

A Meta-Discursive Analysis of Netizens' Comments on the Use of Putonghua Versus the Suzhou Dialect in the Public Space of Suzhou

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Previous research on the relationship between Putonghua and local dialects has been concerned with the macro-social trends and tensions in China's language planning and language policy. However, much less effort has been dedicated to the ways people react to such trends and tensions and understand the relationship between Putonghua and local dialects from a micro perspective. This study focuses on the use of Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect in the public space of Suzhou, the second largest city of immigration in China. Through a meta-discursive analysis of netizens' comments on the use of Putonghua versus the Suzhou dialect in various public domains such as schools, companies, and public transport, the analysis shows that the ideology of anonymity frames Putonghua as a neutral communicative tool whereas the ideology of authenticity helps claim the authority and legitimacy for the Suzhou dialect. Netizens are deeply involved in the production of a meta-discursive regime which empowers the authenticity of the Suzhou dialect in Suzhou, but undermines its anonymity in the public sphere of Suzhou and silences the voices of other Chinese dialects. Despite an increased use of the Suzhou dialect in the public sphere, the dominant status of Putonghua and its public functions do not seem to be challenged whereas the functions of the Suzhou dialect are still limited and its status remains secondary compared with Putonghua.

Keywords: Putonghua, the Suzhou dialect, the ideology of authenticity, the ideology of anonymity, meta-discursive regime

Despite great variations across different speech communities, the hierarchical relationship between national language(s) and local dialects¹ seems to apply more or less independently of speech communities. In addition, the maintenance of the hierarchical relationship typically involves the stigmatization of local dialects, the glorification of national languages, and the rationalization of the relationship (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013). Previous research on the hierarchical relationship between Putonghua and local dialects has been concerned with the macro-social trends and tensions in China's² language planning and language policy

(LPLP),³ however, much less effort has been dedicated to the ways people react to such trends and tensions and understand the relationship between Putonghua and local dialects from a micro perspective through the lens of the topology of linguistic differentiation, i.e., culturally specific ideologies that link social identities, role relations, ideological and political stances with choices between linguistic alternates (Irvine, 1989, p. 252).

China's sociolinguistic landscape has been undergoing tremendous changes and attracting much attention in recent years. Instead of looking at the macro-social trends and tensions in China's LPLP, this study examines the relationship between Putonghua and local dialects from a micro-discursive perspective and focuses on the use of Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect in the public domains of Suzhou, the second largest city of immigration in China. It applies Woolard's (2008) ideologies of linguistic authority (i.e., the ideology of authenticity and the ideology of anonymity) to a meta-

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¹ *Language* used in this study is a cover term for language, dialect, etc. *Dialects* used in this study should be understood in the popular sense, that is, vernacular dialects, such as Cantonese, the Suzhou dialect, but excluding Putonghua (the common speech, the national language of the People's Republic of China).

² The term *China* as it is used throughout this paper refers to Mainland China and excludes Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan.

³ A thorny issue in LPLP studies is the relationship between *language planning* and *language policy* (see Ferguson, 2006). This study does not attempt to make a distinction between the two terms, and use them interchangeably. A broad definition is used in this study to refer to both as the government's efforts to solve language problems.

discursive analysis of netizens' comments on the use of Putonghua versus the Suzhou dialect in various public domains of Suzhou. The findings show that on the one hand, the ideology of anonymity helps maintain Putonghua's position as a public language. On the other hand, the ideology of authenticity frames the Suzhou dialect as the authentic language of Suzhou. The macro-politics of language are encapsulated in a micro-discursive practice of language ranking and order construction (Foucault, 2007) and micro-level discourses play an important role in regulating the social practice (see Cameron, 1995; Coupland & Jaworski, 2004; Jaffe, 1999; Park, 2009). In this study, netizens are deeply involved in the production of a meta-discursive regime (Bauman & Briggs, 2003) which empowers the authenticity of the Suzhou dialect in Suzhou, but undermines its anonymity in the public domains of Suzhou, thus establishing a value hierarchy between Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect. Netizens naturalize and legitimize language behaviour and attitudes that the state agencies of LPLP are trying to promote. Despite an increased presence of the Suzhou dialect in some public domains of Suzhou, the dominant status of Putonghua and its public functions do not seem to be challenged whereas the functions of the Suzhou dialect are still limited and its status remains secondary compared with Putonghua.

Background

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (the PRC), the Chinese government "engaged in the largest language engineering project in the world in terms of the number of speakers and the second most extensive project—second probably only to that in the former Soviet Union—in terms of the number of languages" (Zhou & Ross, 2004, p. 1). The promotion of Putonghua is one of the three major tasks China carried out in LPLP, the other two being simplification and standardization of Chinese characters and development of *Hanyu Pinyin* (Chen, 1999). In China, Putonghua is widely used in such public domains as government, education, the media, etc. whereas local dialects are mainly confined to families. This diglossic compartmentalization of language practice is also reflected in the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* (Chinese Government, 2000) which came into effect as of January 1st, 2001. This law stipulates the use of Putonghua in public domains, such as government, schools, the media, and the public sector (Articles 9, 10, 12, 13) and specifies four

public occasions where dialects may be used (Article 16).

This study focuses on the use of Putonghua versus the Suzhou dialect in the public domains of Suzhou. Located in the Yangtze River Delta of China, Suzhou is the second largest immigration city, next to Shenzhen.⁴ Suzhou has its own local dialect with a long history. This dialect belongs to the Wu dialects and is widely used in the Wu literature including songs, operas, and novels (Snow et al., 2018). It was once used "one hundred percent of the time in all domains" (Wang, 2003, p. 30), but is now a "stigmatized system of communication with an ever-shrinking domain of use" (Wang, 2003, p. 35). With the development of the Yangtze River Delta after China's reform and opening up in the late 1970s, Suzhou's beautiful scenery and favourable policies towards non-local talents have attracted many people to settle down in Suzhou. At the same time, the local sociolinguistic landscape has been undergoing rapid changes. Yu (2010) reports a questionnaire-based survey of language use and attitudes of Suzhou local students. Through an analysis of 589 questionnaires filled by students who were born in Suzhou and whose parents are Suzhou local people, the findings show that in the private domain, the Suzhou dialect is spoken with older generations whereas Putonghua is used more frequently among younger generations in a family. In the public domain, more than half (52.1%) speak Putonghua in markets and more than 80% use Putonghua in supermarkets, post offices, and schools. Results from Yu's language attitudes survey show that the Suzhou dialect receives a higher evaluation in terms of solidarity whereas Putonghua is rated higher along the dimensions of status and instrumental value. Yu (2011) makes a survey of the language profile of students from migrant families in Suzhou and obtains 327 valid questionnaires. The survey results show that 60.2% of the students first learned Putonghua before schooling, and more than 90% of the students use Putonghua in both public and private domains. Although students' responses in Yu's studies cannot be read as accurate reports of their language practice, Yu's studies to some extent reflect the current language situation in Suzhou, that is, the vitality of the Suzhou dialect is in decline and the

⁴ Shenzhen is located in the Guangdong Province, near Hong Kong and Macao. The sociolinguistic landscape of Shenzhen is quite different from that of Hong Kong, Macao, and other parts of Guangdong where Cantonese is the dominant language in various domains (Lee & Li, 2013; Li, 2006). Unlike Suzhou where there is a local dialect with a large indigenous population, Shenzhen developed from a small fishing village and people around the nation came to Shenzhen after China's reform and opening up in the late 1970s. Since most of the people speak different dialects, Putonghua acts as the lingua franca in Shenzhen (Tang & Liang, 2005) and its local dialect is near extinction (Tang & Xiao, 2007).

shift of language use from the Suzhou dialect to Putonghua is under way.

In the past two decades, a series of actions have been taken to promote the Suzhou dialect. For example, in 2011, the local public transport system added the Suzhou dialect to announce the bus stops in addition to Putonghua. In the education domain, the Suzhou dialect was introduced into various levels of education in 2012. According to Wu et al. (2012), some primary and secondary schools in Suzhou are designated as experimental sites of offering the Suzhou dialect courses and some kindergartens allocate 10 to 20 minutes every day for children to learn this dialect. Some tertiary institutes (e.g., Suzhou Institute of Trade and Commerce) start including the Suzhou dialect as one of the compulsory courses for some majors. The first Suzhou dialect teacher training course was organized in March 2012. In addition, one company encourages its workers to speak the Suzhou dialect at work and offers material rewards for the outstanding speaker (Tang, 2012). However, the Suzhou dialect has not received unanimous public support. For example, one company has banned the use of the Suzhou dialect in the company and threatened to fire those who dare speak it at work (Yao, 2012). When various actions have been taken to promote the Suzhou dialect, some forums were set up on the internet for netizens to express their opinions over the use of Putonghua versus the Suzhou dialect in Suzhou's public domains and these opinions present an interesting case for us to explore the relationship between Putonghua and local dialects in China's LPLP.

Language Ideology as a Field of Inquiry

Over the past two decades, the notion of language ideology has gained considerable momentum in different strands of scholarship. With its origin in North American linguistic anthropology, language ideology serves as an important theoretical apparatus and orientation for the exploration of relationships of power and constructions of identity despite its different emphases in different focal areas (e.g., Gal & Woolard, 2001; Kroskrity, 2000; Schieffelin et al., 1998; Silverstein, 1979). Language ideologies are defined as “representations, whether explicit or implicit, that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a social world” (Woolard, 1998, p. 3). Among various language ideologies, Woolard's (2008) ideologies of linguistic authority have received much attention (e.g., Pujolar & González, 2013; Soler, 2013; Woolard, 2013). The ideologies of linguistic

authority concern the rationalization and justification of the authority and legitimacy of a language over other languages. Underlying such ideologies are two ideological complexes, i.e., the ideology of authenticity and the ideology of anonymity. The ideology of authenticity associates a language with “the essential, distinctive nature of a community or a speaker” whereas the ideology of anonymity frames a language as “a neutral, objective vehicle of expression equally available to all users” (Woolard & Frekko, 2013, p. 135). For example, Woolard (2008) finds that Catalan is often perceived as an index of Catalonia identity. The unique features of Catalan at phonological, lexical, grammatical, and textual levels construct the authentic voice of a Catalan person. In marked contrast, Spanish is legitimated in Spain as an anonymous voice from nowhere.

Just as Park (2009) notes, “without the socio-cognitive mediation of beliefs about language and their social meaning, large-scale social events cannot have a real impact upon speakers' linguistic life” (p. 4), it is important to examine the ways how people react to macro trends and tensions in China's LPLP and understand the relationship between Putonghua and local dialects from a micro language-ideological perspective. Previous research on the ideologies of linguistic authority focuses on Europe. However, few studies have been applied in non-Western contexts such as China. This study applies Woolard's ideologies of linguistic authority to explore the relationship between Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect, and aims to answer the following two questions:

1. Do the online comments on the use of Putonghua versus the Suzhou dialect in the public sphere display the ideologies of linguistic authority?
2. How are the ideology of anonymity and the ideology of authenticity (re)produced in relation to each other in online comments?

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Many studies (e.g., Blommaert, 1999; Estival & Pennycook, 2011; Johnson & Ensslin, 2007; Johnson & Milani, 2010) have demonstrated the importance of the media as key arenas for the production and reproduction of language ideologies. In Kelly-Holmes' (2012) opinion, “media have a major role to play in maintaining or challenging existing language regimes, attitudes and ideologies” (p. 333).

The data for this study were collected from various popular internet forums. To construct the corpus, the Suzhou dialect

and Putonghua were used as keywords to search online for netizens' comments on the use of Putonghua versus the Suzhou dialect in various public domains of Suzhou. The first part of the corpus is collected from netizens' comments on a company's policy banning the use of the Suzhou dialect within the company. The second part is from netizens' opinions on the use of the Suzhou dialect in the local railway transit system. The third part comes from netizens' comments on the addition of the Suzhou dialect in the local public transport system to announce the stops. The last part is collected from netizens' comments on the inclusion of the Suzhou dialect as a compulsory course. Netizens' comments, i.e., popular linguistic discourse (Estival & Pennycook, 2011), provide a rich source for us to explore how the ideologies of linguistic authority rationalize and condition the way we talk about the use of Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect in the public domains of Suzhou.

After the data collection, fine-grained data analysis was conducted. Data analysis was a gradually evolving process in which the data were examined to identify key themes and ideological underpinnings of netizens' comments in the light of Woolard's ideologies of linguistic authority. Discourse theory was also applied to provide a deeper understanding of how the ideology of anonymity and the ideology of authenticity are (re)produced in relation to each other. Before the analysis, it is necessary to point out that because of the limited data base for this study and the complex sociolinguistic situations across China, a blanket generalization should be avoided. In addition, selective rather than exhaustive, the analysis is intended to provide a glimpse of people's attitudes and ideologies towards the use of Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect in the public domains of Suzhou. Other research methods should be adopted in future studies to collect netizens' demographic information such as age and sex in order to expose variations and fissures in the ideological complex of authority.

Findings

The Authenticity of the Suzhou Dialect

According to Woolard (2008), the ideology of authenticity "locates the value of a language in its relationship to a particular community" and "a speech variety must be perceived as deeply rooted in social and geographic territory in order to have value" (p. 304). In our data, this ideology overlays Suzhou's sociolinguistic heterogeneity (cf. Irvine &

Gal's 2000 semiotic process of *erasure*) and places a strong emphasis on the essentialist link between the Suzhou dialect and Suzhou, thus establishing the authenticity and legitimacy of this dialect in Suzhou. As can be seen from the Examples⁵ 1-3, the authenticity of the Suzhou dialect in Suzhou is presented as axiomatic and it needs not be justified and questioned.

Example 1

连吴侬软语都不能认同，还谈什么对苏州的认同。
If you do not identify with the Suzhou dialect, there is no need to talk about the identification with Suzhou.
(Xichuangyeyudaotianming)

Example 2

在苏州，用苏州话，还要为什么？
In Suzhou, use the Suzhou dialect, no need to ask why?
(szsw8888888)

Example 3

苏州推行苏州话那是天经地义的事情！
It is an unalterable principle to promote the Suzhou dialect in Suzhou! (Bushiwodemei)

As Woolard (2008) points out, "when authenticity is the legitimating ideology of a language, the linguistically marked form is celebrated, and accent matters" (p. 304). The accent of the Suzhou dialect is a marked form in some netizens' comments and receives positive remarks. For example,

Example 4

苏州话还是很好听的。软软的。
The Suzhou dialect is very pleasant. It is soft.
(disishu2339)

Example 5

苏州话很好听啊！老嗲额！
The Suzhou dialect is very pleasant to hear! It is very soft! (Anonymous)

Example 6

苏州话超级好听。
It is very pleasant to hear the Suzhou dialect.
(Aishanglaangcuo)

⁵ How to make netizens' voices heard with minimal risk to them is a hot topic in applied linguistic studies (Gao & Tao, 2016). This study follows anonymous reviewers' advice. All examples are first presented in the original form followed by English translations and the netizen's nickname. All translations are from the author.

In addition, the evaluation moves beyond the evaluation of the Suzhou dialect, and a clear-cut distinction is drawn between the Suzhou culture (represented by the Suzhou dialect) and the Northern culture (represented by Putonghua), as well as between the local and non-local people (cf. van Dijk's 1993 complementary strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation). For example, in Example 7, the Suzhou culture is viewed as superior whereas the Northern culture is looked down upon as backward. Those who do not like and accept the Suzhou dialect are not welcomed by the Suzhou people and should leave Suzhou. In Example 8, a Chinese idiom (i.e., a turtledove takes over the nest of a magpie) is used to emphasize that non-locals are illegitimate residents of Suzhou and those who do not respect the Suzhou culture should leave Suzhou. It is noticeable that different pronouns (e.g., *we* and *you*) are used in the two examples to draw a clear-cut distinction between the local and non-local residents.

Example 7

懂不懂入乡随俗啊? 学习苏州的先进文化是应该的。我们愿意学习你们北方的落后文化, 让你们学点先进文明的怎么了啊? 不喜欢苏州话就滚出苏州。苏州人不欢迎。

Do you know do as Romans do? You should learn Suzhou's advanced culture. We'd like to learn your Northern backward culture, why can't you learn the advanced culture? If you do not like the Suzhou dialect, get out of Suzhou. Suzhou people do not welcome you. (Tiyz)

Example 8

某些外地佬思维真奇怪, 鸠占鹊巢还一副理直气壮的样子。当然我也是说有些, 尊重本土文化的人, 我们大大欢迎。至于那些张口闭口侮辱他人家乡文化的还是有多远, 滚多远吧。

Some non-locals have a very strange mentality. A turtledove takes over the nest of a magpie but still behaves in a self-confident way. We welcome those who respect the local culture. Those who insult others' cultures, get out as far as you can. (Qingchunxuan)

The ideology of authenticity is also related with language-as-right orientation (Ruiz, 1984) which emphasizes language as a basic human right and is concerned with the protection of minority groups. As can be seen from Examples 9–11, the perspective of speaking the Suzhou dialect as a right is common in some netizens' comments when they comment on one company's policy of banning the Suzhou dialect at work.

Example 9

侵犯人权。

A violation of human right. (Daxiashuizhongyou)

Example 10

真恶心 ~ 有人权没有 ~ 这种工作不要也罢。

It is disgusting. Is there any human right? It doesn't matter if you lose the job. (szmm1211)

Example 11

讲家乡话的权力都没啦。

We do not have the right to speak the dialect of our hometown. (Bujumingbeishang)

The Anonymity of Putonghua

Under the ideology of anonymity, "a language is valuable as a neutral, objective vehicle of expression equally available to all users" (Woolard & Frekko, 2013, p. 135). Arguments for the use of the national language(s) in the public sphere are often "naturalized" into social conventions. As a result, "the link between the standard and the nation-state or other authoritative institutions is (apparently) severed and the socio-political roots of a standard variety are obscured" (Paffey, 2012, p. 52). This ideology frames Putonghua as a neutral communicative tool and an anonymous voice from nowhere. This is typically reflected in the comments accepting the use of Putonghua in the public domains and discouraging the public use of the Suzhou dialect. For example,

Example 12

这个规定是合情合理的, 普通话是全国统一用语, 应该是使用普通话进行公共交流。

The regulation (of banning the use of the Suzhou dialect in the company) is reasonable. Putonghua is the nationwide uniform language and Putonghua should be used for the public communication. (Youzouzaitiandihuaijian)

Example 13

真是搞不明白, 突然发现好多车现在开始用苏州话来报站, 既然是公交, 就应该用公共的语言——普通话。

I cannot understand. I suddenly find that many buses start using the Suzhou dialect to announce the stops. Since it is the public transport, the public language—Putonghua should be used. (sky88600)

Examples 12 and 13 express netizens' views on the use

of Putonghua at work and in the public transport system. As can be seen from the two examples, the commentators hold a negative view on the use of the Suzhou dialect in Suzhou's public domains and regard Putonghua as the public language, implying that the Suzhou dialect is a private language only reserved for the private domains. The examples suggest that the two commentators have internalized the view of Putonghua as a neutral, unmarked, and invisible communicative tool for the public use, thus reinforcing the status quo of Putonghua as the dominant language in the public domains.

While celebrating the communicative value of Putonghua, some netizens hold a language-as-problem perspective (Ruiz, 1984) towards the Suzhou dialect and point out problems when speaking this dialect in the public space of Suzhou. In their comments, speaking and learning the Suzhou dialect becomes a problem of social exclusion and marginalization, thus Putonghua is designated as a language of social inclusion. For example,

Example 14

不准在上班时间说方言，就是避免了一些排斥打击，成就了公司的形象。
Not speaking dialects at work is to avoid some exclusion and establish a corporate image. (Zhangdademengli)

Example 15

我觉得用了方言，只会使外地人觉得自己被边缘化，这样不利于苏州本地人和外地人的融合。
I feel that the use of the dialect only produces a sense of marginalization for non-locals, which is disadvantageous to the integration of Suzhou locals and non-locals. (Suzhourenshihaoyangde)

Example 16

上班那几个小时，工作上的事，都说普通话好了，相互尊重，有些同事听不懂，会误以为排挤她的。
During the work hours, Putonghua can be used to discuss work and show mutual respect because some colleagues may not understand and think that they are excluded. (sunny_1985)

Accent also becomes problematical when it comes to the addition of the Suzhou dialect in the next stop announcement system of the local public transport system. It is noticeable that no comments have been made on the accent of Putonghua, thus making Putonghua invisible. In marked contrast, negative views are expressed on the accent of the Suzhou dialect. For example, some netizens feel uncomfortable (Example 17),

titillated (Example 18), and irritated (Example 19) at the sound of the Suzhou dialect in the public transport. In addition, the vocal features of the Suzhou dialect are also under criticism in Examples 18 and 19 where this dialect is viewed as a female language lacking power and energy.

Example 17

苏州话报站超级恶心，听着好难受。
It is disgusting to use the Suzhou dialect to announce the next stop, and I feel uncomfortable at the sound of it. (Woshidupin)

Example 18

听的有点酥，换个男的说怎么样？
I feel titillated at the sound of the Suzhou dialect, can they use a male voice? (hygxywl)

Example 19

公交车上的苏州话我听了总觉得很烦躁，能不能找个年轻又有活力点的声音呀？
I feel irritated after hearing the Suzhou dialect in the bus, why can't they use a young and energetic voice? (Woniushuijiao)

Discussion

In contemporary societies, the public space has become an important arena for language ideological battles (Shohamy, 2006). With the application of Woolard's (2008) ideologies of linguistic authority, this study makes a meta-discursive analysis of netizens' comments on the use of Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect in the public space of Suzhou. The analysis shows that the presence of the Suzhou dialect in Suzhou's public domains is marked and visible whereas the use of Putonghua is unmarked and invisible. The ideology of authenticity serves as the underlying ideology behind netizens' discourse of supporting the Suzhou dialect. This ideology helps establish a strong essentialist link between the Suzhou dialect and Suzhou and make a distinction between local and non-local people. In contrast, the ideology of anonymity is closely associated with Putonghua. Under this ideology, Putonghua is viewed as a neutral communicative tool whereas the use of the Suzhou dialect is viewed as problematical linguistically and socially. The findings of this study, echoing those of Woolard (2008) and Gal (2006), demonstrate that the authority of languages in non-Western contexts such as China is also based on two cultural values, i.e., universality

and authenticity. Such findings also reflect the ideological constructions of public and private spheres and languages (Gal & Woolard, 2001; McElhinny, 1997) and support other studies (e.g., Jaffe, 1999; McDonald, 1989; Woolard, 1989) which find a binary model of the dominant and minority languages with a contrastive set of social values and attributes.

Although this dataset is obviously limited, it offers a variety of online comments on the use of Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect in various public domains, such as schools, companies, and public transport, and shows how the hierarchical arrangement of Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect is ideologically and discursively naturalized. Similar to other studies which find that meta-discursive regimes condition the way we talk about language (e.g., Makoni & Pennycook, 2005; Park, 2013; Swinehart, 2012), netizens in this study are also deeply involved in the production of a meta-discursive regime which empowers the authenticity of the Suzhou dialect in Suzhou, but undermines its anonymity in the public domains of Suzhou and silences the voices of other Chinese dialects. In other words, the meta-discursive regime legitimates and validates Putonghua over the Suzhou dialect and ascribes linguistic authority or legitimacy to Putonghua speakers over speakers of the Suzhou dialect. Within the meta-discursive regime, Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect are seen in essentialist terms as autonomous and self-contained units and the hierarchical relationship between Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect is misrecognized. The netizens naturalize the hierarchy as part of their linguistic habitus (Bourdieu, 1991). The habitus is “powerful and hard to resist” precisely because it is “silent and insidious” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 51). Such a micro-discursive regime of language ranking and order construction renders the cultural power exercised by the ruling class invisible and organizes people’s lives in a way that is no longer perceived as oppressive or irrational (cf. Bourdieu’s 1991 notions of *symbolic power* and *misrecognition* and Gramsci’s 1971’s concepts of *consent* and *hegemony*). Such a regime and its surrounding discourse also produce an ethos of self-surveillance, like Bentham’s Panopticon, controlling and naturalizing people’s linguistic practices in public and private domains (Foucault, 1977). Although there may be different responses to this dominant regime and the hegemony of Putonghua has not been imposed without challenge (see Liu & Tao, 2012, pp. 207–208), for the most part, this regime and its surrounding discourse dominate people’s perceptions of the relationship between Putonghua and local dialects.

In addition, the anonymity of Putonghua and the authenticity of the Suzhou dialect may easily turn into

discriminatory discourse and practice. As can be seen from the examples, netizens’ comments over the use of Putonghua or the Suzhou dialect often turn out to be abusive remarks, with each side negatively evaluating the other side linguistically, intelligently, and morally. Although such actions exist in the virtual world, such hostility towards each other may be detrimental to the protection and promotion of the Suzhou dialect since non-local people constitute more than half of the Suzhou population and they will become the principal force and play a decisive role in the protection and promotion of this dialect.

Conclusion

The impact of any state-level LPLP relies on the interpretations and appropriations across multiple contexts and layers of LPLP activity. This study applies Woolard’s (2008) ideologies of linguistic authority (i.e., the ideology of authenticity and the ideology of anonymity) to a meta-discursive analysis of netizens’ comments on the use of Putonghua versus the Suzhou dialect in different public domains of Suzhou. The findings show that the ideologies of authenticity and anonymity are in wide circulation behind people’s attitudes towards Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect. Netizens are deeply involved in the production of a meta-discursive regime where the hierarchical relationship between Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect relies on netizens’ perceptions of the relationship as natural and normal.

In contemporary China, dialects are being reintroduced into the public domain, but in limited ways. In the case of the Suzhou dialect, it is being introduced to the local next stop announcement system and the curriculum at various levels of education. In the economic field, it is encouraged in some companies. However, an increased use of the Suzhou dialect in the public sphere does not mean a fundamental change in its functions and status. Despite an increased presence of the Suzhou dialect on various levels of education in Suzhou, it is just a subject rather than a medium of instruction. The Suzhou dialect has been added in the local next stop announcement system but is placed after Putonghua. People are encouraged to speak the Suzhou dialect in some companies, but such policy is implemented with the premise that its use should not affect the normal communication within the company and some companies still put a ban on the use of this dialect. In one word, the dominant status of Putonghua and its public functions do not seem to be challenged whereas the functions of the Suzhou dialect are still limited and its status remains

secondary compared with Putonghua.

Because of the complex sociolinguistic situations across China, the tensions between Putonghua and local dialects may assume a variety of shapes in different areas. Unlike the conflict between Putonghua and Cantonese,⁶ the Suzhou local government plays an active role in the protection of the Suzhou dialect. The local government is not the target of criticism in netizens' comments although it seems that the local government does not intend to alter the diglossic compartmentalization of Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect. Although Li (2014) argues that "without a counterbalance of prestige or economic utility, no post-factum measures will suffice to reverse the trend of Mandarin domination" (p. 66), the Suzhou model may become an indicator of new directions of China's LPLP, suggesting that the Chinese government is aware of the changing and complex sociolinguistic situations in China after the reform and opening up in the late 1970s and tries to strike a balance between national and local tensions indexed by languages, e.g., Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect, in the case of Suzhou. Although the practice is limited in some aspects with many unresolved problems⁷ and the increased

use of the Suzhou dialect in public domains cannot be said to indicate a radical departure in Chinese government's language ideologies, such practice needs to be applauded as it at least shows the Chinese government's concerns for the future of Chinese dialects and the role dialects play in people's daily life.

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⁶ The conflict between Cantonese and Putonghua broke out in 2010 when the Guangzhou local committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference urged Guangzhou authorities to ensure that Putonghua is used on Guangzhou TV's main shows in the run up to the Asian Games to be held in Guangzhou in November 2010. Then the rumour spread that the Guangzhou government would ban Cantonese broadcasting in Guangzhou. Hearing the news, people took various actions to call for the protection of Cantonese. For example, some young people gathered and sang Cantonese songs in public. Hundreds of inhabitants gathered and held a mass rally to defend Cantonese. At the same time, various forums were set up in the internet where people expressed their opinions over the elimination or protection of Cantonese. Finally, a high-ranking official tried to clarify the controversy by saying that the government never tried to forbid Cantonese.

⁷ For example, in the search of the native speakers for the recording of the Suzhou dialect, the teaching of the standard Suzhou dialect, as well as the publication of the Suzhou dialect textbooks, many netizens are enthusiastically pursuing the ideal prototype of the Suzhou dialect. Such practice neglects language variation within the Suzhou dialect under the effects of age, gender, social class, and other factors. It also does not consider language contact between Putonghua, dialects, and minority languages (see Zhou, 2012) and contact-induced changes within the Suzhou dialect. The practice of pursuing a standard Suzhou dialect helps to convey a message that the Suzhou dialect is as authoritative as Putonghua and it is a legitimate linguistic system with a single standard. However, such practice might bring with it the stigmatization of "non-standard" and "non-native" Suzhou dialects and put some speakers at a disadvantaged position. Such practice might also produce linguistic insecurity and cultural inauthenticity among some speakers and create a new set of discriminatory beliefs and practices in daily life. This might become another case of linguistic discrimination transferring from Putonghua and the Suzhou dialect to the "standard" Suzhou dialect and "non-standard" Suzhou dialects.

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