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A sociolinguistics of low-end globalization in Guangzhou: multilingualism, semiotics, and translanguaging

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Abstract: Chinese cities Guangzhou and Yiwu have established themselves as major trade hubs and important nodes of "low-end" globalization. In particular, Guangzhou in Southern China has been an important port of the modern-day belt and road initiative in the 21st century, contributing to the global flows of people, goods, and ideas at a grass-roots level and attracting traders and businessmen from Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and beyond from a superdiverse range of sociolinguistic and religious backgrounds. Despite its fundamental role in the very making of globalization, language is less explored in globalization literature overall. In particular, the (socio)linguistic aspects remain significantly underresearched in low-end globalization or globalization from below (which stands in contrast to the fancy and sophisticated high-end globalization operated by national governments and transnational corporations). The increasingly multilingual and complex world we are in highlights the pertinent issues of grass-roots communication in low-end globalization. In this article, using Guangzhou as a case study, we explore the sociolinguistic aspects of low-end globalization on the ground, highlighting how multilingual signs (e.g. Arabic, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Russian, French, Swahili and Twi), various semiotic materials, and dynamic and hybridised communication practices (e.g. translanguaging) effectively serve as the "language" of low-end globalization at a grass-roots level in a context of superdiversity and mobility. The article also points to the emergence of an English-based trade pidgin in the city as a result of language contact.

Keywords: low-end globalization; multilingualism; Guangzhou; Africans; Middle east; superdiversity

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1 Introduction

Despite recent talks of deglobalization (Roche and Kruk 2025) and the recent setbacks (e.g. Brexit, Trump-era policies, and Covid-related lockdowns and travel restrictions), globalization remains the order of the day and an important fact of life in the 21st century that is here to stay. Generally speaking, although the word "globalization" is often used as an abstract concept in the singular form, there are actually multiple globalizations (Ben-Rafael and Ben-Rafael 2018; Gu and Manan 2024) with various facets and manifestations (e.g. economic globalization and political globalization). Relatively recently, there are conceptualisations of high-end globalization and low-end globalization. High-end globalization is the more noticeable and taken-for-granted kind of globalization that is largely associated with the more regulated, sophisticated, fancy and grandiose face of globalization spearheaded by national governments and regional and international organizations (activities related to major organizations such as the WTO, the IMF, ASEAN and the EU) and led by major transnational corporations (hotels such as Sofitel, Pullman, Mövenpick and Ibis; fast food chains, restaurants and coffeehouses such as KFC, Burger King, Tim Hortons and Starbucks; and luxury and high-end brands such as Chanel, Burberry, Celine and Saint Laurent). In addition, another more under-the-radar yet nevertheless important globalization also exists that is called low-end globalization (Mathews 2008) or globalization from below. As a less regulated and more grass-roots and informal kind of globalization (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007; Haugen 2018; Neuwirth 2011; Portes et al. 1989), low-end globalization concerns the transnational flow of people and goods (Mathews 2008) involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, sometimes semi-legal or illegal transactions (Mathews and Yang 2012) commonly associated with the developing world. This is particularly salient amongst global-south nations.

So far, while a lot has been made of globalization from various perspectives, such as politics, economy, culture, sociology, anthropology, migration and neoliberalism (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007; Haugen 2018; Mathews 2008; Mathews and Yang 2012; Neuwirth 2011; Portes et al. 1989), the (socio)linguistic and communicative aspects have been relatively less explored, with Blommaert 2010; Bodomo et al. 2022; Chao and Wang 2024 being some of the recent work on this topic. What is particularly unknown is how small business owners and foreign traders from divergent backgrounds communicate in various business-related encounters in low-end globalization. This important sociolinguistic and communicative aspect is very much the missing jigsaw piece that prevents us from gaining a more holistic and comprehensive picture of how globalization (especially at a grass-roots level) gets done in a multilingual, mobile, complex and superdiverse world (cf. Arnaut et al. 2016;

Vertovec 2007). Such a relative research gap is salient, considering the fundamentally important role of language in making (low-end and high-end) globalization possible in the first place. It is certainly uncontroversial to say that without language any globalization is all but impossible. While we might assume that business and corporate elites may be able to speak fluent or even perfect English as a lingua franca for high-end globalization (e.g. the acquisition of a foreign company or the merger of two companies), the same cannot be assumed for social actors and practitioners of low-end globalization on the ground. That is, in our not-so-ideal world, individual salespeople and traders engaged in small businesses might have different levels of education and varied abilities and truncated competence (Blommaert 2010) in English and other languages. Theoretically and conceptually, this points to the idea of grass-roots multilingualism or multilingual communication at a grass-roots level (e.g. individual small business owners and traders in trading malls). This highlights the crucial need for more engaged sociolinguistic studies of how communication gets done at a grass-roots level in low-end globalization in a context of great mobility and superdiversity. Related to this sociolinguistic and multilingual research context is the idea of "translanguaging". "Translanguaging" originally is often discussed in education-related contexts as a liberating pedagogical theory and approach (Garcia and Wei 2014). This dynamic concept is of great potential relevance in multilingual and multicultural contact zones such as trading malls in Guangzhou. Theoretically and conceptually, "translanguaging" permits researchers to explore how social actors may dynamically and strategically make use of (linguistic) resources in their communicative repertoire (Li and Zhu 2013) in the grass-roots meaning-making process.

Due to their strategic locations, demographic dividend, and the ability to produce relatively cheap products, places in China such as Yiwu and Guangzhou have consolidated themselves as major hubs of such low-end globalization (Gu 2024) over recent decades. Each year, many tourists, traders and businessmen from South Asia, the Middle East, Africa and beyond (e.g. occasionally places such as Azerbaijan, Russia, Malaysia and Indonesia) come to Yiwu and Guangzhou to buy items such as clothes, caps, bags, toys, stationery, watches, and electronic devices. These products are then brought or shipped to their home countries to be redistributed or resold. In particular, Guangzhou plays a pivotal role in the global flows of goods and people, representing an important node of low-end globalization and entrepôt connecting China and the rest of the world. People often jokingly say that China is the world's factory and Guangzhou is no doubt its showroom. The existence of foreign traders and businessmen from varied socio-political, cultural, ethnolinguistic and religious backgrounds has given rise to various trading malls, cafes, restaurants and travel agencies catering to foreigners' and the trading communities' linguistic, religious and dietary needs. Pockets of Guangzhou (e.g. Sanyuanli and Xiaobei) have

developed an exotic and multicultural vibe rarely experienced in the rest of China (Gu 2024). Such dynamic movements of people, goods and ideas (Appadurai 1990) without doubt have transformed Guangzhou into a multilingual and multicultural contact zone and locale of great (super)diversity (cf. Arnaut et al. 2016; Vertovec 2007). As a result, this effects material changes on the city's language ecology and linguistic landscape.

So far, Guangzhou's position as a business and trade hub has been explored by various scholars from the perspective of economy, business, migration, mobility, geography, urban studies, China studies, sociology and anthropology (Bredeloup 2012; Haugen 2018; Jin et al. 2021; Li et al. 2009; Li et al. 2012; Mathews and Yang 2012; Mathews et al. 2017). For example, from a more sociological and anthropological perspective, Mathews et al. (2017) have examined Africans and other foreigners in Guangzhou's marketplace, focusing on how they operate in trade and business and contribute to the informal economy in a context of low-end globalization. From the perspective of urban studies, Jin et al. (2021) explore whether the ethnic enclave model is applicable in the Chinese context concerning Africans in Guangzhou. In Li et al. (2009), they examined the African enclave in Guangzhou, focusing on the making of a new transnational urban space.

In comparison, despite the importance of language, the sociolinguistic and communicative aspects have been relatively underexplored in Guangzhou-related scholarship. The few studies that have examined language and communication in Guangzhou include Bodomo et al. (2022), Chao and Wang (2024), Gu (2024), Han (2013), Liao and Chan (2022) and Wang (2022). Notably, in Bodomo et al. (2022), the authors examine the strategic use of calculators in markets and trading malls in Guangzhou and beyond to bridge communication gaps. Taking a comparative approach, Liao and Chan (2022) compare the African and Korean neighbourhoods' linguistic landscapes. Wang (2022) looks at street signs related to Africans in Guangzhou from the perspective of translation. Also involving the African communities, Chao and Wang (2024) studied Africatown in Guangzhou as a geosemiotic assemblage. Gu (2024) took a comparative perspective and explored the use of Arabic in Xiaobei in a changing context.

Clearly, of the Guangzhou-related scholarship, a vast majority of studies have focused on Africans or a few streets in a neighbourhood or ethnic enclave. In view of the research gaps identified earlier, this study aims to more systematically investigate the under-explored sociolinguistic aspects of low-end globalization in a broader and more comprehensive manner, covering a wider range of languages, multiple locations and various modes of communication. This promises to shed light on the sociolinguistic aspects of low-end globalization in a more nuanced, layered and embodied way. Based on experience and the researcher's initial observations of

Guangzhou, the language of low-end globalization in the city largely manifests itself at two levels: (1) relatively fixed and static signage in the linguistic and semiotic landscape (e.g. multilingual and multimodal signs and posters) and (2) more dynamic physical multilingual and multimodal communication on the ground (e.g. interactions between salespeople and traders in trading malls). As such, given the data-driven nature of the study, the overarching research aim is realised in the form of two broadly defined and interconnected research questions in order to shed light on:

(1) the ways in which the foreign trading community from a (super)diverse range of backgrounds may have transformed and left material and concrete traces on Guangzhou's linguistic and semiotic landscapes (e.g. the visibility of various foreign languages and symbols)

(2) the meaning-making process on the ground as part of grass-roots multilingual and intercultural communication (e.g. dynamic interactions between salespeople and traders in trading malls)

2 Guangzhou or "Canton" as a dynamic multilingual contact zone and vital node of low-end globalization

Guangzhou, also known as Canton (as in "Canton Fair"), is located in Southern China. Even before Hong Kong rose to global prominence, Guangzhou had been one of the most important foreign-trade cities in China, if not the most important one. With a strategic geographic location, Guangzhou had for centuries been an important port as part of the ancient maritime silk road, connecting ancient China with Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and even Africa and Europe. For some time, due to protectionist policy enforced by Qing China, Guangzhou was actually the only port that was allowed by the then-ruling Qing government to carry out business and trade activities with the outside world (the Thirteen Hongs). Then, the First Opium War was fought between China (Qing dynasty) and the United Kingdom (the British Empire), where the militarily superior British Empire defeated China. This led to the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, an unequal treaty signed between the two empires. Apart from taking Hong Kong Island as a colony, the Nanking treaty also asked the Qing dynasty to open five treaty ports – Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai – for foreign trade. Guangzhou or Canton was under colonial influences from the British and other western powers (Shamian island with many European-style buildings being an example).

Let us fast forward to 1949, when the "new China" or the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded. In the first few decades of the founding of the PRC, China was relatively isolated from the rest of the world, for political and ideological reasons. Even so, due to Guangzhou's favourable and strategic location in the Pearl River Delta, and also its geographical proximity to Hong Kong and Macau, the city remained a major driver of China's economic development. Guangzhou's role as an important bridge between China and the world became even more prominent since China's reform and opening-up. That is, after 1978, China took a more open attitude in its economic development and became more actively engaged in a global system. In this period, China started to pursue an export-driven economic model (Haugen 2018), gradually turning itself into the world's factory. Against a backdrop of China's reform and opening-up (coupled with the broader context of globalization), Guangzhou and Guangdong province in general took advantage of such developmental opportunities and became a major engine of China's economic development. With favourable geographic location, numerous factories that can manufacture products relatively cheaply, and hard-working businessmen with great business acumen and can-do entrepreneurial spirit (Li et al. 2012), Guangzhou (along with other places such as Yiwu, China) became a major business and commercial hub and important trading post (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007; Bredeloup 2012), attracting businessmen and traders to trade and buy products in the city. This has also given rise to fascinating South-South population and goods flows (cf. Gillespie 2001). To sum up, foreign trade runs deep in Guangzhou's DNA. The city's foreign trade heritage has evolved from the more formal, regulated and controlled form (e.g. the Thirteen Hongs which did business with Western powers) now to a more informal form (e.g. individual foreign traders from global South countries). In many ways, despite Guangzhou's long-standing position as a trade hub in South China historically, the mass influx of African, Middle Eastern and South Asian traders and businessmen is a relatively recent thing with only around 2-3 decades' history against a backdrop of China's reform and opening-up and the broader trend of globalization. Please see Figure 1 for some general idea about Guangzhou's strategic location as a bridge linking China, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa and further afield.

As a result of the incoming African, Middle Eastern and South Asian tourists, traders and middlemen, a number of trading malls have been flourishing, which fully or partially cater to the trading community for informal trans-border trade (Haugen 2018). These malls are particularly visible in Xiaobei, Sanyuanli and a few other areas in the city. For some general ideas of trading malls in Guangzhou, please see Figure 2 as an example. Figure 2 is about Guangzhou's Xiaobei area (which is also known as "Little Africa", "Chocolate City" and "Little Arabia"). This particular area has a visible presence of Africans and Middle Easterners. Since many traders are Muslims, there are halal restaurants and cafes within some of the malls in Xiaobei,

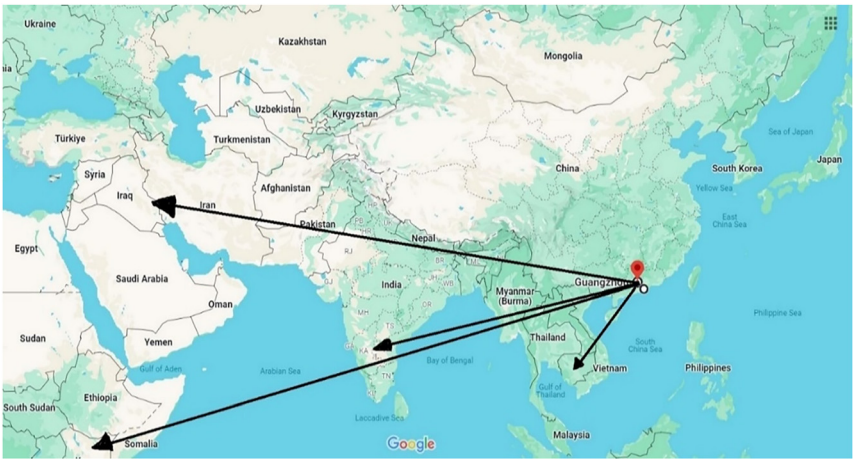

Figure 1: Guangzhou as a major business and trade hub between China and the rest of the world.

and it is not uncommon to see people praying in the staircase a few times a day. The existence of these trading malls also led to a number of foreigner-friendly hotels, restaurants, stores and shops (Gu 2024; Haugen 2018) in adjacent areas. Over time, ethnic areas/ethnic enclaves (cf. Gu and Bhatt 2024; Gu and Coluzzi 2024) have come into being in pockets of Guangzhou, where ethnic economies are thriving (especially during Canton fair). For example, the area near Taojin metro station has many Arabs and a concentration of restaurants, cafes and shops targeting the group. One street in Xiaobei has a number of Indian/South Asian restaurants. In Sanyuanli, a small pocket of the broader area can be seen as the city's 'Little Bangladesh' with several Bangladeshi restaurants and shops. In an area halfway between Sanyuanli metro station and the Guangzhou Railway station, there are a number of Pakistani restaurants. To get an idea of the dynamic and multicultural vibe in Guangzhou, please see Figures 3–7. Notably, Figure 5 (from the Xiaobei area) gives some idea of trader-oriented businesses where halal food and Middle-eastern style shisha are available. Figure 6 illustrates African-style restaurants in Guangzhou. Figure 7 shows some examples of South Asian-oriented shops, supermarkets and restaurants specialising in vegetarian, non-vegetarian and Muslim food (e.g. Pakistani, Bangladeshi, North Indian, South Indian and halal food). In many signs, various linguistic and semiotic and multimodal elements (e.g. colourful portrayal of foreign food) combine in the meaning-making process.

In the media and in Guangzhou-related literature, people tend to almost equate Guangzhou with an "African town". While (black) Africans are certainly highly visible, it is oversimplistic to assume that only traders from Sub-Saharan Africa are

Figure 2: Some general ideas of trading malls in Guangzhou (taken from the Xiaobei area).

Figure 3: General multilingual and multicultural vibe in pockets of Guangzhou.

Figure 4: General multilingual and multicultural vibe in pockets of Guangzhou.

Figure 5: A halal restaurant/shisha lounge in Xiaobei area.

in Guangzhou. In many ways, terms such as “Africa town”, “Little Africa” or “Chocolate City” are far from accurate descriptions of the level of (super)diversity on the ground. This is because people from various ethnolinguistic, religious, socio-political and cultural backgrounds can be found in the city (see Section 3 for more

Figure 6: Restaurants in Guangzhou serving African food.

Figure 7: South Asian restaurants, supermarkets and other businesses.

details). The existence of foreign traders and various businesses oriented towards the trading community have transformed Guangzhou into a dynamic transnational urban space and a major hub of low-end globalization (Gu 2024; Mathews et al. 2017) in the 21st century. Other examples of such low-end globalization can be found in Yiwu's wholesale market (Xu 2024), Singapore's Peninsula Plaza, Hong Kong's Chungking Mansions (Mathews 2008; Wang and Liang 2024) and World-Wide Plaza (Guinto 2019), Dubai's Dragon Mart (Gu 2023) and Bangkok's MBK Centre, Soi Arab (Gu and Bhatt 2024) and Indra Square. As most of those traders in Guangzhou are from various countries in the global South, such South-South population and goods flows represent a defining character of the place being studied. This led to appreciable transformations of the city's linguistic and semiotic landscape (cf. Figures 8–10). Figure 8 (top right) for instance shows a corner in a mall with many prayer rugs which foreigners use to pray. Figure 9 illustrates the visibility of Arabic in various forms in Guangzhou. These include standard Arabic in the Arabic script and also Arabic in the Latin script (Arabizi). In Figure 9, the name of a coffee shop 'mish mish' is an example of Arabizi, where 'mish mish' (the colloquial Arabic word for 'apricot') is creatively written using the Latin script. In Guangzhou, other examples of Arabizi include 'Li Beirut'. Similar examples of Arabizi can also be found in the other major trade city Yiwu, where two middle eastern restaurants have Arabizi names 'Bayt Jiddi' (literally 'grandfather's house') and 'beyti' (literally 'my home'). The dynamic and superdiverse nature (cf. Arnaut

Figure 8: Effects of low-end globalization on Guangzhou's linguistic and semiotic landscape.

Figure 9: Effects of low-end globalization on Guangzhou's linguistic and semiotic landscape.

Figure 10: Effects of low-end globalization on Guangzhou's linguistic and semiotic landscape.

et al. 2016; Vertovec 2007) of many pockets of Guangzhou clearly makes the place a paradise for multilingual, sociolinguistic, sociological and anthropological research. This calls for more engaged studies of the city as a multilingual and multicultural contact zone especially at a bottom-up and grass-roots level.

3 Foreign businessmen and traders and the related ecology

Some further details about these foreign businessmen/traders are provided here. Clearly, traders in Guangzhou come and go, who stay in the city for varying lengths of time (from several hours to a couple of decades). Many may only stay for 2–5 days and then go to Hong Kong and Yiwu or go back to their home countries. However, some Africans and other foreigners who stay in Guangzhou long term may learn Chinese and even get married and have mixed babies with local Chinese women (which often leads to online debates in China and results in fears and hatred that the Chinese "pureness" and Chinese cultural identity might be in danger). It is also not uncommon to see some foreigners overstay their visas and live in China illegally.

The essentially dynamic, transient, fluid and complex nature of the traders' existence defies any accurate and reliable calculation in terms of how many such foreigners are in the city and which countries they are from. However, while people from other places (e.g. Europe and South America) can be found in Guangzhou, in general, most of the foreign traders and businessmen are from the Middle East and North Africa (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Yemen, Jordan), Africa (e.g. Benin, Congo, Tanzania, Guinea, Ghana, Gambia, Chad, Cameroon, Mali, Nigeria, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Ethiopia, Somalia) and South Asia (e.g. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka), as confirmed by my own observations and also by studies such as Mathews et al. (2017). Please see Bodomo et al. (2022) for some details about the linguistic profiles of the Africans.

Clearly, the concept of "superdiversity" best sums up such movement of people. The traders are from different age groups and speak a superdiverse range of languages (e.g. Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Hindi/Urdu, Nepali, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil, Swahili, Igbo, Amharic, Tigrinya, Afar, Somali, Hausa, Fulani and Yoruba in addition to many other languages/dialects). Even among Arabic speakers, there are people who speak different varieties or dialects of Arabic (e.g. Sudanese Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, Algerian Arabic and Levantine Arabic). These traders are also from various religious backgrounds and follow religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism. Notably, Islam is a common religion amongst these traders (indeed in Africa alone

about half of Africans are Muslims). This explains why many halal restaurants, meat shops and stores can be found (e.g. in the Xiaobei area and beyond). The existence of many Muslim traders in Guangzhou in turn also attracts many Chinese Muslims from central and Northwest China, who come to work in the catering industry and work as Chinese-Arabic translators and interpreters. Some Chinese Muslims change money for foreigners in front of halal restaurants. Some disabled Chinese Muslims (e.g. from Henan) are beggars in the Xiaobei area (Figure 11 left), who greet passers-by with the Islamic greeting "assalamu alaikum", play religious audio (e.g. verses from the Quran), and accept money electronically (through ready-made QR codes). Some non-Muslim Chinese hold multilingual signs (Figure 11 middle) to attract and solicit foreign businessmen (e.g. about products and opening bank accounts). In Sanyuanli, Xiaobei, and other places, it is a common sight to see foreigners buy shoes, shirts, fruit and other food items from stalls and roadside businesses run by the Chinese (Figure 11 right). In the soundscape (Hurley and Elyas 2024), pre-recorded audio is sometimes broadcast for advertising purposes. For instance, a shoe shop in Sanyuanli blasts out a recurring female voice recording in non-standard English "Man shoe, man shoe, woman shoe, woman shoe, three pian forty kuai. Jordan shoe, Jordan shoe, quickly quickly quickly". Similarly, in front of the Azal restaurant in Xiaobei, a Chinese girl welcomes diners through code-switching/translanguaging (Welcome! Marhaba! Welcome to Azal). Featuring non-standard English, Chinese nationals engaged in foreign exchange business shout "Hello! Change money! Hello!"

Figure 11: Interesting ecologies driven by foreign traders and businessmen.

to attract the attention of foreigners. Clearly, there is a fascinating foreign traders-triggered dynamic and ecology in Guangzhou as far as sociolinguistics, sociology and anthropology are concerned.

Before I wrap up this section, it is worth pointing out a few things. As briefly alluded to earlier, while the foreign traders are welcomed by local Chinese salespeople, hotel and restaurant owners and foreign language translators, there is a looming sense of fear and anxiety amongst the general public about their presence (Gu 2024). Their existence and intermarriage with local Chinese women lead to fear that, over time, the Chinese ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity might be in jeopardy. Such fears, concerns and the fact that some foreign traders indeed engage in illegal activities led to stricter enforcement of immigration laws and major crackdowns on illegal foreigners (e.g. Africans) in and around 2013 and 2014. As a result of such crackdowns and also the Covid-19 related lockdowns and travel restrictions, there has been a decline in the local African population (and other foreigners in general). However, more and more traders are coming back since the pandemic was over (Gu 2024). Also, it is worth noting that although Guangzhou is a superdiverse trade hub and a multilingual contact zone, such diversity should not be over-exaggerated. In Guangzhou, ethnic Chinese people represent the overwhelming majority and standard Chinese and various Chinese dialects (notably Cantonese) are the dominant language(s) in the city. Overall, despite their visible presence, foreign traders are still the minority in terms of absolute numbers. Nevertheless, the existence of various (super)diverse and dynamic enclaves has effectively carved out fascinating ethnolinguistic spaces from Guangzhou's existing language ecology and linguistic landscape, giving the city an exotic feel and cosmopolitan vibe (cf. Figures 2–10). The broader significance of places such as Guangzhou and Yiwu clearly goes beyond trade, business and language. In a context of low birth rates in many traditionally homogeneous and now increasingly aging East Asian societies (China, Japan and South Korea), such dynamic multicultural cities are in many ways important testing grounds to establish whether multilingualism and multiculturalism may work at a societal level.

4 Data and methodology

As discussed, this study aims to examine the language/sociolinguistics of low-end globalization in Guangzhou. Since the language of low-end globalization mainly manifests in the form of (1) fixed and static multimodal and multilingual signage and (2) dynamic onsite multilingual and multimodal communication at a grass-roots level, the corresponding data collection methods inevitably need to be multi-layered and non-linear. To capture the complex and multifaceted nature of micro-level grass-

roots language use and communication practices in a relatively comprehensive and convincing way, this study draws on heterogeneous methodological approaches in what can be seen as a mixed-methods approach (Ridenour and Newman 2008).

In 2013, 2014, 2023, 2024 and 2025, the researcher made multiple field trips to Guangzhou and spent around 150 h on this topic in total. During these trips, the researcher has had a relatively comprehensive coverage of various pockets of Guangzhou with the presence of foreign businessmen and traders. The areas covered include Xiaobei, Sanyuanli and other areas with many foreigner-oriented trading malls, restaurants, cafés, shisha lounges, supermarkets, and stores. Given the multi-sited nature of the field trips covering different areas and business types across different periods, the observations made can be seen as more representative of the overall situation (compared with looking at only 1–2 streets or examining only one shop). This can shed light on the language or sociolinguistics of low-end globalization in Guangzhou in a relatively systematic and comprehensive way.

To address the first research question, a common linguistic landscape approach (cf. Coluzzi 2017; Gorter 2006; Gu 2025; Landry and Bourhis 1997) is taken, where an approach of "walking ethnography" is adopted. That is, the researcher documented authentic real-world signs, posters and various semiotic elements related to low-end globalization from Guangzhou's linguistic and semiotic landscapes. This has resulted in 1,530 photographs in total (a majority feature linguistic and/or semiotic data, and a small number feature general context, setting and background). In analysing the linguistic and semiotic landscape (cf. Ma et al. 2025) data, the author pays particular attention to what foreign languages are represented and how various linguistic elements might be used alongside other multimodal and semiotic elements in meaning-making, drawing on his linguistic know-how on some of the languages. Such linguistic and semiotic landscape data can also serve as useful background information and provide some sociolinguistic, ethnographic and anthropological insights in general.

To address the second research question, a combination of methods involving observation, fieldnotes, casual conversations and interviews are adopted to establish the dynamic meaning-making process as part of grass-roots multilingual and intercultural communication. Notably, given the fact that people tend to change their behaviour if they are aware that they are being studied (e.g. Hawthorne effect), a more covert observation method was taken for better validity, where the researcher was in the same shared space with the salespeople and traders as a passer-by/potential customer. This made it possible for the researcher to reliably and accurately capture how social actors (in this case the traders and salespeople) use language on the ground in a real-world context. This is in line with the approach taken in Bodomo et al. (2022), which studies the use of calculators in markets and trading malls in Guangzhou and beyond. The benefits of the more covert approach far

outweigh the ethnic considerations. The observations of people's behaviours and conversations and other relevant contextual details are noted down in the form of field notes (cf. Emerson et al. 1995), which provide a useful source of data for further analysis. Subsequently, where relevant and possible, I approached several salespeople, clearly expressed my research focus in layman's terms, and asked whether they would be willing and interested to take a short interview. Some salespeople were too busy or were not interested. Others were happy to talk to me about the communication process at a grass-roots level in a retrospective manner. The aim of the short interviews was to elicit additional details and get further insights about their experiences interacting and communicating with foreign traders from different backgrounds. In addition, I also had casual conversations with several foreign traders about their experience interacting with salespeople in China. Since many such foreign traders were only in Guangzhou for a couple of days and had to go to several malls across the city, the conversations I had with them were relatively informal, brief and often "on the go". Taking a bottom-up and data-driven approach, the data collected were carefully analysed manually to identify main features and salient trends. The results will be presented in the form of representative case studies/examples. Overall, the multiple and more layered approaches adopted in this study constitute a kind of triangulation (Flick 2018). Such a triangulatory approach promises to lead to more comprehensive and reliable findings in a more systematic way. In the actual discussion, the salespersons and traders' identities are kept anonymized as ethical safeguards.

Before wrapping up this section, some relevant remarks are made at this juncture concerning researcher positioning. The researcher has had a long-standing interest in exploring the sociolinguistic and multilingual aspects of language in a globalized and transnational context. Such an interest stems from his transnational background of travelling, studying, living and working in various contexts as an expatriate. As a result of such a personal history of living and working in dynamic, (super)diverse and multicultural contexts, the researcher has developed a keen interest in the cross-linguistic and intercultural aspects of linguistics and communication, acquired cultural awareness and sensitivity, and become familiar with a few different languages/dialects. A combination of these life experiences, cultural awareness and multilingual insights points to the idea of "life capital" (Consoli 2022). While the concept of "life capital" has so far mostly been discussed in language education and TESOL research (cf. Consoli 2022), I argue that this concept, focusing on lived experiences, is also particularly instrumental and relevant in multilingual, sociolinguistic, applied linguistics, anthropological and ethnographic research in general. This is because in these lines of research, scholars inevitably draw on their "life capital" or scholarly and life experiences in conducting any research project. Overall, as far as this study is concerned, it is fair to say that the researcher has some

insider insights in the general (super)diverse, multilingual and transnational context. Yet, he still very much remains an outsider without any first-hand experience of selling and trading goods in these malls in Guangzhou. As such, a combination of insider positioning and outsider positioning (cf. Geertz 1983) might prove instrumental in shedding useful light on this topic in a nuanced, balanced, comprehensive and hopefully reliable way.

5 Data analysis

In this section, the language or sociolinguistics of low-end globalization is presented and discussed. Corresponding to the two research questions, discussions are provided based on the following two aspects (1) relatively fixed and static signage in the linguistic and semiotic landscape (e.g. multilingual and multimodal signs and posters) and (2) more dynamic physical multilingual and multimodal communication on the ground (e.g. interactions between salespeople and traders in trading malls). Given the limited space, only the main trends and features identified are presented.

5.1 Relatively fixed and static signage in the linguistic and semiotic landscape

5.1.1 Multilingual landscape

Let us first have a look at Guangzhou's linguistic landscape, where multilingual signs can be found. The general profile of various languages used in Guangzhou can be found in Table 1. Notably, the total occurrences are greater than the number of photos taken because one sign may feature one, two or more languages. The strategic and targeted use of language can be crucial in micro-level grass-roots multilingualism. Apart from Chinese, overall, English and Arabic are the two most visible foreign languages in Guangzhou's linguistic landscape related to low-end globalization. The visibility of signage in English is unsurprising, given its role as a major global lingua franca and language of business and commerce. The presence of English is illustrated in Figures 12 and 13, as well as other figures in this article. Clearly, English plays various commercial, advertising, informative and other communicative roles and functions. It symbolically also indexes globalization and cosmopolitanism. English either appears alone or alongside other language(s). For instance, in Figure 12, in a mall, the sign says 25 major currencies are accepted. In another sign, the information is clearly indicated in English that DOOR TO DOOR shipping service is available. In Figure 13, one sign in the middle says that a range of services is being

Table 1: Languages represented in Guangzhou (other than Chinese): occurrence and places found.

Languages other than Chinese	Occurrence (times)	Distribution/places frequently found
English	1,283	Non-specific (found in most malls and diverse areas)
Arabic	397	Non-specific but visible in Xiaobei, Sanyuanli and other malls
French	49	Non-specific but visible in Xiaobei, Sanyuanli and other malls
Swahili (N = 17) and various other African languages (e.g. Wolof, Amharic, Twi, Igbo, Somali, Hausa, Yoruba)	37	Non-specific but visible in Xiaobei, Sanyuanli and other malls (e.g. within African restaurants)
Hindi/Urdu/Bengali and other South Asian languages	28	Non-specific but visible in Xiaobei, Sanyuanli and other malls (e.g. within Indian and South Asian restaurants)
Uyghur	25	Mostly found in Xiaobei area
Russian and other languages using Cyrillic script	25	Restricted to certain malls only
Malay/Indonesia	2	Restricted to certain malls only

Figure 12: Presence of English.

Figure 13: Presence of English.

offered, which include booking flight tickets, extending visas and dealing with overstayed visas. In Figure 13 bottom (middle), a big poster featuring Chinese and English portrays the image of a smart suit-wearing businessman who can make it and get "success from now" through doing business in this mall in Guangzhou. Also, a sign found in a trading mall says in Chinese and English that it is not allowed to wash feet in the basin. In another sign (red background), a company welcomes customers back after the pandemic is over.

Interestingly, the use of English can sometimes be only functional. That is, although the main ideas can be more or less conveyed, sometimes the use of English sounds awkward or is grammatically problematic, incorrect or incomplete. Such an observation is apparent in Figure 14. Rather than saying "we have stock" and "please

Figure 14: Grammatically problematic signs in English.

come in and give it a try", the non-standard versions "have stock" and "come try try!" are used. These point to instances of Chinglish or pidgin-style language arising from extensive language contact (more examples of this taken from face-to-face communication are presented later). This shows the frequent focus on functionality (Xu 2024) in grass-roots communication in a context of globalization (as opposed to striving for perfection and complete grammaticality). We are living in a globalized and mobile world with a lot going on. Often, people may develop truncated competence (Blommaert 2010) in a few languages yet without complete fluency in any (Li 2021). This more functional use of English is also witnessed in Yiwu and other places in the developing world (e.g. Thailand and other places in Southeast Asia), where English is not a native language.

In addition, Arabic is also widely used, arguably the second-most visible foreign language after English. As such, Arabic represents a major language of low-end globalization in Guangzhou (and also in Yiwu). This makes sense as many traders from the Middle East and North Africa are native Arabic speakers. Also, Arabic, as the language of Islam, is partially understood by many Muslims in other countries (e.g. in Somalia, Senegal and Nigeria). Clearly, Arabic is a commodified language deployed for various commercial, communicative, religious and symbolic purposes. As seen in Figures 15–18, various businesses at grass-roots level use Arabic in conveying important information (e.g. restaurants, massage services, clothes shops, currency exchange,

Figure 15: Presence of Arabic.

Figure 16: Presence of Arabic.

Figure 17: Presence of Arabic.

Figure 18: Presence of Arabic in LIUHUA market.

translation services, getting SIM cards). There is a particularly high concentration of Arabic signs in the Liuhua Fashion Mall (cf. Figure 18), amongst other places (e.g. Xiaobei and Taojin). The visibility of Arabic is also illustrated in Figures 8–10 above.

While this study aims to provide a comprehensive account of languages and grassroots language use in general and is not envisaged as a diachronic or comparative study per se, it is clearly visible that there has been a decrease in multilingual signs and an increase in Chinese monolingual and/or Chinese/English bilingual signs (cf. Wang 2024) possibly with the few years between 2019 and 2022 being a watershed (which also coincided with the brief trend of deglobalization that came as a result of Covid-19 related travel restrictions). As part of this trend, Arabic and explicit Islam-related symbols (e.g. the halal sign, shahada, depictions of mosques and star and crescent), for various socio-political, ideological, national security (e.g. combating religious extremism) and language policy-related reasons, were not encouraged/forbidden (Bhatt 2023). This led to many Arabic signs and religious symbols being removed or covered (cf. Gu 2024; Wang 2024), especially in visible street-level signs outside. Such top-down efforts led to a trend of de-Arabization and growing Sinicization (Gu 2024) in some ethnic areas of Guangzhou and China overall (Bhatt 2023). This trend is particularly salient in the Xiaobei area, which has many halal and Muslim-friendly restaurants, meat shops, stores and other businesses. Such de-Arabization is clearly visible in the before/after photos of businesses in the Xiaobei area (Figures 19 and 20). Now, since Covid-related restrictions were lifted, many foreign traders are gradually coming back.

Figure 19: Disappearing Arabic (before/after comparison).

Figure 20: Disappearing Arabic (before/after comparison).

Now, some Arabic signs are slowly reappearing at a street level, possibly due to a (temporary) relaxation of or less strict enforcement of certain language-policy rules and regulations. This shows the flexible, dynamic and constantly changing nature of

the linguistic and semiotic landscape on the ground, which corresponds with broader socio-political, cultural, ideological and also public health-related changes. In some cases, to avoid being identified, some businesses write Arabic names in the form of Arabizi (e.g. 'mish mish' and 'Li Beirut'). As such, an Arabic identity can still be expressed without necessarily using the standard Arabic script. In some cases, certain businesses creatively turn the Arabic business names into calligraphic styles or into logos (so much so that the Arabic elements become less obvious and less easy to be identified). The researcher visited Xiaobei again in October 2025. Interestingly, some previously (briefly) allowed signs in Arabic have been removed or covered up again. It seems like the top-down inspection and regulation of the signs come in waves. Overall, there seems to be a cat-and-mouse game between the government regulators/inspectors and small business owners on an ongoing basis. Figure 40 shows a large poster about an Arab/Yemeni restaurant, which has been redesigned from a version with Arabic (early 2025) to a latest version without Arabic (late 2025). The visibility or invisibility and presence or absence of certain elements (Gu forthcoming) in the linguistic and semiotic landscape clearly tell a fascinating story about an urban space.

Mirroring the often imperfect use of English identified earlier, the grass-roots use of Arabic also sometimes suffers from some grammatical and stylistic issues. Sometimes, the information in Arabic is incorrectly formatted. Arabic is written from right to left and certain letters need to be joined. However, several signs are formatted erroneously from left to right and/or letters are not connected (cf. Figures 21 and 22). This is presumably because people without knowledge of Arabic try

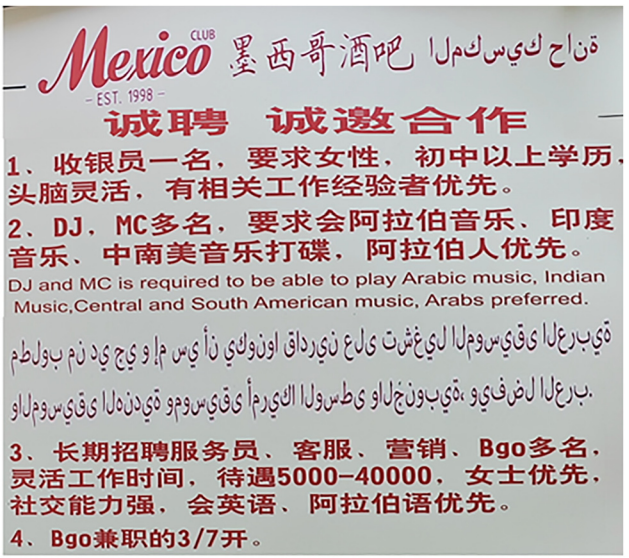

Figure 21: Poorly formatted Arabic.

Figure 22: Poorly formatted Arabic.

to improvise and use free translation software to translate. The formatting is usually incorrect after copying and pasting the machine-translated versions. For instance, at the bottom of Figure 22 (left), three incorrect signs of the Arabic word for "welcome", "Marhaba", can be seen. The correct way to write the word is illustrated on the right. This often incorrect use of language points to the nature of grass-roots multilingual communication (Xu 2024), where language use is often restricted by individuals' lack of linguistic competence and expertise and hindered by a lack of resources.

French, an influential and former colonial language of many countries in Africa and Asia, is also visible in the city (Figure 23). The language still has official status, is a recognised language, and/or is commonly spoken or understood, for example in Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Burundi, Madagascar, Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Mali, Gabon, Chad, Benin, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia. The deployment of French, therefore, makes sense from a communicative and business perspective. Figure 23 (top right) shows a store in Guangzhou that specialises in providing manzaraka-related decorations. Manzaraka is an important part of local cultural weddings in Mayotte, an overseas department and region of France (the French flag is also prominent in the advertising sign along with the written information). At the bottom, an African male is painted on a T-shirt, which portrays a socio-political figure in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The French information says "Vote Mutiri Wa Bashara. Force de l'efficacité", portraying him as a powerful force that can deliver and effect welcome change in an efficient and effective way. In other instances, French words and expressions such as 'bonjour' (hello) and 'bon marché' (good deal) are visible.

Figure 23: Presence of French.

As discussed earlier, many traders, businessmen and middlemen are from Africa. African languages are also seen to some extent (cf. Figures 24–26). In Figure 24, Wolof (red background), Amharic and Twi are found in a few African restaurants. A sign (red background) in Wolof says "Diareudieuf SERIGNE TOUBA KHADIMOU RASSOUL". The sign expresses a message of gratitude and appreciation to the Senegalese religious leader. The sign is enacted in a restaurant in the Xiaobei area that aims to attract customers from Senegal. Wolof is a commonly spoken language in Senegal, which has been historically influenced by Arabic and French. Wolof is commonly written using the Latin script and was traditionally and to some extent still is written in the Arabic-derived script called Wolofal. Wolof is not standardized and many words can have different spellings. In the following two signs in Figure 24, Amharic is used. The two signs are taken from an Ethiopian restaurant in Xiaobei called Desta (*'desta'* ደስታ means 'joy' or 'happiness' in Amharic). In the last two signs, the word *akwaaba* (Twi for 'welcome') is found. These serve as important sociolinguistic and cultural markers (Landry and Bourhis 1997), indicating Guangzhou's African connections and attesting to the city's reputation as "Little Africa" (Mathews et al. 2017) on Chinese soil.

It is also not uncommon to find menus with a (super)diverse range of African languages. For example, in an African-style restaurant in Guangzhou, various local names in different African languages are simultaneously provided for the same/similar kind of corn meal made from maize or sometimes corn flour (see Figure 25).

Figure 24: African languages.

This pan-African food item is, for example, called ugali, sadza, mieliepap, pap, papa, shima, nzema, fufu, foutou in different African languages. The existence of these names/languages also reflects the superdiverse nature (cf. Arnaut et al. 2016; Vertovec 2007) of Africans in the city. To some extent, Guangzhou, as a gathering place of Africans from different countries, has a wider representation of Africans than any given city or town in Africa.

Of all the native African language signs documented, Swahili is by far and away the most visible (cf. Figure 26). Swahili is a Bantu language that is widely spoken in East Africa, which is an important lingua franca in the region. In the Figure 26, words and expressions like *asante* 'thank you' and *karibu sana* 'welcome' are found. Since Swahili is a major regional lingua franca in East Africa, signs in it can reach out to many traders in Guangzhou. Despite being a Bantu language, Swahili has incorporated many words from Arabic, due to historical interactions between the region and the Arab world. As seen in the sign, words like *karibu* 'welcome' and *tarehe* 'date' are

Figure 25: African languages.

respectively derived from Arabic words *qarib* 'close' or 'near' and *tarikh* 'date', 'time' or 'history'. Similarly, other Swahili words *nusu* 'half', *wakati* 'time', *baridi* 'cold', *habari* 'news', *dakika* 'minute', *hasara* 'loss', *faida* 'profit/benefit' are respectively from Arabic words *nisf/nus*, *waqt*, *barid*, *khabar*, *daqiqa*, *khasara* and *faa'ida*.

As part of bottom-up grass-roots communication, signs in Hindi/Urdu/Bengali and other South Asian languages are also found to a small extent (cf. Figure 27). These signs tend to be restricted to South Asian restaurants and shops or businesses with many South Asian clients. At the bottom, an Urdu sign (which uses a kind of the Perso-Arabic script and more specifically written in the Nastaliq style) says *Cigarette peena mana hai* 'smoking is prohibited/no smoking'. In other cases, languages such as Russian (Cyrillic script) and Indonesian/Malay can very ocasionally be found (Figure 28). In the sign in Indonesian/Malay, it says *Jangan duduk di sini!! Makasih!!* ('Don't sit here!! Thanks!!') in a forceful yet more colloquial style (the spoken and shorter form *makasih* 'thanks' is used instead of *terima kasih*).

Notably, in the diverse areas frequented by foreign traders, other ethnic minority languages widely spoken in Northwest China (e.g. Uyghur) can also be seen in Guangzhou. Figures 29 and 30 for example illustrate a few such signs in Guangzhou's

Figure 26: Presence of Swahili.

Xiaobei area. In Figure 30 (top), the Chinese information哈俩里巴扎 is also visible, which is the Chinese phonetic representation of "halal bazaar" (or "halal market").

In sum, while English is pervasive overall as the global lingua franca, Arabic is also highly prominent in various pockets of Guangzhou. In addition, French, Swahili and other languages are also seen to varying degrees. Clearly, these languages are commodified in a way that facilitates grass-roots communication. To some extent, Guangzhou is a multilingual and multiscriptal city with great superdiversity. Yet, the existence/enactment of these languages at a bottom-up level is by no means random. Guangzhou is a commercial and business market of goods. At the same time, it is also a (socio)linguistic market (Bourdieu 1977), where different languages carry different values and are valorized differently. This shows the nature of low-end globalization, where some languages are more powerful and valued than others. Notably, overall, the use of multilingual signs is a mixed bag in Guangzhou. That is, while many are authentic and idiomatic, some are poorly formatted and grammatically problematic. This points to the pragmatic, functional and often imperfect nature (Xu 2024) of grass-roots communication that is often restricted by various real-world challenges (e.g. a lack of expertise and resources).

Figure 27: Presence of South Asian languages.

Figure 28: Presence of Russian/Cyrillic system (top) and Indonesian/Malay (bottom).

Figure 29: Presence of Uyghur.

Figure 30: Presence of Uyghur.

5.1.2 Semiotics of low-end globalization

Regarding the semiotics of low-end globalization in Guangzhou, various businesses routinely draw on Africa or Middle East-related symbols and themes for advertising. The use of various visual and semiotic elements gives very concrete ideas of the

nature of the business and the services provided. In Figure 31 top left, the name and logo of a local hotel XIN YUE XIN are visible. The hotel is located in the Xiaobei area (with many Middle Eastern and African traders). Interestingly, from the perspective of semiotics (Bhatt 2023), the colour (green), motif and design (two crossed swords) are highly prominent, which are reminiscent of the flag of Saudi Arabia and other national, cultural and religious symbols related to Islam. Both the colour green and crossed swords are of important symbolic meaning in Saudi Arabia and the middle east in general. As such, the design may be seen as a conscious effort to attract foreign traders and give a sense of "familiarity" and cultural affinity. Similarly, in Figure 31 bottom left, the logo of TIAN XIU HOTEL (also in the Xiaobei area) features a star and crescent design, which is a common motif or symbol in Islam. The logo design (in a red background) reminds people of the Tunisian or Turkish national flag with similar design. Clearly, such semiotic elements (Bhatt 2023) manage to explicitly or implicitly convey certain culture or religion-related information multimodally and discursively (e.g. logo, design and colour). This is fascinating and pertinent, given many traders in the area are Muslims from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia.

In various parts of Guangzhou, it is also common to see maps of Africa and the flags of African countries (sometimes also countries in the Middle East). The inclusion of maps of Africa (Figure 32) and the flags of African countries (Figure 33) discursively points to the idea of "banal cosmopolitanism" (Piller 2017). In contrast to "banal nationalism" or the everyday flagging of nationalism (Hopkyns 2023), for example through sporting national flags and symbols, the idea of "banal cosmopolitanism" concerns the showcasing and displaying, for example, of a superdiverse range of countries' flags and languages (e.g. "welcome" sign in different languages). This enacts

Figure 31: Hotel logos reminiscent of Islam-related motifs.

Figure 32: Portrayal of maps of Africa.

Figure 33: Portrayal of African flags.

cosmopolitanism and a sense of being inclusive and international. In the case of Guangzhou's low-end globalization, the inclusion of various African countries' flags gives a global and cosmopolitan feel multimodally, pointing to local businesses' global reach and more specifically African connections. Clearly, this portrays an inclusive and welcoming image, inviting customers and traders (e.g. from Africa and beyond) to do business with them. This might be viewed as a kind of semiotic or multimodal capital that potentially can be converted into business and money.

In addition, in Guangzhou's semiotic landscape related to low-end globalization, images of males and females, for instance, from Africa and the Middle East are visible in various places in order to attract customers and buyers from these particular geographical regions (cf. Figures 34–36). This seemingly makes sense given that most

Figure 34: Poster featuring African hairstyles.

Figure 35: Posters featuring African figures.

Figure 36: Posters featuring Middle Eastern male figures and traditional dresses.

traders and buyers are from these regions. This therefore represents targeted communication through both linguistic elements and various visual and other semiotic elements. For example, African hair styles can be found in Figure 34. These people are illustrated in a confident and presentable manner. Similarly, portrayals of Arab men and other Muslims wearing traditional clothes can be found in posters designed by a few shops (cf. Figure 36). These businesses specialise in the wholesale of Muslim clothing (e.g. Arabic and Omani caps, headscarves, hijab, Saudi and Sudanese robes, haji bags). Similarly, various kinds of products can be found that are specifically designed to cater to African customers' needs. For example, in Figure 37, various shirts of African football teams and clothes featuring bright African-style design and African figures can be found. Figure 23 featuring an African politician is also an example of this. In Figure 38, a pan-African restaurant features multilingual and multimodal design and depiction of a pot, which reminds us of bright African colours and African food. A combination of colour, design and pattern adds to Guangzhou's semiotic landscape related to low-end globalization. The existence of these is a testament to the city's semiotic repertoire, that is, the ability to convey social meanings through various multimodal and discursive means beyond language per se. These various linguistic and multimodal elements lead to semiotic assemblages (Pennycook and Otsuji 2017), spatially, visually and discursively carving out a

Figure 37: Colourful shirts and African-oriented designs.

Figure 38: Colourful multilingual and multimodal design of a Pan-African restaurant.

unique space in Guangzhou that is different from the rest of China. This points to the fact that pockets of Guangzhou may be understood as liminal spaces of great cultural and linguistic hybridity (cf. Gu and Song 2024; Song and Gu 2025).

5.2 Dynamic physical multilingual and multimodal communication on the ground

Having explored the more fixed elements in the linguistic and semiotic landscape, attention now is focused on the more dynamic face-to-face onsite interactions between various social actors to highlight grass-roots communication. As a general observation, the traders and salespeople generally have some knowledge of English (with varying levels of proficiency). In certain situations, both the salespeople and the customers can communicate in the global lingua franca English without much problem. Yet, in most cases, the English being used is basic and grammatically problematic and resembles "broken" English. That is, the use of English is more functional than perfect. Rather than saying perfectly idiomatic and complete sentences, they tend to exchange key words in their grass-roots communication. Such verbal communication is also facilitated by facial expressions and hand gestures etc. Clearly, gestures (Xu 2024) form an essential part of the grass-roots communicative repertoire, contributing to the language of low-end globalization.

This is exemplified in the conversation below (Example 1) that took place in a mall in the Xiaobei area. In the conversation, the salesperson and an African trader communicate in basic, accented and grammatically problematic "broken" English that characterises such low-end globalization. This resembles pidgin language (Bolton 2000; Fedorova 2022) found in other dynamic and diverse places and multilingual contact zones. In this example, the salesperson invites the person for tea for relationship-building, before having more detailed conversations. Some usages of English by the Chinese salesperson point to features of Chinese English or Chinglish (e.g. by speakers from Southern China). Such use of (broken) English reminds us of the examples discussed earlier (e.g. signs in Figure 14 featuring "have stock" and "come try try"). Also, there is mutual copying seen in the conversation. For example, the salesperson says "no have" ("have" is pronounced like "haavu" with extra vowel sound added). Then, the trader imitates her speech style and asks "No have now? Before have?". The salesperson then also follows naturally from his word use and says "Yes. Before have. Now no have". Throughout the process, hand gesture and body language have been used. Other multimodal means of communication (e.g. showing image on mobile phone) is also employed. Some of the non-standard use of language in Example 1 can also be heard in many trading malls across Guangzhou. While there are differences in accent and different individual styles, some common expressions and phrases including "no have" (we don't have any), "no one" (you cannot only buy one), "many many" (buy many/wholesale), "no money lah" (I don't make any money based on your price), "las las" (last price or final price), "good good" (very good), and "same same" (the same) have emerged. This seemingly points to the

existence of a commonly understood trade pidgin and a kind of world English, which is one vivid manifestation of grass-roots communication. This arguably represents the "language" of low-end globalization in trading cities such as Guangzhou. This, to some extent, reminds us of other historical or current pidgin languages in various geographical contexts (Bolton 2000; Fedorova 2022) that have resulted from business, trade and language contact (e.g. Bazaar Malay in the Malay world, Gulf Pidgin Arabic in the Gulf region, several Arabic-based pidgins and creoles in Africa such as Juba Arabic, Hindi-based pidgins, and various English-based pidgins).

Example 1:

Salesperson: Come come! Come look look first lah (also uses hand gesture to welcome the trader)

Trader: Okay. Thanks.

Salesperson: Look look no problem. Everything good. Want tea? Sit! Drink tea! Want Chinese tea? Red tea? (correct way should be 'black tea')

[———]

Salesperson: You like which ah?

Trader: Have this colour? This style? (shows a photo saved on his phone)

Salesperson: No have.

Trader: No have now? Before have?

Salesperson: Yes. Before have. Now no have.

[…]

Trader: This how much?

Salesperson: How many P.C.? (how many pieces do you need?)

Trader: one

Salesperson: No one. Many many okay (you cannot only buy one. You need to buy many)

[…]

Trader: How much? XXX okay?

Salesperson: No okay. No money no money lah. Las las XXX for you. This good good. This this same same (this is not okay. I don't make any money based on your price. Last price is XXX. Only for you. This product is very good. This one and that one are the same)

Example 2

Egyptian customer: Hi Nihao (Nihao is Chinese word for 'hello').

Salesperson: Nihao. Nihao. Hello. Welcome. Merhaba. Kaif Halak? (Generic Arabic: Welcome. How are you?)

Egyptian customer: Ana kuwayyes. Alhamdulillah. Bekam dah? (Egyptian-style Arabic: I am good. Thank God. How much is this?)

Salesperson: XXX. This is new style. Very good quality. Shoof! Hada gameel giddan (See! This is very nice).

In this example, a young Chinese salesman sells shoes in a mall in Xiaobei. He has decent knowledge of Chinese, English and standard Arabic (and some words from different Arabic dialects). After the initial conversations, he tentatively sensed that the trader might be from Egypt. He then replies with Egyptian Arabic 'gameel giddan' (very nice/beautiful) alongside English. The salesman has a background as an Arabic major student at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in Guangzhou. After graduation in 2014, instead of furthering his study and doing a masters degree, he decided to work in the sector of foreign trade. In my conversation with him, he mentioned that Guangzhou is an amazing place that truly enables him to use his Arabic skills. Since his customers are from various countries in the Middle east and North Africa (where different Arabic dialects are spoken) and beyond, he routinely practices what is called code-mixing, code-switching or translanguaging (Garcia and Wei 2014; Li 2018) between the languages/language varieties at his disposal (e.g. English, standard Chinese, Cantonese and various varieties of Arabic). For example, he mentioned that he usually starts the conversation with English or standard Arabic greetings (e.g. *ahlan wa sahlan*, *merhaba*, *as-salam alaikum*). After a few exchanges, he will be able to speak standard Arabic with some local dialectal words/expressions thrown in his speech to better communicate with his customers. That is, with years of experience dealing with customers from various backgrounds on a daily basis, he can easily tell where the trader is from (e.g. by his accent or way of dress). As such, for example, when expressing the idea of certain product being 'very good/nice', he may say *kolish zain* to Iraqi customers, *mezyan bezzaf* to Moroccans and some North Africans, *gameel giddan* or *kuwayyes awi* to Egyptians, *kteer helo* to Levantine-Arabic speakers (e.g. Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine) and use words like *marrah*, *waayed* and *shadiid* for emphasis when talking with people from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Sudan. In my conversation with him, he said that at university in China often extremely formal standard Arabic (fusha or MSA) is taught (e.g. used in diplomacy, news and religious contexts). This however does not reflect the reality of business and trade on the ground for him. As such, he has had to learn on the job and consciously pick up different colloquial Arabic words and expressions so that he can better build rapport and talk to people's hearts in a friendly, close and even brotherly way. He also emphasises the importance of learning Arabic in the 21st century, as it is rapidly becoming a major language of business and trade and the "language of globalization" or لغة العولمة.

Example 3

Moroccan trader: Hello. La bas khoya? Kidayr? (hello. How is everything my brother? How are you?)

Interpreter: hi 你好! (hi hello!)

Salesman: 你好! 你好! 欢迎欢迎 (Hello! Hello! Welcome welcome!)

Moroccan trader: Ana smiti Youssef. Enchanté! Shno smitek khoya? Alors bghit nchouf hada afak. Bshhal hada? (I am Youssef. Nice to meet you! What is your name my brother? So I want to see this one please. How much is this?)

Interpreter to Moroccan trader: Hal mumkin ta'aiid dhalik min fadlak? Lam afham (possible you repeat that please? I didn't understand)

In Example 3, a conversation takes place in LIUHUA Fashion Wholesale Market, where a Moroccan trader, around 50 or 60 years old, talks to a Chinese salesman with the help of an Arabic-speaking interpreter (who is ethnically Hui Chinese Muslim from Western China). Assuming the interpreter has good knowledge of spoken Arabic, the Moroccan trader speaks relatively fast in Darija or Moroccan-style Arabic.

In Arabic, there are high and low varieties and many different regional dialects. Moroccan Arabic, as a geographically distant dialect from varieties in the Middle East (e.g. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Syria and Jordan), is very different from Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or fusha and is significantly influenced by other languages such as French, Spanish and Berber. Speakers of Moroccan Arabic tend to use French words and expressions extensively, given the country's history as a French colony. Moroccan Arabic, therefore, is difficult for other Arabic speakers to understand (let alone the Arabic interpreter). Despite the fact that the short conversation is more basic in nature (e.g. greetings and asking about name), the interpreter clearly does not quite understand what the trader is saying. In the first exchange, the interpreter is able to say 你好 (hi) and convey some basic information partially because the trader says "hello" at the beginning of the conversation. However, in the next exchange, the trader speaks quickly in the local dialect and even mixes French words and expressions (*Enchanté* 'nice to meet you' and *alors* 'so'). Clearly, the interpreter does not understand much. Despite the efforts made by the trader to establish good rapport with the salesman (e.g. by using *khoya* or 'my brother'), most information has been lost in translation. As such, the interpreter has to turn to the trader, asking for clarifications. Afterwards, the trader starts to speak slower and use more formal MSA-style Arabic (the formal variety Arabic learners are more familiar with). However, many Arabic native speakers are not comfortable with speaking this very formal variety.

This example shows that in such multicultural, multilingual and even multidialectal environment, communication is not always straightforward. Even when the

Moroccan trader takes for granted that the interpreter he hires can speak good Arabic and understand him well, the reality is not always the case. Indeed, in a context of low-end globalization, there can be various hiccups, challenges and slippages preventing more effective communication.

Example 4

As another kind of grass-roots communication, (temporary) handwritten signs are also commonly used to draw attention and to facilitate face-to-face communication. As demonstrated in Figure 39, certain businesses either write down information themselves or ask previous customers to write down certain information (e.g. on a glass wall or a white board). These include Arabic greetings such as "assalam alaikum. Merhaba" (Figure 39 second picture on the right-hand side) to show friendliness and draw attention. Similarly, latest products and models available and the latest discounts etc. are also written down. For instance, in Figure 39 right (top), the Arabic message says "best prices for wholesale". Writing certain details handily on the wall also permits some kind of "silent" communication. That is, given the immediacy and adjacency of these handwritten messages (e.g. certain model details), both the traders and salespeople can easily point at certain information as a means of communication, especially when they do not have a shared lingua franca. Notably,

Figure 39: Handwritten multilingual information on businesses' walls.

some messages (Figure 39 left) from previous customers etc can also be seen (e.g. customers' names). Occasionally, some businesses also openly display foreign currencies from various countries. This gives the image that the business has a good track record of successfully doing business with foreigners from around the world over an extended period of time so much so that foreign customers are happy to "vouch" for them. This conveys a kind of trustworthiness and good reputation. This is also highlighted in Chao and Wang (2024). In addition, based on my observation, calculator and translation software are also frequently and strategically used in such grass-roots communication. This is also in line with the observations made by other scholars in similar contexts (e.g. Bodomo et al. 2022; Chao and Wang 2024; Xu 2024). Such translation software and calculator-mediated communicative practices are entangled with the place in the formation of temporary geosemiotic assemblage given the transnational flow of goods and people (Chao and Wang 2024). These are not elaborated on, given the limited space.

Overall, the four scenarios discussed here show the dynamic and sometimes also challenging and complex nature of such cross-cultural and intercultural communication. These highlight that grass-roots communication might not always be perfect and effective in an elitist or idealised sense. They also point to the importance and crucial need of communicating in a creative, flexible, pragmatist and multimodal manner, where social actors may dynamically draw upon various tools and strategies and make creative and flexible use of the linguistic and multimodal communicative repertoires (Li 2018; Li and Zhu 2013) at their disposal. There is inevitably a pragmatic picking and choosing of linguistic/multimodal elements. This is particularly relevant and important in a dynamic, superdiverse, constantly changing and "liquid-multilingual" context (Li 2021) like Guangzhou (where it is not possible for one to master all languages).

6 Conclusions

Guangzhou has over time established itself as the interface of intercultural communication and point of civilizational contact (Gu 2025), thus representing a fascinating language contact situation. Aiming to study the under-explored topic of the sociolinguistics of low-end globalization, this study examined grass-roots communication in Guangzhou, a dynamic hub featuring South-South flows of people and goods. The existence of foreign tourists, traders and businessmen has effected changes to Guangzhou's otherwise homogeneous ethnoscape and linguistic ecology.

As discussed, the "language" of low-end globalization in the city largely manifests itself in two ways: (1) relatively fixed and static signage in the linguistic and

semiotic landscape (e.g. multilingual and multimodal signs and posters) and (2) more dynamic physical multilingual and multimodal communication on the ground (e.g. interactions between salespeople and traders in trading malls). For the first category, it was found that languages such as English, Arabic, French, Swahili etc. are used in various grass-roots signs. Yet, some languages are more prominent and important than others. In many ways, Guangzhou represents a (socio)linguistic market (Bourdieu 1977), where different languages carry different values and are valorized differently. Often, various socio-political, cultural, commercial, economic, technical and practical factors may explain why different languages are valorized differently and some are prioritized and foregrounded over others (Berezkina 2017). Clearly, in the context of Guangzhou, English and to a lesser extent Arabic are the more dominant languages apart from Chinese. However, for Arabic, despite its visibility overall, the language is also subject to change (e.g. in Xiaobei) from time to time in a constantly changing context (cf. Figure 40 for a sign being redesigned). Also, the linguistic elements are often complemented by various semiotic elements (e.g.

Figure 40: A large poster redesigned (with the removal of Arabic elements).

colour, design and motifs). These can be dynamically combined in meaning-making at a grass-roots level.

Regarding the second category, the study illustrates how social actors (e.g. the salespeople and traders) interact and communicate on the ground, drawing on various strategies and multimodal ways (e.g. using basic English in a pragmatic way, resorting to translators/interpreters, using gestures and body language, making use of temporary handwritten messages on the wall, using translation software and calculators). Overall, the study points to the dynamic, complex, non-straightforward nature of communication at a grass-roots level, where people may not be fluent in certain languages or may only have truncated knowledge and competence (Blommaert 2010) in certain languages in our dynamic and multifaceted world. As such, grass-roots communication may be fraught with grammatical mistakes and formatting errors. This points to the more pragmatic and functional nature of such grass-roots communication. This is in contrast to the more idealised and elitist image associated with high-end globalization (where presumably everybody is proficient in English). In such a context, it is crucial for people to communicate in a creative, flexible, pragmatic and multimodal manner. That is, in a dynamic, superdiverse, constantly changing and "liquid-multilingual" contact zone (Li 2021) like Guangzhou, one person may only have limited linguistic competency in certain languages. This highlights the necessity for social actors to demonstrate agency and make full use of various communicative tools and strategies at their disposal in a pragmatic, flexible and embodied way. Such linguistic and multimodal communicative repertoires (Li 2018; Li and Zhu 2013) at individual levels (e.g. individual shop owners and salespeople) altogether also constitute the overall linguistic and communication repertoires of Guangzhou as a cosmopolitan city. The study also pointed to the existence of an English-based trade pidgin.

Through shedding light on the "language" of low-end globalization in Guangzhou, this interdisciplinary study contributes to scholarship in linguistic landscape, social semiotics, multimodality, multilingualism, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, globalization studies, urban studies and anthropology in general. Going forward, it would be useful to take a more fine-tuned language-specific approach or ethnic group-specific approach (e.g. language use by Nigerians or people from Ethiopia). Also, since foreign traders from different ethnolinguistic and religious groups may concentrate in different areas and go to different malls in Guangzhou, a more nuanced and differentiated trading mall-specific approach might be taken in the future. Overall, this study paves the way for further and more in-depth studies that examine other China-foreign trade towns (e.g. Yiwu, Suifenhe and Manzhouli) and other global trade and business hubs (e.g. Dubai in the UAE, Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, Bangkok in Thailand) along the 21st century Belt and Road.

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