

Commodifying Non-English Foreign Language via Chinese University Websites

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Abstract

This paper examines the commodification of non-English foreign languages through the official websites of 42 China's double first-class universities. Informed by the concepts of language as commodity (Heller 2010), this study examines how non-English foreign languages are ideologically constructed as valued resources exchange for decent job, advanced education and China's regional integration. However, the study also finds that even these websites try their best to portray non-English foreign languages as valuable commodity, the concept of English as the default language still permeates in the whole promoting process. Therefore, there is still some tensions between ideal promoting vision and actual practices. This study can shed lights on the valorization of multilingual education in China and the promotion of non-English foreign languages to the world.

Key words: Non-English foreign languages; Language as commodity; Double first-class universities; Multilingual valorization

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INTRODUCTION

Intensive research has shown that language can always be conceptualized as a commodity. The commodification

of Russian spreads far beyond the European continent (Muth & Ryazaniva-Clark, 2015). In the modern English language teaching industry, the English language is treated as a highly valued commodity and a standardized set of knowledge items and skills that can be passed on to students in the “transaction” of language teaching (Cameron, 2012). Similarly, the promotion of standard Chinese language is part of language commodification and possibly a necessary step in selling the language internationally as a global commodity (Liu & Gao, 2020). There are some researches which focus on specific field such as Linguistic commodification in tourism (Heller, 2014). However, these studies either study only the commercialization of general language or highlight the commercialization of language in a particular field. To the best of our knowledge, the study of non-English foreign language is still in its infancy. There is little known research on the commercialization of non-English foreign language, let alone in the field of education. By the way, there could be other terms to refer to other foreign languages except English, the reason why I chose “non-English foreign languages” in this paper is that English has always been the dominant foreign language, so using “non-English foreign languages”, it not only shows the respect for other foreign language, but also it's more clear to readers to know the object of this paper. Investigating the official enrollment websites of 42 double-class universities, this paper aims to clarify how universities commercialize non-English foreign languages as the commodity under specific political conditions, and to offer a nuanced account of the commodification of non-English foreign language, and to interpret the tensions between ideal promoting vision and actual practice at a deeper level. Further research may seek understanding of the voice of students combining with their expectation to draw a more comprehensive picture of the education market.

RESEARCH CONTEXTS

The Increasing Importance of Non-English Foreign Languages

The non-English foreign languages are playing increasingly important roles in the countries along the “Belt and Road” under the promotion of the “Belt and Road” Initiative (Li, Dong & Liu, 2019). Improving the ability of speaking non-English foreign languages can promote China’s direct investment to the host country of the corresponding language (Bai & Luo, 2019). While as Nguyen (2017) illustrates “schools, together with families, function as agents of social reproduction which play the role of mechanisms for generational transmission of knowledge and class structure.” Therefore, the Ministry of Education (2017) indicated that from 2012 to 2017, 37 non-English foreign language majors have been added to the list of approved undergraduate majors, which means that 90 non-English foreign language majors have been established in universities.

Market-Based Education

Nguyen (2017) illustrates “In this era of market-based education, schools worldwide must compete for more student enrollments in order to remain financially solvent and viable and enhance their social standing.” Therefore, schools need to turn to various techniques to advertise, promote and represent themselves (Drew, 2013; Saichai & Morpew, 2014). Among these advertising tools, it’s commonly acknowledged that school websites are effective means especially in the age of Internet. It plays a significant role to reach perspective students. In the competitive education market, colleges and universities learn from the discourse and marketing strategies of advertising discourse, actively construct and propagate self-image, persuade, encourage and promote consumers to buy their own educational products.

Facing the situation that education field is going through the marketization, combining with the increasingly significance of non-English foreign languages, the commodification of non-English foreign languages through the official websites of 42 China’s double first-class universities is explored with the following questions:

- How are non-English foreign languages commoditized through official websites of 42 China’s double first-class universities?
- What are the tensions in the process of promoting multilingual valorization?

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts language as commodity as the theoretical framework. Heller (2003, 2010) illustrates “how the phenomenon of commodification occurs in a

number of key sites of globalization in which language emerges as a symbolic capital becoming a resource with an exchange value —tourism, marketing, translation, communications and performance art.” The neoliberal ideology places commodities at the centre of “its social world” (Holborow, 2015). Heller (2003, 2010), Tan and Rudby (2008) and Duchêne and Heller (2012) are among those who have addressed the relationship between language and political economy. The term “commodification of language” was introduced by Heller (2003) to refer to the exchange value of language on the job market. However, even though in the theory of language as commodity, non-English foreign language is regarded as a valuable resource in various markets, there still exist tensions between the ideal promoting vision and actual practice.

Methodology

Data in this study were collected through the enrollment website of 42 double-class universities, and these websites were publicly accessible on the Internet. Nguyen (2017) illustrates “Websites have shaped schools’ marketing practices and have become an essential tool for schools to represent themselves, reach a varied audience and build their own brand in this increasingly digital world.” They are effective tools for information about schools as the former can rapidly communicate a significant amount of content to a vast audience. In the course of the collection, this study will try to explain how non-English foreign languages are commodified as valuable resource in various markets such as job, education and national economy.

Data collection and analysis

For Data-collecting procedure, the data is collected from the official websites of 42 double first-class universities since October 2020. It is worth mentioning that 39 out of the 42 universities offer non-English foreign languages majors, so the total number of subjects studied below is 39. Data collection includes the calculation of the elements based on the frequency that the prosperous prospects for graduates and the abundant resources for first-class academic pursuit has been mentioned ; the exchange value of non-English foreign language in national economic market according to the “Belt and Road” Initiative. What’s more, content analysis (Shardakova & Pavlenko 2004) is adopted to explore the commodification of non-English foreign languages.

Findings

The non - English foreign language majors offered by 42 double first - class universities are listed in the following, of which three are not set up non - English foreign language majors.

Table 1
Non-English foreign language majors in 42 double first-class universities

Universities	Established Non-English foreign language majors
Peking University	Arabic; German; Russian; Sanskrit; Pali; Hindi; Urdu; Bengalese; Tibetan; Spanish; Portuguese; Italian; Mongol; Kiswahili; Hausa; Amharic; Ose baba(约鲁巴语); Ibo; Korean; Filipino; Burmese; Thai; Indonesian; Vietnamese; French; Japanese; Farsi; Hebrew; Bengali; Sinhalese; Nepali; Hindi; Malay; Burmese; Lao; Cambodian; Vietnamese; Thai; German; Russian; Japanese; French;
Yunnan University	Arabic; German; Russian; Spanish; Portuguese; Italian; Japanese; French
Nankai University	Japanese; Russian; German; French; Spanish; Korean
Nanjing University	Japanese; Russian; Korean; Spanish; German; French
Fudan University	Japanese; Russian; Korean; Spanish; German; French
Shandong University	Japanese; Russian; Korean; Spanish; German; French
Renmin University of China	Japanese; Russian; German; French; Spanish
East China Normal University	Japanese; Russian; German; French; Spanish
Southeast University	Japanese; Russian; German; French; Spanish
Zhejiang University	Japanese; Russian; German; French; Spanish
Ocean University of China	Japanese; German; French; Korean; Russian
Sichuan University	Japanese; Spanish; French; Russian; Polish
Xiamen University	Japanese; Spanish; French; Russian; German
Jilin University	Japanese; Russian; Korean; Spanish
Xi'an Jiaotong University	Japanese; German; French; Russian
Northwestern Polytechnical University	Japanese; German; French; Russian
Lanzhou University	Japanese; German; French; Russian
Shanghai Jiao Tong University	Japanese; Russian; German; French
Wuhan University	Japanese; German; French; Russian
South China University of Technology	Japanese; Spanish; German; French
Huazhong University of Science and Technology	Japanese; German; French
Central South University	French; Spanish; Japanese
Sun Yat-sen University	Japanese; German; French
Beijing Institute of Technology	Japanese; German; Spanish
Northeastern University	Japanese; German; Russian
Zhengzhou University	Japanese; German; Russian
Northwest A&F University	Japanese; French; Russian
Minzu University of China	Japanese; Russian; Korean
Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics	German; Russian
Beijing Normal University	Japanese; Russian
Dalian University of Technology	Japanese; Russian
Harbin Institute of Technology	Japanese; Russian
Chongqing University	Japanese; German
University of Electronic Science and Technology of China	Japanese; French
Tongji University	German
Xinjiang University	Russian
Tsinghua University	Japanese
Hunan University	Japanese
TianJin University	Non-English foreign languages department
China Agricultural University	\
University of Science and Technology of China	\
National University of Defense Technology	\

In the below sections, the advertisements on the official websites of 39 China's double first-class universities are examined to show how non-English foreign languages are ideologically constructed as valued resources exchange for decent job, advanced education and China's regional integration.

Non-English Foreign Languages as Valued Resources Exchanging for Decent Job

Among most of these 39 double first-class universities, they claim that the graduates of non-English foreign language own high employment rate. What's more, the main job areas of graduates are foreign trade, tourist trade, colleges and universities, government sector, sino-foreign joint venture and so on. They claim to provide such a prosperous prospect hence maybe more attractive to students who are not interested in English.

Yunnan University explained:

After graduation, students majoring in Burmese language can be engaged in diplomatic, economic and trade, cultural exchange, press and publication, education, scientific research, management and other work.

法语系的学生法语语言基础扎实, 历年的专四、专八国家法语水平测试成绩均超过全国平均线, 均有获得优秀等次的学生。近三年来, 法语专业本科的就业率均为100%, 主要去向是: 外事、外贸、旅游、新闻、金融等部门; 高等院校、科研单位、政府部]以及中外合资企业等; 留学法国继续深造、考上或被保送攻读硕士研究生; 到法语国家或地区从事教学、翻译或管理工作。

Peking University explained:

Most of the graduates are active in the fields of diplomacy, foreign cultural exchange, international trade, press and publication, universities and scientific research institutes, and have made positive contributions to the country and society.

本系毕业生大多活跃于外交、对外文化交流、国际贸易、新闻出版、高校和科研等行业

The ideologically commodified non-English foreign languages in the official websites of 39 double first-class universities indicate that non-English foreign languages are being portrayed as an important professional skill and personal asset for career development. Students can get decent jobs on job market by exchanging with their ability of non-English foreign languages. Language "is seen as an important type of economic and social capital which can enhance their professional opportunities in a broad range of fields" (Leeman & Martinez, 2007).

Non-English Foreign Languages as Valued Resources Exchanging for Advanced Education

These websites of universities in which they relate their non-English foreign languages to "prestigious universities world-wide" may be helpful to persuade students that they can provide the students opportunities to gain high level educational experience through their overseas education. It shows that the shifting conceptions of language as

a marketable commodity on its own. It's found in the analysis that the advertisement of official websites of China's double first-class universities contribute to the construction of the non-English foreign languages as commodity which can be exchanged for more beneficial condition on education market in this globalized world.

Zhejiang University explained:

We have a program of preparatory courses for studying abroad, the program covers 11 countries including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan and South Korea.

继续教育中心设有留学预备课程项目, 涵盖美国、加拿大、英国、澳大利亚、新西兰、法国、德国、意大利、西班牙、日本、韩国共11个国家的本科及硕士留学预备课程。

The websites mentioned that they could offer students opportunities of further first-class academic pursuit may reveals that they may want to claim that these majors own the distinguished commodity values that no other majors have. The commodity value of Non-English foreign languages have been exchanged to an admission ticket of first-class academic institutions for students.

Non-English Foreign Languages as Valued Resources Exchanging for China's Regional Integration

Non-English foreign languages are being valued and prioritized as commodities or resources based on their economic importance by the websites of universities which means "the association between a language and its geopolitical importance will determine its relative market worth as a "resource"" (Ricento, 2005, p. 363). Just as the picture from the Yunnan University shown, the ideologically commodified non-English foreign languages in the official websites of 39 double first-class universities promotes the sustainable societal multilingualism and linguistic diversity to some extent.

Yunnan University explained:

Against the backdrop of the Belt and Road initiative and the deepening construction of Yunnan Province's Radiation Center for South and Southeast Asia, the potential for exchanges and cooperation between China and Myanmar in various fields is enormous, in particular, the construction of the China-Myanmar community with a shared future and the China-Myanmar economic corridor needs a large number of first-class talents who have solid basic skills in Burmese, cross-cultural communication ability, broad knowledge and strong professional ability.

在“一带一路”倡议和云南省面向南亚东南亚辐射中心建设不断深化的背景下, 中国与缅甸之间在各个领域的交流与合作潜力巨大, 尤其是中缅命运共同体和中缅经济走廊建设需要大量具备扎实的缅甸语基本功, 跨文化交际能力以及知识面较为宽广和专业能力较强的复合型缅甸语专业一流人才。缅甸语专业每年约有20名本科毕业生, 毕业后可从事外交、经贸、文化交流、新闻出版、教育、科研, 管理等方面的工作, 优秀毕业生可面试推荐到国内一流高校成本或本校攻读硕士学位, 近三年本科毕业生就业率为100%。

The ideology embedded in this discourse is the commodification of language, which seems to privilege economic rationales for developing and promoting 'learning or speaking any given language or language variety' (Leeman & Martínez, 2007). As illustrated in this study, non-English foreign language is perceived to be more valuable than other languages whose countries are not along the "Belt and Road" in the Chinese education system due to its economic and geopolitical importance for China society.

The Tensions in the Process of Commodifying Non-English Foreign Languages

Although the non-English foreign languages are increasingly important nowadays, and universities are promoting it with various tools especially with websites, there is still some tensions between the multilingual valorization and the dominant position of English.

Shanghai Jiaotong University Explained:

The second required foreign language for Japanese majors is English.....

日语专业学生必须第二外语为英语.....

Even though the position of non-English foreign languages are improving rapidly, non-English foreign languages are still regarded as not useful as English. Some universities force students who major in non-English foreign languages to learn English as a basic course, which internalize the gap between the ideal promoting vision and actual practice.

DISCUSSION

Previous studies conducted in commodification of languages demonstrate that language acts as a resource which can be produced, controlled, distributed and constrained in these domains such as tourism, translation, marketing and language teaching. As the product of modernity and new economy, these domains have particular characteristics to illustrate the ways in which language commodification is involved in the symbolic dimensions of added value (Heller, 2010). Heller (2003) also pointed out language owns exchange value on the market. Adopting this idea, this study has confirmed that non-English foreign languages have been constructed as a commodity via 42 double first-class universities to change other beneficial conditions such as prosperous prospect, further academic pursuit in various market. The advertisement on websites not only commodified non-English foreign languages as significant capital to achieve their ideal aspiration, but also to enhance non-English foreign languages' identity and prestige so that to make students believe in. However, it also finds that even these websites try their best to portray non-English foreign languages as valuable commodity; there is still

some tensions between ideal promoting vision and actual practices.

CONCLUSION

This study explores how the 42 double first-class universities ideologically constructed non-English foreign languages as commodities, with which students can be returned by more valuable sources in job, education and national economic market. It also try to draw further attentions to the global sustainable language preservation and linguistic diversity. Furthermore, there are also some tensions between ideal promoting vision and actual practices. Therefore, it suggests that further research may seek understanding of the voice of students combining with their expectation to draw a more comprehensive picture of the education market.

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