Linguistic exhibitionism in the real world

We now inhabit a post-global world—well over a decade past globalization, and where it is increasingly apparent that the world is not completely “flat” (Friedman 2005). One of the most striking features of a post-global society is the inherent tension between the push and pull of on the one hand, monolingualism, and on the other, multilingualism. Using Orwellian aphorisms, we witness evidence that all languages are equal at the very same time that we experience evidence of a qualification—but some languages are more equal than others. With the emergence of deterritorialization of the nation-state and the rise of supranational spaces, we are witnessing what seems to be an apparent contradiction between the increased visual prominence of nationally-bounded languages—a linguistic exhibitionism of sorts—at the very same time that we are witnessing a strengthening of linguistic hierarchies—forms of linguistic monolingualism in which languages vie for value. No better instantiation of such linguistic workings occurs than in the seemingly innocuous display of actual exhibitionism at The 2010 Shanghai Expo. This ‘world’ trade-fair with its 149-year tradition of public-diplomacy par excellence witnessed a particular linguistic shift at the outset of this decade.

In a bid to stifle any rumors of American decline as a consequence of the 2008 financial meltdown, Ghattas (2013: 157) recounts that then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, raised enough corporate sponsorship to put up a 60,000-square-foot bunker exhibiting America to the world. Perhaps most striking was the space given to key languages at the expo—a careful, cosmetic orchestration and showcasing of diverse American attempts at linguistic inclusion recorded from citizens and celebrities alike. Ghattas (2013) a BBC reporter, provides copious details of some of the audiovisual material on display as experienced by the travelling press corps of which she was a part:

Suddenly, basketball legend Kobe Bryant from the Los Angeles Lakers appeared on the screen on the red wall on our left. “Ni hao,” he greeted
the viewers in Chinese. Stunned silence. The video continued as ordinary Americans filmed on the streets of the United States were taught how to say “Welcome” in Mandarin. The Chinese giggled with laughter as the men and women tried, failed and ultimately succeeded in uttering a few words in Mandarin. Famous skateboarder Tony Hawk did a stunt and then spoke into the camera in apparently fluent Chinese, possibly picked up during his trip to the country a few days earlier to inaugurate a Woodward skateboard camp in Beijing. Olympic medalist Michelle Kwan slid up to the camera on her skates, speaking Cantonese. A group of white, Latino, and Asian firefighters standing in front of their red truck; two dozen schoolchildren of mixed backgrounds in a park; a black shopkeeper; stockbrokers on the trading floor—all of these Americans offered their greetings to China. Wild applause.

In the next room, courtesy of Citicorp, a giant Hillary was projected on the wall. “Ni hao,” she said, “I’m Hillary Clinton.” Warm applause from the crowd. (158)

Particularly intriguing in this account is the careful management of multilingualism in the governmentally sanctioned audiovisual display. Lest readers believe that this was the only language on exhibit, consider yet another seemingly innocuous millisecond detailing of the event that Ghattas (2013) provides of the opening events. She tells readers that the visiting crowd “was almost all Chinese, their eyes trained on the two young Americans in jeans speaking to them from bullhorns” (157). With details that only a journalist can muster, she describes the unfolding events.

These were the “student ambassadors,” two from a group of 160 college-age Americans, perfectly bilingual, not just linguistically but also culturally. The visitors were delighted to be greeted in their own language by smiling young Americans after they had waited in line in the heat, sometimes for three hours. (157)

What follows is a cinematic account of linguistic exchange par excellence—one in which we witness a careful, institutional showcasing of Mandarin at the very same time as there is plenty of bureaucratic space reserved for the spotlighting of English. Ghattas (2013) in transliterated form takes care to recount the role of these language ‘ambassadors’. In filmic fashion her verbal details close in on another seemingly, informal code on display—one which captures the aural power of another louder language on exhibit:

“Ni hen lihai,” the students said and then translated, “You are awesome!” The audience was transfixed. Some of the Chinese visitors, who were coming from all corners of the vast country, had never met a foreigner