure of signs* – the grammatical patterns in sentences, the phonological rules underlying word formation, the indexical load signs give off, a particular spatial arrangement in visual signs (e.g. reading from left to right or from top to bottom) and so forth. I can only make sense when the signs I produce have a recognizable structure, which marks its shared meaning for you and enables you to decode the sign as meaning this-or-that.[2]

Mobility of signs evidently complicates several matters. Much of the literature on meaning assumes an a priori sharedness of both elements; it assumes the stability of signs-as-structures as well as of the conventions for decoding the sign as meaningful. This a priori stability accounts for some of the sociological naïvité of which linguistics and sociolinguistics have been repeatedly accused. In a world in which signs and sign users travel across entirely different societies and cultures, of course, no such a prioris can be made; quite the contrary, the non-sharedness of such elements ought to be the point of departure for every consideration of meaning-making in an age of globalization. We know that mobility of signs and sign users involves complex processes of decoding and interpetation; and we know that when signs travel, their shape moves rather unproblematically from one place to another, while other features of the sign – meanings, indexicals, social value and so forth – do not travel too well. An accent in English that is perceived as prestigious and valuable in Nairobi may index low levels of education and migrant identity in London, for instance.[3]

What is required, therefore, is (a) to establish the relationship between spatiotemporal mobility and meaning, in which meaning is in itself seen as an effect of mobility (I can understand you because you and I can relocate ourselves into a space of shared meaningfulness); and (b) we need to dig into the structure of signs in an attempt to produce a detailed account about which features of signs *exactly* allow, invite or enable the necessary sharedness that produces meaning, and which features do not. Those two questions will guide us in this paper; in order to answer them we shall analyze some signs that are rather

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[2] See Agha 2007 for an excellent overview and discussion of these points.

[3] We have, in earlier work, elaborated on this problem of non-exchangability of sign value; see Blommaert (2008). The notion of 'order of indexicality' captures some of the systemic features of such patterns: we not only operate on the basis of 'indexical order' – producing signs that invoke conventionalized meanings – but also within larger and more enduring 'orders of indexicality' in which several forms of indexical order are organized (Blommaert 2005, 2010; also Silverstein 2003; Agha 2007).

straightforward, even typical globalization objects: public signs in English, found in tourist hotspots in the People's Republic of China.[4]

Such signs would often be discussed in the context of 'world Englishes', and the assumption that the signs are 'in English' is in itself quite questionable. Such signs, as we shall see shortly, *look* English but can best be understood from within a local economy of signs and meanings in which 'world Englishes' is hardly relevant as a target of interpretation. We shall not delve deeper into this discussion; rather, we shall see the signs as semiotic artefacts in which specific resources are being blended in an attempt to make sense to mobile people – foreign tourists to whom 'English' appears more accessible than 'Chinese'. Detailing what these resources are is part of the exercise here; and the bottom line question is: when we talk about signs that move around the globe, *what exactly is mobile*? When are texts truly moving?

Before engaging with the materials that are central in this paper, we need to pause and reflect on some general semiotic principles. Contrary to the Saussurean doctrine, signs are not random; we must therefore situate them before we can move on.

**Signs, landscapes and semiotics**

The questions we gave above can be reformulated as: how do we get from spatial mobility to semiotic mobility in studying signs in an age of globalization. As announced earlier, we see meaning as an effect of mobility – communication itself is an act of mobility since it involves the transfer of signs across universes of interpretation, in which the participants are required to relocate themselves in an often locally created space of meaningfulness. In some literature, such a space is often called a 'third space', i.e. a range of conditions for meaning that cannot be reduced to either of the participants but which consists of a kind of ad-hoc compromise reached between the participants. Such a compromise can be attached to any feature of the sign, and we must therefore be precise about what we understand by the specific types of signs we will address below. Note that such a compromise is best seen in terms of *normativity*: participants agree on an ad-hoc set of norms by means of which signs can become recognizable as meaningful.

The signs we shall investigate belong to a particular genre best described as *public order signs*: signs manufactured by a public authority with the intention of informing the public

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[4] The signs were collected in 2009 and 2010 by the authors and are part of a larger database of Linguistic Landscaping materials on tourist places in China. The illustrations used in this paper are pictures taken by the authors themselves; the copyright for these pictures is theirs solely.

about an aspect of public order. Road signs, safety signs, warnings and instructions for appropriate presence or use belong to this genre complex, and such signs are used across the world in a wide variety of places – from roads and parks to building sites, public toilets, tourist or sports venues, commercial premises and so forth. Their normative dimension is evident. Many of these signs would be internationally standardized (think e.g. of road signs), and the reason for that is that such signs are *important* and *consequential:* they often specify what is legally appropriate (and consequently sanctionable in the event of transgression) and are thus strictly normative; they are legally binding both for the authority producing it and for the audiences consuming it. Because of this elevated status, such signs need to be semiotically *transparent*: the meanings they intend to convey should be clear to anyone, must leave as little room as possible for misinterpretation, should not be contestable as to what they signal. Great care is therefore put into the construction and manufacturing of such signs; they are never the work of amateurs and always highly conventionalized and standardized. Public order signs are entirely non-random, and their explicit function is *denotational*: provide precise, clear and unambiguous meanings to all possible audiences.

Such signs are material objects of course, and they combine a variety of semiotic features, ranging from the general shapes of signs (e.g. round versus triangular road signs) and their colors (red versus blue, white or green road signs); over their genres, registers and styles, the specific semiotic instruments used (e.g. arrows) including language and the linguistic rules dominating language; the literacy resouces by means of which they have been constructed (orthographic and spelling rules), and finally their *emplacement*: the particular spot in which they have been put (Scollon & Scollon 2003). Such signs are typically *multimodal* signs, and analyzing them includes attention to the different modes that enter into the construction of the sign (Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996). Together, these features compose the sign as a semiotic actor: it is because of the complex interplay of these various features that the sign provides meaning to its audiences. As we see it, every sign is a *composite* artefact, and in our analysis we shall have to disassemble it and focus on different features in an attempt to understand their role in mobility contexts.

This is a first theoretical point: signs are composites of various features. The second point we shall use is an ethnographically-based semiotic heuristics grounded in the common-sense communicative features of these signs. Actual signs never produce *general* meanings, but always a *specific* range of meanings. This is because every actual sign is restricted both by a semiotic scope and a spatial scope: its meaning is semiotically restricted by the actual

message in the sign ("don't drive more than 50") and spatially by its actual emplacement ("don't drive more than 50 *in this specific area"*) (Blommaert & Huang 2010). It is by looking at semiotic and spatial scope that we begin to understand the social and political functions of signs: they *demarcate* spaces into a patchwork of (often overlapping and layered) zones in which a particular set of rules and restrictions prevails. You cannot drive more than 50 here but you can drive faster in another zone; you can eat your lunch here but not there; you can smoke here but not there; and this particular space is inaccessible to you while the adjacent one is not. For public order signs, such demarcation is of critical importance: the strict rules they articulate (and their consequences) are specific and valid in particular spaces only. And evidently, the idea of demarcation now enables us to see linguistic landscapes as heavily ordered and stratified spaces, in which various power regimes operate; the aspect of normativity is again evident.

A third theoretical instrument we shall use is this; it is again ethnographically inspired. We have to see signs as communicative actors in their own right, and consider their actual structure as a trace of the commnicative situation it is intended to shape (see Fabian 1986 for an inspiring example of analysis). Every sign points *backwards* to its producer(s) and its conditions of production; and it points *forwards*, towards the intended audiences and the intended consequences of the sign. Thus, a road sign reading "maximum 50" is more likely to have effects on the behavior of car drivers than on pedestrians, since the latter are not likely to violate the 50/hour speed limit. Pedestrians are thus not normally selected as an audience by the sign, and most pedestrians would not take any notice of it, other than to be upset when they witness a car driving manifestly faster than what the sign imposes. The condition for that, however, is that the production of the sign was done in such a way that the clear and precise meanings they communicate are indeed perceptible as such. Every sign, therefore, raises in its actual composition and structure ('backward pointing') questions about the resources, competences and skills mobilized and deployed in its production, and from this inspection the ('forward pointing') conditions for uptake can be judged. Again, it should be clear that all of this has a normative dimension. A decent analysis of the conditions of production of signs enables us to predict the future, so to speak; it enables us to make statements on the possibility for successful uptake of the sign. In a particular theoretical jargon, analyses of the conditions of production enable us to judge the capacity for *voice* inscribed in the sign; in more applied reformulations we can say that they enable us to judge the capactity of signs to be mobile communicators, to be truly moving (Hymes 1996; Blommaert 2005; 2008).

The theoretical points outlined here will underlie our analysis in what follows. We are now ready to have a look at the signs we collected in tourist places in China.

**Signs, places and thresholds**

English has over the last decade become a prominent language in the People's Republic of China. Obviously driven by China's rise to global prominence in economic and political affairs, China has begun to imagine itself as a globalized country, the main centers of which – Beijing, Shanghai to name just the two most visible of them – must become global cities. International mega-events such as the Olympics (Beijing 2008) and the World Exhibition (Shanghai 2010) underscore this ambition, while a strong drive towards generalized provision of English among the middle-class population articulates a more fundamental process of 'globalization in the hearts and minds' of the contemporary Chinese citizens (Dong 2011). Places that profess the globalized nature of China – tourist hotspots being chief among them – are effectively bilingual. And this is where our story begins.

We shall consider four signs taken from three tourist spaces in China. The signs are bilingual in a particular sense: they show the 'equivalent bilingualism' common in public order signs, in which everything that is communicated in the first language is also communicated in the same order in the second language. The first two signs were found in the Forbidden City in Beijing – undoubtedly one of China's major tourist attractions; the third one was found at the Great Wall, another world heritage site in China; and the fourth one was detected in a hotel in Xining, the capital of the central-Chinese province of Qinghai. All three signs belong, as we said, to the genre of public order notices. Let us consider these signs in sequence. We shall first present the signs, after which we will engage with them in some detail.

*The fire extinguisher box*

Fig. 1 is a picture of a rather mundane object in public spaces such as tourist centers: a box containing fire extinguishers and other fire-fighting equipment. The box is red, and several of these boxes could be found across the enormous compounds of the Forbidden City. The bilingual signage tells us that the selected audience is essentially anyone within eyeshot of the box – Chinese as well as international tourists.

FIGURE 1 HERE. Caption: 'Fire Exting Uishr Box'

Note in figure 1 the way in which the equivalent bilingualism is effected. The Chinese characters are neatly aligned; the English glosses underneath are coordinated with the characters and read FIRE EXTING UISHR BOX, awkwardly separating parts of the word 'extinguisher' and with a typographic error (UISHR). Note also the unwarranted hypen between 'fire' and 'alarm'. Now consider figure 2: a similar fire extinguisher box found just meters away from the one depicted in figure 1.

FIGURE 2 HERE. Caption: 'Fire extinguisher Box'

This box looks, and is, of more recent production than the one in figure 1, and we notice a difference in the orthographic quality of the English displayed on it. The awkward spatial correspondence between the Chinese characters and parts of the English words has been replaced by an entirely normative spatial organization. The English words are now separated along their conventional unit boundaries, and the typographic error has been corrected. The unwarranted hyphen, however, persists.

*Monkey around in the cable car*

The third sign we will discuss was found near the entrance of a cable car at Mu Tian Yu, one of the places from which one can access the Great Wall and admire the breathtaking views from there. The sign is actually just part of what amounted to an entire wall full of English instructions – reminding one of a user's manual, a software licence agreement or a patient's guide to the use of medicine. In China, however, extensive and elaborate public texts are not

unusual; in fact, they form part and parcel of the sociolinguistic landscape of almost any public space or tourist venue.
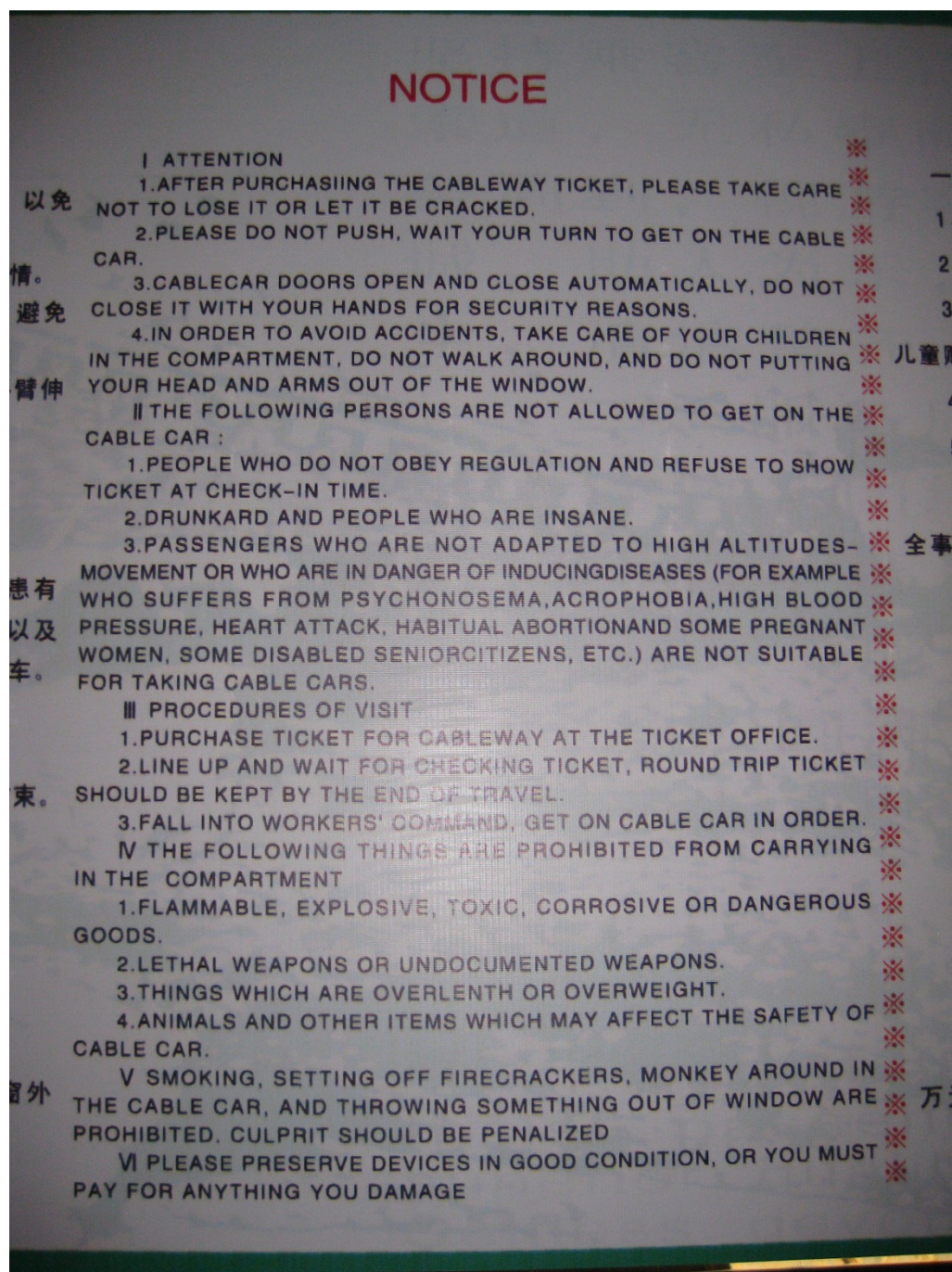


FIGURE 3 HERE. Caption: 'Monkey around in the cable car'

As we can see, the sign contains a rather astonishing amount of text – too much for anyone to process in the few moments spent in the area where it is put. In contrast to the signs in figures 1 and 2 where Chinese and English co-occurred within one sign, this sign is a monolingual one juxtaposed to its Chinese equivalent. The selected audience is manifestly the growing

numbers of domestic and international tourists visiting the site. While generally speaking the English displayed here is quite adequate – there are hardly any major grammatical or orthographic problems (but notice, e.g. 'overlenth') – some unexpected expressions occur. People are warned not to "monkey around in the cable car" for instance, a rather colloquial expression at odds with the formal and official character of the sign.

*Point profess your excellency seat*

The fourth and final sign we shall discuss here was found near the elevator in a hotel in Xining, Central China. It is again a mundane, yet important notice, explaining the evacuation procedures to be observed in case of an emergency.



FIGURE 4 HERE. Caption: 'Point profess your excellency seat'

Such evacuation signs (here: 'safety scatiering sketch map') are mandatory in public buildings in most parts of the world; their layout and contents are standardized and controlled by laws specifying liability rules in case of hazards. The sign we see in figure 4 was in all likelihood produced by the Chinese authorities; identical signs can be found on the internet from a variety of places in China.

The sign is of course bilingual; yet, the English in the sign is, to put it mildly, challenging. Let us consider the text in more detail (figure 5).



FIGURE 5 HERE. Caption: 'Point profess your excellency seat, detail'.

We read remarkable phrases such as 'succor scattering' (for 'security – evacuation'), see references to people being 'transmitted' and taken out 'to the security belts' ('secure zones'), and can't help but wonder about the sentence 'point profess your excellency seat'. This, in fact, is the attempted equivalent of a Chinese sentence saying that the dot on the floor map indicates your current position – a mandatory element in notices of this kind.

**Three different problems**

The cases shown here present us with three different problems; all, however, belonging to larger questions about the mobility of linguistic and semiotic resources. Let us recall that these signs are composite artefacts in which language, literacy, genre and style conventions are being blended into one act of communication. While all the signs presented here do show

what can in a loosely descriptive way be called 'problems with English', the problems are different in nature in each of the cases.

The *fire extinguisher box*, we would argue, represents problems at the level of English *orthography*: the rules for 'writing English correctly'. As we have seen, these rules are violated in two ways. First, the English writing contained a spelling error: the missing 'e' from 'uishr'; second, the English words were also graphically ordered in a way that violated their conventional morphosyntactic boundaries ('exting-uishr'). The unwarranted hyphen ('fire-alarm') could also count as an orthographic problem, though it is a widespread practice in several languages.

The *monkey around in the cable car* represents an entirely different kind of problem. Here, the grammatical rules and the orthographic conventions have all been largely observed; some curious discursive features occur, creating a measure of deviation from genre norms ('monkey around'), without, however, being too problematic. The main problem of the sign is that it is too 'full': it contains so much text that it may defy the purpose of being read by customers of the cable car. In addition, the text is heavily structured in 'chapters' (I, II, III etc.) and 'sections' (1, 2, 3 etc.), turning it into a complex architecture of super- and subordinate statements. A full reading of the wall filled with guidelines and restrictions would take several minutes of concentrated reading; most customers would either not have the time to make such an effort or would switch off after a few seconds. This problem is a *genre* problem: while the genre of a public notice ought to be constructed in such a way that it enables everyone to read and process it effectively within the specific conditions of consumption (as is the case, e.g. with a road sign even when people drive a considerable speed), this genre is here realized in a way that makes the sign effectively dysfunctional. What should have been a concise and extremely clear text has become elaborate, over-structured and over-detailed prose – something which on social media such as Facebook would be disqualified as 'TMI', 'too much information'.

The *point profess your excellency seat*, finally, presents us with yet another kind of problem. Here, the problem is *discursive*: the English translation results in a veritable soup of words, each of them closely or remotely equivalent to the Chinese text, but nonsensical when put together in what appears to be conventional English orthography and syntax. Here, it is *the totality of the message* that fails to communicate – it is not easy to imagine someone able to make sense of 'point profess your excellency seat' in the panic and confusion of an

emergency. People who do not read Chinese would require a generous while of deep reflection on the meaning of the sentence, because the only ways in which one can make sense of it is either by associative connections with earlier examples of the genre ('oh yes, this is the point on the map!'), or by relying on the assistance of someone who understands the Chinese text and is capable of providing a more adequate English equivalent.

The 'problems with English' thus appear to be problems with specific features of the sign: orthographic norms attached to the language, genre norms attached to the function of particular text types, and discursive norms attached to the general rules of communicability. All three sets of norms co-operate in the signs, and the different signs display different degrees of observance and deviation, not towards 'English' in an abstract sense, but towards *specific resources that enter into the construction of an 'English' sign*.

These resources and the ways in which they are deployed in our examples compel us to follow the ways in which signs point backwards, towards conditions of production. We know of such resources that they are unevenly distributed across the globe, and that some learning environments in the world offer easier and more egalitarian access to them than others. 'English' is not an egalitarian commodity wherever it occurs; its global status involves new and highly unpredictable forms of stratification in access and distribution (Blommaert 2005, 2008, 2010). This is why highly professionalized sign producers such as the ones who produced the signs shown here – public authorities, who can be expected to have access to a pool of advanced competences and skills – can be shown to struggle with 'English'. When the signs were manufactured, clearly the specific resources entering into the construction of 'English' were not generally accessible to the sign producers in China. Some aspects of it were – it is not unlikely that the *point profess* sign was manufactured with the assistance of an automatic translation computer – while others were not. We thus see a pattern of distribution of resources through these signs – an unstable system of allocation of specific semiotic resources entering into the construction of 'English' signs.

This explains the difference between figures 1 and 2. As noted, the box in figure 2 was of more recent origin than the one in figure 1, and we see that the English on the more recent box is largely devoid of the kinds of problems we observed in figure 1. The reason is *change in the system of allocation*. The Beijing Olympics of 2008 were perceived as a showcase for contemporary China, and the Chinese government made huge efforts to 'clean' the public Englishes in Beijing and other major cities in China (Zhou 2007; He 2008; Gao & Lin 2010).

The effect of that 'cleaning' can be seen in figure 2; the fact that this 'cleaning' campaign focused on the major centers in China explains the persistence of severe problems in the *point profess* example – Xining is a place of secondary importance in the hierarchy of places-to-be in China, and it may take a while before the metropolitan cleaning exercise reaches these secondary centers.

The *monkey around* sign, too, testifies to the effects of the 'cleaning' campaign. Naturally, the Great Wall is one of the main attractions of China; the public English there is both abundant and of relatively high standards. Note, of course, that the 'cleaning' campaign is in effect a campaign of *normative re-centering*. While the dominance of local Chinese templates for writing was – literally – evident in figure 1, the re-centering exercise drags Chinese English away from its local influences and modes of hybridization, and brings it into the fold of normativity associated with the 'global center' for English: the normative varieties of the UK and the US. We thus see in the developmental aspects of our cases a dynamic pattern of redistribution of English resources: a particular set of (normative, 'central') resources is made available and accessible in some 'central' places in China, while it remains unavailable in less 'central' places. Our signs thus point backwards to a large-scale pattern of sociolinguistic re-ordering in China.

They also point towards a differential 'weight' for the different specific resources. In terms of what we could call 'global comprehensibility', different thresholds appear to operate in our cases. The orthographic problems appear to be the least momentous in terms of comprehensibility, even if they are perhaps the most widespread ones. The orthographic problems do not prevent us from quite accurately understanding what the sign is supposed to communicate. At the other end of the scale of comprehensibility, we see that discursive problems can render a text virtually meaningless. The *point profess* example shows that adequate grammar and orthography can be overruled by inadequate discursive pragmatics. Words and sentences can be well-formed, yet entirely nonsensical for reasons we have begun to understand since Chomsky's 'curious green ideas' that 'sleep furiously'.

As for the level of genre, our *monkey around* example shows that genre conventions are rather compelling – violate them and the text is likely to *transform into another genre*: the 'text not made for reading' – and we are familiar with such genres as well (how many people actually read the licence agreement statements they have to 'accept' when downloading software?). Failed genres can still turn into other genres, and be quite effective as instances of that

(unintended) genre, as when a serious statement is turned into a joke or vice versa. This is a *voice* problem, not a *language* problem. The one whose statement is re-genred by interlocutors is likely to be frustrated because of what feels to him/her like a massive case of misunderstanding; he/she is not likely to see this problem as lodged into inadequate levels of linguistic competence.

We thus see how voice and communicability appear to be determined by different thresholds of communicability, attached to specific features of the sign. Signs are composite artefacts, and it takes a detailed ethnographic analysis of them to actually distinguish what they mean and which specific problems they emanate.

**Conclusion**

John Gumperz taught us three decades ago that understanding revolves around the capacity to contextualize utterances in an appropriate contextual universe (Gumperz 1982); Erving Goffman described such universes as 'frames' (Goffman 1974 (1986)). When we consider signs produced in and for mobility, we see that the accessibility of adequate frames for understanding signs is located in a variety of different levels of semiotic structure, different features of the sign. Linear models of understanding, in which a sign 'directly' communicates a particular meaning, appear not too have too much purchase in this world.

This may be both sobering and encouraging for people involved in fields such as, for instance, TESOL or intercultural communication training. The insight is sobering because simple stories about communication are unlikely to be of practical value, stories focused on 'correct language' and orthography for instance. It is encouraging because it compels them to develop more nuanced and detailed accounts of language and communication, and this can only benefit the quality of their endeavors. More theoretically inclined scholars may wish to consider the ways in which contemporary signs and the communication processes they trigger and emanate need to be seen as layered and fragmented, with a range of different possible effects to a large part contained and inscribed in the ways in which specific resources have entered into the sign. In simple terms: they may wish to disassemble what is commonly called 'language', and start looking at the different components of communication.

Even if such an enterprise generates new challenges and demands, it is an exercise we consider hard to avoid in a globalizing world of language. The effects of globalization have shaped highly complex sociolinguistic environments, populated by people with wildly

different backgrounds and trajectories, different forms and degrees of access to sociolinguistic and semiotic resources, and frames for interpretation. Unified notions of language and communication will not stand the test of empirical verification in such a superdiverse sociolinguistic world.

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