

TROUBLING INTIMACY: LANGUAGE AND POWER IN PRIVATE DOMAINS

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Language, Power and Intimacy

Spanglish (Brooks, 2004), as the title succinctly implies, is a movie about a Hispanic immigrant woman in the US whose life consists of a mixture of two languages, Spanish and English. The heroine is Flor Moreno, a single mother who emigrates from Mexico to America with her daughter. One day, searching for a better job, she decides to venture out of her familiar Hispanic community in Los Angeles and meets Deborah Clasky, a wealthy Caucasian stay-at-home mom who needs help around her massive mansion. The job interview goes successfully, owing to Flor's bilingual cousin who serves as a translator. Deborah, seemingly nervous at the sight of her potential Hispanic employee, gabbles on about her family—her top-chef husband, two children and a grandmother—and about herself—currently not working after she closed down her design company. She rushes on, “I like the house to be like me. I’m very loose and meticulous at the same time. But it’s all about first names and closeness here. Let her know. Absolutely.” She then suddenly realizes, to her chagrin, that she has not left any intervals for the translator. Meanwhile, Flor wears a puzzled look, shifting her eyes between Deborah and her cousin. However, when Deborah asks what her name is and finds herself unable to pronounce the trilling “r,” Flor speaks up. She persistently instructs Deborah how to tense and loosen her tongue, urging her reluctant cousin to translate her Spanish words into English, so that Deborah finally articulates “Flor,” to which she cheers, “*Perfecto!*” Flor thus impresses Deborah, and the moment of connection leads to a job contract of \$650 per week, a condition more than ideal for Flor.

This comical scene in fact entails a multilayered politics. Between

the Hispanic, working-class, single mother who had to work on three different jobs to make ends meet and the Caucasian, upper-class, full-time homemaker who can afford to hire a full-time domestic worker is a grave social divide. Language here plays a symbolic role; while Deborah has all the words at her disposal, Flor is essentially muted. Deborah's words, "Let her know," reveals that she is in fact talking to the cousin, not to Flor herself, as if the person who would actually be working in her home were of lesser importance. That is, the language each woman speaks, along with her racial, ethnic and class status, positions her in an unequal relationship: Deborah is the dominating addresser, and Flor the passive addressee. Flor's total dependence on her cousin represents the powerlessness of a non-English foreigner in an English-speaking society. Neither the successful deal making nor Flor's momentary role reversal as a Spanish teacher would be possible without the cousin's presence.

What *Spanglish* signifies, underneath its lightheartedness, is how language is inseparable from social power relations. Language can serve as an apparatus of control and oppression. As Deborah's chattiness and Flor's silence exemplify, one's inability to speak the dominant language immediately defines her as a vulnerable "other." Yet, one may subvert the marginalized position by, as Flor dares, taking advantage of the other-ed position. That is, language, far from being a mere vehicle of communication, is a highly political site of participation, investment and negotiation (Norton, 2000; Block, 2009).

Furthermore, *Spanglish* depicts power struggles in a private, intimate sphere. What appears as a formal business transaction in fact concerns care work, which, by nature, is on the blurry boundary between the formal and the informal, the public and the private. Flor is hired as a professional to clean, cook, wash and take care of the children, and while doing so, she inevitably interacts with the family members, considers their wants and tries to meet their needs. She is soon involved with the teenage daughter's personal life, and as the story unfolds, with the husband's too, giving much grief and worry to Deborah whose status as a mother/wife is threatened. Flor, while transgressing the linguistic border, also subverts the line between family and non-family in the most intimate sphere that is called home.

The personal is always political—and linguistically so. While multiculturalism and multilingualism have attracted much attention in recent academic and political debates, they are often considered to be public matters of legal and institutional concerns. However, as *Spanglish* shows, encounters and conflicts over cultural and linguistic differences are an everyday matter (Wise and Velayutham, 2009). More focus should be on the mundane and personal aspects of linguistic politics (Gottlieb, 2011), and this paper looks into how language, power and intimacy manifest themselves in private power relations—between wives and husbands, between parents and children, and between madams and maids—by drawing on studies in sociology, social linguistics and applied linguistics as well as the author’s original ethnographic data.

Negotiating Power in Intimate Spheres

Feminist scholars across disciplines have long problematized the romanticized image of home and family, disclosing hidden patriarchal hierarchies and the resulting domination among genders and generations. Wolf (1990) argues, through analyzing cases in Taiwan and Java, that internal hierarchies at home—a typical example being one between a father and a daughter—are often disguised under the name of “household strategies.” What may seem like rational decisions are often made by “the father-cum-family economy accountant and manager” (p. 62), at the expense of the will of the weaker party. Through observing and interviewing Taiwanese and Javanese young women particularly, Wolf critiques romantic assumptions of family members being equal and cooperative. The daughters are often distressed at the authoritative decision makers in their households; at the same time, some young women conduct acts of noncompliance such as remitting as little income as possible home, in defiance of their fathers’ instructions. Wolf calls for further exploration of “the struggles and the processes within households which perpetuate domination or engender resistance” (p. 67).

Many linguistic investigations into language and gender also revolve around power. Most mundane conversations between a woman

and a man can entail control and dominance, according to West and Zimmerman (1983). Their empirical study of male-female interchanges and adult-child interchanges demonstrates that women as well as children are more often unable to complete their turn to speak, and as a result are interrupted, ignored and thus silenced. DeFrancisco (1991), turning more specifically to conversations between wives and husbands, too raises the issue of turn-taking violation in dialogue. Through interviewing actual interlocutors, she discovers that it was no-responses, rather than interruptions, that are more exasperating for women. In the study, while females work hard to maintain interaction with their husbands, males do not value the effort and refuse active engagement. The irony is that the men's silence, a strategy to stay away from conflict, leads to the women's frustration, a source of more conflict.

Ochs and Taylor's research (1992) looks into one of the most intimate sites of all, that is, dinner-table conversations among family members. They identify a clear hierarchy among family members: fathers often take on the role of "problematizer," questioning the others' speeches and actions whereas children are often in the role of "problematizee," a target of such authoritative scrutiny. Interestingly, mothers are found in the middle ground: they problematize their children's actions but not their husbands', are often problematized by their husbands, and most interestingly, problematize themselves as if to secure her position just above children but below fathers. Gender and generational power relations, discussed by Wolf above, are thus discursively constructed. However, Tannen (2003), reviewing Ochs and Taylor's study, asserts that it is not solely oppressive power that is at work. Women, according to Tannen, engage in problematizing work not for the sake of power but connection. A mother may seem like she is interrogating her teenage daughter about her first date, but she does so not because she wants to establish a hierarchy between them but because she wants to maintain the mother-daughter connection, just like the wives in DeFrancisco's study who strive for maintaining interactions with their husbands. Neglecting this dimension—"female culture"—of conversational attempts leads to miscomprehension, Tannen argues.

The four influential studies above relate to a long-standing

“dominance or difference” debate over language and gender (Coates and Pichler, 2011). While Ochs and Talyor as well as West and Zimmerman focus on the discursive dominance that takes place between genders and generations, Tanenn, and more implicitly DeFrancisco, speak of women’s and men’s different inclinations in conversing. While the former “dominance perspective” questions gender inequality that oppresses women, the latter “difference perspective” attends to how women and men exhibit different behaviors, without much consideration of their political consequences:

To put it very simply, research which takes a dominance perspective interprets the differences between women’s and men’s linguistic usage as reflexes of the dominant-subordinate relationship holding between women and men. Research which takes a difference perspective, by contrast, sees the differences between women’s linguistic usage and men’s linguistic usage as arising from the different subcultures in which women and men are socialized. (Coates and Pichler, 2011, pp. 483-5)

The two perspectives are, in fact, both problematic. Despite their seeming opposition, both the dominance approach and the difference approach presume that women and men constitute monolithic groups without any internal differences. Assuming that men are always interrupting while women are silenced—a dominant perspective’s picture—is just as unrealistic as presuming that all the conversations involve uncooperative men and enthusiastic women—as a difference perspective would have it. The dichotomous thinking distorts the social reality in which we often come across, for example, men candidly and cooperatively gossiping (Cameron, 2011) and women diverting and subverting gendered language norms of feminine speech (Inoue, 2006). The teenage daughter in Tannen’s study is a case in point; as a female the daughter should be happily engaged in a feminine type of conversation with her mother, but she in fact exhibits the so-called masculine traits of saying only few words and thus silencing her mother. Apparently, social realities are far more complex than the bipolar images.

Moreover, neglected in both dominance and difference perspectives are the inequalities within each gender. As feminists in Western countries

since the 1980s have come to understand, the “women” to which much mainstream scholarship had been devoted were white, middle-class, educated, Christian and abled women. Neglecting minority women and overlooking the intersectionality of identity—connectivity among gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, disability, language and more—has been critiqued for decades now. The aim here therefore is not identifying whether men oppress women or whether women and men belong to different cultures, but inquiring into how such social positions are constructed linguistically (Coates and Pichler, 2011) in private spheres, particularly.

For Piller and Takahashi (2013), intersectionality is a key concept when examining gender and language in contemporary transnational contexts. In a review article, they examine studies on female migrant workers in domestic and sex industries, focusing on the severe vulnerability of those who take on the burden of the “inferior” jobs in developed countries across the globe. Their social location is of an ultimate irony; the women are stigmatized, marginalized and excluded as racial, ethnic, class, and linguistic “others” by the very society that cannot do without their labor. Piller and Takahashi particularly attend to linguistic ideologies and practices that are at work:

Limited or non-existent proficiency in the majority language may even work to the advantage of employers by creating “the pretense of distance,” rationalizing reproductive workers’ inferiority, and maintaining their unequal status. (Piller and Takahashi, 2013, p. 542)

A worker’s inability to understand and speak the employer’s/client’s language can easily expose her to exploitation, abuse and violence. Her vulnerability is intersectioned by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and crucially, language.

As such, individual households are now becoming the battleground of such conflicts and dominance. An illuminating example is given in Lan’s study (2003) in which she analyzes linguistic exchanges—“symbolic struggles” (p.133)—between Filipina domestics and their Taiwanese employers. Interestingly, domestic workers hold a somewhat twisted position in Taiwanese society. They are regarded as a foreign

“other” with their racial/ethnic traits and their status as a servant-like domestic worker, but they speak English, a coveted form of capital in Taiwanese society. Thus, employing an English-speaking maid can serve as a status symbol for the employers, a form of conspicuous consumption, Lan argues. More practically, domestic workers can teach English to the family, especially the children, and cosmopolitanize the household. The leverage is appreciated by the workers themselves; “It’s good if your employer doesn’t know much English, then they cannot ask you to do much work,” one worker says (p. 150). They also mock non-English-speaking Taiwanese, saying, “They ask me to speak slowly, but I think I already speak very slow!” (p. 152), and “They are pretty and dressed in fashion, but they can’t even speak English!” (p. 153).

However, Lan emphasizes that such jokes and ridicule are carefully hidden under the mask of subservience. The workers establish themselves as docile maids in front of their employers, so that they won’t risk punishment or discharge. The employer-employee relationship never dismantles although there are temporary linguistic role reversals. Moreover, Lan quotes Taiwanese employers who say Filipinas’ English is only “substandard” and “unrefined.” Their English ability is therefore a double-edged sword that could further their marginalization.

Intimate spheres are never devoid of power; rather, they constitute a political matrix of race, ethnicity, gender, class and language within which people experience discrimination, resistance, exploration, manipulation and negotiation. Departing from the romantic assumption that all household members—including domestic workers—work together equally and harmoniously, more focus should be given to the dynamic ways in which people *live* such politics.

When a Foreign “Other” Enters the Private

To further explore the linguistic politics that takes places in private domains, let us now turn to how Japanese women experience hiring migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. The women’s experiences are of unique importance in that they move from a global city where

migrant workers are relatively scarce to another which depends heavily on foreign labor. Employing a “maid”—an opportunity for them to become a “madam”— suddenly presents itself as a lifestyle option without much economic strain or social stigma. I have elsewhere depicted Japanese expat wives in Hong Kong as “hesitant madams” who do not take up the option readily. Reluctant at first, some decided eventually to take advantage of the foreign system, while others consistently stayed away from letting a stranger into their Japanese household. Both groups, interestingly, used such rhetoric as “for the sake of my child/family” as if to uphold their gendered status as a wife/mother. Simultaneously, many overtly or covertly participated in the local discourse that marginalizes migrant domestic workers as a foreign “other.” The women’s private choices are, apparently, intertwined with gender, racial, ethnic and class politics (Kitamura 2015).

Hereafter, I draw on an original interview data collected from twenty-four Japanese women who have lived or are living in Hong Kong for more than a year. Between 2014 and 2016, I conducted fifteen interviews in Hong Kong and nine in the greater Metropolitan Tokyo area, utilizing snowball-sampling method to talk to the research participants. Each interview was conducted in Japanese and took one to three hours, and upon consent, audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The questions included why they moved to Hong Kong, how they like/liked their lives there, and what their thoughts are on the city’s Foreign Domestic Help program. The research participants led the conversations with the interviewer actively engaging in the dialogues, thereby co-constructing their lived experiences (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Here, I specifically focus on ten research participants who have hired a Southeast Asian domestic worker, fulltime or part-time, so as to explore the madam-maid relationship from a language-centered viewpoint. All the research participants are referred to with pseudonyms, and some of their personal details have been changed in order to protect their privacy.

Madams' Linguistic Experiences

The women in this study narrate their experiences with the migrant domestic workers they hire—a majority of them being English speakers from the Philippines—in multiple ways. For some, letting in a foreign domestic worker turned out to be a favorable experience. Ms. Aoyama recalls that she had little reservation about hiring a live-in worker because people around her had long encouraged her to do so when she and her Hong Konger husband started a family: “It’s been eight, nine years since she came. She never bothers us, and is now like a family member. It actually costs more to continue with the same person for a long time, but even with the extra cost, we’ve wanted her to stay. She is that great.” Ms. Bizen also says that she felt it natural that she and her husband, a double-income couple, hire someone for their daughter: “I rely on her for everything. She and my daughter get along very well. So I’m not really mother-like.” Interestingly, both Ms. Aoyama and Ms. Bizen grew up abroad themselves in households where there were maids. They have no problem interacting with their Indonesian and Filipina worker respectively in English, and so do their husbands—an English-speaking Hong Konger and a Japanese who also spent his youth abroad. That is, their households had already been multilingual before the migrant domestic workers joined in.

In contrast, according to Ms. Chida, who is also a fluent speaker of English and married to a native speaker of English, language is often a major reason why “ordinary” Japanese wives shy away from hiring a foreigner in their home: “Some of the wives complain that they are too busy doing everything on their own and taking care of children 24/7. They sometimes say they can’t remember a thing about their life in Hong Kong. What a pity. I tell them to go for a domestic worker, but they say they don’t want to because they can’t speak English.” Apparently, for non-English speakers, opening their home to a foreigner involves linguistic and the accompanying psychological obstacles.

Some interviewees, less confident in their language ability, recall their initial hesitation and struggles. Ms. Daito says that her English was barely enough for communicating with her maid in Hong Kong: “I

sometimes couldn't make myself understood, and that was frustrating. I just wanted to say *gobou* (burdock) but didn't know the English word, went to get my dictionary and pointed to the translation. My daughter's English is like a native speaker's, and they were talking naturally, while I understood but couldn't really participate in the conversation." However, she contrasts herself with a Japanese mother who speaks no English at all and asks her bilingual children to give orders to their maids in English, saying, "After all, I managed alright. I was scared at first, but I got used to it." She also speaks fondly about how hiring the maid enabled her to engage in athletic and volunteer activities in Hong Kong. Now back in Japan, she yearns for the Hong Kong lifestyle.

For Ms. Ekoda and Ms. Fushimi too, employing an English speaker was an option that they initially felt hesitant toward. However, cosmopolitanizing their households turned out to be linguistically beneficial for their children. Ms. Ekoda's toddler learned English through interacting with his Filipina nanny and "is not afraid of talking and playing with our foreign guests when my husband invites them home for business." Ms. Fushimi recounts her surprise when she heard her children fighting in English: "They were saying, 'That's not fair!' We don't say that in Japanese. It doesn't translate, does it? I knew right then that my children learned something valuable in Hong Kong." Those Japanese mothers do not expect their employees to serve as a maid-cum-English-tutor as explicitly as the Taiwanese employers in Lan's study do; still, they emphasize the extra benefit when they narrate their experiences.

Ms. Ekoda continues, "However, it was still difficult for me to say to my maid, 'Can you change the way you do this?' or 'I want you to do that more properly,' because I had never hired someone in my life. I speak English fine, so it wasn't so hard language-wise, but still, supervising someone wasn't easy." Asked how she managed such situations, she replies, "I tried hard. I prepared the whole speech in advance, and was like, 'Okay, I'm going to deliver it today.'" Ms. Chida also shares how she honed her "madam skills" when I asked her if she ever gets angry with her employee: "Being angry doesn't help. I could pick at what she did wrong and scold her, but there's no point. I just say, 'Okay,' and she feels sorry and tries harder next time. Even when she is

obviously wrong, I say, 'Sorry that I didn't give you clearer directions,' and she improves herself. Otherwise, we'd butt heads all the time. That's the lesson I learned." Each madam strategizes her approach, a learning process for which no one has prepared her before.

Yet other participants, after some years of learning, establish more hierarchical relationships with their employees. Ms. Goto, who hired a Filipina worker for six years before returning to Japan, says she built a relationship that was akin to that of a superior and a subordinate in a company. "I didn't see her as someone who helped me. I was more like her boss, her superior. I knew I would leave Hong Kong eventually, and so she would have to look for the next employer. That means, her work would affect my reputation. I can't have someone who hires her after me say, 'You worked for Ms. Goto for so long and are so poor at this simple task?' or 'I can't believe Ms. Goto let you clean her house like this!' I saw myself as her trainer." Ms. Hisano recounts her experience with her second employee and says that she sometimes has to "scold" her: "She was terrible in the beginning. She said she wanted to quit after a week, complaining I gave her too much to do and I was too strict. I snapped at that. I said to her, 'What do you think your job is? It's going to be like this anywhere you go. I'm not angry with you. I'm trying to teach you.'" Unlike Ms. Chida, whose strategy is to stay in a conflict-less relationship, Ms. Goto and Ms. Hisano have learned to become a madam who trains and teaches.

The varying accounts by the Japanese madams above suggest that many find themselves ill-prepared for the madam role that they suddenly take on in their Hong Kong homes. While some are equipped with language skills and have environments that help their smooth transition, others have to struggle on their own. Each madam learns, through trial and error, to devise a coping strategy that includes practicing her supervisor speech in advance, keeping her frustration at bay, and taking on an authoritative stand toward her employer. All such efforts require a certain level of foreign language competency; therefore, many non-English-speaking women from Japan, however hard their lives may be without a domestic worker, resort to taking on the burden of all the household chores and childcare on their own shoulders.

The Politics of Madam Vocabulary

Let us now turn to the language that the research participants use while narrating their madam experiences. The names they use to refer to their employees are varied. Ms. Aoyama, mentioned above, married to a Hong Konger and using English mostly in her life, lists the terms up for me, saying, “Let’s see, they are called maid-*san* and helper-*san*. I call ours helper. Some say auntie, too.” Another term mainly circulated in Japanese expat communities is *amah-san*, a mixture of a Cantonese term with a Japanese honorary suffix. Unlike “maid” and “helper,” which directly signifies what role the foreigner in their home assumes, the unique term seems to veil the actual reality as well as the blatant class hierarchy underneath it. Lan (2006) also observes numerous term replacements among Taiwanese madams: they avoid “maid” and use terms such as “babysitter” and “caregiver,” or introduce their employees as “sister” and “auntie.” She argues that those employers “do not want a drama of social inequality onstage in their everyday family scenes, and they feel uncomfortable when their sweet home turns into a cold workplace” (p. 214). Arguably, some Japanese madams too might be adopting the most foreign-sounding term so that they could turn away from the power relation in which they now find themselves.

The relationships between Japanese madams and their Southeastern Asian maids are manifested in other linguistic practices too. The interview research reveals that hiring a part-time maid, although illegal in Hong Kong, is rather customary among Japanese expats. As temporary residents, few want to go through troublesome paperwork in a foreign language, and opt for the easier option of employing on a need-based basis someone who already has a full-time, legal contract with another Japanese family. Both Ms. Iida and Ms. Jinnai explained the system to me, using expressions that make the domestic workers seem like goods to be shared and returned after use.

Ms. Iida: My vent was really sticky with cooking oil. I couldn’t stand it any longer. So I thought of a friend of mine who hired a domestic worker. Hers was legal. She was going back to Japan for a vacation, and no one was in her apartment. I asked, “Could

I borrow her a bit? Is she available? It'd be great if you could lend her to me."

Ms. Jinnai: A friend of mine was leaving for her husband's home for a month. The domestic worker was not going with them. She said, "You can use [the worker's name] while we are away." I was like, "Really?" I offered to pay, but she said, "No, no," because they had already paid her for a year, including the vacation time. She didn't want to overcompensate her. Otherwise, she would learn the pleasure of additional income, and once they did, they'd start neglecting the original home and take on more and more part-time jobs, for example, on Sundays, when my friend may need her sometimes. So I said, "Okay, just tell me how much I should give her." The total amount was 50 Hong Kong dollars for five days. Bargain, right?

The words, "borrow," "lend" and "use," as disturbing as they are, signify how migrant domestic workers are commodified in Hong Kong society. Moreover, the maid-sharing condition is determined solely between the madams, without consulting the maids themselves; in the latter case, how much she earns—approximately 100-150 yen per day—and what she does on Sundays are decided without the worker's knowledge. No wonder Ms. Jinnai later in the interview calls her friend who has the original contract with the worker "her *ōnā* (owner)." Maids are regarded to be madams' property.

Who is more vulnerable when such illegal sharing is exposed is another issue that slips the research participants' minds. Ms. Iida, whose husband has a successful business in Hong Kong, and Ms. Jinnai, who is to return to Japan after her husband's short-term relocation, may be less likely to be deported immediately than the workers on a temporary visa program. The vocabulary that circulates among madams is a reflection of the inequality between middle- to upper-middle-class Japanese wives and Southeast Asian domestic workers in Hong Kong.

How do madams refer to themselves, then? In the interviews, no one actually uses the term "madam" although they often quote domestic workers calling them "Ma'am," using the English word. Some refer to themselves as *enpuroiyā* (employer), borrowing an English word that

is very uncommon in everyday Japanese. Other *katakana*-ized terms appear during the interviews: the underlined words below are the original, borrowed English terms used by the interviewees in their Japanese speech.

Ms. Daito: There are many agencies there, and we went to one of those. We interviewed like ten people at a time, listen to what each had to say—their former employer hit her and what not—and had to decide. It didn't finish there. We had to work on a contract, fill out this form and that form... We ended up using an agency for that too.

Ms Goto: We paid the minimum wage set in the law, starting from 3,700 HK dollars with food and other allowances. Our auntie seemed satisfied because we gave her a separate allowance for food. Some people don't do that and provide little food, like giving them only leftovers.

Neither Ms. Daito nor Ms. Goto is a confident speaker of English; and yet, they use *katakana*-ized English words, unable to find exact Japanese words to replace them. Apparently, such legal procedures, experienced as a part of their household management, were new and unfamiliar to them. The sheer lack of suitable vocabulary to describe their own personal experiences points to, once again, how ill-equipped the Japanese women are when relocated in the neoliberal global city. That is, their learning involves acquiring the madam vocabulary along with racial, ethnic and class terminologies that prevail in Hong Kong society. Ms. Hisano's words below are a case in point:

Ms. Hisano: My husband is from Hong Kong, so I heard a lot of people's opinions and experiences, including his families', and have come to know what to do in each situation. Japanese people are modest, and that's wonderful, but when it comes to hiring a domestic worker, Japanese wives would easily be taken advantage of. ... I think Japanese people should face up to the facts that they have kept away from. Such as how people from this country do such things, these types of people act in this way. That sounds like discrimination, but still. Hong Kong people always say these things, and it's like their hiring manuals.

Listening to them, I learned a lot.

The “things that Japanese people have kept away from” include racial, ethnic and class stereotypes that go unquestioned in Hong Kong. They also include the social, political and economic hierarchies that lie between the women and the foreign “others” they hire. Learning to confront these harsh facts and to cope with them results in, more often than not, reaffirming the global inequality, rather than questioning the structure itself (Lan, 2006; Kitamura 2015).

Sautman (2006) describes Hong Kong as “semi-ethnocracy” where ethnic hierarchy defines one’s status and entitlements. Under this social structure, expats and foreign professionals are “denizens,” a privileged group of foreigners while low-skilled migrants are “margizens,” a target of social exclusion and discrimination. The data above reveal that these two groups routinely encounter each other in private spheres. Japanese madams and Southeast Asian maids—both foreigners in Hong Kong but holding glaringly different social statuses—interact with each other, sharing intimate parts of their lives. As analyzed above, many research participants regard migrant domestic workers as a commodity to manage, a potential risk, or a source of trouble to overcome: clearly, the “semi-ethnocracy” seeps into the vocabulary that Japanese madams learn and use. Even those who personally had positive experiences in their households hasten to add, “We are exceptionally lucky that we found such a reliable person” (Ms. Aoyama), and “I’ve heard unfortunate stories such as theft and other crimes, too” (Ms. Bizen). While the denizen madams enjoy multilingualization of their households, proudly exhibiting stories of their learning and coping, the margizens, whose lives often are full of agony, persistence and resistance, are silenced in front of their employers. The social divide is grave despite the fact that their lives are in such close proximity.

When the Private Goes Multilingual

Language is a tricky thing. In this world where globalism and neoliberalism go hand in hand, multilingual skills are a crucial form of

capital for one's survival. They surely empower one, but at the same time can confine her within a hierarchical relationship where she oppresses and/or is oppressed by someone else.

Private domains are never without such linguistic politics. As *Spanglish* indicates, one's social position is at times predetermined by the language she speaks. As the sociological and linguistic studies introduced above demonstrate, the most mundane scenes of interrupting, questioning or silencing someone during friendly and family conversations can involve power relations between the interlocutors. And as my own ethnographic data suggests, talking about private incidents that occur in the home may require power-laden vocabulary that may further marginalize the already vulnerable. What one says, how, and in what language can all be political.

However, overestimating language's domineering power is just as misleading as treating language as apolitical. As Flor resists her potential employer's condescension, as daughters and wives at times defy their authoritative fathers/husbands, and as madams expose their ill-equippedness about supervising their domestic employees, the seemingly rigid hierarchies often let slip the complexity within them. As multilingualization of private domains exceeds, a close and careful look at such dynamic negotiations is necessary for future studies.

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