Learning and teaching Chinese in the Netherlands

The metapragmatics of a polycentric language

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This paper is concerned with the metapragmatics of Chinese as a polycentric language. Based on ethnographic observation and interview in and around a Chinese complementary school in the Netherlands, this paper describes an ongoing shift along with demographic, economic and political changes, in what counts as Chinese: a shift from Hong Kong and Taipei to Beijing as the most powerful centre of Chinese in the world. Migration makes communicative resources like language varieties globally mobile and this affects the normativity in the diaspora classroom. A clearer understanding of the metapragmatics of Chinese is useful because it provides a key to understanding social identities in contemporary Chinese migration contexts and to understanding language within contexts of current globalisation.

Introduction

Mobility has become one of the key notions in the field of sociolinguistics (Blommaert 2010; Heller 2011; Pennycook 2012; Canagarajah 2013). In an ever more globalised world, the movements and migrations of people become increasingly important to understand their communicative practices. People move across spaces and bridge distances between spaces in their communication. These spaces are not empty but filled with norms, with conceptions of what counts as ‘proper’ and ‘normal’ language use and what does not count as such. The mobility of people therefore involves the mobility of linguistic and sociolinguistic resources. This mobility creates inequalities, overlaps and contrasts between languages as produced in different spaces. We find that such spaces are not equal or flat, but hierarchically ordered, and that language practices orient to one or more of such spaces as centers of communicative practice.
This paper focuses on Chinese in one of the oldest diasporas in Europe, the Netherlands. It examines the subtle ways of speaking about and referring to Chinese and explores the implicit and more explicit meanings that are carried with it in metapragmatic discourses. We suggest that we need to consider Chinese as a polycentric language, i.e. as a language that operates on various scales and has multiple centers, and that these centers are unstable and shifting as a result of political and historical changes.

In what follows, first we shall look at the key theoretical notions and contextualize the notions against the linguistic backgrounds of China in relation to Chinese complementary schooling in the Netherlands. Second, in order for us to understand the ongoing processes of change within the Chinese community in the Netherlands, it is necessary to trace its historical, linguistic and demographic development. After that, we shall focus on empirical data collected in and around a Chinese complementary school in the city of Eindhoven, the Netherlands. The theoretical notions will be deployed in the paper for interpreting and analyzing the empirical data.

Theoretical framework: Metapragmatics, polycentricity and Chinese

Metapragmatics as coined by Silverstein describes how the effects and conditions of language use themselves become objects of discourse (Silverstein 1993). Metapragmatics has to do with meta-language, i.e. language about language. More precisely, it refers to the pragmatics, i.e. the meanings in use or the processes of social signification in praxis, that are applied in relation to varieties of language or ways of speaking, including accents, dialects/languages, etc.

Metapragmatics is thus concerned with the meanings or indexicalities that are attached to the use of a particular language variety. Such meanings may vary from (in-) appropriate, (un-) civilized, (un-) educated, (in-) authentic, (non-) standard, (ab-) normal, (im-) polite, (in-) correct, (im-) proper, right/wrong, good/bad, backward/modern, old/young, rude/elegant, beautiful/ugly, etc. Metapragmatic meanings are mappings of social categories on the basis of the language use of a particular individual or group. Often language use generates multiple and competing and partially overlapping meanings along several parameters. Someone’s language may for instance be considered educated but inauthentic, or standard but too polite or old-fashioned for a particular context. Such meanings are applied to individuals’ idiosyncratic ways of speaking, as in statements such as ‘my English is a bit rusty’ or ‘she has a fake accent when she speaks dialect’; but often also to the types of language associated with whole groups of speakers as in (cliché)
statements such as ‘French is a romantic language’, ‘Japanese sounds aggressive’ or ‘dialect speakers are dumb’.

Polycentricity is used in various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, including geography, political sciences and sociolinguistics. It refers to the multiplicity of centres of gravity (or centering forces) in social or spatial configurations. Whereas monocentric configurations are regulated according to a single reference point in space (and/or time) polycentric configurations are regulated by multiple, competing centers with unequal power.

Sociolinguistically, whether languages (in their nominal, countable form) are seen as species of ideolects with family resemblance (Mufwene 2008), as artefacts created by linguists (Blommaert 2008) or as historical constructs that emerged as by-products of nation-building projects (Makoni & Pennycook 2007), they may be recognized to have a centre and periphery. The centre of a language is where speakers recognize that the language is ‘best’, ‘most correctly’ or ‘most normally’ spoken and often corresponds to the most populated middle class areas and to where the best or the highest number of educational institutions and publishers are or were established (think of Cambridge English, Florentine Italian, Île-de-France French, Randstad Dutch). The periphery of a language is where speakers (from the center) recognize the language is ‘hardest to understand’, ‘most corrupted’ or ‘least civilised’ and often corresponds to those areas with (historically) lower access to (higher) education and printed language.

To say that a language is polycentrically organized is to say that it has multiple, more or less powerful centers that compete with each other. These centers, may differ along the metapragmatic parameters that are considered. What may be the centre of educated speech or of ‘the standard’ language, is not necessarily (often not) also the center for authentic or cool speech; and what counts as center for such evaluative norms may change over time and be replaced by other centers. Polycentricity is not entirely the same as pluricentricity as used by Clyne (1992) because the latter term emphasises plurality of varieties within a language, i.e. plurality of relatively stable self-contained linguistic systems that together make up a language. This is the case when ‘the German language’ is defined in terms of its German, Austrian and Swiss counterparts; or when ‘the English language’ is represented in terms of concentric circles consisting of a small number of native and a larger (growing) number of second and foreign language varieties. Polycentricity emphasizes the functional inequality between such varieties and the simultaneous links to the various centering powers language practices are simultaneously subject to. Whereas a pluricentric language is the sum of its varieties, a polycentric language is a dynamic, socially ordered system of resources and norms that are strongly or weakly associated with one or more centers.
Although all languages are polycentrically organized, Chinese presents an extreme case of polycentricity. The Chinese language groups a higher number of people, a vaster geographical area and a larger continuum of variation beyond mutual intelligibility than any other language in the world, while at the same time upholding a meaningful sense of unity among its speakers, through a common writing system. For this reason, the Ethnologue (2009) recognises Chinese in their list of languages of China not as a language, but as a macrolanguage, i.e. ‘multiple, closely related individual languages that are deemed in some usage contexts to be a single language’. As a macrolanguage, Chinese has thirteen ‘member languages’, listed alphabetically as Gan, Hakka, Huizhou, Jinyu, Mandarin, Min Bei, Min Dong, Min Nan, Min Zhong, Pu-Xian, Wu, Xiang and Yue.

The official discourse in China, however, is that there is only one Chinese language that comprises variation in the form of many fangyan or dialects on the level of informal, spoken language. The Chinese language is unified by a homogeneous writing system that enables communication across a wide geographical area and among speakers of widely varying and mutually largely unintelligible vernaculars. This unification has a long and complex history, dating back to the third century BCE when Qin Shi Huang, the first Chinese emperor passed a series of major economic, political and cultural reforms, including the unification of the Chinese writing system. DeFrancis (1984) explained the situation of Chinese and its internal diversity, translating it to the European context with the hypothetical situation of the greater part of the European continent, from Italy to the Iberian peninsula and France with their many language varieties (Italian, French, Catalan, Corsican, etc.) would be united in single state and would have only Old Latin as a common language of literacy and of education, despite the differences and unintelligibility that exists between the language varieties spoken in such places as Rome, Paris, Geneva, Barcelona and Milan.

In order for us to understand the changing polycentricity of Chinese in the Netherlands, it is necessary to trace the historical, linguistic and demographic development of the Chinese diaspora. After that, we shall focus on empirical data collected in and around a Chinese complementary school in the city of Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

China and the Chinese diaspora in the Netherlands

The Chinese are one of the oldest established immigrant communities in the Netherlands, and they form one of the largest overseas Chinese populations in continental Europe. In July 2011 the Chinese community celebrated its centennial: one hundred years of Chinese in the Netherlands (Wolf 2011). The first Chinese immigrants were seamen from the southern part of China who settled in harbor
cities like Rotterdam and Amsterdam where they built Chinatowns. Later, Chinese immigrants and their children spread all over the county. Figures of the number of Chinese residing in the Netherlands vary a lot depending on the source and on the definition of ‘Chinese’. According to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics, there were around 78,500 Chinese, (i.e. persons who were born or one of whose parents were born in mainland China, Hong Kong) in the Netherlands in 2011. Among them, 51,000 are first generation. In official statistics third and subsequent generation migrants are invisible and are registered only in terms of citizenship and country of birth.

During the Mao Era (1949–76), a series of reforms in the Chinese language were introduced in the People’s Republic of China, including the introduction of a new, simplified Chinese writing system and a new romanisation system (‘pinyin’) – reforms that were not followed in Hong Kong and Taiwan (where traditional characters continued to be used). In this period, migration from and to, or foreign contact, including business, with the People’s Republic was by and large impossible. The Chinese variety of the mainland, Mandarin or Putonghua, played only a marginal role in the Chinese diasporas until sometime after the Economic Reforms of 1978. Because migration from and contacts with Hong Kong (and Taiwan) remained possible all along this period, the Hong Kong Chinese, together with the earlier migrated Guangdong Chinese – both Cantonese-speaking – became the largest group of Chinese immigrants in the Netherlands. Together they represented some seventy percent of the Dutch Chinese around 1990 (CBS 2010: 6). Consequently, Cantonese was the dominant language and lingua franca of the Dutch Chinese diaspora.

However, this has changed since the 1990s because of the political and economic transformation in China in the last three decades. In the period of 1991–2000, immigration by people from mainland China, especially from Zhejiang province has increased dramatically to over 50 percent (CBS 2010: 4). After 2000, more and more Chinese students have come to the Netherlands to study at Dutch universities and they have consequently become the second largest group of foreign students (after Germans) in the Netherlands. From this period onwards, Chinese immigrants have originated from all over China. This increase of diversity in the Chinese diasporic population has meant a dramatic change of the status of Cantonese from the main language of the diaspora, to only one of the dialects. The Chinese variety of the north, Mandarin or Putonghua has steadily gained importance, both in China itself as well as in the diaspora.

After the turnover of Hong Kong and Macau to China, in 1997 and 1999 respectively, Putonghua became increasingly important there as well. In the course of the events recounted above, we are witnessing a language shift within a language, or the making of the world’s biggest language. This account suggests how little languages as we identify them by their names are natural-givens and
how much languages are the result of political and historical contingencies and of strategic decisions and promotion campaigns designed to create national unity/identity or to boost national economies.

In short, the current flow of Chinese migration to the Netherlands is multi-layered and highly diverse in terms of the place of their origin, individual motivations and personal or family trajectories. The demographic changes in the constitution of Chinese diaspora and their linguistic changes have far-reaching consequences for people's language and identity repertoires.

A Chinese complementary school in the Netherlands

Many young persons of Chinese heritage attend Chinese language schools on weekends. Most of these so-called ‘complementary schools’ gather on Saturday mornings, often on the premises of mainstream schools. They are community-run schools operating outside of the mainstream education system and offering a community-specific curriculum complementary to the mainstream educational contents. While much recent applied linguistics research exists on Chinese and other complementary education in the UK (Francis, Archer & Mau 2009; Li Wei & Wu 2009; Blackledge & Creese 2010), not much has been published about the Dutch context.

The first officially registered Chinese school in the Netherlands was established in the late 1970s. At the moment of our research (2010–2011), in all major cities in the Netherlands there was at least one Chinese school offering complementary education in Chinese language and culture for children with Chinese parents. The Stichting Chinees Onderwijs Nederland [Foundation Chinese Education The Netherlands] lists more than forty schools (www.chineesonderwijs.nl) (accessed March 2013).

The research reported here takes place primarily in a Chinese complementary school in Eindhoven in the Dutch province of North Brabant. The school is one of the oldest official registered Chinese schools in the Netherlands, initially established in 1978 by the Chinese Protestant Church of Eindhoven. It originally provided Cantonese lessons to children of Cantonese origin in a café-restaurant. There were only about twenty students at the time. With the changing composition of Chinese immigrants in the Netherlands and the geopolitical repositioning of PRC in the globalized world system, lessons have gradually shifted from Cantonese to Mandarin in the last decade. And since 2006, there have been only Mandarin classes left.

At the time of our research, the school had around 280 students, and like many other Chinese community schools, the Chinese school in Eindhoven rents classrooms from a Dutch mainstream secondary school (for four hours
Per week). This happens mostly on Saturdays when students and teachers are free from their daily education and/or work, and when the school premises are available for rent. Classes in the Chinese school run from 9.15 to 11.45 in the morning and include a 20-minute break, during which there are regular staff meetings for the teachers. The school has classes starting from kindergarten and progressing to level 1 through level 12. The lower grades typically have up to twenty pupils whereas the higher grades usually have less than eight pupils. In addition, there are four levels of adult language classes on offer to non-Chinese speakers who wish to learn Chinese. There is also a Dutch class for people of Chinese origin that is attended by, among others, teachers that are not yet proficient in Dutch.

Students in the school are mainly from the area of Eindhoven, but some students also travel considerable distances to attend the school, including those who come from towns across the border in Belgium. Altogether there are 25 teachers, including teachers for calligraphy, music and Kong Fu. Many of the teachers are long-term residents in the local area. Both teachers and students at the School come from a wide range of social and linguistic backgrounds. Some of the teachers are well-paid professionals working at the High Tech Campus or for one of the hospitals in the city. Others are housewives or househusbands or they work in the catering business, running or working for a Chinese restaurant. Yet others are researchers or doctoral students who have recently arrived in the Netherlands from Mainland China. Recruitment of teachers is mainly from the community through personal introductions, or through the school website. Student recruitment, likewise, is through word of mouth, the website, and advertisements in local Chinese supermarkets and restaurants.

Since the classes have gradually changed to Mandarin, the school no longer uses textbooks prepared in Hong Kong but by Ji Nan University on the Mainland. The textbooks that are donated by the Chinese embassy in the Netherlands, are written especially for ‘overseas Chinese’ and were originally targeted at overseas Chinese children in the United States and Canada. Therefore, the language of instruction in the textbooks used is English. Teachers often speak English in addition to, or sometimes instead of Dutch, and flexibly switch in an out of Chinese, Dutch and/or English in the classroom.

Methodology

We adopted a sociolinguistic ethnographic perspective (Blommaert 2005; Rampton 2007; Heath & Street 2008; Blackledge & Creese 2010; Heller 2011) in our study of discourses of multilingual identity and inheritance among young people with families of Chinese migration background.
Our fieldwork started from the institutional context of the Chinese language and culture classroom at the Chinese school in Eindhoven, but we also see the school as deeply situated in a wider context, and as a non-autonomous sociolinguistic space, anchored in the wider Chinese community of Eindhoven. Thus we move from what happens inside the classroom to what happens outside the classrooms and outside of the school, involving e.g. observations in both on- and offline Chinese communities (Qingfeng tea-room, Chinese restaurants and other organized community celebrations and activities such as tai qi and ping pong as well as in online social network sites (e.g. the Asian and proud forum on Hyves). The ethnographic perspective thus includes on the one hand the ‘traditional’ objects of ethnography (sound recordings, observation of situated events, interviews), but it adds to this two other dimensions: attention to visuality in the field of language; and attention to macro-sociolinguistic aspects influencing and constraining micro-events.

Before entering the field as researcher, Jinling was a teacher in the Eindhoven Chinese school giving a practical course of Chinese as a foreign language for Dutch adults. Access to the Chinese school was therefore not problematic. After four years of involvement as a teacher and as a first-generation migrant herself, Jinling was regarded as a member of the teaching staff and a member of the Chinese community more generally. As an outsider to this community and only working part-time on this project, Kasper had a secondary role in the ethnographic fieldwork and joined only some of the weekly visits (see Creese & Blackledge 2014 for reflexive researcher vignettes of us and other researchers in the project).

Together we worked as a team complementing each other’s strengths and weaknesses and combining in our ethnography an insider’s with an outsider’s perspective – both in terms of membership of the school community and the wider Eindhoven Chinese community and with respect to our multilingual repertoires. We discussed and analyzed pieces of data together, and drafted and revised internal research reporting as well as research papers for publication collaboratively, helping each other, in turns, to render the strange familiar and the familiar strange. The authorial ‘we’ used here reflects that collaborative research practice (see Creese & Blackledge 2012 for general discussion about ethnographic team research).

Our observations followed the school year and spanned the period between April 2010 and June 2011. During this time we regularly observed classroom practices, staff meetings and breaks in the school context and had many conversations with teachers, students, administrators and parents about complementary school life, diasporic identity, China, and Chinese language teaching in the Netherlands.
The metapragmatics of sociolinguistic transformation

The first extract we discuss is based on an observation in May 2010 in Mr. Zhou’s combined grade 11/12 class, the final class in the school. Nine students aged 16 to 19 had officially registered in Mr. Zhou’s class. The actual number of students attending his class, however, fluctuated considerably. At the moment of our observation there were only four students, all female. According to Mr. Zhou, the low attendance was due to the fact that it was exam weeks in the mainstream schools.

Mr. Zhou’s class is ethnolinguistically very heterogeneous. Two of the students present, Esther and Hil Wah, were of Hong Kong Cantonese background, one, Wendy, of Wenzhouese background, and Tongtong had a mixed Guangdong and Hong Kong background. According to Mr. Zhou, there were also students from Fujianese and Malaysian Chinese backgrounds. Seven of the nine students attended mainstream Dutch medium school, the two Malaysian students attended an English-medium international school from Monday to Friday. Six of the students in Mr. Zhou’s class were born in the Netherlands, and the remaining three in mainland China and Malaysia.

Mr. Zhou is an earlier migrant from Guangdong province and is a speaker of Cantonese. The day when Mr. Zhou and the researcher (Li) arrived in the classroom, he greeted and chatted with the students in Cantonese. When the lesson started, Mr. Zhou switched from Cantonese to Mandarin as the language of instruction. During the lesson, Mr. Zhou and the students were practicing synonyms in the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK – ‘Chinese proficiency test’) for level 5. The HSK test is the Chinese equivalent of the TOEFL and IELTS tests for English. It is a Chinese language proficiency test designed and developed by the HSK Center of Beijing Language and Culture University to assess the Chinese proficiency of non-native speaking foreigners and overseas Chinese. HSK has in total six levels ranging from elementary level 1 to advanced level 6. What is interesting is that the term for Chinese in the name of the test is Hanyu (汉语) – the language of the Han, the majority nationality (zu, 族) in China. In practice this means Putonghua.

The classroom was organized in rows. All four students sat in the middle row. Wendy and Hil Wah were in the middle of the first row in the classroom with Esther and Tongtong sitting in the row behind them. There was a whiteboard in front of the classroom and the teacher sat between the whiteboard and the students. The researcher took position in the back of the classroom, making notes and video recordings at selected moments while audio recording the entire lesson. The lesson started with vocabulary training of what is known in the HSK exercise book as tong yi ci 同义词 ‘synonyms’. Extract 1 below is taken from the beginning of the lesson.
Extract 1. Tongtong correcting Mr. Zhou’s accent (classroom observation, May 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original in Chinese/Dutch</th>
<th>Translation in English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Mr Zhou 你们造句也行，把荷兰文的意思说出来也行，就过了。’本质’ [běn zhī]</td>
<td>You can make sentences or say the meaning in Dutch: ‘Quality/nature’ [běn zhī].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Tongtong 本质 [běn zhī]? 某某东西的本质 [běn zhī] [eigenschap van ×××]?</td>
<td>Quality/nature? Something’s nature? nature of ×××?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Mr Zhou Eigenschap.</td>
<td>Quality/Nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Tongtong 不是本质 [běn zhí] 吗?</td>
<td>Should it not be [běn zhí]? (with falling tone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Mr Zhou ((looks at the book again)) 本质啊，应该读第四声啊，对不起。</td>
<td>Běn zhí ah, should be pronounced with the fourth tone ah, sorry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Mr Zhou 下一个，‘比较’ [bǐ jiào].</td>
<td>The next one, ‘comparing’ [bǐ jiào]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Tongtong 比较 [bǐ jiào]? 比较 [bǐ jiào] 嘛?</td>
<td>Bǐ jiào? Should it not be bǐ jiào?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Class ((all four students correcting his pronunciation))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Mr Zhou ((nods in agreement, repeats the corrected pronunciation)) 比较啊，也读错了。</td>
<td>Bǐ jiào ah. I made again a mistake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Class ((students look at each other and laugh))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let us first take a look at what is happening here. The class was one month before the HSK exam. Mr. Zhou’s assignment was to let the students practice synonyms. To achieve this, Mr. Zhou asked the students to make sentences with difficult words in Chinese or translate these words into Dutch. The students did not, however, just do the assignment by making sentences in Chinese or translating the words in Dutch but immediately turned the exercise into pronunciation training for the teacher. In line 4, Tongtong corrected Mr. Zhou’s pronunciation of bǐjiào. In line 5, Mr. Zhou agreed with Tongtong that he had made a mistake. In line 7, Tongtong corrected Mr. Zhou’s pronunciation again and in line 8, all the four students corrected Mr. Zhou’s pronunciation. Mr. Zhou kindly agreed with the students and admitted in line 9 that he had made yet another mistake. The extract ends with the students looking at each other and laughing at the situation and/or the teacher.
This example adds further evidence to Li Wei and Wu’s (2009) observations in the UK that despite the prevalent stereotypes of Chinese children being polite, passive subjects in the classroom, Chinese adolescents in fact regularly engage in ridiculing and mocking behaviour at the expense of the teacher. The resources for such ‘linguistic sabotage’ (Jaspers 2005) are located in the tension and conflict between the teachers and pupils’ language repertoires and preferences. Whereas in Li Wei & Wu’s data, the participants are younger than the current research group, the tension manifests itself mainly in the children’s more sophisticated proficiency in English compared to the teachers, in this example the tension also arises over ownership and expertise in Chinese, the target of learning and teaching in this community.

When we take a close look at the transcript, we see abundant features of non-nativeness in Mr. Zhou’s speech. The classroom episode presents a serious deviation from the traditional Chinese language class where the teacher has all the ‘knowledge’ and is assumed to be a model language user, with respect to vocabulary, grammar, orthography and also pronunciation. However, in this classroom, we see another scenario. The language teacher’s pronunciation is corrected by his students. From a traditional educational point of view, one might raise doubts about Mr. Zhou’s qualification as a teacher of Chinese. Is he a qualified language teacher?

In order to answer this question, from a sociolinguistic point of view, we need to look at what happens outside the classroom. Schools as institutions are non-autonomous sociolinguistic spaces and are deeply situated in a wider societal context. Chinese heritage schools are situated at the intersection of two or more different political, social, economic, linguistic and sociological systems or regimes. Our analysis sets out from a sociolinguistic perspective that involves different scale-levels. Different scales organize different patterns of normativity (Blommaert 2005; Collins & Slembrouck 2006; Collins 2009). The analysis of our classroom interaction requires a processual epistemology in which the classroom interactions at one level of social structure need to be understood in relation to phenomena from another level of social structure. Time and space are the two key concepts in understanding of what is happening here.

For a long time, Cantonese was taught at Chinese school overseas. Mr. Zhou is a first generation migrant of Cantonese background, who started his voluntary teaching career as a Chinese language teacher teaching Cantonese but had to reeducate himself to teach Mandarin. His reeducation is self-taught, but also partly taken care of by his students as could be seen in Extract 1 above.

The point here is not about the pronunciation of ben zhi, but to document the emergent and problem-ridden transition from one language regime to another. This little classroom episode reveals big demographic and geopolitical changes
of global Chineseness – i.e. changes in spatial configurations: (1) the language teacher becomes a language learner; (2) the school surrenders the old language regime to capture a (new) audience; (3) the traces of worldwide migration flows impact on the specific demographic, social and cultural dynamics of the Chinese presence in Eindhoven; (4) the Chinese philosophy of cultural, political and sociolinguistic ‘harmony’ is not strongly enforced in the diaspora, but is brought in – with force – by new immigrants from the PRC; and (5) on the whole we witness a geopolitical repositioning of China: the emergence of PRC as new economic world power.

This classroom episode triggered an interview with Tongtong’s parents. The meeting took place at the restaurant of Tongtong’s parents on a Saturday evening. The restaurant is located next to a supermarket, under a residential apartment in the north of Eindhoven. The name of the restaurant is written in Dutch (Chinees-Indisch Restaurant), traditional Chinese characters (富贵酒楼 ‘prosperous’) and Cantonese romanisation (fu kwei). The linguistic landscape of Chinese communities and the role of restaurants deserve a separate paper. This kind of Chinese restaurant is a typical Chinese restaurant in the Netherlands: established in the 1960-70s and serving Chinese-Indonesian (Chinees-Indisch) cuisine. The restaurant was a family business. For 20 years, the restaurant has been owned by Tongtong’s parents, who inherited it from Tongtong’s paternal grandparents.

Extract 2 is taken from a one hour interview with Tongtong’s mother in Tongtong’s presence. The interview was an informal, although audio-recorded conversation about the family’s migration history and their language use. In the extract, we can read the researcher inquire about the family’s language policy.

**Extract 2. Interview with Tongtong’s mother about family’s language policy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original in Chinese (Mandarin)</th>
<th>Translation in English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 JLi 听彤彤她说她小时侯在家是说广东话，看广东话电视，后来你把广东话的电视频道删了？只让她看普通话电视节目？</td>
<td>I heard from Tongtong that she watched Cantonese channels at home when she was small, but later you deleted all the Cantonese channels and let Tongtong watch only Putonghua channels?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 TM 是，因为我是在国内受的教育。我们国内都是讲普通话教学的嘛。来这里我就觉得奇怪，为什么要广东话教学。不过我们家都是讲广东话的，我们是广东人嘛，当然在家是讲方言啦。</td>
<td>Yes, because I was educated in China. In China, we all know about Putonghua teaching. When I came here, I felt it was very strange that Cantonese was taught at school. But at home, we speak Cantonese. We are Cantonese; of course at home we speak dialect.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tongtong’s behaviour in the classroom (her correcting of the teacher’s accent) needs to be understood against the background of the decision made by Tongtong’s mother to transfer Tongtong from a Cantonese class to a Mandarin class as soon as this was possible in Eindhoven. This extract gives insight into Tongtong’s ‘family language policy’ (see Curdt-Christiansen 2013 for an introduction) as well as the macro political transformation at the highest scale-level. This is most clearly articulated by Tongtong’s mother in line 10: Putonghua is a bridge to enable communication in a broader network of Chinese migrants. This rescaling of the community (from a local Guangdongese language community to a translocal or global
Chinese community) is necessitated by the new waves of Chinese mobility from the PRC, causing a diversification of ‘Chineses’ and Chineseness.

This diversification of Chinese diasporas across the world is a result of political and economic changes in China over the last three decades. The language ideological effects of this geopolitical transformation can be read in Extract 2. For people who are educated in China such as Tongtong’s mother, being educated is equal to speaking Putonghua. We read this quite literally in line 2 and 4. Tongtong’s mother found it strange that Cantonese was taught at Chinese schools in the Netherlands, because for her, Cantonese is not a language, but a dialect. Tongtong’s mother, who has been educated in China and has worked as an editor at a television station in Guangzhou before her emigration in the late 1980s, stresses the importance of speaking Putonghua for educational and general success in life. This ideology is shared with the majority of new migrants from the PRC, especially the university educated elite of liuxuesheng (Chinese international students). This brings us to extract 3, an interview with a former teacher of the school, who was educated in Guangdong. The interview is conducted in 2011. Jessie migrated to the Netherlands in the late 1990s to study and was a voluntary teacher at the school from 1999 to 2003.

Extract 3. Interview with former teacher Jessie

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>JLi</th>
<th>Jessie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>你以前在安多分的中文学校教过书?</td>
<td>You had been teaching Chinese in the Chinese school in Eindhoven?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>教过，教粤语，教过4年。从99年开始。</td>
<td>Yes, I taught Cantonese for 4 years since 1999.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>那时中文学校粤语班多吗？</td>
<td>Were there many Cantonese classes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>有好几个，学校都是以说粤语为主。</td>
<td>Quite a few. Cantonese was the dominant language in the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>现在中文学校都没有粤语班了，都是普通话班。</td>
<td>There is no Cantonese class anymore in the Chinese school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>就是，早就该没粤语了。</td>
<td>Yes, should have done that earlier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Hmmm</td>
<td>Hmmm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>知道吗，我那时候教得很痛苦。书是繁体字，教简体字。</td>
<td>You know, it was very painful for me to teach at that time, because the textbooks were in traditional characters but you had to teach the children simplified character writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the interview, Jessie describes her experience of teaching Chinese, the demographic composition of the students, and the teaching materials that the school used. In her teaching, she confronted with the strong ‘polycentricity’ of Chinese: Cantonese had to be taught using Taiwanese textbooks, raising linguistic and literacy issues that she found hard to manoeuvre, all the more since the parents demanded the teaching of simplified script to their children.

Intuitively, many people see the school teacher as the all-knowing repository and mediator of knowledge, as a stable figure whose input would always be
directed towards the focus of the class activities and the curriculum knowledge he or she is supposed to transfer. In the context of our research, however, we came to see the teachers as a highly heterogeneous, ‘unstable’ group of people. The reason for this is twofold. First, the teachers themselves have a complex repertoire and a complex sociolinguistic biography, involving sometimes dramatic and traumatizing language shift during certain phases of their lives. As a consequence, language teachers themselves are, in actual fact, language learners. The second reason is that teachers from the PRC often arrive with a teaching style and a set of language-ideological assumptions that are at odds with those of the learners in the diaspora. This potentially results in mutual frustration and in incidents over class activities and interpretations of tasks.

Jessie’s teaching experience dated to a decade ago, probably the very early stage of the process of language shift to Putonghua we currently see in full force. These observations show the fundamental aspects about language in the current globalised world. Chinese, or any language for that matter, is not a fixed object or entity that people can learn to make use of but is dynamic, changing, contested, in transformation. Languages are moving targets. Chinese as a language has a long history of export and mobility, of being exported ‘to the world’ by Chinese migrants from the late 19th Century until today. This has resulted in divergent configurations of language diversity overseas and at home, that are converging in the current wave of globalization characterized as superdiversity (cf. Blommaert & Rampton 2011). If we understand current globalization processes as the compression of time and space through increased flows of people, goods and images – migration, (mass) communication, imagination – facilitated through technologies, then we can understand how developments in the diaspora are reflecting in intricate ways developments in the PRC. Researching Chinese language in the diaspora helps us look at “the world as one large, interactive system, composed of many complex subsystems” (Appadurai 1996, p. 41) and at processes that are of a larger scale than nations and states.

Conclusions

We began this paper by suggesting that we need to consider Chinese as a polycentric language in the context of migration and globalisation. Drawing on Silverstein’s notion of metapragmatics, we have examined the specific Chinese diasporic context, namely the educational context of the Chinese complementary school in the Netherlands, through which this paper has demonstrated an ongoing shift along with demographic, economic and political changes, in what counts as Chinese: a shift from Hong Kong and Taipei to Beijing as the most powerful reference centre of Chinese in the world.
These ongoing language shifts in the Chinese diaspora reflect a series of language political changes in China and have to do with what Dong (2010) has called ‘the enregisterment of Putonghua in practice’, the processes in which Chinese is becoming an exclusive, monoglot, homogeneous entity that erases the diversity existing underneath it, the process that makes Chinese synonymous with Putonghua in an increasing number of contexts (Li & Juffermans 2012). Consequently, speakers in the diaspora such as Mr. Zhou, Tongtong and her mother, and Jessie have adjusted or are adjusting or catching up with this changing situation. Chinese language learning and teaching take place on shifting ground: the main foci of orientation – the normative ‘centers’ of language learning and teaching – are shifting and changing rapidly and intensely. The object of learning and teaching in this heterogeneous, polycentric community and the identities that emerge in the process are moving targets – unstable and changing sociolinguistic configurations. A better understanding of these is a key to understanding the complex and shifting social identities as they are shaped by and shaping various educational settings, both within and beyond the complementary school context.

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Transcription conventions

×××  :  inaudible word(s)
(( ))  :  the transcriber’s comments
italics  :  Dutch
[bĕn zhī]  :  pinyin gloss of characters, with tone indication
References


