

**The place/s of Tagalog in Hong Kong's Central district:
Negotiating center-periphery dynamics**

Nicanor Guinto

*The University of Hong Kong, King's College, London
& Southern Luzon State University*

Abstract: The Central district is the government, financial, and business center of Hong Kong. Yet, on Sundays, it turns temporarily into a space densely occupied by migrant domestic workers from the Philippines. It is then that Tagalog emerges as a valuable linguistic resource in the center of Hong Kong, primarily as it is used on commercial signage as well as by speakers of other languages who see the presence of Filipinos – predominantly female domestic workers - as a business opportunity. Other signs in central Hong Kong that include Tagalog are regulatory, indexing the same Filipinos as low status domestic workers. Using the key concepts of *sociolinguistic scales* (Blommaert, 2007) and *center-periphery dynamics* (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2013), I analyze the underlying forces relevant to Tagalog's (and hence its speakers) symbolic centering and peripheralization in Hong Kong's semiotic landscape.

Keywords: Sociolinguistic scales, center-periphery dynamics, Filipino domestic workers, Tagalog, Hong Kong

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1. Introduction

Officially, the Central district (henceforth, Central) is Hong Kong's government, financial, and commercial center. Yet, Constable (2007: 1) observes:

Sundays in Central District are a spectacular sight. There in Hong Kong's most celebrated financial district, amidst awesome high-rise structures, towering hotels, and dwarfed colonial government buildings, crowds of domestic workers, mainly from the Philippines, but also from other regions of South- and Southeast Asia, gather to socialize, to attend to personal matters, and to escape the confines of their employers' homes and their mundane weekly routines of domestic work.

Also visible and hearable in the area is Tagalog, one of approximately 187 identified languages in the Philippines (Simons & Fennig, 2018).¹ Largely spoken in the capital, Manila, and surrounding provinces, it is the basis of *Filipino*, the national language, and one that is used as the language of the central government, the media, and education alongside English (Gonzalez, 1998). A translocal language in the Philippines, Tagalog also serves as the lingua franca of the roughly 10 million Filipinos overseas (Commission on Filipinos Overseas, 2013; Tupas & Lorente, 2014).

In Hong Kong, Tagalog speakers, broadly speaking, include approximately 200,000 temporary migrant (and predominantly female) domestic workers from the Philippines, 184,000 permanent residents of Filipino descent, and a sizable number of Filipino tourists, the group ranking seventh in tourist arrivals in 2017 (Hong Kong Census and Statistics

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Department, 2017, 2018; Hong Kong Tourism Commission, 2018). Despite these large numbers of Tagalog speakers and, as I show below, the noticeable presence of Tagalog in Hong Kong, studies on the linguistic and semiotic landscape in and of Hong Kong (e.g., Lai, 2013; Lock, 2003; Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2003) seemed to have entirely missed Tagalog. Arguably, this is symptomatic of the relative invisibility of Tagalog and the perception of its speakers.

In this article, I consider public signage (and some talk) in Tagalog to uncover how the presence (and absence) of the language indexes positionings that may be linked to stereotypes and discriminatory practices. Specifically, I examine the dynamic of discursive peripheralization/centering of Tagalog in the semiotic landscape of Central with respect to particular spatio-temporal scalar configurations. As has been argued by Haarstad and Fløysand (2007), a scalar approach provides a more nuanced view of globalization and power, one that opens up possibilities of challenging neoliberal constructions of globalization in which power and privilege are seen to be fixed to government entities and those perceived as socio-economically powerful. Following Lemke (2000), signs such as the ones I analyze here are ‘heterochronic’ objects; that is, they are the product of processes, events, or activities across stretches of time that have consequences for shorter timescale activities and social meanings.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I give a brief background on foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, specifically those from the Philippines (section 2) as well as their weekly presence in Central (section 3). This is followed by a short discussion of how I ‘approached’ Central and of my theoretical approaches: geosemiotics, scale, and centre-periphery dynamic (section 4). In section 5, I analyze my data and demonstrate how they are contingent on the spatio-temporal activities of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. In

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my conclusion (section 6), I follow Del Percio, Flubacher & Duchêne (2017) and argue that the production, distribution, and consumption of Tagalog in Central point to its fluid and contingent valuing across differently scaled times and spaces.

2. Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong: A marginalized migrant labor group?

Migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Hong Kong are hired on a renewable two-year contract, subject to the satisfaction of the employer. Required by law to live with their employers, MDWs are expected to do household work and/or care for children and/or the elderly (Hong Kong Immigration Department, 2015). They get one day off from work, usually Sundays, and up to two weeks of paid vacation leave in their home countries within the span of the two-year contract. Within this time, they are not allowed to shift to other lines of work, nor can their years of stay be counted towards permanent residency status (see Bradsher, 2013). As of 2017, the number of MDWs in Hong Kong has grown to about 370,000 or roughly 9% of the city's total workforce (Legislative Council Research Office, 2017). Of this number, comprised predominantly of women, 54% of all documented MDWs come from the Philippines (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2018). The ever-increasing number of Filipinos hired as domestic workers in Hong Kong has been attributed to the Philippines' economic turmoil in the 1970s and its continued reliance on labor exportation for its economic strategy (see Aguilar Jr., 2014; Lorente, 2018; Rodriguez, 2008).

While MDWs are recognized as an 'integral part of Hong Kong's community', contributing to economic growth, and are said to be paid well compared with other places (Legislative Council Research Office, 2017), issues of exploitation and abuse structured by racial, gender, and class discrimination have been amply documented (Asian Migrant Centre, 2001; Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Helpers & Progressive Labor Union of

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Domestic Workers in Hong Kong, 2016; Justice Centre Hong Kong, 2016). In his psychosociolinguistic and discursive Hong Kong study, for example, Ladegaard (2015) reports the painful recollections of MDWs' stories about running away from abusive employers and seeking refuge in a church shelter. Issues like these which Parreñas (2001) claims are being shared by most Filipino domestic workers (FDWs) elsewhere in the world, are thought to exacerbate workers' marginal social status and their feelings of dislocation and non-belonging.

3. Filipino domestic workers in Central: A contested space

Of the many places in Hong Kong, Central has been described as an important social space for Filipino domestic workers (FDWs), both in academic research and in mainstream media (see Constable, 2009; Dwyer, 2016; Law, 2002; Lee Moss, 2017; Lindio-McGovern, 2012; Peralta-Catipon, 2011). According to Law (2002), this began in 1982 when Hong Kong Land, the largest land owner in Central, proposed that parts of Chater Road be closed to traffic to encourage Sunday shopping in the 'upscale' area. As Law notes, 'The crowds did arrive but were not the clientele that Hong Kong Land had in mind' (p. 1635). Instead, migrant Filipinos were drawn to the nearby but 'downscale' World-Wide Plaza, for remittance services and shopping. This area comprises a three-level enclosed commercial space located right at the heart of Central and above the MTR Subway System's Central Station. The proximity of Central's public spaces to World-Wide Plaza made it ideal site to convene, meet and socialize.

Constable (2007, pp. 3-8) notes that, by the 1980's, the number of Filipino workers 'taking over' Central on Sundays had become so noticeable that criticisms began to appear in the news media. This eventually became a public debate in 1992-93 which was infamously

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called the ‘Battle of Chater Road’. Store owners reportedly complained about the ‘noise, litter and illegal street hawking’ (Law, 2002, pp. 1635-1636). There were groups who proposed reopening the area to traffic on Sundays as a way to drive off congregating migrant workers, while others proposed giving FDWs designated areas such as underground parking spaces removed from public view. In response, other people defended the congregating FDWs, arguing that comments about migrant groups bordered on racism and that proposals to keep them from public view were inhumane and a reflection of the systematic inequality all MDWs endure. Nonetheless, it appeared that, despite the relative silence of the congregating migrant workers on the matter, their embodied response was to maintain the status quo by simply continuing to use the public areas for their Sunday social activities (Constable, 2006). This was evidently a strong enough message to the wider public; by 2006, the ‘battle’ had long been forgotten, and ‘[t]he area surrounding Statue Square, still filled with Filipinas on their day off, had become, as Hongkong Land had first imagined, a tourist attraction and a well-accepted part of the urban landscape’ (Constable, 2006: 8). This, however, is a claim which warrants further probing. To this end, I consider Central’s linguistic landscape with a specific view to regulatory and commercial signage (and some instances of talk) in Tagalog. This signage, I propose, reveals the wider social meanings of FDWs and their ethnonationalistic discursive position(ings).

4. The geosemiotics of Central: Sociolinguistic scales and center-periphery dynamics

The area under examination here covers an approximately 500-meter radius around World-Wide Plaza and the MTR Central Station; it is here that migrant workers, predominantly FDWs, congregate on a weekly basis. From this space, the data I am discussing are notable samples of signage (and some overheard talk) in or containing Tagalog. This material was

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collected as photographs and observation notes during fieldwork conducted between November 2016 to December 2017. During this time, I also found signage with Tagalog appearing – albeit sparsely – elsewhere in Hong Kong; this happened alongside five other ‘minority’ languages in sanitation-related signage.

Drawing from Scollon and Wong Scollon’s (2003) framework for *geosemiotics*, my analysis attends to the *indexical world* and the *social meanings* generated through the material placement of signs. Incorporating some degree of ethnographic detail (cf. Blommaert, 2013; Jaworski, 2014), my analysis is heavily informed by my engagements with different Filipino groups. I myself have first-hand insights through a close relative who has been a domestic worker in Hong Kong for more than two decades, and who I had the chance to ‘follow’ during my fieldwork. It was in this way that I sought what Rampton (2007: 590) describes as ‘analytic distance on what’s close-at-hand’. To this end, I considered not only the linguistic tokens and the visual landscape, but also contingent semiotic resources and arrangements. Finally, my analysis is organized through two contemporary perspectives in sociolinguistics: scalar relations and center-periphery, both understood as inherently ideological ‘projects’.

Introduced to sociolinguistics initially by Blommaert (2007), the notion of scales is intended to complement the field’s generally horizontal, dispersion-driven investigations. In an age of escalated globalization where the (im)mobility of people and inequitable access to resources emerge as pressing concerns, Blommaert argues that a concern for vertical ‘scalar politics’ and relations of power is a necessary corrective.

Scales are both spatial and temporal (Blommaert, 2007; Lemke, 2000). A social phenomenon that is ‘local’ and ‘momentary’ and generally interpreted as ‘lower scale’ tends to have limited mobility and value, while those that are ‘global’ and ‘timeless’ and commonly

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interpreted as ‘higher scale’ tend to have a greater trajectory potential. This attention to spatio-temporal scalar relations is necessarily a matter also of *orders of indexicality* – of differential norms which invariably reveal *polycentricity*, the presence of many centers of authority at one point. As Irvine (2016) stresses, scalar configurations are ideological projects, which means scalar perspectives are always in competition, always relative and/or relational. In other words, the scaling of an object, practice or person as ‘central’ or ‘peripheral’ is contestable or, at least, negotiable. Examples of this way of thinking about scalar relations and center-periphery dynamics are to be found in Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes’s (2013) investigations of multilingualism in minority-language sites, or Jaworski and Thurlow’s (2013) attention to multilingualism and mobility in the semiotic landscape of airports. In precisely the same vein, I will show below how a scalar analysis of the place (or placing) of Tagalog in Central’s semiotic landscape reveals the dynamic, negotiated status and subject-positionings of Filipino migrant workers.

5. Analysis: Marginalizing and centering Tagalog in Central

When I started my fieldwork for a larger research project on the linguistic repertoire of migrant workers, I asked locals and fellow Filipinos alike where I could meet FDWs to interview, pretending not to know exactly where to go. (This is a strategy recommended by Blommaert & Dong, 2010). Interestingly, *everyone*, including those who refused to participate, pointed me to Central on Sundays. This was in spite of the fact that I had seen and met small groups of FDWs congregating in parks and other locations outside Central, and despite the groups in Central being just a small proportion of the entire population of FDWs in Hong Kong. Regardless, the whole scene in Central appears to be a transient, yet well-

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organized community that Law (2001) calls ‘Little Manila’, and that Constable (2007, p. 3) characterizes as ‘a corner of the Philippines transplanted into Hong Kong’.

FDWs’ sizable presence adds a significant layer to the indexical ordering of Central all set against an imposing commercial and governmental landscape which evokes a different indexical order altogether. Specifically, the embodied presence and considerable flow of FDWs is realized as a ‘spatial repertoire’ (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014) in at least four key ways:

- (1) *soundscales* (Pappenhagen, Scarvaglieri, & Redder, 2016) constituted through chatter (online and offline), music in multiple Filipino languages but predominantly in Tagalog, and from unexpected Tagalog speakers like sidewalk vendors of a different ethnonational background;
- (2) *smellscales* (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015) constituted through cooked Filipino food brought and shared in their respective *tambayan* (hang-out place);
- (3) *taskscales* (Ingold, 1993) constituted through a multitude of interconnected activities done en masse in the area; and, finally,
- (4) *sign-scales* which is the focus of my analysis below.

Every Sunday, this spatial repertoire transforms what is otherwise a ‘foreign’ space for the rest of the week into a local, familiar place for the occupying FDWs. Following Jaworski & Thurlow’s (2013) analysis, we might understand this transformation as one where the central becomes marginal and/or the marginal becomes central. My analysis is organized in terms of this dialectical relationship, although what becomes apparent is that processes of

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marginalization/centering are structured along very different political-economic lines – the one regulatory, the other commercial.

5.1. *Marginalizing Tagalog: Regulatory signage*

Regulatory signs are perhaps the most obvious indicators of an indexical order which hinges on the discretion of a known authority. In Hong Kong, most public order signage is in Chinese and English, the two official languages; as such, the presence of any other language on government (top-down) signage warrants special attention. One example of this is shown in Figure 1: a trilingual sign (Chinese, English, Tagalog), emplaced in concrete rectangular plant boxes in Chater Garden Square; the sign reads, in capital letters, ‘Hawking or littering is prohibited. Offenders will be prosecuted.’. Throughout much of the week, this area is frequented by a mix of locals, tourists, and migrants. However, the presence of Tagalog at the bottom of the sign also clearly points also to the park’s Sunday occupants as an intended audience – specifically targeting the FDWs and street vendors.



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Figure 1. Permanent sign in Chater Square Garden

As noted by Angermeyer (2017, pp. 167-168; see below), regulatory signage, by nature, exhibits a *dual indexicality*: while it informs addressees of what actions are prohibited in the relevant area, it points also to the possibility that these actions have previously occurred, or may occur in the future. Reflected in the message and the materiality of the signage are (potential) events over an extended timescale that signal a possible history of unregulated hawking and littering incidents committed by those who are literate in the languages (hence, the need to put up a permanent sign). Implicit in the specific, marked use of Tagalog is the assumption that these prohibited acts have been committed and/or will be committed again by the people who speak or understand this language.

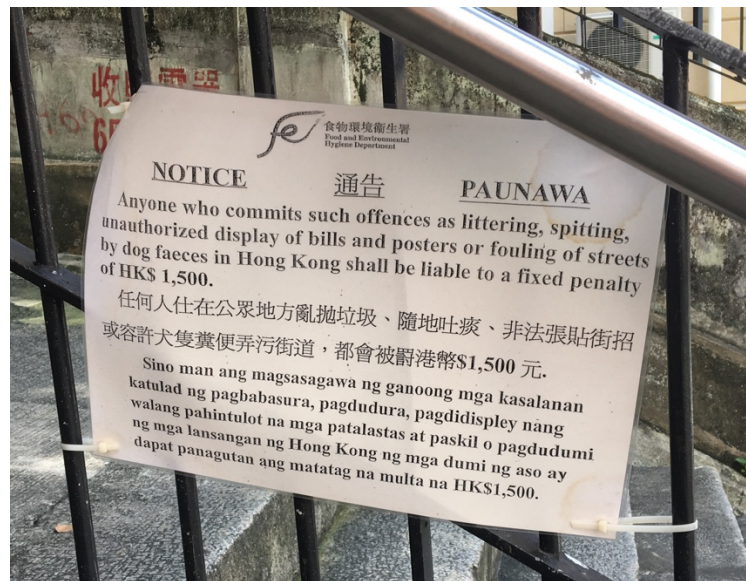


Figure 2. Notice on a stairway close to the heart of Central

Another trilingual sign (see Figure 2) appears in English, Chinese and Tagalog warns against littering, spitting, unauthorized postings, and ‘fouling of streets by dog faeces’.

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Again, the sign's dual indexicality links these undesirable acts (past, present or future) to either dog owners but, most probably, dog carers who are predominantly FDWs. The Tagalog in this sign appears somewhat anomalous in its word-for-word translation of the English; this results in some pragmatic infelicities, such as 'pagbabasura' (scavenging) instead of 'pagkakalat' (littering); 'kasalanan', typically meaning 'sins' or 'faults', rather than 'offences'; and 'matatag' being used instead of 'karampatan' meaning 'fixed'. The cataphoric use of 'ganoon' (such/those) in 'ganoong mga kasalanan' before the actual prohibited offenses is similarly anomalous in the context of public regulatory signage.

Another permanent sign (not shown here) with Tagalog appears on a church gate by a walkway leading to a Catholic Church.² Every Sunday, the walkway is busy mostly due to groups of tourists walking towards the Victoria Peak tram terminal, and worshippers (predominantly Filipino women) attending English-language services in the morning or one of three consecutive Tagalog-language services in the afternoon. The church grounds and the adjacent Cheung Kong Garden are likewise host to groups of FDWs congregating on Sundays. In this case, the sign admonishes passersby to observe silence on the church grounds, but the three language versions are markedly non-parallel:

You are welcome to use this gate. Please be quiet in the Cathedral grounds.

座堂 範圍內,

'Church' 'within the area'

請 保持 寧靜.

'please' 'keep' 'quiet'

Panatilihin po natin ang katahimikan ng hindi po magambala any* mga sumisimba.

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‘Keep’ ‘please’ ‘us’ ‘the quietness’ ‘so that’ ‘don’t’ ‘disturb’ ‘the churchgoers’

As is evident, the English ‘You are welcome to use this gate’ is absent from the Chinese and Tagalog, and the Tagalog version gives an entirely different impression. Like the Chinese version, it does not carry a welcoming sentence; instead, it is a typically formulaic directive + consequence Tagalog regulatory expression. Although the use of the inclusive ‘natin’ (us) and politeness particle ‘po’ suggests the sign authors’ acknowledgement of a shared responsibility for maintaining a quiet environment, the dual indexicality of the term ‘magambala’ (disturb) points to Tagalog speakers (potentially) being a nuisance to churchgoers, presumably more so than any other group of passers-by who may be literate in both or any of the two other languages.

My final example of this type of regulatory signage is a sign (again, not shown here) appearing to be a plain print-out on a sheet of A4-sized paper and pasted on the side of the ceiling of a minibus serving Central and the upmarket residential area known as The Peak. I attribute this top-down sign to the management of the company running the transportation service. Arranged with Tagalog on top and Bahasa (Indonesia) at the bottom, the sign clearly addresses the two ethnic minority groups, the two largest groups of domestic workers in Hong Kong. I offer here the Tagalog text and my English translation:

Ayon sa batas ng HK cap 374g reg53

Ang isang bata na wala pa sa edad na tatlong (3) taong gulang, kung may kasamang matanda at hindi siya nakaupo ay wala siyang babayaran. Ang tatlong (3) bata na nasa tatlong taong gulang (3 years old) pataas pero hindi lumalagpas sa taas na 1.3 metro ay ang bilang nito ay dalawa (2 person) katao.

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According to HK law cap 374g reg53

A child who has not reached the age of three (3), if accompanied by an adult companion and who is not occupying a seat, shall not pay for the ride. Three (3) children who are three years of age but who do not exceed 1.3 meters in height shall be counted as two (2) persons.

The crude, seemingly machine translated Tagalog appears, on first reading at least, very complex and unintelligible. For example, the mention of two subjects in the first sentence ('bata' or child, and 'matanda' or adult companion) makes the referent of the pronoun 'siya' ambiguous. The tendency to apply the normative active voice syntactic construction of English to the typically passive syntactic construction of Tagalog adds further obscurity in the second sentence. Examining its dual indexicality, the sign points to the speakers of these languages (hence domestic helpers) as likely ignorant of the Hong Kong public transport regulations, but this is not assumed of Chinese, English or other language-speaking parents and carers riding on the minibuses. One may thus wonder if the assumption in the sign is that these other speakers are being driven in, or driving their own cars.

As I have suggested, the presence of Tagalog in these regulatory signs is *marked*, a markedness that may be understood in scalar (and also discriminatory) terms. In this regard, the government, property owners, and businesses are construed as centers of authority. On the surface, the signs' superaddressees appear to comprise those who are literate in one or other of the languages, be it English, Filipino and/or Chinese. However, the presence of Tagalog in these spaces, and compared with its relative absence elsewhere (or its parallel presence with a host of other 'minority' languages), arguably indexes the Filipino workers' presence in Central as temporary, marginal or anomalous. The (semi-)permanent materiality

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of the signs accords with this too. It appears to match the conditional and provisional nature of their status – they may be present but they do not belong.

The evidence of machine-generated translations of Tagalog resonates with Angermeyer's (2017, p. 175) observations about Google-translated Hungarian in public order signs aimed at Roma migrants in Toronto. Angermeyer shows how such translations 'control' Roma refugees in ways which ironically reproduce the kinds of discrimination they have escaped in Europe. He explains that pragmatically felicitous and infelicitous translations index the Roma refugees' contradictory social position(ings), with public order signage in Hungarian (or at least what looks like it) tending to function as a 'covert racist discourse that stigmatizes speakers of particular languages as social deviants' (p. 179). In much the same way, I suggest the use of Tagalog in the Central signage is an example of *punitive multilingualism* (Angermeyer, 2017: 167), whereby the inclusion of a language covertly invokes the exclusion or punishment of its 'deviant' speakers.

5.2. Centering Tagalog: Commercial signage (and register)

As indicated earlier, previous studies of Hong Kong's linguistic landscape (e.g., Lai, 2013 in the 'busy areas' in Hong Kong; and Lock, 2003 in the MTR subway system) have overlooked Tagalog as a part of the commercial landscape of Hong Kong. In this regard, I start here with Figure 3 which shows a bilingual English-Tagalog seasonal sign in a branch of the Hong Kong-based clothes store Giordano, next to World-Wide Plaza.

Final Version:

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Figure 3. ‘Maligayang Pasko’ on a Hong Kong clothing brand store

Here we see the Tagalog expression for Merry Christmas ‘Maligayang Pasko’ centered in a large, stylized (gold-colored) font. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) note that information centered in an image (or sign) is usually rendered salient and hence important. Since the Christmas period is a peak season for sending home *balikbayan* boxes (or gift packages), the store clearly orients to Tagalog speakers as an important customer base, knowing only too well that the mid-range prices of Giordano’s make their goods a popular choice with the FDWs (Camposano, 2012).

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Figure 4. ‘lingguhang espesyal’ on a watch shop

Another commercial sign (see Figure 4) is a movable floor-standing sign by the door of a watch shop located on the opposite side of the street from World-Wide Plaza. Foregrounded is the Tagalog ‘lingguhang espesyal’ (lit. trans., ‘Weekly Special’); again, this foregrounding is achieved through its being centered in a larger, clearer font. This is supposedly a Tagalog translation of the English ‘Weekend Special’ which appears in the background, printed in a complementary color scheme. The design is reminiscent of a circular assembly line, or a ‘wheel of fortune’ with the pointer resting on Tagalog. A copy of the same sign is pasted in one of the display cabinets inside the store. Jaworski and Thurlow (2013) discuss how movable signage in airports allows for the temporary centering of different agents (in their case airlines) in spaces used by many different social actors. Similarly, the ‘Weekly Special’ sign appears to have been moved into place next to a common footpath for Filipinos headed to *Ali-Ali*, an open commercial area, to buy cheap souvenir items, chocolates, and (sometimes counterfeit) merchandise, or to avail themselves of cheaper salon and massage services. Despite its awkward or incorrect translation, the foregrounding (in the sign and in its emplacement) appears to be a well-designed commercial

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strategy. We see similar commerce-driven appeals to FDW's emerging in other less formalized ways too in Central; take the example in Figure 5.



Figure 5. 'Tubig' on a bottom-up sign

In small mobile stands or kiosks owned by Hong Kong locals (Figure 5) is the Tagalog word 'tubig' (water) along with the brand names of various carbonated beverages on sale for \$HK 6 (about US\$ 0.75, € 0.65) Every Sunday, stands like this one are stationed in different places around Central, especially in more densely occupied spaces of socialization. Also, around the area are sidewalk vendors of Chinese and South Asian descent who call out their customers using Tagalog terms for prices and merchandise quality like 'beinte; mura na' (Twenty dollars only; this is cheap) or 'maganda 'to; bagay sa'yo' (This is good; it fits you well). Some vendors can manage extended conversations with bargaining Filipino customers in otherwise 'accented' Tagalog. More often than not, their 'metrolingual' (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010) Tagalog is clearly an important marketing strategy – in much the same way that Thurlow & Jaworski (2010) found in the use of English by Gambian market vendors seeking to attract British tourists. Tagalog is even more prominently seen and heard in commercial spaces such as World-Wide Plaza and Ali-Ali; in these places – generally staffed

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by Filipinos - Tagalog and other Philippine languages are clearly transactionally functional on an everyday basis. As Hutton (2014, p. 605) suggests, in any landscape, ‘the amount of signage escalates as vendors, official agencies and private citizens compete within an “economy of attention”’. This is certainly the case in and around Central where we also find Filipino personnel being hired to facilitate transactions and encourage purchases.

Commercial Tagalog signage tends to construct FDWs as a particular kind of consumer in a much lower scale (or price range) than, say, the customer base of upscale multinational stores in the area where signs remain in English and/or Chinese. Regardless, Tagalog is evidently part and parcel of the political economy of Central. In this sense, and in contrast to the regulatory signage, Tagalog is given value and its speakers are accommodated and centered rather than excluded and marginalized. These relatively temporary (seasonal or weekly) signs and accompanying registers correspond with the once-a-week presence of Filipinos in Central. However, in this case, the presence of Tagalog signals FDWs’ considerable, collective purchasing power. From serving for the most part of the week to being served on particular days and in this part of Hong Kong, FDWs are positioned as desirable, privileged migrants to be welcomed; if only fleetingly, they and, again, partially, are the center of attention.

6. Conclusion: The contradictory political economy of Tagalog (speakers)

The Tagalog signs (and some sales talk) examined in this article are material representations of two competing scalar perspectives - one regulatory, one commercial - tightly linked to the place-related activities of migrant Filipino domestic workers. Temporally speaking, both kinds of signs are entrenched manifestations of the kind of ‘permanent temporariness’ which characterizes FDWs’ presence in Central. While the materiality and emplacement of

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regulatory signage shows no indication of the possibility of replacement or removal anytime soon, the commercial signs may look temporary, their seasonal or weekly appearance reveals their recurrence or repeatability.

By addressing the particular – and particularly marked – presence of Tagalog in two types of signage in Central, I hope to have shown how center-periphery politics are not only negotiated linguistically but also in sometimes contradictory or at least competing ways. On the one hand, Tagalog’s presence or absence in the regulatory signs suggests the relative marginalization and/or invisibility of FDWs in ways which recursively reiterate (Gal, 2016; Irvine & Gal, 2000) the global marginalization and invisibility of these and other ‘unskilled’ migrant workers. On the other hand, the same Tagalog speakers are centered as desirable, valued consumers, being linguistically accommodated to in the pursuit of profit.

Del Percio et al. (2017) suggest that the valuation of linguistic resources in particular sites inevitably emerges from the production, distribution, and consumption of such resource at particular times organized by different entities to achieve particular ends. Tagalog in Central is a perfect case in point. Here, we see how the relatively volatile political economy of Tagalog is spatialized and, in turn, is structured by space. It is in this way that Tagalog speakers are also scaled as both peripheral and central. In this first instance, Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong are positioned within the larger global ‘South-North’ divide which drives economic migration in the first place (cf. Heugh, 2013). In the second instance, another layer of indexical order emerges, one that positions them, however provisionally and temporarily, as relatively powerful migrants. These concomitant, competing scalar ideologies (Irvine, 2016) certainly undermines any essentialized configuration of center-periphery relations, just as the chronotopic fluctuations of the migrant workers’ status confirms the dynamic, complex political economies in contemporary urban linguistic landscapes.

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Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to a number of people: my PhD supervisor Adam Jaworski for his expert advice and hands-on support; editors Crispin Thurlow and Kellie Gonçalves for their guidance and generous assistance; my two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments; Brian Villaverde, Joan Dizon, and Andre Theng for commenting on earlier drafts; Jasper Wu, Corey Huang, Cao Libing, and Raymund Vitorio for their translation help; Ben Rampton, Beatriz Lorente, Paolo Valdez, and some of my participants for the insightful conversations while I was still conceptualizing the paper; and Jenn Gresham for proofreading the final draft. Any remaining mistakes or oversights are, needless to say, my own. I dedicate the paper to my father who will no longer be able to see it in print: Tay, this is for you.

Notes

¹ The linguistic tokens in the signs that I examine in this paper, and the complementary soundscape description, have been identified as ‘Tagalog’ by 26 out of my 28 primary informants for the purposes of my larger project.

² Due to space limitations, the three images discussed but not shown here can be viewed online at <http://www.nicguinto.com/research-publication/112019>.

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Abstrak

Sentro ng gobyerno, pananalapi, at negosyo sa Hong Kong and Central district. Subalit tuwing Linggo, ito ay nagiging pansamantalang pahingahan at pook libangan ng mga nagtatrabaho doong kasambahay mula sa Pilipinas. Mula rito, lumalabas na mahalagang wika rin ang Tagalog sa sentro ng Hong Kong na makikita sa mga patalastas sa mga tindahan at ginagamit ng ilang mga magtitindang nagsasalita ng ibang wika at nakikitang oportunidad sa kanilang negosyo ang pagdagsa ng mga Pilipino roon. Samantala, makikita rin ang Tagalog

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sa mga babala na tumutukoy sa mga Pilipinang namamalagi roon tuwing linggo bilang mga kasambahay na ibinibilang sa mababang antas ng lipunan. Gamit ang mga susing konsepto na *sociolinguistic scales* (Blommaert, 2007) at *center-periphery dynamics* (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2013), at *geosemiotics* (Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2003) bilang balangkas, pinag-aralan ko sa papel na ito ang magkaugnay na puwersa sa simbolikong pagse-sentro at pagsasa-isang tabi sa Tagalog (at sa mga nagsasalita nito) sa semiotic landscape ng Hong Kong. [Filipino]

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