Sociolinguistic approaches to Chinese discourse

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Introduction

Sociolinguistics investigates the relationship between language and society. As its name suggests, it was born as a multidisciplinary field (Coupland, 2016) that might involve disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, education, cultural studies, media studies, etc. It becomes a cover term for segments of different fields, such as variationist sociolinguistics, the social psychology of language, linguistic anthropology, the ethnography of communication, interactional sociolinguistics, linguistic ethnography, sociocultural linguistics, etc. In addition to providing insights to language maintenance and policy making, sociolinguistics also provides researchers with theories and frameworks to deal with language and discourse occurring in diverse social contexts.

The variationist approach of sociolinguistics, first established by Labov (1966, 1972a, 1972b) and his followers, laid the foundation of sociolinguistics as an independent discipline. The key concerns of this approach (i.e. language variation, change, and structure) remain important issues in contemporary linguistics research. Following that, sociolinguistics was extended with the developments of the anthropological approach by Hymes (1974; Gumperz and Hymes, 1972) and interactional sociolinguistics by Gumperz (1982, 2001) among many other approaches. More recently, a sociocultural linguistic approach was initiated by Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 2008) with a view to distinguishing itself from the traditional variationist sociolinguistics, often associated with the quantitative analysis of linguistic features and their correlation to sociological variables. The term ‘sociocultural linguistics’ is currently used to indicate a broadly interdisciplinary approach to language, culture and society.

The diverse approaches in sociolinguistics can be roughly put in a continuum with ‘social’ and ‘linguistic’ orientations at opposite ends. Each approach can be aligned at some point on this continuum. Viewing sociolinguistics as a broad discipline, its linguistic range covers examinations of language variation and change in phonological, lexical, and morphological levels, while its social range extends to research on societal bilingualism or multilingualism, language maintenance and shift, language contact, language ideology, and language planning, etc. In light of their influence on Chinese discourse studies, the discussion below is limited to three sociolinguistic approaches, namely variationist, interactional and sociocultural.
Variationist approach

Sociolinguists widely attribute the seminal studies of language variation and change in the variationist approach to research conducted by William Labov (1963, 1966, 1969, 1972). Variationist sociolinguistics is concerned with linguistic variation and change in written and spoken language. While linguistic variation is concerned with synchronic differences in speakers’ pronunciation, word choice, morphology, or syntax, linguistic change examines the diachronic developments of language. The central idea of this approach is that language varies systematically in accordance with social characteristics of the speakers and the social context in which the language is used. Weinreich and his colleagues (1968: 99–100) argue that linguistic variation is characterized by orderly or ‘structured heterogeneity’. That means speakers’ choices among variable linguistic forms are systematically constrained by multiple linguistic and social factors. The speakers’ language use and the underlying grammatical system also reflect and partially constitute the social organization of the communities to which users of the language belong. This approach aims to uncover the correlation between language variation, especially at phonological, lexical and syntactical levels, and social/cultural factors, such as ethnicity, religion, temporal and spatial differences, gender, age, level of education and occupation.

In terms of research method, variationist sociolinguistics often features large-scale quantitative studies examining the correlation between language forms and language user variables. Contemporary variationist research has also extended its focus from the analysis of traditional aspects of linguistic variation and change, i.e. the phonological, morpho-syntactic, to discourse and pragmatic aspects, while incorporating contemporary quantitative methods and statistical practice.

The variationist approach was first introduced to mainland China in the late 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Zhu, 1985; Chen, 1985), and it has been consistently followed and promoted by a group of Chinese scholars for Chinese discourse studies. Chen’s (1999) was the first monograph in Chinese that systematically introduces theories on language variation and change, relevant research methods, and applications of the research. Xu (2006) provided a comprehensive review of the variationist approach in Western contexts, discussing new developments in the field and delineating the potential applications of these theories in Chinese contexts.

Replicating the research of language variation and change in Western contexts, Chinese scholars have investigated variations and changes of Chinese as a result of social and technological development, language contact, and other factors, not only at the lexical level, but also at phonological, syntactic, pragmatic and stylistic levels (e.g. Su, 2010; Xu et al., 2005, 2010; Zhang, 2005). Xu and his colleagues employed this approach to investigate Chinese language variations in the city, for example, the use of Putonghua, Nanjing dialect, and other linguistic varieties by people of different genders and age in Nanjing (e.g. Xu and Fu, 2005; Xu and Wang, 2010). Drawing on Labov’s ‘rapid anonymous observation’, they also designed the ‘Asking-the-Way’ data collection technique to collect street data of linguistic variation by asking people the way in the standard variety (i.e. Putonghua) (Xu and Fu, 2005). This study finds that, though most interviewees’ ‘insider language’ (i.e. language used to communicate with family, friends, and all acquaintances) is not Mandarin, nearly 100% of the interviewees accept Mandarin as the daily communication tool, especially as an ‘outsider language’ to communicate with strangers.

Zhang (2005) examined four phonological variables (i.e. rhotacization, lenition, interdental, full tone) closely linking to the local Beijing Mandarin among Chinese professionals in foreign and state-owned companies in Beijing. Her study demonstrated that professionals in foreign businesses employ linguistic resources from both local and global sources to construct a new cosmopolitan variety of Mandarin, whereas their counterparts in state-owned businesses favor
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The use of local features. This study shows that the linguistic practice of professionals in foreign companies in the local site of Beijing is inseparable from what is happening in the transnational Chinese community and the global market. They see themselves as belonging simultaneously to Beijing, mainland China, and the international business world. Their sense of flexible belonging is articulated through their linguistic behaviors. This study also indicates that the linguistic variation does not just reflect existing social categories and social change, but is a resource for constructing those categories and participates in social change.

While a considerable amount of previous research in Chinese contexts has largely emphasized linguistic variations and changes in terms of forms, types and the sociocultural reasons behind these variations and changes in scattered social groups and geographical areas, Cao (2013) provided a systematic and comprehensive study which aims to uncover the patterns and structures of these variations and changes, and explore the relationship between these changes and the original Chinese language structure. This endeavor is much in line with the central mission in variationist sociolinguistics. His study examines the emergence of new elements in modern Chinese language in the aspects of vocabulary, semantics and grammar. It reveals that with lexical innovation and deviation from or violation of the rules of the original Chinese language system, the modern Chinese language is in constant progress to forming new norms and patterns because of various social and linguistic factors. These changes have made huge impacts on different levels of traditional Chinese language, but on the other hand, they promote language development through expansion of vocabulary and grammatical systems.

**Interactional approach**

If we postulate the variationist approach as aligned at the linguistic end of sociolinguistics, the interactional approach is situated in the middle of the socio/linguistic continuum that explores how language is used to create meaning via social interactions. The work drawing on this approach includes research on participants, the norms of interaction and audience, and the social construction of meaning through language choices and changes. Unlike the variationist approach, interactional sociolinguistics, represented by John Gumperz (1982), extends the units of analysis to the larger context of language use and to larger stretches of language use such as conversations and texts. This approach is largely qualitative in nature and aims to combine wider contextual knowledge with linguistic analysis to illuminate the interpretive processes of interaction. Like other branches in sociolinguistics, interactional sociolinguistics bears a strong social/cultural agenda in its linguistic exploration. It aims to demonstrate the connection between ‘small-scale interactions’ and ‘large-scale sociological effects’ (Jacquemet, 2011: 475), providing a ‘dynamic view of social environments where history, economic forces and interactive processes . . . combine to create or to eliminate social distinctions’ (Gumperz, 1982: 29). Scholars in this field also work to identify communication problems as a result of linguistic and cultural diversity and aim to address social issues such as inequality, discrimination, social injustice through examination of language use. Having been developed in an anthropological context of cross-cultural comparison, interactional sociolinguistics has also focused largely on contexts of intercultural miscommunication, including intercultural and inter-group communication, and comparative research.

Although research methods used in interactional sociolinguistic research often blend tools and theories from pragmatics, conversation analysis, politeness and other linguistic theories, interactional sociolinguistics usually makes use of both ethnographic and linguistic methods to investigate language use in interaction (Gumperz, 2001). Ethnographic research is often used at the initial stage of the research to provide insights into the local communication setting; to
identify representative data relevant to the research question; and to check whether the analyst's expectations and interpretations are in line with or contrary to the local interlocutors. Following up on that, the researchers examine audio or video-recordings of conversations or other interactions by drawing on various linguistic methods. They analyze linguistic forms such as words, sentences and even the whole text, as well as other subtle cues such as prosody and register what the interlocutors rely on in the communication process. Interactional sociolinguistics has been widely used in investigating linguistic interaction in various social settings and professional domains.

In the field of Chinese discourse studies, interactional sociolinguistics was first introduced as a discourse-analytical approach by Xu et al. (1997) and Xu (2002), followed by a series of introductory and commentary publications in Chinese in the new century. Drawing on interactional sociolinguistics as a developing research field in discourse studies, an increasing number of empirical studies has been conducted to examine Chinese discourse (e.g. Endo, 2013; Pan and Kadar, 2013; Wang, X., 2015; Zhu, 2016). Pan and Kadar (2013) brought together empirical studies that employ diverse methods and analytic frameworks in interactional sociolinguistics in analyzing data sources derived from various Chinese contexts, including mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and other overseas Chinese communities. For example, in Pan and Kadar’s (2013) collection, Endo (2013) examined the sentential positions and functions of a Chinese expression wo juede (我觉得 ‘I think’) and its relation to the epistemic stance that speakers take in conversation. It was found that Chinese speakers modulate social relations with their interlocutors by changing the positions of wo juede (‘I think’) in conversation.

By drawing on interactional sociolinguistics, Wang, X. (2015) examined the supportive verbal feedback such as some interjection or exclamation words like mh (嗯), ah (啊), yeah (对), or some non-verbal feedback signals like nodding, in naturally occurring Chinese conversation with a view to exploring the influence of social factors on supportive verbal feedback. The study investigated the form, pragmatic function and the distribution of verbal supportive feedback in Chinese natural conversations and discussed the interactive mechanism and characteristics of supportive feedback in the Chinese language.

Zhu (2016) investigated extended concurrent speech and guānxi (Chinese: 关系, i.e. relationship) management in Mandarin. Drawing on interactional sociolinguistics (incl. conversation analysis and ethnographic information concerning the participants’ relational history, occupation, age, sex and social distance), this study explores extended concurrent speech as a strategy for guānxi management employed by non-familial equal-status Mandarin speakers in everyday practice. Spontaneous mundane conversations (incl. 8 extracts being presented in the article) were analyzed and interpreted with the focuses on central linguistic features and marginalized contextualization cues, which situate inferences in contexts. The participants were found to co-construct extended concurrent speech to maintain or enhance guānxi without any manifestations of negative evaluation. This study suggests the importance of situating research in local and large contexts, and the necessity to examine extended concurrent speech, floor taking and topic switching in different varieties of Chinese language.

In addition, Wu and her colleagues (2016) reviewed and critiqued many sociolinguistic studies on new media during recent decades and proposed future directions for research in this area of inquiry. They call for cross-disciplinary endeavors to be attempted in the theoretical, perspective aspects as well as the methodological aspect in order to better describe, interpret, and predict patterns and development of human interaction in digital times. They also suggest more interactional sociolinguistics and multimodality studies to be conducted in the domain of new media in Chinese language.
Sociocultural linguistics

In the new century, due to disciplinary and methodological distinctions, the term ‘sociolinguistics’ was often used to only refer to variationist approach in sociolinguistics, that explores the correlation between language forms and language user variables using large-scale quantitative analysis (Shuy, 2003; Spolsky, 2010). In outlining the current developments in sociolinguistic studies and their difference from the traditional variationist approach, Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 2008) advocated the use of the term ‘sociocultural linguistics’ to highlight the interdisciplinary efforts used to explore the interrelationship between language, individual, culture, and society. In the same vein, scholars in Europe talk about ‘linguistic ethnography’ (Blommaert, 2005; Rampton et al., 2015) to emphasize the importance of incorporating ethnography into linguistic studies. These two schools, sharing many commonalities, can be regarded as the current efforts to bring together the traditionally separate anthropological and linguistic approaches to language. In the traditional sense, anthropological approaches including interactional linguistics have sought to illuminate culture through investigation of speech events (e.g. Hymes, 1974) and interactional practices (e.g. Gumperz, 1982), whereas the linguistic approach has largely drawn on social information to address issues of linguistic structure, variation and change (e.g. Labov, 1966). In promoting a broadly interdisciplinary sociocultural approach to language and discourse, sociocultural linguistics aims to ‘forge an alliance or coalition that fosters dialogue and collaboration between complementary approaches’ (Bucholtz and Hall, 2008: 403) in the investigation of language and discourse to illuminate social and cultural processes.

As argued by Bucholtz and Hall (2008: 423), the key strengths of sociocultural linguistics lie in the ethnographic grounding of linguistic anthropology and the rigorous analytic tools of quantitative sociolinguistics and conversation analysis for the detailed investigation of linguistic and interactional structures. Bucholtz and Hall (2008) illustrated sociocultural linguistic approach by re-examining the data collected as part of an ethnographic sociolinguistic study of language, race, and youth culture conducted by Bucholtz in 1995–96 at ‘Bay City High School’, an ethnically diverse and racially divided urban high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. This study brings the previous ethnographic interview data to the focus of the detailed interactional linguistic analysis. In this data re-examining process, the informal ethnographic interviews used to solicit demographic data information such as name, age, grade level and gender are analyzed in depth by drawing on tools in interactional linguistic analysis. This reanalysis of data yielded rich insights into the students’ dilemma in the self-representation of their ethnicity (see detailed analysis in Bucholtz and Hall, 2008: 413–416). It shows that the research interviews in sociolinguistics studies cannot only provide mere background information but also be taken as a medium from which to extract linguistic variables as well as richly contextualized linguistic data in their own right.

Similar to Bucholtz and Hall, Rampton and his UK/Europe-based colleagues described linguistic ethnography (LE) as a ‘discursive space’ and ‘a site of encounter’ (Rampton, 2007a, 2007b; Rampton et al., 2015) that brings together scholars with mixed interests and backgrounds in broad alignment with two basic tenets. First, LE scholars assume that the contexts for communication should be investigated rather than assumed. Meaning takes shape within specific social relations, interactional histories and institutional regimes, produced and construed by agents with expectations and repertoires that have to be grasped ethnographically; second, analysis of the internal organization of verbal (and other kinds of semiotic) data is essential to understanding its significance and position in the world. Meaning is far more than just the ‘expression of ideas’, and biography, identifications, stance and nuance are extensively signaled in the linguistic and textual fine-grain.
Rampton (2007b) illustrates that linguistic ethnography investigates communication within the temporal unfolding of social processes that involve 1) persons, 2) situated encounters, 3) institutions, networks and communities of practice. LE scholars draw on Goffman’s perspective (1959, 1967, 1974, 1981) to analyze the whole of what’s going on in a communicative event – the physical setting and the participants’ positionings, their interactional histories and projects, their institutional and ethnic identities, the topic that they are talking about, their words and their actions.

Scholars drawing on sociocultural linguistics or linguistic ethnography generally hold that language and social life are mutually shaping, and that close analysis of situated language use can provide both fundamental and typical insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural practices (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Rampton et al., 2015).

In unravelling the intricate relation between language and society, contemporary developments in sociocultural linguistics and linguistic ethnography show increasing interest in small-scale qualitative studies that incorporate ethnographic methods in their socio-cultural linguistic investigation. The following study (Wang, W., 2015) is presented as an example of the small-scale qualitative study that employs the sociocultural approach just described.

**Case study**

This study examines how identities of migrant workers (i.e. 农民工 Nongmin Gong) have been constructed and represented by public media in China. The data for the study were collected from the production and broadcasting process of a TV talk show program in China, called “China’s Nongmin Gong” (Chinese: 中国农民工), launched by Guizhou Satellite TV (GZSTV) in China in 2007. Drawing on sociocultural linguistic theories on interaction and identity (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, 2008), and a dramaturgical model of social interaction analysis (Goffman, 1959, 1974), the study explores how the migrant workers’ personal life experiences have been transformed into media discourse.

‘China’s Nongmin Gong’ is a 40-minute talk show between a host/hostess and one or two migrant worker interviewees, talking about the migrant workers’ life experience. It is broadcast once a week by Guizhou Satellite TV (GZSTV), a provincial broadcasting system based in southwestern China, Guizhou province. Located inland in an underdeveloped area of China, this province is a major exporter of migrant workers to other parts of the country every year, which has provided the GZSTV with abundant resources for its coverage of this floating population.

**Narrative identities of the migrant workers on this TV program**

In discourse studies and sociolinguistics, narrative or storytelling is considered as the ‘basic’, most ‘essential’, mode of human communication (Blommaert, 2005: 84). In this talk show program, storytelling/narrative is the key means through which particular aspects of reality and specific facets of the interviewees’ identities are co-constructed by themselves and the host/hostess in the program. In doing so, they are constructing a narrative identity by integrating their life experiences into an internalized, evolving story of the self, which provides the individual with a sense of unity and purpose in life (Lorenzo-Dus, 2009; McAdams, 2001). Being identified as typified or outstanding migrants, interviewees are asked to share their life stories on the TV screen. However, they are usually inexperienced media performers, yet are expected to tell ‘true stories’ about themselves and deliver ‘authentic talks’ to express their opinions. To achieve this, their participation in the program must be much guided or even manipulated by the television crews, and particularly by the hosts in the studio. Consequently, this study aims at examining the discursive practices used by the public media to achieve this sociolinguistic construction.
of migrant workers’ identities. Their discursive practices are analyzed through three distinctive stages of the production, namely ‘off stage’, ‘back stage’, and ‘front stage’.

In analyzing the narrative identities of the migrant workers, we also draw on the notion of abnormality, which is attributed to Michel Foucault’s Abnormal (2003). As noted by Dong (2013), migrants in China are often regarded as ‘abnormal individuals’, since they cannot be integrated into the normative system in the cities. According to Foucault (2003: 162), the norm is the ‘rule of conduct, the tacit law, the principle of order and conformity, against which irregularity, disorder, disorganization, dysfunction, deviation are measured and disqualified’. In this sense, contemporary public discourse in China often regards the migrant worker as someone that deviates from the ‘normal’ as they have often introduced disorder to, and disruption of, the established normative system in cities (Dong, 2013).

In the context of the public discourse of abnormality around migrant workers, the TV show program ‘China’s Nongmin Gong’ attempts to provide a counter-discourse (Foucault, 1977) by tempering the perception of abnormality of migrant worker’ identities and advocating their normality or even their super-normality. With a view to doing this, this TV program presents to its audience that the migrant workers are as ‘normal’ as all ordinary people and even ‘supernormal’ (i.e. better than or exceeding the normal), which is achieved partly through being selected for the TV show.

The data in this study consist of 48 episodes of the ‘China’s Nongmin Gong’ program broadcast across 2007–2009, and the interviews and observation notes collected through ten days fieldwork by the researcher with the TV crews in 2010. Despite the wide variety of the migrant workers’ life experiences showcased in the program, a content analysis of the 48 episodes reveals some common features of their narrative identities that might have made the interviewees exceptional or supernormal. These features include representing the migrant workers as 1) diligent and frugal individuals striving for success; 2) perseverant and confident in face of adversities in life; 3) proactive with visions and strategies. These features in their narrative identities have been well-preserved in the TV program through the interviewees’ storytelling of their personal experiences.

**Discursive practices in the co-construction of identities**

The study aims to investigate how the narrative identities of the migrant workers have been represented and manipulated in the media. Drawing on a dramaturgical model of social interaction analysis, interaction between the migrant workers and the TV crew has been analyzed in terms of how they operate as actors performing around the stage (Macionis and Gerber, 2011). The model adopted here has its origin in Goffman’s work (1959, 1977), which made an important demarcation between “front stage” and “back stage” behaviors. As the term indicates, “front stage” actions are visible to the audience and are part of the performance. People engage in “back stage” behavior when no audience is present. In this study, ‘back stage’ refers to the intensive preparation between the TV crew and the migrant worker participants in getting ready for the live ‘front stage’ performance. ‘Off stage’ is the term used in this study to refer to the living circumstance of the participants’ private life that is distant from the TV studio and it is out of audience sight. The following sections will briefly illustrate the three-stage production of this sociolinguistic construction of identities.

**Reaching into the ‘off stage’ life**

Upon being spotted by the media, the interviewees’ ‘off stage’ life is invaded and interfered with by the program crew, who usually pay an on-site visit to the potential interviewees. In
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this on-site visit, the crew observes, records and interacts with the interviewees and the people around them. Short video clips are shot to focus on some facets of the interviewees’ life experience that are considered ‘useful’ for the program.

At this stage, the interviewees are briefed about the goals and procedures of the TV program. Thus, the migrant workers’ ‘off stage’ life and space, which was previously invisible to the audience, has been accessed by the crew and some aspects of their life are captured for the TV presentation.

‘Back stage’ preparation

Then, the interviewees are invited to the studio for the ‘back stage’ preparation of the program. Despite it being claimed a live show, this program makes the participants fully aware of what they should talk about on the show and how they should do it. As a crucial step of the ‘back stage’, the producer and the program host have a ‘lengthy talk’ with the interviewee to decide what should be covered at the ‘front stage’. The ‘lengthy talk’ (Chinese: 长谈), so called by the program director, usually takes several sessions over a few days, enabling the program crew to have a thorough understanding of the participants’ life, and, more importantly, enabling them to draft a script for the live show on the basis of this ‘back stage’ interaction.

This script (see an extract in Table 3.1), which serves as a running sheet for the program, covers the key steps of the program and the major points that the program host will bring up. As the professional presenter, the host controls the shape, the length and even the content of the program by following the running sheet with its key questions and points. Below is an extract of such a running sheet with the pre-scripted host’s key questions.

‘Front stage’ performance

The ‘reality’ talk show interweaves two main sites of the participants: the immediate site of the studio, in which the interview takes place, and the visually marked and dynamic sites from the interviewees’ daily life, which have been captured by the pre-recorded video clips. As indicated in Table 3.1, the interviewee in this episode was a music teacher at a rural primary school before migrating to Beijing to become a singer. At the beginning of the program, the host introduced him with a pre-recorded video clip, presenting his background and his school for migrant children. Using the pre-scripted opening remarks and key questions, the host facilitates direct access to the socio-historical world from which the interviewee comes to tell viewers ‘true stories’ about ‘real people’.

As the key player in the reproduction of the migrant workers’ life stories, the program host acts as a coaxes who helps the lay participants spell out what the media wants them to say, encouraging them to dwell on certain aspects of their stories and telling the stories in a particular tone of voice. These practices can be simply termed scaffolding in co-construction of the desirable identities of migrant workers for this program. Here scaffolding practices refers to a variety of linguistic practices that the media staff draw on to support presentation of the migrant workers’ identities. These include strategies of eliciting, positive feedback, reinforcement, topic change, and, more importantly, foregrounding and backgrounding of specific aspects of the participants’ identities. These discursive strategies are discussed below.

ELICITING AND POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Eliciting and positive feedback, commonly employed by the host to introduce the stories or topics, are often manifested in the form of a question, or a statement as a reminder in the live interview.
Table 3.1 A sample of the running sheets for the program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>序号 [no.]</th>
<th>环节 [steps]</th>
<th>内容 [content]</th>
<th>要点 [key hints]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>开场 [opening]</td>
<td>[key lines by the interviewer] 观众朋友，这里是“中国农民工”讲述节目。欢迎收看。欢迎我们节目的嘉宾，来自北京的孙恒，也欢迎大家来参加我们节目的现场的观众朋友们。先来看一个短片来认识一下今天做客我们节目的嘉宾。[Dear audience, here is the “China’s Migrant Workers” program, welcome. Welcome Sun Heng, the participant from Beijing to our program. Also welcome the audience to the site to participate in our program. First, a short film to introduce our guest for our program today.]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Video clip 2</td>
<td>[Introduction to the school run by Sun Heng] 同心实验学校位于北京朝阳区的金盏乡皮村，距市中心有近两小时的车程。孙恒选择在这里办学，一是因为价格便宜，二是因为这里居住着众多的外来打工者，而本地村民只有外来人口的十分之一。[Tongxin Experimental School is located in Pi Village, Jinzhan Township of Chaoyang District, Beijing, about two hours’ drive from the city centre. Sun Heng chose here as the location for the school; first because land price is low, second it is inhabited by a large number of migrant workers and local villagers was only one-tenth.] ..</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 5          | 演播室访谈 [studio interview] | [key questions by the interviewer] 1. 问：孙恒有没有孩子？他的孩子将来会不会来这里读书。Q: Does Sun Heng have children? Will his children attend school here in the future?  
2. 问：你怎么想到成立打工青年艺术团的？Q: What do you think about the establishment of a working youth art ensemble? | 突出那段打工经历给他带来的人生影响 [Highlight the impacts that work experience made on his life]  
这个阶段还处于寻找人生道路的迷茫时期 [This stage in his life is the lost time in finding out his life goal]. |

Extract 1

1. 主持人／你干的是什么工作? [Interviewer/what kind of work do you do?]  
2. 余大娇／我现在干的是检查员。[Yu Dajiao/I’m now working as an inspector.]  
3. 主持人／是一个技术性比较高的工作嘛! [Interviewer/ It is a technical job now!]

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In Ext. 1, the host deliberately formed the questions about the interviewee’s current job by following the eliciting strategy step by step. First (L. 1) is the opening question to start the topic; second (L. 3) is the elaboration of the topic and positive feedback to what she has done; third (L. 5) is an alternative question (i.e. you got the job through recruitment or a test), exploring how the interviewee got the job. This eliciting strategy aims to highlight two key points regarding the interviewee: 1) the interviewee got a technical job with a higher status due to her ‘认
真、老实’ (conscientiousness and honesty); 2) she got the job via passing an exam based on her own capacity. This eliciting strategy enables the host to introduce the topics and guide the interviewees through to spell out the desirable stories.

REINFORCEMENT AND TOPIC CHANGE

Reinforcement, a strategy used to confirm and stress the interviewees’ remarks and feelings, was frequently observed in the host’s front stage performance. For instance, in the story about Yu Dajiao (details in Ext 1), some questions (underlined in Ext. 2) are found in the host’s utterances. Note that these questions are for emphasis or to seek confirmation of the previous remarks rather than to elicit different answers from the interviewee. Here the host purposely repeats or strengthens the interviewees’ utterances to draw the attention of the audience.

Extract 2

1 余大娇／一件衣服才十五块。 [Yu Dajiao/it is just 15 yuan for each clothes]
主持人／十五块钱啊!?[Host/ only 15 yuan?]

2 余海深／开始的时候，我一般都是买一下衣服。买的衣服都是很便宜，都是在三四十块钱以下的，都是很便宜的，然后就没有其他的了。[Yu Haishen/ at the beginning, I started with buying some clothes. All the clothing is very cheap, below 30–40 yuan, very cheap, then, buy nothing else.]
主持人／就没有其他的了?[host/ nothing else?]

Another strategy employed by the host is ‘topic change’. It is a discursive technique used by the host to change topics and keep up the pace of the program. In doing so, the host uses hedge
phrases or structures, such as ‘it seems . . . ’ (好像), ‘I heard that . . . ’ (我听说), ‘it is heard that . . . ’ (听说) to initiate a new topic when he needs the interviewee to get onto it immediately. For instance,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extract 3</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 主持人／好像你当时思想斗争挺厉害的，好像还专门请了一天假去看了一下上海？ [Host/ It seems that at that time you were quite conflicted and asked one day leave to visit Shanghai.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 主持人／你在那儿，刚开始去的时候，也干的是装卸工，后来听说你当队长是自荐的，自己推荐自己的？ [Host/ you were a loader as the start there. Then, it was heard that you self-recommended yourself to be the team leader, self-recommended?]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here the host uses phrases or sentences to introduce a new topic that he wants the interviewees to talk about next. ‘Topic change’ here is a technique commonly used by the host to control the pace of the program and to help the interviewees cover the anticipated stories that the program requires them to spell out. It is assumed that in the ‘back stage’, the host has acquired all the stories that could be told ‘on stage’, where he is just using this topic change strategy to prompt the new topic on time.

FOREGROUNDING AND BACKGROUNDING

As drawn from Fairclough’s work on discourse and social change (1995), foregrounding refers to the practice of emphasizing some concepts or issues in the text, while backgrounding alludes to the practice of playing down concepts or issues in the text. The term ‘foregrounding’ would overlap in some cases with the term ‘reinforcement’ and be similar to ‘positive feedback’. It is found in this TV program that backgrounding is probably more implicitly presented than foregrounding. However, a distinctive example found in the dataset is in the life story of a migrant worker called Deng Qimao (Extract 4).

<table>
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<th>Extract 4</th>
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| 主持人／什么错误？你能不能跟我们说一说？ [Hostess/what’s wrong? Can you tell us about that?]
邓启茂／ . . . 那人就讲了，弄菜去，可能就是偷菜了。当时就比较胆怯，不愿意去。但是人家说你了，我们天天弄给你吃，你吃了我们。你不去弄不行啊，去的过程当中就被逮着了。 [Deng Qimao/ . . . The man told me to get the veggies. He probably meant stealing. I was a bit shy and unwilling to go. But he said, ‘we provide you with food every day. Since you feed on us, you have to go’. So I got caught in the process of doing so.]
主持人／等于就是到农民的菜地去摘点菜？ [Hostess/ It appears that you picked some vegetables from the farmer’s farm?]
邓启茂／到菜地我还没有去摘，我就在路边站着看他摘。他去摘，来人了，他跑了，把我逮着了。 . . . [Deng Qimao/I haven’t picked but standing on the sidewalk, I saw him pick. He picked and the people came. He ran away, and they caught me. . . .] |
Here the host attempts to background the interviewee’s misconduct of stealing by calling it ‘pick veggies from the farm’. While misconduct such as theft and violence have been common complaints by urbanites against migrant workers, the host here deliberately downplays this complaint in order to promote positive images of this population, which might be the key social function of this reality TV talk show program.

Conclusion

This case study revealed how the TV crew drew on diverse discursive strategies and linguistic resources to transform the migrant workers’ personal experience to a form suitable for a public media program. As a demonstration of the sociocultural linguistic approach to discourse analysis, this small-scale study employed a wide range of theories and concepts, including sociocultural linguistic theories in identity and interaction, the dramaturgical model of social interaction, Foucault’s ‘abnormality’ and Fairclough’s ‘foregrounding and backgrounding’, to name just a few. This fusion of theories and concepts constructed a theoretical repertoire in addressing the research question of the study, i.e. how the identities of migrant workers have been constructed and represented in public media in China. By employing both ethnographic and linguistic methods, this study exemplified the modern interdisciplinary trend to explore social issues through examination of language use, thus exemplifying the sociolinguistic approach to discourse analysis.

References

English references

Sociolinguistic approaches


Chinese references


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Wei Wang