Visual arguments and discriminatory discourse: Comparing modes and affordances in representations of Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong

M. Agnes Kang

Department of English, HSH 321, Ho Sin Hang Building, Lingnan University, 8 Castle Peak Road, Tuen Mun, Hong Kong

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In the context of what has been referred to as the 'Mainlandization' of Hong Kong since 2003 (Yew & Kwong, 2014), I consider the affordances offered through different modalities by comparing the written linguistic mode to that of visual arguments used in a local political advertisement. The choice of modalities available as a means of expressing familiar topoi found in discriminatory texts provides alternative options for recontextualizing (van Leeuwen, 2008) discriminatory practices. I show that the affordances of specific modalities can be used to express certain topoi and/or support those expressed through other modalities.

© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, socioeconomic and political pressures have led to increased tensions between local Hong Kong people and Mainland Chinese. Hong Kong media and social media recount some of these tensions that have led to familiar 'us' versus 'them' accounts of social categorizations that have ensued. For example, Flowerdew (2012) reports that the main linguistic strategies of discrimination reported in the critical discourse analysis literature are also used against Mainlanders in a corpus of Hong Kong English newspaper articles collected between January 1999 and August 2000. In this paper, I examine the continuing emergence of multimodal discriminatory discourses using discourse analysis, multimodal critical discourse analysis and visual grammar in Hong Kong media and social media texts circulating about a decade later. By analyzing visual representations of a popular derogatory metaphor for Mainland Chinese used in the media and social media, I demonstrate the role of linguistic and visual discourse strategies in developing a negative social stereotype of the other in Hong Kong.

This paper is part of a larger project that involves a discourse study of multimodal texts (advertisements, YouTube videos, internet memes, parodies of ads, blogs, etc.) that shape how social relationships and social groups are perceived and represented in Hong Kong media and new media. In particular, the study addresses how Mainland Chinese 'tourists' are represented in various media, using the frameworks of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) to demonstrate how ideological meanings develop through the production, circulation and interpretation of discourse texts.

In February 2012, the Apple Daily, a popular pro-democracy, tabloid-style newspaper, ran a full-page advertisement paid for by a group of Hong Kong netizens depicting Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong as 'locusts' and protesting the practice of 'double negative' children, i.e. children with neither parent from Hong Kong, being born in Hong Kong (See Fig. 1). Netizens were protesting the so-called 'birth tourism' – mainlanders traveling to Hong Kong to give birth to babies in order for them to obtain permanent residency and be entitled to local benefits, adding further pressure to an already strained healthcare system as well as other public resources. This was a dramatic example of how discourses of identity had been circulating in recent years in Hong

Fig. 1. Apple Daily advertisement; 1 February 2012. Accessed from: https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/files/2014/02/20120203-Facebook-British-Hong-Kong-Locust-Advertisement-in-Newspapers.jpg.

Kong media and new media, delineating boundaries between social groups in a rapidly globalizing society. Yew and Kwong (2014: 1105) report that Mainland Chinese visitors to Hong Kong increased tenfold from 1998 to 2011, which they claim attributed to the growing sentiments of 'Mainlandization' that could be observed in Hong Kong. The appearance of the political advertisement in the popular local newspaper was noted in other local media as well, pointing out that the appearance of the ad marked 'Hong Kong's latest fissure with China' (*Wall Street Journal*) and the return of the 'Yellow Peril' (*South China Morning Post*).

The derogatory symbol of the 'locust' to depict Mainland Chinese visitors refers, according to one news site, to "Mainlanders who come and plunder resources in Hong Kong" (Lam, 2011). The metaphor of 'Mainlanders are locusts' brings together the target domain of Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong and the source domain of swarming insects that can do extensive damage. Reisigl and Wodak (2001) note that "metaphors of 'racial', 'national' and 'ethnic bodies' and 'materiality' are very often also recruited from naturalisations, …from meteorologisation, geologisations and biologisations" (59), and they list several types of metaphors (59–60), including "natural disasters". The Hong Kong context provides a further example of a metaphor recruited from biologisations (in a category of "swarming") that may be described as a metaphor of *pestilence* or *plague*. The use of the more general category of natural disasters as source domains has been shown to be prevalent in representations of immigrants and foreigners (e.g. Charteris-Black, 2006, Crespo-Fernandez 2013, among others), and in this regard, the Hong Kong case is not unique. But the fact that the locust metaphor is represented through the visual text rather than the linguistic one in the *Apple Daily* ad raises the question of how visual metaphors contribute to the discriminatory discourses circulating in Hong Kong media.

The work of van Leeuven and Kress has defined discourses as 'socially constructed knowledges about some aspect of reality … resources for constructing and interpreting the content of texts and communicative events' (van Leeuwen and Kress, 2011). This definition incorporates multiple modes, or systems for making meaning, expanding the scope of discourse from linguistic texts to visual and multimodal texts as well. Research in this field interprets language as a kind of social practice (Hodge and Kress, 1988) that can be used to understand how social meanings are created and how texts can be used to persuade audiences to understand people and events in specific ways. The widened scope of discourse analysis allows for a more comprehensive study of discourse texts in Hong Kong, highlighting the affordances and limitations of various modalities in producing ideological discourses of an 'other'. Machin (2016) notes that

> [t]he different semiotic resources produce meaning together, but each brings different affordances. It is possible to say something with one kind of semiotic resource that you cannot say with another (327).

Given that different semiotic resources offer different affordances, or ways of producing meaning, can this be useful in understanding how discriminatory texts are constructed? In this paper, I focus on comparing the affordances of (written)