"People Are Poison" – A Case Study of Chinese Young Adults' Printed Clothes as Linguistic Landscape From Wearers' Perspective

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Abstract

Printed clothes have been treated as a special type of mobile linguistic landscape and wearing these clothes can be regarded as a conscious communication act. Previous studies have paid their attention on producers and printed clothes themselves, but wearer is also an essential step which should not be ignored in forming printed clothes as linguistic landscapes. In this study, wearers, as the "second" decision in printed clothes that they choose from existing printed texts to express themselves were explored, to see how different social and linguistic factors influence the final presentations of printed clothes. Applying an ethnographic approach, twenty three private items were collected from six Chinese young adults who are now locating in three global cities: Shanghai, Hong Kong, and London, and interviews were conducted for exploring the agency of buying and wearing texts on their bodies. This paper gives a glance of young Chinese adults choosing or not choosing to wear clothes with texts to express their own identities, and how sociocultural factors lead to the results that Chinese, as their first language, is absent in this communication act. Finally, I suggest that the final presentations of these printed clothes do not only reflect wearers' own language and cultural ideologies but also globalization of English from economic and cultural perspectives.

Keywords: Printed Clothes, Linguistic Landscape, Globalization of English

1. Introduction

Printed clothes have become media of conveying information about culture and identity. Jaworski and Lou (2021) claimed that language elements displaying on people's body have formed a special type of mobile linguistic landscape in the urban areas, including clothes, tattoos, bags, and so on. Being carried by their wearers, these moving languages build a connection between public and private, and they could be seen as an essential part for individual's identity formation and public presentation.

Previous studies related to T-shirts have looked at language policy related issues, especially for local varieties printed on T-shirts (Coupland 2010; Järlehed 2019). This type of communicating actions can be regarded as local identity formation, and a challenge to the standard variety in these areas. Recently, studies have also seen these printed language elements on T-shirts as a special kind of moving linguistic landscape. Not only the designers or producers' thoughts but also wearers' agency play an important role in the representation of them in urban space (Jaworski and Lou 2021). Caldwell (2017) built up a comprehensive framework for language elements presented on body as a mode. Wearing these clothes can be potential speech acts. However, most linguistic related studies about language printed on T-shirt started from the clothes themselves, to some extent, from the designers' perspective. They paid much of their attention on how language elements were designed to present on T-shirts as the platforms. Although wearers' agency also determines the representation in public space, abundant ethnography work is required to explore the role of wearers' agency in wearing printed T-shirts as a communication act, which makes studies from wearers' perspective are limited.

This study looked at agency behind purchasing and wearing printed clothes. It aimed to explore these language elements on clothes, mainly T-shirts from a wearers' perspective, to see how situational factors and wearers' own ideologies shape the final presentations of words carried by individuals, as a bottom-up language practice. An ethnographic approach was applied that firstly, three to five items with language elements were collected from six participants from 20 to 25 years old, following with semi-structured interviews related to their opinions on purchasing and wearing these items. This study will provide a different perspective for treating printed clothes as linguistic landscape, and how younger Chinese treating printed clothes as an expression of themselves.

2. Wearing T-shirts as self-expressions of identities for younger generations

Studies related to printed clothes mainly focused on T-shirts. T-shirts have become communicative media and index of language ideology and wearers' identities (Jaworski and Lou, 2021). According to Armani (quoted in Harris, 1996, cited in Caldwell, 2017), one of the most famous fashion designers, T-shirt is an anti-status symbol that the rich and the poor can be put on the same level with the white cotton surface. This feature young generations tend to pay more attention on fashion and have more aspiration in expressing themselves. T-shirts are not just pieces of clothes but mobile, multimodal, and highly accessible communicative media (Järlehed 2019). They provide semiotic affordance for scripts (Caldwell 2017). Different from other types of mobile texts on human bodies, such as tattoos, printed T-shirts do not afford such long permanence and they could be largely determined by their wearers. For wearers, they are self-conscious linguistic signs which tie wearers and these texts, texts and the surrounding environment, wearers and the surrounding environment together (Goffman 2017; Caldwell 2016).

Before treating printed clothes as a type of mobile linguistic landscape, most studies explore from language policy aspect and paid their attention on local varieties printed on T-shirts as a local identity formation, and a hybrid form of standard variety and local varieties printed on T-shirts to some extent forms a challenge to official languages of the society. Coupland (2010) looked at T-shirts produced and sold by a small local company in Wales. Local variety printed on T-shirts can be regarded as a bottom-up language practice which revealed local cultural values. The creations related local Wales variety are mostly ironic and these textual representations show the local identity and antagonism of the top-down official language policies. Järlehed's (2019) study focused on T-shirts produced in Galician and Basque. Code-mixing of standard variety and local varieties revealed a mix identity for local people. These texts dealt with issues related to local language policies and traditional understanding of local culture in a rather humorous way ("rurban", which refers to rural + urban). It provides a critical stance for local people and fosters them to rethink the value of local culture and urban "coolness" rooted in modern western Anglo-Saxon pop culture brought by globalization. Using the hybrid of standard variety and local varieties, together with urban youth register on printed T-shirts exhibit the complicated situation in language policy and this type of "imperfect" language displaying challenges standard language ideology and elaborates with local language, culture, as well as identity.

Globalization of English is one factor which reflect the social and political trend within the culture on T-shirts (Seargeant 2009). As a result of British colonial empire and economic, military, and political dominance of the United States, English has set its status as a global language (Ferguson 2012). In this case, English has composed a picture as a seemingly ubiquitous language in the world. It further influences the English dominate language policy in international business entities. However, it also brings various problems, such as cultural homogenization. Globalization of English represents cultural influence as a unidirectional flow, and it shows a vector of cultural "Americanization" (Pennycook 2003). Currently, English is no longer a singular clearly bounded entity that indexes a specific, determinant identity. It portrays the recipiences of western cultural goods and consumers become passive and unreflecting in this process (Ferguson 2012). New hybrid cultural forms and hybrid identities and cosmopolitan sensibilities have been put forward. They are usually mixed with English which is no longer bounded with certain identities. With the spread of Neoliberalism, market mechanism also organizes individuals' activities, including its governing and self-governing capabilities (Rojo 2018). Although it seems that individual have opportunities to choose the language they use, market mechanism as an underneath factor has transformed individuals' language choice imperceptibly.

This kind of values conveyed by English scripts is discussed in Curtin's (2008) study of linguistic landscape in Taipei. Those English scripts in public spaces were designed to be seen as visual presentations mainly perform symbolic functions. As mentioned in interviews with local residents, they may not be able to comprehend the content of English but the visual form of English indexes the certain quality and identity of the products. Using these product will index the identity of users as "educated, youthful, fashion, and worldly". As language elements appearing in a language environment other than English, those English scripts act as "ethnic" roles, and "reterritorialize" image of English-speaking culture which indexes values of English as modernity, wealth, fashion, and freedom (Iwabuchi 2002).

Different from these studies which looked at these T-shirts from a producer and designer's perspective, Jaworski and Lou focused on mobile texts themselves. They collected data from pedestrians wearing printed clothes with texts in the streets in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and

London. The term "wordswewear" was put forward to summarize this category of mobile semiotic landscape. Texts on clothes and being carried to different public spaces by wearers reveal the interface of private and public space. Also, as mentioned before, wearing printed T-shirts with texts can be seen as a conscious language practice, so these printed T-shirts emphases human agency in this semiotic practice. These words worn on individuals' bodies may target or diffuse certain audience, even if they are looking at themselves in the mirror. Studying these texts can help us understand the power of self-expression. They index the awareness of others, and visible or potential with any possible groupings in the urban public space.

3. Printed T-shirts as a Mode

In Caldwell's (2017) study, corpus of printed T-shirts were built with visual data from online catalogue. They were treated as interactions between wearers and the T-shirts as a type of conscious speech act. Different from hanging in the wardrobe or windows on the sides of streets, wearing on ones' body make the wearer as affordance of text and wearers visually articulate the meaning of elements on the T-shirts. The representation of texts and images on T-shirt can be seen as a specific communicative mode. Based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004) and Multimodality (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2020), a taxonomy of printed T-shits was built for different elements appearing on a printed T-shirt. These texts with different linguistic features on T-shirts are oriented with certain functions according to human agents. Projections, labels, and icons are three main features which construct the lower level of the taxonomy.

Projection is usually realized by a single clause (Caldwell 2017, 136). These short clause projecting on t-shirts function as Mental or Verbal process, so the role of wearers here is Senser or Sayer of the texts. The result of the projection is the wearer says/thinks the content of the text. For example, wearer wears a jacket (figure 1) with "never mind" and a sad teddy bear to show his or her depressed situation. The feature of label is realized through adjective, a single noun or noun group (except proper noun or noun group). Texts can also function as the value of the wearer. These texts displaying on clothes "label" the wearer, and the attitudes or description could be either positive or negative (139). They are potential to be read as the wearer is xxx (printed texts) and these communicative acts are more like self judgements to wearers. Proper noun or noun groups printed on T-shirts care categorized as icons. These texts denote to specific objects or persons (139-140). One of the most frequently appear types of items with icons is souvenir, which creates physical connections between wearers and these proper names. This type of texts usually creates an emotive Mental Processes, such as "I love Fall Out Boy (band)". The icon feature is not just valuable for printed T-shirts, but also important for broader themes, including globalization, mobility, mass production of clothes, as well as youth culture and fashion culture. This taxonomy provides a systematic framework for analysing T-shirts worn on individuals. It links specific linguistic features to functions and brings consciousness to the agents of these printed T-shirts.

Figure 1. example of projection (Never Mind)

4. Research questions

The current study decided to focus on individuals' agency and presentation of language elements from wearers' perspective, and how environmental factors shape the representation of language elements on clothes. There are two main research questions:
1. What are the preferred features of printed clothes for young adults (20-25 years old)?
2. What are the individual and environmental factors influence individuals' presentation of the language elements in public spaces?

5. Methodology

5.1 Participants

There are six participants aged from 20 to 25 in this study, including three females and three males. Chinese is their shared first language. They located in different cities with different language environments when participating in this study. Three of them were in Shanghai, two in Hong Kong, and one in London.

Age group has been considered in this study. As mentioned in Jaworski and Lou (2021), young generations tend to pay more attention on fashion and have more aspiration in expressing themselves. Identity formation and presentation play a more important role compared with other age groups. Another consideration for choosing this age group is English proficiency. All participants are either university students or new graduates, which guarantees a capacity for them to interpret most of the English elements, which provides a higher possibility for them to wear these items as expressing themselves.

The three cities they located, also give three different language environments for this study. Shanghai, as one of the major cities and the economic center in China, is a Chinese dominant environment. With the colonial history and biliterate and trilingual language policy nowadays, Hong Kong can be seen as a bilingual society. For London, the capital of the UK, English is the most frequently used language. These different language situations would help this study explore the influence of different language environment on language choice and presentation on clothes.

5.2 Data collection

Qualitative data collection was conducted in this study in two rounds. The first round was questionnaires with open questions related to participants' individual items, such as clothes, bag, phone case, with language elements on them. Photos of the items themselves which can clearly show the language parts on the clothes, and photos of participants wearing the items in the public (if possible) were asked to be provided in the questionnaire. Then, the following questions focused on why they purchased the items and how they wear the items, including participants' own interpretations of the language elements, reasons for purchasing them and detailed situations that participants would like to wear them. Participants were asked to choose three to five their private items to fill the questionnaire. At the beginning of data collection, participants were asked to use three to five their "favorite" items, because it may indicate that they have possibly interpreted with the language parts when they decided to buy and wear them. However, during the collecting process, it was found that there were much fewer items with language elements from participants than I thoughts. Some participants can only find two items and some participants provided five items with the same brand logo in the front. Data from these participants were eliminated from this study because limited number or types of clothes may not reveal their authentic situations and opinions about language on clothes. In this case, the instructions of questionnaires were modified as three to five items with language elements. With this requirement, twenty-three items were collected in total and six participants who were able to provide more than three items were selected for the further interviews for the second-round.

In the second round, based on the information provided by interviewees, some further questions related to the general situation of one participant were asked. For example, participant A provided three items with English only, questions like "have you noticed that most printed T-shirts using English on them?", "why do you think it happens?", "will you buy clothes with Chinese on them and why?" were asked during the interview. Each interview took about fifteen to twenty minutes. Questions for the interviews were mainly from three perspectives, whether they would pay attention on language elements when purchasing, whether they care about others read the language elements, proportions of different languages they prefer to buy and why. Since all participants have comparatively high English proficiency, interviews were conducted in English. Sometime participants may feel hard to express their opinions, Chinese was allowed to support their expression, and English translations of Chinese part has been double checked with participants.

5.3 Data analysis

Qualitative data for photos of clothes and questionnaire answers and interviews were analyzed separately. Photos of clothes will be analyzed based on the framework put forward by Caldwell (2017). Texts on T-shirts were categorized into three main types of text features and discussed how different types of text interact with wearers and function variously. Different codes printed on clothes were also paid attention to when categorizing the collected data. Different features of texts on clothes were labeled to see the general preferences for all participants as Chinese young adults and participants' individual preferences. The table shows the general information of collected items has been shown in Table 1. Participants are labelled as surname initial + given name initial (for example Nancy Wang is shown as WN) and items has been labelled by numbers.

Thematic analysis was applied for responses in questionnaires and follow-up interviews. Themes related to language practices and ideologies were identified in questionnaire responses and transcripts of interviews. Then the identified themes were refined and interconnections among all participants were build. Themes were analyzed based on Huebner's (2008) framework for language analysis of linguistic landscapes. Huebner elaborated this comprehensive framework from settings, participants, to presentation of linguistic landscapes for analyzing linguistic landscape from different angles. The analysis of responses and interviews provided evidence for how different factors influence the display of these language elements on clothes, and they helped to reveal the trend of preference related to text on clothes in Chinese younger generations, as well as the factors of individuals and environment that influence their choices.

6. Results: Wearing Printed clothes as a conscious communication act

6.1 Avoid self-expressions on clothes

For younger generations, printed T-shirts have become an important media for self-expression and culture conveying (Jaworski and Lou, 2021). These written texts are silent but literate as the same time. As Caldwell (2017) clamed, the interaction between text and audience can be seen as conscious speech act (p.127), and wearers may probably use these clothes as media to release the messages to other. From participants responses, all participants confirmed that they will check the content of the text parts before they determined to buy them, and they will consider the occasions for wearing these printed clothes. In this case, purchasing and wearing clothes with texts on them are conscious actions for wearers. LS mentioned in the interviews that she would like to buy these items with language elements because of two features, their overall designs and printed texts as cultural symbols and self-expression. They did care about different codes and contents displaying on their bodies, because when they wear these clothes to the public space, audience may be able to receive the messages on clothes. These messages will be conveyed by the wearers, and they become part of wearers' own identities. Different participants mentioned different checking points. Some would check whether the overall content of the texts fit their own value while one participant said he just checked whether there are some "strange" words on the clothes, such as language taboos, which may be not polite to wear in the public. From this consciousness of picking language elements, it could be found that when some is wearing the texts, a connection has been built between the texts and wearers' own identity presentation. For audience who have received the messages on the clothes, these texts will probably be regarded as externalization of wearers own personalities.

However, because wearing clothes with texts can be seen as releasing some messages to the public, and for audience, these massages would be thought as reflections of the wearers themselves, during data collecting process, it was found that some participants avoided buying and wearing clothes with languages elements. One participant said usually he will only buy clothes with language elements as logos (LB), and three participants showed their attitudes that they prefer not to purchase clothes with language elements, even without elements as brand logos (LS, LE, WE). Design could be a reason for their rejection for clothes with texts. One participant said that she prefers simple designs without any decorations because "These designs look more mature, and they can show the high quality of the fabrics" (LE).

Reasons provided by the other three participants were related to "expression" itself, either about the contents that they were able to choose or the behavior of expression itself. LB and YS claimed that they don't like the contents of language elements usually displayed on clothes. "Most texts printed on clothes are either very negative or very positive, such as 'life sucks' and some prep talk (figure 2). These texts do not fit my own personal values", as YS said. He also mentioned about the designs related to text elements themselves. "I can't accept clothes with texts only. Texts and some images together is ok, but only several lines is not. You can't see the designs for these clothes. They're too straightforward." From this statement, it can be found that wearers, or consumers, have the freedom to choose the texts they would like to display on their bodies, but their choices are limited within the corpus provided by producers and designers. Another participant gave a clear attitude about the rejecting of the act of wearing printed clothes as expression, "I don't think I need to use wearing clothes with texts as a way for releasing any messages" (WE). Some other evidence was also found during the data collection process that when asking participants to provide items at the beginning, some participants can only find no more than two items with language elements, including all their personal items, such as clothes, bags, shoes, and cases of phone, tablet, and laptop. Common explanations from these participants were "I don't like items with texts" (about design) and "I don't want to be 'read' by others in the public". Since these texts build connections with the wearers, they become parts of their identity formation in the public. Those people who reject to wear texts may because those texts may cause misunderstanding of their own personalities, or they just do not want themselves to be stared by strangers who are able to interpret the texts in the public.

Figure 2. example of prep talk (optimistic thinking)

6.2 Absence of Chinese

For all six participants, Chinese is their shared mother tongue, and for both Shanghai and Hong Kong, Chinese is official language. However, from collected items, only five of them have Chinese elements, including two with both English and Chinese on them. As one of the most common used languages among these participants, it was quite strange to find the absence of Chinese on clothes in collected data.

Among these five items, three of them are Chinese band related merch. For the other two, one with the Chinese character "中国" (China) and the other with the Chinese character "囍". During interviews, LS, who is now in London, said that "because I am now in an English-speaking environment, English is the most commonly used language here". She also made

the inference that in Chinese Speaking areas there should be more items with Chinese based on her own situation. However, this statement could not explain the large proportion of English in other five participants' collected items, that they are in either Chinese-dominant environment or bilingual environment. Also, all participants said they had more clothes with English texts than other languages, including two participants who only have clothes with English. It was also interesting to find that when being reminded that most of their printed clothes are English, several participants mentioned that "there should be more people in the street wearing clothes with Chinese". In other words, they thought other people prefer to wear Chinese printed clothes more than they do. They were more like uniform, such as T-shirts with Chinese association names printed on them for members of student associations, or vests for certain marathon campaigns. For these uniforms, or uniform-like clothes, these Chinese names and titles printed on clothes represent more of a collective identity rather than individual identity. For reasons behind this type of absence, from both the collected items and interviews, it could be found that there are neither many shops selling items with Chinese nor many participants would like to buy items with Chinese. When asking about participants' opinions about why they do not have many items with Chinese, two participants responded as they did not see many items with Chinese texts in the shop ("Just simple didn't see this type of items that much", LS; "in my own impression, there are not many shops selling clothes with Chinese", LB). Also, two of the participants mentioned about the designs of items they have seen with Chinese, and they did not think these items have very high-quality design. "Last time I saw some T-shirts with Chinese in a Chinese fashion brand shop, but I didn't feel like I want to buy them. They are about *Three Kingdoms*. They just…do not fit my own taste of clothes" (LB). YS also talked about his ideas related to design, that he thought that t-shirts with only texts on them could not be counted as "design". This situation may be cause by globalization of business and mass production of clothes. These larger size international business entities are more able to invest more in design which could be more attractive for consumers. Also, as international companies, English as a global language is probably the most suitable choice for international market, which to some extent, may explain the higher proportion of English texts in collected data. From another perspective, it could be seen as a socio-economic inequality and cultural homogenization as well (Ferguson 2012). With larger proportion in the market, those international entities, to some level, "force" consumers to buy clothes with English texts on them, which leave limited space for local business and texts in local varieties to survive.

Another factor influences wearers' decision is audience. As discussed in previous session about self-expression, being interpreted together with the texts will make wearers feel embarrassed and the texts may bring negative effects to themselves. When being in Chinese speaking environment, Shanghai and Hong Kong, it raises the possibility for Chinese texts being processed by strangers in public space. "It is quite embarrassed because everyone understands Chinese. And most of the texts printed on clothes are related to, that kind of subculture, very depressed ones. I am not a fan of them, and I don't want others to think me in this way" (YS). A conflict between ideology and practice was also found in some participants, that they did not reject about purchasing items with Chinese, but when asking whether they have bought any items with Chinese texts, they said no. Reasons behind the rejection are similar to these mentioned in self-expression session, that they do not want to catch strangers' attention because of the printed texts, together with the limited choice for Chinese texts printed on clothes.

For those who have items with Chinese, they were quite careful about the situation wearing these items with Chinese. There two reasons for this situation which need to be more careful.

One situation is related to the T-shirt with "中国"(China) (figure 3) which is regarded as too straightforward for wearer to wear it in public. YS mentioned in the interview that he would only wear it for sporting and with elder generations. This item was a present from his aunt, who used to be a basketball player of Chinese national team. In this case, from both the source and the texts on this item, it enhances the national identity formation. Wearing it in situations except doing sports with his aunts and other family members gave him a sense of flaunting, which does not make him so comfortable.

Figure 3. 中国

The second one is the contents of items collected in this study are quite offensive in Chinese culture community. In addition to the fact in both Shang Hai and Hong Kong, these Chinese elements can be interpreted by most of the people in public space, they are not quite acceptable by Chinese speakers. For example, it is inappropriate to talk about death openly in the public in Chinese speaking society because death is ominous in Chinese culture. One item provided by participant is a T-shirt (figure 4) with the name of the band "暗狱戮尸" (The Dark Prison Massacre), which is a Chinese death metal band. The texts are written in yellow, very close to skin color, with red filled inside, which makes them looks like wounds. Below is a picture with a person holding a knife surrounded by pieces of corpse. When I tried to search this item on Taobao, one the biggest online shopping website in China, the picture of this item had mosaic on it because of the bloody and violent elements. "I will only wear it when I go to music festival, because that is where I would like to express myself. Only people there can understand what is on the T-shirt" (WE).
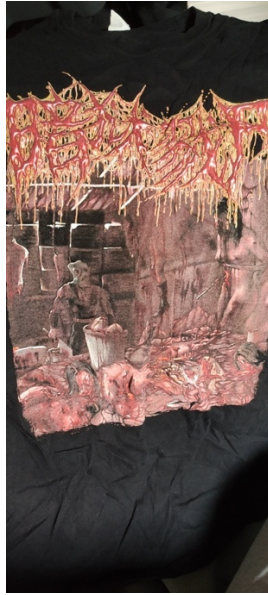
Figure 4. 暗獄戮尸

Another example is not about the content of the Chinese text but a Chinese character which is functioned more as a symbol. The character "囍" (double happiness) is usually used in wedding ceremony in Chinese cultural society, and the color code should be red, or the character written in gold with a red background. For this item (picture 5), the character "囍" is written in black, which referred to an obsolete tradition of wedding for death. For Chinese cultural society, red usually indexes happiness, which is usually used in wedding and Spring Festival, and black and white is the color code index death, which is usually used in funeral. Because of this, wearing "囍" written in black or white is ominous for people belong to Chinese speaking society. The participant was attracted by the design when purchasing it, and the brand of this item is mainly about gothic style, about death and horror. Using an unacceptable color code for this character to some extent, shows a sense of rebellion which is the main attracting point for the participant. However, when she brought the jacket back home, her parents could not accept the design and asked her to remove the part with the black "囍" (figure 5).

Figure 5. removal of "囍"

7. Conclusion

This study explores printed clothes with texts as linguistic landscape from wearers/agents' perspective. Both printed clothes and owners, as wearers' opinions related to their opinions on different languages printed on clothes were collected. Some texts perform informational function, and they can be seen as an important part for wearers' identity formation and self-expression, which leads to the result that some people avoid wearing printed clothes. The practice of language on printed clothes is determined not only by the wearers themselves but also shaped by the globalized environment. These representation of texts on human's body, to some extent, is a reflection of globalization of English, as well as the capital behind the language itself.

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