DE GRUYTER MOUTON IJSL 2020; 262: 97–122

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Language competence, identity construction and discursive boundary-making: Distancing and alignment in domestic migrant worker narratives

https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2019-2071

Abstract: Many people in developing countries are faced with a dilemma. If they stay at home, their children are kept in poverty with no prospects of a better future; if they become migrant workers, they will suffer long-term separation from their families. This article focuses on one of the weakest groups in the global economy: domestic migrant workers. It draws on a corpus of more than 400 narratives recorded at a church shelter in Hong Kong and among migrant worker returnees in rural Indonesia and the Philippines. In sharing sessions, migrant women share their experiences of working for abusive employers, and the article analyses how language is used to include and exclude. The women tell how their employers construct them as "incompetent" and "stupid" because they do not speak Chinese. However, faced by repression and marginalisation, the women use their superior English language skills to get back at their employers and momentarily gain the upper hand. Drawing on ideologies of language as the theoretical concept, the article provides a discourse analysis of selected excerpts focusing on language competence and identity construction.

Keywords: domestic migrant workers, language competence, distancing and alignment, language ideologies, Chinese and English in Hong Kong

1 Introduction

Increased mobility is a condition of life in a globalised world. For people whose qualifications and expertise are sought after in the global economy, mobility is a privilege and a choice, but for people at the bottom of the globalisation market, as Blommaert (2010) has called them, mobility is a necessity. People in developing countries are often faced with an insoluble dilemma. On the one hand, there are no job opportunities in their local communities, so if they stay at home,

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their children are kept in poverty with no prospects of a better future. If they become migrant workers, on the other hand, they will suffer from more or less permanent separation from their children, husbands and other loved ones. This makes the issue of choice for migrant workers an illusion, or, as it has been argued, it constitutes a "choiceless choice"[1] (Langer 1980; Ladegaard 2017a). As Jovi, a 39-year old Filipina migrant worker returnee, aptly put in a sharing session with four other migrant workers in her village in the Philippines:[2] "the reason [for going overseas] is financial, because you see the future of your children (1.0) they don't **have** a future unless you go, so in a sense yeah (1.0) it's not a choice".

Each year, hundreds of thousands of Asian migrant workers leave their home countries to seek job opportunities overseas in order to provide for the basic needs of their families. The largest exporter of labour in the global economy is the Philippines with currently around 10 million Filipino migrants working overseas. The numbers from Indonesia are also high: approximately 400,000 new migrant workers leave home every year to work overseas. The majority of these migrant workers are women. They are predominantly from the Philippines and Indonesia, but increasing numbers from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar also leave home to seek work in affluent Asian countries/territories like Hong Kong or in the Middle East. In recent years, increasing numbers of Asian migrant workers have also found work in Europe and North America (Anderson and Shutes 2014), and labour export/import on a global scale has thus become an intrinsic part of the global economy. Asian governments and recruitment agencies often label this flow of migrant labour as a win-win scenario; it simultaneously addresses labour shortage in the global North and massive unemployment in the global South. However, government statistics and agency reports fail to mention the detrimental consequences of migration for migrant women and their families (Parreñas 2005).

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1 Not all women in sending countries become domestic migrant workers, but in rural areas in Java and throughout the Philippines, everybody is somehow affected by migration. In the 19 villages I visited during my fieldtrips, not one family I was in touch with was unaffected. If it was not the mother in the family, then it was the father, a sister or a daughter. Family members often took turns working overseas for one, two or three contracts.

2 Please see the Appendix for notes on the conventions used in the quotations and excerpts that appear throughout this article.

In Hong Kong, there are currently around 390,000 non-local domestic workers; almost 90% of them are from Indonesia and the Philippines. They work as live-in foreign domestic helpers (FDHs)[3] on 2-year contracts in order to send much-needed remittances to their families back home. Hong Kong has a long tradition of employing Chinese *amahs*, live-in maid servants working for upper- and middle-class families, and this paved the way for a massive influx of foreign domestic workers, especially in the 1980s and 1990s when many Chinese domestic workers turned to better-paying jobs outside the home. Although the *amahs* left the domestic employment sector in large numbers, the behavioural norms introduced during their era of prominence remain. Treated as household commodities, *amahs* learned to act in subservient and humble ways, including always obeying their masters without question. Thus, the *amah*-system has become "a metaphor for domination and control and a tool with which to put present day workers 'in their proper place'" (Constable 2007: 62).

Recent research in Hong Kong and in other Asian and Middle Eastern destinations to which migrant workers emigrate has shown that they are often abused and exploited (Ladegaard 2017a). In Hong Kong, labour laws are arguably better than in many other countries, but since there is no mechanism in place to enforce these laws, widespread abuse is still shockingly common. Several studies have documented verbal and physical abuse, starvation, underpayment, sexual assault, and excessive working hours among domestic migrant workers, and despite increased media attention to at least some of these cases, little has been done to improve their living conditions (Chiu 2005; Constable 2007; Ladegaard 2017a). Even if migrant women are not marred by the anxiety that comes from working for an abusive employer, they still suffer the pains of being more or less permanently separated from their family, often leading to divorce, alienation and estranged relationships. Pratt (2012) has referred to this dilemma as "the destructiveness of distance" (Ladegaard 2018, Ladegaard 2019).

An intrinsic part of migrant women's experiences is their ability, or inability, to communicate in one (or both) of Hong Kong's dominant languages: English and Cantonese. Piller and Takahashi (2010) argue that migrant women's experiences are profoundly embedded in linguistic and communicative inequalities.

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3 "Domestic migrant worker" is the preferred term in the literature and in Migrant Worker NGOs because the term "helper" is seen by some as having negative connotations (Constable 2014). However, I also use the term "(foreign) domestic helper" (FDH) because the women in my data consistently refer to themselves as "helpers". How groups of people decide to name themselves is important as it suggests (positive) self-identification, and thus indicates how they see themselves, and how they want others to see them (see Milani 2010; see also Ladegaard 2017b).

They point to the common experience of domestic workers to have limited competence in their employers' language (cf. Anderson 1997). FDHs' limited or non-existent proficiency in the majority language may even work to the employer's advantage by creating a distance that reinforces migrant workers' inferior position. In their work among Filipina domestic workers in Toronto, England and Stiell (1997) found that language competence was used to assess domestic workers' competence, as evidenced by this comment from one of their participants: "They [the employers] think you're as stupid as your English is" (England and Stiell 1997: 195). Thus, Filipina domestic workers may sometimes be preferred over Indonesian workers because of their superior English language skills (Lorente 2018). Nevertheless, being a proficient speaker of English may also work against Filipina workers because their less English-proficient Indonesian peers may be seen as more docile and obedient and less likely to make demands (Lan 2006).

However, language competence may also be used by repressed and marginalised groups to claim some legitimacy for themselves. In Hong Kong, English language competence is highly valued and, thus, becomes a commodity (Budach et al. 2003). Chinese parents will go to great lengths to get their children into English-medium schools, including hiring a Filipina helper to work in the home and tutor their children (Leung 2012; Wolfaardt 2015). Because Filipina domestic helpers tend to be well educated, their English competence may be superior to that of their Chinese employers, so they can also use language competence as a way to get back at their employer and gain the upper hand, if only temporarily.

Drawing on a large corpus of more than 400 migrant worker narratives recorded at a church shelter in Hong Kong and in villages in rural Indonesia and the Philippines, this article aims to show how language is used to include and exclude. Using discourse analysis as the analytical tool, the article shows how the competent "self" and the incompetent "other" are constructed through storytelling, with perceived language competence as a key issue. Domestic workers tell how their employers construct them as "incompetent" and "stupid" because they do not speak Chinese – an accusation frequently raised against FDHs but never against *gweilos*, white people who work as professionals in Hong Kong and rarely speak any Chinese. However, the women also discursively construct their employers as "incompetent" and "ignorant" because they do not speak English or because their English proficiency is poor. The article also considers how employers, in the absence of a mutually intelligible language, may resort to violence to discipline and control their domestic helpers.

2 The study

2.1 The narratives

According to a simple definition of narrative, it entails “a verbal description of one or more concern-causing events and the way in which the concern is eliminated or diminished” (Colby 1970: 177). A more detailed conceptual framework is provided by Labov (1972) who identifies six key components of an oral narrative: (1) abstract (a brief summary of the general propositions the story will make); (2) orientation (background information like time, place and people involved); (3) complicating action (the key events of the narrative); (4) evaluation (evaluating the key points of the story); (5) resolution (how the complicating action was resolved); and (6) coda (closing or conclusion). Not all narratives contain all six components, but the complicating action and resolution are essential (Thornborrow and Coates 2005). In DMW narratives, the orientation, complicating action and evaluation are usually there, but the resolution is often missing because of the women’s circumstances. They usually seek help at the shelter because their contract has been terminated, or they have run away from an abusive employer, so nothing has been resolved when they tell their story. The women usually do not know how their story will end, and the resolution and coda are therefore missing.

The analyses in this article draw on a databank of more than 400 narratives. The largest dataset, consisting of around 300 narratives, was collected at Bethune House, a church shelter that provides temporary accommodation to domestic workers who are facing acute problems. Any newcomer to the shelter is invited to share her story with other migrant women and a volunteer in a sharing session. The purpose of the sharing sessions is twofold: first, to clarify the details of a particular incident in case a migrant worker needs to file a complaint to the Labour Department (for labour law violations) or to the police (for criminal cases), and second, to serve a therapeutic function by giving the women an opportunity to talk about their often traumatic experiences in a safe environment (see Ladegaard 2017a for more details).

As the primary purpose of these sessions was for the women to share their stories rather than to be interviewed, there was no interview guide or set of questions. After introducing themselves, the women were invited to take turns to participate, usually prompted by broad questions such as: “Why are you here at Bethune House?”, or “What happened between you and your employer?”, and “What will you do when you leave Bethune House?” I occasionally asked brief questions for clarification but otherwise did not interfere in the storytelling. That

does not mean, however, that there was only one storyteller; most of the narratives in the sharing sessions were co-constructed. Thus, the telling of a personal narrative should be seen as a joint discursive construction in which individual group members' input is an integral part of the story. Ochs and Capps (2001) provide space for such co-construction in narratives through their continuum between the *default narrative* with only one active storyteller at the one end, and *a co-constructed narrative* with multiple co-tellers at the other end. In the sharing sessions, the co-constructed narrative was by far the most common. This finding is supported by Ochs and Capps (2001) who conclude that the default narrative, which has received the most attention in the literature, is, in fact, quite rare in natural conversation.

I joined the shelter as a volunteer in 2008 but realised that the work at the shelter might receive more attention if the stories were documented and shared with a wider audience. Therefore, the project was converted into a research project while I continued my work as a volunteer at the shelter. I am aware of the potential problems involved in trying to fulfil two roles at the same time: my position as a researcher who observes and analyses language without "contaminating" the social environment I am studying cannot be fully separated from that of the volunteer/social activist who documents the stories and encourages the women to take action against abusive employers. I am not a neutral observer in this scenario: I am on the side of the FDHs, and I make no secret of that. I identify myself as a researcher *and* a social activist, and I think these roles can be complimentary rather than contradictory (Phipps 2012). Each week, I met with newcomers who had signed up for a sharing session (usually 4–6 women), and each sharing session usually lasted 1–2 hours.

The second dataset consists of 112 narratives of migrant worker return narratives recorded in Central Bohol in the Philippines and in East and Central Java in Indonesia. This part of the project seeks to collect narratives from migrant women who have returned home after years overseas as domestic workers. I travelled from village to village with an interpreter and a driver talking to women in small groups, or, in some cases, in one-on-one sharing sessions. The data collection had been prepared by local NGOs who had travelled ahead of me and asked the women if they wanted to share their coming-home narratives with a fieldworker from Hong Kong. Only three basic questions were put to the women: (1) What was it like to be a migrant worker? (2) What was it like to come home? (3) What are you thinking about the future? They decided which stories they wanted to tell. Prior to each session, the women were informed about the research component of the project, and they were asked to give their consent. They were also promised full anonymity; all names are pseudonyms.

2.2 Theoretical and methodological frameworks

The research in this article draws on a variety of theoretical frameworks and analytical concepts from sociolinguistics, social psychology, pragmatics, and discourse analysis. The data were collected using the ethnography-of-communication framework (Saville-Troike 2003), which emphasises the need to closely observe the research site and use contextual information to interpret the data. Another framework that has been applied to understand how discourse is conceptualised in the sharing sessions with migrant women is social constructionism (Burr 2003), which sees talk as a contextual, situated and dynamic activity. It argues that in discourse, people construct and negotiate their social identities, and it questions the idea that identity (and other forms of social categorisation) serves as evidence of underlying psychological states. Rather, identity is seen as a discursive construction involving the audience as well as the narrator. Storytelling, therefore, becomes constitutive of the context, and the storyteller, a social actor (Augoustinos et al. 2014).

The analysis of narratives was informed by Toolan's (2001) critical linguistic approach to narrative and by Ochs' (1992) notion of indexicality. Toolan (2001) argues that analysts need to pay equal attention to narrative structure and form, and by analysing the language of narratives, we get important information about the narratives themselves, the narrator(s) and the audience(s). In line with the social constructionist approach, Toolan sees narratives as socially situated: they are collaborative endeavours between the teller, co-tellers and audience, all of whom may disclose identity issues as well as cultural predispositions and values.

Indexicality is also central to the notion of creating and negotiating identities in talk. It connects linguistic (and paralinguistic) features and utterances to an extra-linguistic reality because linguistic features have the ability to point to something in the social context. De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg (2006: 4) define indexicality as "a layered, creative, interactive process that lies at the heart of the symbolic workings of language". They emphasise that it goes beyond simple referencing and includes the ability of linguistic features to infer complex meanings such as shared conceptualisations of space and place, ideologies, group memberships, social roles, individual and collective stances, social practices, and organisational structures (2006: 4). According to De Fina et al. (2006: 15), "any aspect of language can become indexical of social identities, from phonological variables to individual words, to complex discourse structures such as patterns of actions in narratives". However, this does not mean that everything we do in discourse should be interpreted as

identity construction; we do much more than just "speak our identities" (Mishler 1999: 19) when we talk.

Scholars have identified at least five key functions of storytelling (Medved and Brockmeier 2008). First, it creates coherence by bringing together different personal experiences that may otherwise appear disconnected. Second, narrative helps the storyteller distance herself from the immediacy of her experiences by converting them to stories. Third, storytelling serves an important communicative function: it connects the narrator to her audience and, thus, makes the narrator's universe a shared experience. Fourth, narratives help storytellers evaluate their past; they provide perspective and the possibility to develop alternative stories. Finally, storytelling serves an explorative function. It encourages storytellers to compare two aspects of the human experience: the real and the possible. This function is important in DMW narratives because the women at the shelter are encouraged to question the demeaning discourses they were subjected to while working for abusive employers and "re-author their lives from victimhood to survival and beyond" (Duvall and Béres 2007: 233).

Ideologies of language play an important role for the themes that will be analysed in this article. Irvine and Gal (2000: 35) have defined the concept as "the ideas with which participants and observers frame their understanding of linguistic varieties and map those understandings onto people, events, and activities that are significant to them". Thus, according to Irvine and Gal, ideas about language rub off onto ideas about people and, as Haviland (2003: 764) argues, "pervade the very stuff of anthropology: social life and its comparative organization". From a social constructionist perspective, a useful way to think about ideology is "knowledge deployed in the service of power" (Burr 2003: 85). Thus, ideologies are detached from questions of true or false; they are ideas – in this case about language (in)competence and use – which are used by powerful people in society to sustain their position. In the Hong Kong context, predominant ideologies prescribe that certain (low-status) migrant groups are expected to speak Cantonese, other (high-status) migrant groups are not, and a (low-status) person's overall competence is assessed according to her ability to master the local language. Through powerful institutions like the media and the school, in conjunction with Hong Kong's British colonial legacy, they also ascribe value and status to the use of English, notably standard (British) English as opposed to Hong Kong English (Li 1999; Lai 2005). This status of the language contributes to negative attitudes toward people who do not speak English, which, as Haviland (2003) points out, can become a reflex of the ideological position that all "normal" people should speak English.

3 Analysis of the data

The examples that will be analysed in the following sections were selected because they address language issues. In their stories, the women draw attention to their employers' positioning of them based on their perceived Chinese language incompetence. As an alternative, they reference their own English language competence as a means of claiming some legitimacy for themselves in a context that gives little or no recognition to FDHs. The examples show the marginalisation or exclusion of migrant women that results from their inability to speak the majority language of the society in which they live and work. This focus sheds light on the ways in which perceived (or actual) linguistic incompetence may lead to exploitation and abuse.

3.1 Marginalisation and exclusion

The first example to be analysed is from a returnee narrative recorded in Central Java. Mita is telling the male fieldworker (FW) and female interpreter what it was like for her to be a migrant worker in Hong Kong.

Excerpt (1)
Mita, 32 years old, 2 years in Singapore, 7 years in Hong Kong (HK). She got pregnant by her Bangladeshi boyfriend while she worked in HK, lost her job and overstayed, and was eventually deported. She has been back in Indonesia for 5 months (original in English).

1 Mita: I just think about how to find money (1.0) but sometimes work is hard, eating
2 is also not, not easy to find food
3 FW: yeah
4 Mita: and it's very difficult to find a good employer
5 FW: so difficult to find a good employer?
6 Mita: yeah difficult (1.0) no good employers
7 FW: okay [...]
8 Mita: for the first contract in Hong Kong I was underpaid
9 FW: okay
10 Mita: because I don't know, I don't speak Chinese
11 FW: yeah

12 Mita: and also I don't know, I know very little English
13 FW: yeah
14 Mita: so she give me (1.0) underpaid salary

The identity position that Mita is claiming for herself in Excerpt 1 is that of the subservient helper who accepts demeaning treatment like verbal abuse (as she later testifies), hunger and underpayment because she is poor (lines 1–2). Mita's story is typical for Indonesian first-timers: poverty brought them to the city so their primary concern is finding money for the family back home (line 1). They work long hours (as Mita later testifies, around 16 hours per day), and although the contract stipulates that employers must provide either food for the helper or give her a food allowance on top of her salary, hunger is a very common problem (line 2) (Ladegaard 2017a). However, FDHs are often prepared to suffer almost any humiliation, as long as they still get paid and can send remittances home.

Underpayment is the norm, not the exception, among Indonesian first-timers in Hong Kong. In Chiu's (2005) comprehensive study, which surveyed a representative sample of 2,500 FDHs in Hong Kong about their lives and experiences in the city, half (50%) of the Indonesian respondents reported that they were underpaid for their first contract. At the shelter, more than 80% of Indonesians reported being underpaid for at least their first contract. As in Mita's case, a typical scenario for Indonesian domestic workers when they first arrive in the city is that they speak no Chinese and little English, or little Chinese and no English. The employment contract is usually written in English and Chinese, but not in Bahasa, the language in which they tend to be literate, so many first-timers sign a contract they do not understand. In the cases in which they understand the contents of the contract, many are unaware of the minimum wage for migrant workers in Hong Kong. As a result, the recruitment agency and the employer may get away with a significant salary reduction for the first two-year contract. Underpayment is a form of non-recognition, and, as Taylor (1994: 25) argues, non-recognition "can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being". Thus, underpayment as well as other contractual violations that particularly Indonesian migrant women are subjected to, such as cancellation of their weekly day off, insufficient food, and verbal and physical abuse (Ladegaard 2015), work to oppress them and destroy their sense of self. And this type of oppression is at least partly caused by their inability to understand and communicate in English or Chinese.

In the next excerpt, a group of Indonesian women are discussing why they think they are being exploited and abused by their Chinese employers.

Excerpt (2)

Sendy, 24 years old, 5 months in HK; Lintang, 37 years old, 9 months in HK, 3 years in Taiwan before; Utari, 33 years old, 9 months in HK, 2 years in Malaysia before; Sarawasti, 25 years old, 5 months in HK. Three more Indonesian migrant workers, a fieldworker (FW) and an interpreter (Sinta) were in this sharing session (original in Bahasa and English).

1	Sen:	my employer was kind for the first and second month but after that (1.6)
2		she became so bad, she always cut my salary and she hit me three times
3		(0.5) if the door is broken I have to fix it, if the pipe is broken I also
4		have to fix it (0.8) when it's my holiday [Sunday] I leave at 12 and
5		have to be back by eight but I usually come back before eight (0.8)
6		they don't give me a key so sometimes I fall asleep for three or four
7		hours in front of the house before they open the door for me (2.0) and
8		they don't allow me to use hot water [for showers] (Bahasa) [...]
9	FW:	why do you think (1.0) people (0.5) treat you like that? Why are you
10		(0.8) being treated like that by your employer? Why have (1.3)
11		why? (0.9) (English)
12	Sin:	what's on your mind, why did the employer do this to you? (Bahasa)
13	Lin:	maybe because I don't have any work experience in Hong Kong before
14		(0.5) so maybe my employer (0.9) thinks I'm stupid (0.5) don't
15		understand anything (1.7) maybe that's why they don't give me any
16		holiday (0.9) I might get influenced by my friends, so that's why I
17		didn't get any holiday, even public holidays (Bahasa)
18	Uta:	my employer said (0.5) domestic helpers are stupid, dirty (0.5)
19		**rotten** (0.5) so we are not worthy to (0.6) be respected (Bahasa)
20	Sar:	because this is my first time so I couldn't (0.5) speak Cantonese yet
21		(0.5) so my employer said (0.7) 'you've been here for two months,
22		why can't you speak Cantonese?' (0.7) they said I'm **stupid** (0.8)
23		that's what they said (Bahasa) [...]
24	Lin:	[sighs] my employer loves to say I can't do anything, my work is
25		always wrong (0.5) my employer said (0.5) I'm useless, cannot speak
26		the language (0.5) even though I (0.5) my employer said I cannot
27		cook and they complained to the agent (0.5) although I have paid
28		attention to the cooking, I even wrote everything down so I'm sure
29		I can do it, but my employer keeps saying I'm useless (Bahasa)

The accounts given by these Indonesian women, all first-timers in Hong Kong, are unfortunately all too common, particularly for Indonesian migrant workers. They are underpaid (line 2), their weekly day off is (partly) cancelled (lines 4–5,

15–16), they are physically assaulted (line 2) and subjected to humiliating name-calling (line 18, 22, 25, 29). Domestic workers are being referred to as "stupid, dirty, rotten" (lines 18–19) and "useless" (line 25, 29), and their inability to speak Cantonese is being used as a reason for denigrating them (lines 21–22, 25–26). Thus, as described in the literature review above, language ideologies rub off onto ideas about people, and proficiency in Cantonese is used to assess domestic migrant workers' overall competence (Irvine and Gal 2000). Different ideas and expectations about language apply to high-status immigrants like *gweilos* (literally 'white ghosts'), expatriates of European or American descent who usually work as professionals in the city. Despite their permanent residency (in many cases), most of them do not speak Cantonese, and are not required, or even expected, to do so (Gamst Berg 2013). So, language ideologies work effectively to label some low-status immigrants as useless (line 25, 29) while they do not apply to higher status immigrants in the same local setting.

The fieldworker's questions (lines 9–11) show perplexity: they contain several lengthy pauses and incomplete utterances. The questions follow a number of narratives where the women have shared painful stories of how they were subjected to repeated humiliation and various forms of abuse by their former employers, so the pauses and hesitation could be interpreted to indicate shock and disbelief. Lintang's reply suggests that Indonesian domestic workers themselves are buying into the demeaning discourses that Chinese employers construct about them. She says she is abused because *she* does not have any work experience (line 13) and thereby indirectly blames herself for the inhumane treatment she is subjected to. Repeatedly being subjected to denigrating discourses destroys the self and eventually leads to self-blame. Thus, Utari concludes that the women are abused because they are not "worthy to be respected" (line 19). Brison (1999: 41) points out that "victims of human-inflicted trauma are reduced to mere objects by their tormenters." What happens to the victim is "the undoing of the self by trauma" (1999: 41): the gradual destruction of self-confidence and self-worth means they become objects with no voice and no subjectivity. This is indexed through Lintang's deep sigh (line 24) followed by an account of how her employer has reduced her to a useless object (lines 24–29). Note also the semantic implications in the words Utari's employer uses about her: stupid, dirty (line 18) and rotten (heavily stressed) (line 19), signifying that FDHs are framed as outcasts, or even as less than human, by their employers (Tileaga 2007).

Denial of the right to talk to and socialise with other domestic workers represents a particularly salient form of marginalisation and exclusion. This is a common problem among FDHs that was brought up repeatedly in sharing sessions at the shelter. Excerpt 3 provides an example in which five Filipina workers discuss this issue.

Excerpt (3)

Beryl, 37 years old, 3 months in HK, 2 years in Singapore before HK; Flordeliza, 46 years old, 3 years in HK, 3 years in Taiwan before HK; Alma, 33 years old, 1 week in HK, 3 years in Jordan before HK. Two more Filipinas and a fieldworker (FW) were in this sharing session (original in English).

1 Ber: my employer is very strict, just because she saw me talk to another Filipina but the
2 truth is I didn't talk her, she just **say** I talked to her, but no, it's not true [...]
3 FW: and you're not supposed to talk?
4 Ber: not to another maid because I took her [another FDH] to the supermarket because
5 I had something to carry and then some Filipina came and suddenly she asked
6 me 'where is my employer, is she inside the supermarket or not?', but I didn't
7 answer and suddenly my employer got out and she saw the Filipina talk to me,
8 so she think that I talked to her
9 FW: and you're not allowed to talk to another//
10 Ber: //that's right
11 Al: yeah
12 Ber: that's just the reason [for terminating the contract]
13 FW: is that (1.0) have you experienced the same thing? (1.0) that you're not allowed to
14 talk to other (1.0)
15 Al: most, most are like this
16 Flor: yeah yeah, most employers don't want their helper to talk//
17 Al: //also my employer [...]
18 because she is a teacher, tutor, so some other Filipinas go with the children to have
19 tutoring there with my employer and then when they come, my employers say to
20 me 'don't talk to her', like this

Denying other human beings the right to converse with others is a way to deny them a part of their humanity. Only in discourse *are* we; only through language do we get to know the Other, and only through language do we truly get to know

ourselves through our interlocutor's affirmation of our value. As Sampson (1993: 187) cogently states, "no one voice can be quieted without losing the greatest opportunity of all: to converse with otherness and to learn about our own otherness in and through those conversations". Tajfel (1981) argues that individuals' membership of ingroups, and the values associated with these groups, are of the utmost importance, not only as they relate to our wellbeing as human beings, but also for our very survival. Our sense of belonging to one or more ingroups is an essential identity marker, and it is through language that these memberships are established and maintained. Thus, depriving people of talk also deprives them of their sense of belonging, self-worth and confidence.

Beryl's story appears almost absurd and it is only because similar stories were told regularly in sharing sessions at the shelter, and because Alma confirms that this has also happened to her (lines 18–20), that we have to believe it. Beryl is not allowed to answer a simple question from a fellow FDH ("where is my employer", line 6), so she has to be rude and not respond (lines 6–7). Note that Beryl's use of the term "maid" (line 4) and "some Filipina" (line 5) suggests negative connotations. "Maid" is (almost) never used for self-reference by FDHs because it carries negative undertones; they prefer the term "helper", suggesting that they are in Hong Kong to *help* their families and the people of Hong Kong and to serve God (Ladegaard 2017b). The term "maid" is often used by employers to denigrate their helpers ("you are just a maid", Ladegaard [2017b]). "Some Filipina" also suggests the accidental nature of the meeting and underlines the absurd reason for her being fired (line 12).

A possible reason for which employers do not want their domestic workers to talk with others is the fear of losing control. It is easier to control people who are lonely and isolated, so keeping FDHs from talking to their peers is also a way to exercise power over them and to ensure they are kept ignorant of their rights (Foucault 1980). Discourse not only reaffirms our value as human beings; it brings us out of loneliness, and the bonding with others makes us stronger. Indonesian domestic workers tend to be more isolated because of their typically limited English and Chinese competence and their low membership (relative to Filipinas) in migrant worker NGOs. These might be important reasons why they are usually also more severely exploited.

3.2 Language and violence

Another pertinent issue for FDHs is that lack of a mutually intelligible language between a domestic worker and her employer may lead to violence as the next example shows.

Excerpt (4)

Liezel, 25 years old, Filipina, 4 months in HK, 1 year in Singapore. One more Filipina helper and a fieldworker (FW) were in this sharing session. Liezel is explaining why her contract was terminated (original in English).

1	Liezel:	er: because my *popo* [grandmother] only, she cannot communicate with me,
2		she don't know how to speak in English (1.0) I don't know why she's always
3		angry with me, she always knock my head //every day//
4	FW:	//knock// knock your head?
5	Liezel:	yeah, knock my head (1.0) always so painful and then I don't know after that,
6		after one month, she terminated me, my ma'am, she said only 'my *popo* is,
7		she don't like you', she don't want me only (1.0) because I don't know how
8		to speak, **she** don't know how to speak in English
9	FW:	what would she say, what would she do to you?
10	Liezel:	always like this only, she knock my head, my head always (1.0) and then if,
11		I said only 'sorry *popo*', and after that my shoulder again, she beat my
12		shoulder, sir (1.0) and then after that, I said only 'sorry *popo*', I want to
13		cry, but I control myself sir

It is common in Chinese households for two or three generations to live together. As the middle generation often work outside the house, the grandparents have to interact directly with the helper. This excerpt comes from a scenario in which an elderly couple, who do not speak any English, is served by a FDH who does not speak any Chinese. In the absence of a mutually intelligible language, the grandparents resort to physical assault to resolve communication problems. Battery is usually explained with reference to power and control, and the commonly accepted narrative, as Augusta-Scott (2007) explains it, is that men are abusive and women are not. However, in the case of FDHs, it is usually the female employer (and/or her mother) who is the perpetrator (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004; Ladegaard 2017a). Power and control are no doubt an issue, but it is also possible that conflicts between helper and employer are exacerbated because they do not have a common language. Liezel suggests a direct

causal link in lines 1–3, arguing that because the grandmother cannot communicate with her, she gets angry (lines 2–3) and starts hitting her (line 3).

Liezel is young and relatively inexperienced. She discursively constructs herself as the humble and subservient helper who unquestionably accepts the demeaning treatment she is subjected to. When she is assaulted, she does not defend herself but, rather, apologises (line 11, 12) Her apology essentially gives the grandmother a carte blanche to abuse her. Constable (2007: 12) argues that "power does not exist as a monolithic, autonomous, 'natural state' until the moment when it becomes 'fractured' by particular acts of resistance (Haynes and Prakesh 1991: 2)". In Liezel's case, this may be true in the sense that there is no power struggle because she does not resist her own domination, but it does not erase the display or abuse of power. It is true, as Constable (2007) claims, that DMWs wield certain forms of power, but it is equally true that when the self has been destroyed by trauma, there is no voice and no subjectivity left to fight against oppression and injustice (Brison 1999).

An interesting detail in Liezel's narrative vis-à-vis the objective of this article is that the humiliation and violence are brought about by her alleged linguistic incompetence. Her contract is prematurely terminated because of language problems (lines 7–8). However, despite her self-denigration, Liezel still claims some legitimacy for herself through her self-correction in line 8 in which she initially stresses her own inability to speak Chinese but then shifts the blame to the grandmother's inability to speak English. She indirectly singles out the grandmother as the one to blame for their miscommunication, which she conveys through the heavily stressed **"she"** in "she don't know how to speak in English" (line 8). In this way, she also acquits herself of any blame for the premature termination of her contract. There is an implicit reference here to the power of English and to the ideological position, which is very much alive in Hong Kong, that non-mastery of English is a handicap and a deficiency, especially for those with middle-class status and higher (Lai 2005; Li 1999).

3.3 Fighting back: Distancing and alignment

While FDHs' alleged incompetence in Chinese is often singled out as the reason for communication problems, migrant women may also use language to get back at their employers and gain the upper hand, if only momentarily. Excerpt 5 provides an example. Ruth, a Filipina domestic worker, has been accused of stealing money from her female employer. Ruth has worked up a debt and has

borrowed a large sum of money to pay overdue agency fees. The employer wants to terminate the contract and to avoid paying the compensation stipulated in the contract (one month's salary and return airfare), she claims that the money, which Ruth keeps in an envelope in her room, was stolen from her. A neighbour has told Ruth that the employer "changes her maid monthly": she has had four domestic workers in less than a year and finds a way to avoid paying the compensation each time. However, the employer underestimates Ruth's determination; she will not be falsely accused of wrongdoing, and she manages to discredit the employer and condemn her actions.

Excerpt (5)

Ruth, 39 years, Filipina, 9 years in HK, 2 years in Malaysia. Two more Filipina helpers and a Fieldworker (FW) participated in the sharing session (original in English).

1 Ruth: even though my lady employer, she's er: an agent of ICAC [The Independent
2 Commission Against Corruption] before she jumped on the business,
3 that's what she's telling me
4 FW: yeah
5 Ruth: 'do you know *tai-tai*, for the last time', because she don't know how
6 to speak in English, she's talking to me in Chinese, 'I'm sorry can you
7 call your husband to translate so that I can understand what you're
8 saying?' (1.0) she go '*dak-a-dak-a-dak-a-dak-a-dak*', I said 'I'm sorry
9 ma'am, I don't understand you, so you better speak in English so that
10 we can understand each other' (1.0) and she go *'dak-a-dak-a-dak-a-dak'*,
11 saying like that, 'yeah *tai-tai*, this money, no no no, that's **not** your
12 money (1.5) I've called the police to do the investigation and then I can
13 prove myself that I'm innocent'
14 FW: mhm
15 Ruth: because she's not letting me go and then I cannot talk to other helpers
16 and pass the letter to the Immigration that I'm planning to break the
17 contract, I can't **post** it
18 FW: right
19 Ruth: she's not letting me out of the house already
20 FW yeah (1.0) tough (1.0) hopefully you're gonna get a better employer
21 Ruth: yeah, I hope (1.0) yeah, I'm just hoping and praying

Ruth fights back against the injustice that has been committed against her. She indirectly points out the employer's hypocrisy by referring to her alleged employment with the ICAC (The Independent Commission Against Corruption) (line 1). She further indexes the employer's dishonesty by mitigating the claim in line 3 with the hedge "that's what she's telling me", emphasising that this is only what the employer claims. The discrediting continues in line 5 where Ruth acts out a conversation she had with her employer (whether fictitious or real, we do not know). She is a committed storyteller and uses several performance features (Toolan 2001), including a mocking tone and ridiculing the employer's language by reproducing it as a series of high-pitched incomprehensible sounds (line 8, 10). The mockery continues in lines 6–8 when Ruth asks the employer to call her husband so that he can translate into English. Through this request, Ruth emphasises the employer's 'non-English handicap' (Haviland 2003). Considering the role of English in the Hong Kong context, Ruth's mockery is more serious than it may sound because the ability to speak English can be used in Hong Kong as a way to assess overall competence, level of education and social class (Lai 2005).

The humiliation is further strengthened in lines 9–10 when Ruth advises the employer: "you better speak in English so that we can understand each other". One would not normally say this to a monolingual person, but intelligibility and cross-cultural understanding are not the goals here. Rather, the repeated reference to the female employer's lack of competence in English works effectively to humiliate her, at least in Ruth's mind. The employer is also referred to as a *ta-tai* (lines 5, 11), a term that is sometimes used condescendingly to refer to a Chinese woman of leisure who has to rely on her husband for social status and recognition. In addition, the emphatic correction, "no, no, no, that's **not** your money" (lines 11–12), through its resemblance to a mother's scolding of a disobedient child, further positions Ruth as more powerful than her employer.

Analysed at the intergroup level, this excerpt provides an example of the cultural and racial "other" looking back (Paul 2011) and a way in which domestic workers may become active agents in micro-level racial projects (Omi and Winant 1994) against their employers. These projects reflect "a defensive effort by these workers to explain to themselves and others the oppressive race and class dynamics they experience while simultaneously attempting to shift the racial order in their favour, at least in their own minds" (Paul 2011: 1069). Ruth is contesting and dismissing her employer's attempts to discredit her and, perhaps more importantly, claiming legitimacy for herself and moral superiority over a dishonest employer. By discursively constructing herself as different from and, morally superior to, her Chinese employer, Ruth creates distance and engages in racial distancing and alignment (Paul 2011). She also aligns herself

with other domestic workers who share the same values; this alignment creates ingroup cohesion and positively enhances individual and group identity (Tajfel 1981).

This practice of racial distancing and alignment also emerges in another sharing session at the shelter with eight Filipina helpers. The women laugh about their Chinese employers' stereotypes of Filipinas as having "no brain [and] no common sense", and then they retort: "but **they** are the ones who are not well educated", and "we are proud that we come here and **we** have a **degree**" (Ladegaard 2017a: 121). The "we-they" dichotomy is clearly expressed in the heavily stressed pronouns; it further reinforces intergroup distinctiveness (Hogg and Abrams 2003). Thus, Filipina domestic workers, many of whom have university degrees and are better educated than their Chinese employers, use their higher levels of English language competence to index its high status, thereby repositioning themselves – albeit temporarily – as superior to their employers. In Ruth's case, however, the irony is that the employer presumably does not understand her mockery. When she asks her to call her husband to translate (lines 6–7), we assume the employer is ignorant of her request and possibly too embarrassed to ask for clarification. Thus, the shift in racial order and alignment happens, first and foremost, in the minds of these domestic workers rather than in the real world. In the real world, Ruth is held captive so that she cannot communicate with other FDHs and send her letter of complaint to the Immigration Department (lines 15–17, 19). The way forward in a seemingly impossible situation, therefore, is "just hoping and praying" against the odds (line 21).

4 Discussion

The examples that have been analysed in this article have shown that perceived language (in)competence is used to include and to exclude. Employers use domestic workers' inability to speak Chinese to belittle them and render them as "stupid, dirty, rotten", and, therefore, "unworthy to be respected" (Excerpt 2, lines 18–19). This derogatory stereotype presumably has little to do with FDHs' language competence, and more to do with their status in the city as cultural and racial 'others' doing menial work for which they get little recognition and low pay. Despite their background as well-educated professionals in the Philippines, domestic helpers are brought in to do "the dirty work" (Anderson 2000) and get no credit for their university degrees or excellent English-language skills. Their inability to speak Cantonese is used to discredit them. Even if

they speak some Chinese, it may be the wrong variety. As Eni, a 31-year-old domestic worker from East Java with 6 years of experience in Hong Kong, attests in a sharing session in Indonesia with eight domestic worker returnees:

Excerpt (6)

The employer happened to be Chinese, not Hong Kong Chinese, from China, he spoke in Mandarin and what I had learned was Cantonese like that yeah, so as usual, the job was never right, everything I did was wrong, every day [they] complained about me.
(Original in Bahasa)

Some recruitment agencies in Indonesia offer crash courses in Cantonese to FDHs before they leave for Hong Kong. However, they usually consist of a few weeks of intensive training, which may equip the women with some stock phrases but little more. Paradoxically, this minimal competence sometimes leads to more trouble for them when they arrive in the city because the Hong Kong recruitment agencies have marketed them to local employers as proficient in Cantonese. As Eni's example shows, however, being able to speak a little Cantonese is no help if the employer is from Mainland China. With the influx of Mainland Chinese migrants to Hong Kong, this can increasingly be the case.

As mentioned above, the women's narratives also provide insight into language ideologies in Hong Kong. Tileaga (2007) has referred to these ideological positions as the local codes of argument, or the ideological assumptions in certain socio-cultural contexts that justify the repression and marginalisation of certain minority groups (migrant workers from developing countries), while others are granted status and legitimacy (professional expatriates from Western countries) despite the two groups' similarly low competence in the same language (Chinese). These ideological positions are reflected in linguistic practices: migrant workers are expected to "fit in", accommodate and learn the local language. If they do not, it will be used against them. Professionals in high-status jobs, on the other hand, are free to live the life they choose. They can bring their family members who will get dependent visas, which makes it possible to maintain the family unit's lifestyle, and there is no expectation for them to learn the local language and try to "fit in".

Another pertinent issue that arises from the local codes of arguments about FDHs' alleged language incompetence is the finding that repressed minority group members also adopt these ideological positions. As De Fina (2006: 353–354) argues, "The identities that people display, perform, contest, or discuss in

interaction are based on ideologies and beliefs about the characteristics of social groups and categories and about the implications of belonging to them." When domestic workers say they are not worthy of respect (Excerpt 2, line 19) and accept the narrative they have heard from their employers that a domestic helper who has been in Hong Kong for two months should master the local language (Excerpt 2, lines 21–22), they also accept their subordination in society. According to Piller and Takahashi (2010: 550), "the linguistic factor [the language barrier] has increasingly been acknowledged as one of the most crippling obstacles to the social inclusion of migrants". It is no doubt a problem, as this article has demonstrated, when migrants do not speak the language of the host country. It might lead to social exclusion and discrimination or, as we saw in Liezel's story (Excerpt 4), to escalation of violence against migrant workers. However, given the contrasting perspective of high status migrants who also do not speak the local language but are subject to far less discrimination, FDHs' social exclusion from the host societies is arguably a more serious problem than that of language. Constable (2014: 13–14) argues: "domestic workers are welcomed to Hong Kong as workers and not as people or citizens. They are not welcome as women with families of their own or with sexual lives and relationships. They are stripped of these." As a result of migration laws that make no allowances for accompanying family members and a precarious migration status that is wholly dependent upon their FDH contract, the migrants featured in this paper are constrained from developing a voice in the community or a sense of belonging. They cannot call the host country 'home' despite having spent the better part of their lives there and having made a significant contribution to its financial development. For these reasons, in order for FDHs to be included in the host community and the contribution they make to society valued, more than linguistic competence is required.

5 Conclusion

Resourceful domestic workers can use their superior English-language competence to get back at their employers and temporarily gain the upper hand. They acknowledge their inferior social status, but they use their superior English-language skills, together with their higher levels of education relative to their employers, to gain legitimacy and status, at least amongst themselves. As one of the participants in Lan's (2003) study of Filipina domestic workers and their Chinese employers in Taiwan says: "They have more money, but I speak better English" (2003: 133) (see also Lorente 2018). This awareness gives them as

members of a repressed and marginalised group “a semblance of control over their own situation as live-in servants” (Paul 2011: 1082), something they can use strategically to counter the daily reminders they get of their inferior position in the host country. Language competence thus becomes part of a coping strategy. It becomes much more than just linguistic competence and becomes, instead, one of the means through which to rewrite life-stories from victimhood to survival. As Duvall and Béres (2007: 233) state:

> Thinking about identity as fluid allows for the possibility for movement from an identity that focuses only on being victimized by the trauma to one that includes having survived and resisted it. People can move their identities from defining themselves only in relation to the traumatic experience to having identities that also involve other elements of their lives.

Thus, FDH narratives also provide hope and encouragement that repressed members of society *can* gain voice and visibility. They may not have the power to change discriminatory labour laws, but, through storytelling and peer support, they can regain trust in themselves and “repair” the self that has been damaged by their employers’ demeaning discourses about them (Ladegaard 2017a). This is particularly true for Filipina domestic workers whose superior English language competence makes them more marketable (Lorente 2018).

Shuman (2005: 5) has referred to storytelling as “a healing art or as a means for transforming oppressive conditions by creating an opportunity for suppressed voices to be heard”. As migrant women linguistically distance themselves from their abusive employers and align themselves with their peers, they also take the opportunity to empower themselves by rewriting their life stories and becoming active agents in their new stories. Toolan (1993) posits that sociolinguists can bring about empowerment through greater awareness of language ideologies, and, in particular, language-mediated prejudice, which may be harboured by the migrant workers’ host communities. At the same time, this prejudice may also be harboured by migrant workers themselves who, as we saw in Excerpt 2, buy into society’s stereotypical narratives about them and consider themselves “not worthy to be respected” because they do not master the local language. However, Brown and Augusta-Scott (2007: xiv) insist that change is possible through story-telling because “as we story or talk about experience, self and identity, we create them: We form them as we speak them.”

Acknowledgements: The research reported in this article was supported by two competitive research grants from the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong; grant numbers HKBU-244211 and PolyU-2444/13H.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

Bold	pronounced with stress/emphasis
Italics	Tagalog/Bahasa/Janavese/Cantonese
[it’s a]	word(s) inserted by the transcriber to ease comprehension
,	short pause, less than 0.5 second
(2.0)	pause in seconds
‘give me that’	reporting direct speech
: (as in ah:)	the vowel sound is prolonged
Xx	incomprehensible
//	interruption
//as I said//	overlapping speech
?	question/rising intonation
[...]	turn(s) left out

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