

Jie Dong

The Sociolinguistics of Voice in Globalising China

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In the second book of her trilogy, Dong Jie discusses the results of the sociolinguistic fieldwork she has been carrying out in China over the past decade. While the first book, *Discourse, Identity, and China's Internal Migration: The Long March to the City* (Jie 2011), focuses only on rural-urban migration, this one widens the object of study, looking also at other forms of migration: labor migrants, elite migrants, cross-continental migrants and online 'netizens'. The author states that all kinds of analyzed mobilities - rural migrant workers and elite migrants within China's borders, transcontinental mobility and virtual mobility - are all the direct or indirect consequences of China's deeper involvement in globalisation. Indeed, as indicated in the title, voice and globalisation are two key concepts in this second volume. Voice - seen as both the personal defining features of speaking acts and the results of communicative events in social contexts - is the critical analytical tool in Dong's research on the structure of contemporary Chinese society and its ongoing change or 'reshuffling'. Voice is positioned against the backdrop of globalisation which, far from being a static context, plays an active role in destabilizing previous sociolinguistic patterns of stratification, making some linguistic forms more prestigious than others, while also offering new expressive potentials.



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The book is divided into three parts and each of them contains two chapters. Part I, “Voice”, revolves around the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study. Chapter 1 addresses the effect of globalisation on Chinese society and provides some key notions of ethnography, understood as a perspective on and an approach to studying language in society. Going beyond the distinction usually drawn between the notions of voice by Hymes (1996) and Bakhtin (1982), Dong provides an ‘inclusive’ perspective, i.e. voice is seen as the ‘concrete speaking personality’ (the fact that, for instance, one’s voice reflects one’s social class, group, etc.) and the outcome of communication (whether one succeeds or fails to be understood and have their voice heard). As Dong explains, language is both a symbol of national homogenisation and hierarchization, as it empowers some people while disempowering others. Voice is a key category for studying such interaction.

In Chapter 2, Dong discusses theories of social stratification, from classic ones (Marx, Weber and Durkheim) to their modern developments (Dahrendorf, Wallerstein or Parsons). Departing from such theoretical discussions, she then traces the stratification of Chinese society back to a time before 1949, then discusses its reformulation between 1949 and 1979, and finally addresses the changes that have occurred since 1979 with the implementation of the reform policies. The last part of Chapter 2 deals with the sociolinguistic complexity of contemporary China, where, alongside Putonghua (the official language of the People’s Republic of China standardised upon the variety used in Beijing), there are more than thirty officially written and nearly one hundred spoken languages. Even under the umbrella of one Putonghua, literally ‘common speech’, there are at least seven major ‘dialects’. As Dong explains, their definition as dialects derives from the Chinese point of view, according to which a common orthographic system, a literary corpus, historical roots, cultural heritage and political unity draw the boundary between dialect and language. In this linguistic complexity, the written language has always functioned as an element of conjunction across Chinese history, while the search for a national standard spoken language started between nineteenth and the twentieth century, and ended in mainland China with the codification of Putonghua in 1955. Since then, Putonghua has become the official language in the educational system, in mass media and in other state institutions. It is the most important linguistic tool to get things done and having one’s voice heard. The author then addresses the importance of English as a linguistic resource that also serves as another factor in social layering.

Part II, “Stratification of voice and stabilizing conditions of voice”, and Part III, “Restratification of voice”, constitute the core of the volume and are directly concerned with the results of Dong Jie’s fieldwork. Part II deals with the process of stratification of voice in China.

In Chapter 3, moving from Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic capital and symbolic power as applied to Parisian French and Agha's (2003, 2005, 2007) explanation of the process of 'enregisterment', Dong analyses the course through which one linguistic variety has become the national standard language that is known today as Putonghua. For Putonghua, as for all modern nation-state languages, the involvement of the education system in promoting one national language brings about two consequences. Firstly, Putonghua is perceived as a means for enhancing one's chances for success in the educational and labor market. Secondly, the rise of standard language devalues other languages and language varieties. This monoglot language ideology is enhanced also by means of state-supported campaigns, such as the annual 'promoting Putonghua', or by state-run newspaper articles, one of which is provided as an illustration. The article, as analysed by Dong, urges rural people to learn Putonghua before entering the city. A cartoon stressing the distinction between a smartly dressed urban young man and a rural couple in rags accompanies the text. Putonghua is a form of semiotic capital, and its standardisation comes along with an ideological process through which it has become as quasi-natural language, in such a way that, as shown by one of Dong's fieldwork interview, a primary school teacher in Beijing who has a migrant pupil in her classroom defines the pupil's lack of Putonghua competence as a 'problem' that is responsible for her slow learning progress.

In Chapter 4, Dong undertakes the task of analysing the voicing processes of people who move geographically and socially within China, more specifically migrant workers and 'elite migrants', the latter being individuals who have moved to the urban centres with high academic or professional qualifications and are part of the emerging 'middle class'. Despite some features that both groups share, migrant workers and elite migrants are crucially different in their access to linguistic resources. As a result, they have different voicing possibilities and this in turn affects their position in society. The main question underlying this chapter is how migrant workers and elite migrants negotiate their voice in their movement across social spaces. The first part of the chapter deals with the voice of labor migrants. In order to highlight the different values of regional varieties, Dong compares the voice of a migrant child in an urban public primary school, an example taken from mass media discourse, with that of a Beijing child she interviewed. The Beijing variety, once a local dialect, now enjoys a prestige status as it registers its users as legitimate speakers, as which they have been recognised also by those who have not mastered this variety. Dong's fieldwork depicts how this takes place concretely. The migrant child, in fact, attempts to get rid of her regional accent, perceived as a barrier, while the Beijing child feels proud of his Beijing pronunciation and makes fun of the non-standard pronunciations of some of his schoolmates. The voices of labour migrants are then compared to

that of elite migrants. The case study here is a group of young urban professionals who share the common feature of possessing and driving a specific brand of imported car. Dong shows how different voices reflect different social classes, which in turn is tightly bound to the potential for mobility. For instance, in contrast to the example in the first part of the chapter, one of the elite migrants ‘rejects’ the local variety and also does not use his hometown dialect, opting instead for Putonghua with an accent known as *gangtaiqiang* in Chinese (literally “Hong-Kong-Taiwan-accent”). The proficiency of these elite migrants in such a linguistic style frees them from being tied to one single place in China, while English skills offer them the possibility of having their voices also heard abroad.

In Part III, Dong turns her attention to transcontinental and virtual mobility. Chapter 5 analyses the voice of the new Chinese immigrants abroad, including highly educated and skilled immigrants. Dong does not select a particular receiving country in her studies. Many fieldwork interviews were conducted in Beijing and include, for example, a student migrant who moved to Canada and was sent back to China as a senior manager of a Canadian company, or a skilled migrant who is working in China to support his family in New Zealand. These new types of Chinese immigrants are a product of China’s new middle class. They present themselves as highly educated and professional, and are renegotiating the identity of what it means to be a Chinese living abroad. One eminent distinction of Dong’s work is that, in dealing with globalisation, she not only focuses on English, which usually draws most scholars’ attention, but she also addresses the increasing utility of Putonghua abroad. Putonghua has spread outside China to the point that it is replacing Cantonese among the Chinese diaspora. Putonghua has greater utility for facilitates career prospects also in the diaspora.

Chapter 6 deals with the discursive practices of Chinese netizens. Dong goes beyond the usual dichotomy that mainly concentrates on two topics – the Internet as a tool of liberation of various sorts and censorship by the state. Dong stresses the artifactual nature of the online – offline distinction, by illustrating the strong linkages between online voices and the formation of social groups. In case of the group of imported car drivers, she shows how they use online space to organise an offline event and then report the results of this event again online. Through such practices, the new Chinese middle class displays new forms of mobility, creating in so doing the voice of a new social class and new class culture. In the same way as language, the access to the Internet depends on a set of resources which are distributed unevenly. Therefore, despite providing new possibilities for mobility, the Internet also plays a role in empowering some and disempowers others.

In Chapter 7, Dong sums up her main arguments and the empirical

data examined. She points out the ways in which geographical and virtual mobility creates new class effects. She stresses that voice is a new class marker, which has been produced by and helps to create new forms of mobility.

In conclusion, this book is a valuable resource for those interested in the role of voice in social stratification. It is also of great use for those involved in Chinese Studies as it provides fresh insight and deeper understanding of contemporary Chinese society. One of the major merits of Dong's book lies in the ability to meticulously analyse a broad variety of materials (mass media discourse, fieldwork interviews and online data) with remarkable linguistic and cultural awareness. Dong provides thoroughly examined and well-argued case studies on the voicing processes of people moving within and beyond China's border, as well as in the virtual space. The examples in her book offer a strong basis for her main claim that voice is playing a crucial role in identifying and defining social layers – even in a society that is politically considered to not be distinguished by social class.

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