

Jan Blommaert. 2010. *The sociolinguistics of globalization*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press. (xvi, 213)

This book takes a fresh approach to understanding the broadened presence of international languages in the world with the apt observation, “the world has not become a village. That well-matured metaphor of globalization does not work.” Instead the author makes a comparison to a *web*, “a tremendously complex web of villages, towns, neighborhoods, settlements connected by material and symbolic ties” (1). This view of globalization leads to a sociolinguistics that sees the phenomenon not as uniformitization but as “locality transported into locality,” where the “localities do not necessarily become more ‘global’ or ‘deterritorialized’” (79) in the process.

The text is supplemented with a useful index and 26 illustrations that exhibit the samples being analyzed. A prominent feature of the work is the presentation of long sections of detailed analysis of examples which expose what are termed “truncated repertoires” – ways to use language resources which are incompletely developed (102 ff) — including those of local origin — in pluralized language contact situations. One such phenomenon is the appearance of both Kanji and English words on a prepaid telephone card in Japan. This is frequently paralleled on the mainland of China, but with *pinyin* Romanization often added to the mix. This type of situation in fact is very common. The appearance of multiple languages and scripts, for numerous reasons, is a feature of display advertising and product packaging across the Asian continent, in the Middle East, in South Africa (where 11 official languages are recognized), and elsewhere where products are marketed in a plurilingual society.

An interesting case appeared at a chocolate shop in the “very exclusive and expensive food section” of an “up-market department store in Central Tokyo” called NINA’S *derrière*. Although I think B misses the boat in some of the analysis, here is introduced a concept that I think is very useful, that the French, represented by *derrière*, is not “linguistic

French,” i.e., its meaning does not involve decoding the linguistic sign as such, but “*semiotic*” French (emphasis his), present with an “*emblematic*” function” (29).

I do not challenge that the appearance of a French word on the sign carries indexical associations for many viewers as well, but it is not at all out of the question that at such a store in central Tokyo, the well educated and prosperous clientele have enough exposure to French or to English, where *derrière* is a well established French loan, one with a certain flair unmatched by any of the numerous English alternatives, to grasp its “linguistic,” i.e., lexical, denotations. And given the confluence of zany trends and humor in Tokyo fashions in recent years (including the extreme fashion statement that high quality imported chocolates became, the astonishing mixing and (mis)matching of garment styles in composing an outfit, and wearing undergarments outside street clothing), it is not unlikely that the choice of term, especially in the playful, semi-cursive script in which *derrière* appears against the staid serif block upper case type used for *NINA’S*, that the name of the shop functioned as a kind of highbrow in-joke (after all, precisely that French word and no other was selected), a joke possible only in a foreign tongue with such “*chic*” associations among its semiotics.

A process similar to the “*emblematic*” function described at *NINA’S* *derrière* is at work in a poster promoting a 2007 professional golf tournament at the most exclusive (and expensive) country club in Beijing (142). There Chinese character and English text appears against an image of a lush fairway and an inset of an obviously professional white golfer posed in the follow through phase of his swing. An analysis of the semiotics of these images must begin with the observation that golf itself is possible in East Asia only as a product of globalization — it was taken there by Europeans — and it has not been indigenized to any extent, especially on the mainland. But assuming that the use of the English on the poster is meant only for “people who are familiar with golf and who know English, mainly for Beijing-based expatriates,” (143) is mistaken, and a number of pieces of information point to

that.¹ The semiotic value of the images of the fairway and the Caucasian golfer are much greater for the Chinese public than a European or American one, which sees golf televised every weekend of the year and is quite accustomed to Asian golfers participating in and winning events on PGA tours in the USA and in Europe. The Chinese political slogan, 树运动新风 *shu yundong xin feng* ‘cultivate a new spirit in sports, which is translated on the poster, “teeing off sports consciousness (sic),” and rendered “promote modern sportsmanship” in the book, is juxtaposed with 建和谐社会 *jian hexie shehui* ‘build a harmonious society’, which is rendered on the poster, “for a harmonious community.”

As noted, the English text contains a spelling error and the textual message is a domestic political slogan (143), reflecting government rhetoric for a domestic audience (note that all corporate business is undertaken either in partnership or in a close relationship with units of government). Furthermore, the English rendition, “teeing off sports consciousness (sic) for a harmonious community,” is unintelligible.. These images have much greater appeal to aspiring Chinese of the higher classes than to Europeans. Ticket prices for the event, 5,000 Yuan, about 500 Euros, according to the author (200, n. 5.2), and about \$725 USD at the time of the tournament, preclude the demographics that include most expatriates, who either teach at various levels of the education system or work at corporate jobs at middle management levels, even if they were interested in attending the Asian Tour event. This poster in no way appears designed to appeal to “international audiences.” Nor do the organizers target international “corporate business”; their sponsors, like their audience, are domestic. These images and messages, and their “English” rendering, speak to the local higher professional and business classes and the government officials who sanction them. This English does not

¹ The demographics of the golfing public in China somewhat parallel those in the West, but lie in a higher band of professional and business classes. Green fees start at about 800 yuan (about \$120 USD) and go up from there. A larger portion of the golfing public therefore does not actually play on courses but takes their clubs to driving ranges where they can spend an afternoon or an evening hitting balls off practice tees. Playing on a course is the hallmark of economic and political elites.

communicate “linguistically,” but has primarily “semiotic” value: it gives the project a flavor of foreign presence.

Even though I have not agreed with the author’s analysis on some particulars in the examples, I emphasize again that this notion of the “emblematic function” (“semiotic,” *ibid.*) of bits of a (foreign) language is a valuable concept for understanding the functionality of international languages in environments where they are not spoken and do not serve a role in intercourse.

While many of the semiotic associations in the discussion of the novel *Mirada Bubu ya Wazalendo*, written in Swahili by Gabriel Rhumbiki, remain purely sociological, i.e., nonlinguistic, the review highlights indexical associations of a language in a plurilingual situation — as political statement, for socioeconomic placement, and in complying with particular norms (64 – 74).

In the long section of the text given to a discussion of the widespread phenomenon of fraudulent email solicitation from operators in Nigeria (106 – 136), the evident technical savvy of the spammers is highlighted along with a detailed analysis of the discourse features of samples of the most common types of messages. One with greater familiarity with the long-established beggar culture in the region perhaps might see these discourse elements, while transferred to English, as features of the well codified discourse conventions of the beggar genre in Yoruba and Igbo, and thus as another case of the “translocal,” i.e., language resources from one locality being transferred to another locality (and language). The valuable point is demonstrated here that in the language contact situation, the resources of all languages involved are (re)allocated and deployed “over specific genres and registers” (134).

The section “Selling Accent” (47 – 61) analyzes samples of advertizing content and customer testimonial from World Wide Web-based businesses that market training in “American Accent,” mostly to telephone call centers located in India. The excellent points are

made that the speech norms preferred by those centers and their employees [and imposed by their customers] contrast with state-sanctioned norms as established in government schools (60, 61), and that in the globalized language marketplace, “*normativity* becomes quite complex” (emphasis original) (60).

This phenomenon of accent exportation likewise represents the transfer of the “American accent” to offshore speakers. These courses and their advertizing do not so much represent “imposed” norms whose “cultural semantics revolves around uniformity, homogeneity, and submission” (ibid.), but a response to the local demands of the customer base in the marketplace that the call center operators seek to serve, into whose locality call center employees are reaching via the telephone line. To be successful, and thus continue to enjoy the middle class lifestyle that working at the agencies offers, these employees perceive the need to sound enough like their customers to be accepted as conversationalists.² This version of globalization thus also highlights the transfer of local norms, here those of Northern and North Midland Dialect speech, to the call centers of India for use in selling to or servicing customers who are accustomed to that sound.

In a settlement school in South Africa, where English is the L2 of choice for students, it is not the international standardized norms that are sanctioned in the classroom but the localized community norms, which are also reflected in the speech and writing of the teachers (81 – 101). But for me this adherence to local norms represents less a “downscaling’ of education, bringing it down to the level of the local or regional community” than the “localization of normativity,” (95) where, clearly, English is not being learned to gain admission to Oxford or Harvard but to achieve some measure of economic mobility in the regional community. Each of these case studies, along with NINA’S *derrière* and the poster

² Certainly anyone who has taken a sales call from an Indian call center employee using an assumed English given name like *Jack* or *Skip* who speaks with sounds and in discourse patterns that appear distinctly foreign while offering a local product or service, has sensed great social distance, which can be overcome by speaking with norms more familiar to the customers.

for the golf tournament, in its way, reflects the blending of the “local and translocal in complex networks” (60). It is a detailed, close inspection of the local particulars that defines this approach to global sociolinguistics.

The complex deployment of local and “translocal” resources that occurs in plurilingual situations effectively repudiates what the author refers to as the “linguistic rights paradigm,” which perceives expanding international languages like English as killer languages (43 ff; 182). He shows that it is most often the case that English, “the language that defines globalization,” (48) threatens another former colonial language, while the more real threat to indigenous language is another, more dominant, local or regional tongue (43), as in Tanzania, where, after independence, the government imposed Swahili over English as the national language (65 ff), but at the expense of numerous local varieties. It is shown that globalization in fact has offered opportunities for the unparalleled expansion of some resources of local indigenous languages, such as the use of Sami, a language of about 300 speakers in Finland, in the hip-hop genre for a wider audience (78) and a localized jargon of Swahili among participants in the hip-hop “*gangsta*” culture of Dar es Salaam, who otherwise aspire to competence in English (191).

The sociolinguistics that is argued for in this book recognizes that social distinctions and inequality indexed by language are “organized around concrete resources, not around languages in general but specific registers, varieties, genres ... the challenge is to think of language as a mobile complex of concrete resources” (47). This sociolinguistics blurs the distinction between the synchronic and the diachronic; it recognizes that “very different processes may produce similar outcomes,” which contrasts with the “prima facie uniformity of cultural globalization processes” (139, 40) and that globalization is a “historical process,” one of “considerable depth in time” (137).

This sociolinguistics perforce incorporates local history in understanding local outcomes,

where each of the resources involved is emphasized or disfavored because of local events and trends. The notion that bits of language and linguistic repertoires index regional and social relationships is far from new. But the sociolinguistics developed in this text, which insists on examining the semiotics of individual outcomes in specific locales in terms of their particular histories, is a significant contribution, one that challenges us to trade in our time-worn framework of general socioeconomic class relations for a penetrating curiosity about each outcome that emerges and the particular histories of the relations that produced it.

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