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Lou, Jackie Jia (2017) Spaces of consumption and senses of place: a geosemiotic analysis of three markets in Hong Kong. *Social Semiotics* 27 (4), pp. 513-531. ISSN 1035-0330.

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To cite this article: Jackie Jia Lou (2017) Spaces of consumption and senses of place: a geosemiotic analysis of three markets in Hong Kong, *Social Semiotics*, 27:4, 513-531, DOI: [10.1080/10350330.2017.1334403](https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2017.1334403)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2017.1334403>



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Published online: 25 Jun 2017.



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## Spaces of consumption and senses of place: a geosemiotic analysis of three markets in Hong Kong

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### ABSTRACT

While spaces of consumption have been extensively studied in geography, recent sociolinguistic research on metrolingual markets, semiotic landscapes, and translanguaging space present new ways to examine the linguistic, semiotic, and sensory aspects of these prosaic spaces. Integrating these perspectives in a geosemiotic framework, this paper examines the interactions in three markets in Hong Kong which have emerged as important social spaces for three participants during a larger ethnographic project. Through video walks, interviews, and participant observations, it is found that each market embodies a unique configuration of the geosemiotic aggregate and the customers selectively attended to specific modes of communication and sensory properties of the spaces, which in turn shaped their experiences of the place. Thus, this paper suggests that situated analyses of linguistic, semiotic, and material resources in everyday interactions can contribute to a better understanding of the dialogical relationship between *spaces of consumption* and *senses of place*.

### KEYWORDS

Geosemiotics; spaces of consumption; senses of place; markets; Hong Kong

## Introduction

While spaces of consumption have been extensively studied in geography (e.g. Goodman, Goodman, and Redclift 2016; Miles 2010), they have also increasingly captured the attention of sociolinguists. On the outside, shop signs constitute a large part of the multilingual landscape of a street, a neighborhood, or a city (e.g. Leeman and Modan 2009; Lou 2007, 2016; Malinowski 2009; Peck and Banda 2014) and indexes global and local places on various scales (Hall and Datta 2010). The interiors of shops have also been examined as multilingual, multimodal, and multisensory spaces (in addition to papers in this volume, also see Pennycook and Otsuji 2015b; Zhu Hua, Li Wei, and Lyons 2015). Continuing with this inward analytical gaze, this paper aims to further examine the relationship between *spaces of consumption* and *senses of place* inside shops and markets by examining the wide range of language, semiotic, and material resources made available during interactions.

Using the geosemiotic framework (Scollon and Scollon 2003) as a heuristic guide, this paper examines the multilingual, multimodal, and multisensory repertoires of three

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markets in Hong Kong, which have emerged as key social spaces for three participants during a larger multi-sited ethnographic project. In the project, the researcher walked alongside her participants or participant-researchers<sup>1</sup> as they navigated the urban landscapes of Hong Kong. Some of these walks were recorded with a GoPro action camera or smartphone camera, adding a valuable source of data to pre- or post-walk interviews with the participants and the fieldnotes of the researcher. While a total of 21 individuals participated in this study, this paper focuses on three of them.

After a brief discussion of the theoretical issues pertaining to this analysis, this paper describes the geosemiotic aggregate of each market and examines the actions and practices of each participant especially regarding the use of language and other symbolic means. The comparison is then situated in the ethnographic understanding of each person's sense of place, or relationship to the city. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to our understanding of how language works with semiotic modes and material resources to construct the social space within each market and that it will shed some light on the multiple senses of place experienced by the participants, which are often obscured by the search for a homogeneous place-identity in Hong Kong.

### Space, place, and the geosemiotic framework

The physical circumstance of language use has always been considered an essential part of its context. In Hymes's (1974) SPEAKING grid, a mnemonic summary of the eight essential contextual components in the ethnography of communication, the letter "S" stands for "setting and scene," with "setting" referring to "the time and place of a speech act, to the physical circumstances," and "scene" referring to the "the cultural definition of an occasion" (55). But perhaps because it is too obvious, the spatial dimension of context has received far less attention (but see notable exceptions such as Hanks 2001) than the other components in ethnographically oriented studies of language, some of which have even become the focuses of new sub-fields of discourse analysis. For example, interactional sociolinguistics is concerned largely with "P," standing for participants; genre analysis obviously with "G," standing for "genre," but also with "E," standing for "end" or purpose, and with "A" standing for "act sequence." Meanwhile, geographic location has also always been an important variable correlated with language variation in traditional dialectology, as illustrated in the contemporary example of *The Atlas of North American English* (Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006). However, as sociolinguistics in general has moved towards a dialogical view of context (e.g. Duranti and Goodwin 1992), it no longer seems sufficient to conceive *space* as a neutral container of talk and *place* merely a location where language is sampled (Eckert 2004; Johnstone 2004).

It seems evident that sociolinguistics and discourse analysis have an important role in understanding how *space* carries on socio-cultural meanings and is transformed into a *place*. As succinctly summarized by de Saint-Georges (2004):

On one hand, discourse is bound to spaces of actions and interactions. There is no discourse, knowledge or social practice that stands outside of a social, historical and physical space. On the other hand, discourse is also "about" space (Lefebvre 1991, 132). It can formulate it, appropriate it or participate in its transformation. (71)

While acknowledging the significant role that language plays in constructing *place*, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists are also fully aware that it is only one of the building blocks. The term “semiotic landscape,” for example, was proposed by Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) to extend the study of linguistic landscape to include other modes of communication, such as the visual, the auditory, and the architectural. Pennycook and Otsuji (2015a) have taken this argument even further by including the olfactory sense, which as they argue, provide associational rather than intentional meanings. Using the ecological metaphor, Shohamy and Waksman (2009) suggest that linguistic landscape could encompass anything and everything beyond language inscribed in place. While their argument underscores the blurry boundary between linguistic landscape and other aspects of our spatial environments, it also poses an analytical challenge: How do we go about analyzing all of these aspects that can be considered part of the linguistic or semiotic landscape of a place?

Scollon and Scollon’s book *Discourses in Place: Language in the Material World* (2003) provides a useful framework to conceptualize these interactions in terms of three main semiotic systems – “interaction order,” “visual semiotics,” and “place semiotics.” Together they constitute what Scollon and Scollon have termed the “semiotic aggregate,” defined as “multiple semiotic systems in a dialogical interaction with each other” (12).

The first semiotic system in the framework is *interaction order*, a term Scollon and Scollon (2003) borrowed from Goffman (1959) but they also expanded it to include any analytical tools concerned with “the current, ongoing, ratified (but also contested and denied) set of social relationships we take up and try to maintain with the other people who are in our presence” (16). As Scollon and Scollon have reminded us, it is important to recognize *interaction orders* also as semiotic signs, which “give off” (Goffman 1959) social information of social actors. In addition to these “units of interaction order,” Scollon and Scollon also include the five types of perceptual spaces developed by Edward T. Hall, but because different sensory properties are more relevant to the physical environment than interactions, I have moved them under *place semiotics*, which will be discussed shortly.

The second component system in the geosemiotic framework is *visual semiotics*, defined as “the ways in which pictures (signs, images, graphics, texts, photographs, paintings, and all of the other combinations of these and others) are produced as meaningful wholes for visual interpretation” (Scollon and Scollon 2003, 8). Here they opted for a narrower definition of the term as used in Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). A broader definition of *visual semiotics* would include “all of the ways in which meaning is structured within our visual fields” (Scollon and Scollon 2003, 11), which would significantly overlap with the other two component systems, as *interaction order* and *place semiotics* can also be perceived visually. While the narrower definition of *visual semiotics* is followed in this paper, I am also expanding it slightly to include other visual characteristics of signs, such as code preference, inscription, and emplacement, which were part of *place semiotics* in Scollon and Scollon’s original framework (see their outline on pages 20–21 in Scollon and Scollon 2003), because these characteristics are intrinsic to the visual display of language.

The third component of geosemiotics – *place semiotics* – is coined by the Scollons in order to connect studies in the fields such as urban planning and cultural geography to the studies of micro-level social interaction and language use. It is concerned with the

meaning system of spatial organization, or inversely defined as “the huge aggregation of semiotic systems which are not located in the persons of the social actors or in the framed artifacts of visual semiotics” (Scollon and Scollon 2003, 8). *Place semiotics* includes a typology of spaces according to their uses, for example, frontstage versus backstage, private versus public, display space versus passage space. As mentioned in relation to *interaction order*, I would also include Hall’s typology of spaces according to the five kinds of sensory perceptions under *place semiotics*. Hence, a modified outline of geosemiotics and its component systems is presented in Table 1.

To recapitulate, geosemiotics is the study of semiotic aggregate which is composed of three main semiotic systems – *interaction order*, *visual semiotics*, and *place semiotics* – in dialogical interaction with each other. In addition to contextualizing visually displayed language in its interactional and physical spaces, this framework could also serve as a bridge between research on linguistic landscape and Lefebvre’s (1991) triadic model, which conceptualizes social space as consisting of three components: spatial presentation (related to visual semiotics), representational space (related to interaction order), and material space (related to physical semiotics) (for more detailed discussion of how these two triadic models could be linked, please see Lou 2009, 2016). Therefore, the geosemiotic framework provides an effective way to examine *spaces of consumption* on the one hand and *senses of place* on the other.

### Language, identity, and space in Hong Kong

A former British colony for more than 150 years, Hong Kong exemplifies a classic diglossic situation in which English, a language spoken as the usual language by a minority of the population (2.2% according to the 1991 census and 1.4% in 2013), has dominated the administrative, educational, and legal domains, whereas Cantonese, the mother tongue of the majority of the population (88.7% in 1991 and 90.3% in 2013), has been the vernacular used primarily at home, in primary education, and in commerce. The change of sovereignty in 1997 has affected this stable situation in several ways (see Pennington 1998 for an overview of the issues involved). First, HKSAR declared a “biliterate and trilingual” language policy (Poon 2010; Tsou 1996), adopting Putonghua as an official language

**Table 1.** A modified outline of geosemiotics based on Scollon and Scollon (2003, 20–21).

Geosemiotics		
Interaction order	Visual semiotics	Place semiotics
1. Interpersonal distance (intimate, personal, social, public) 2. Personal front (appearance, behavior) 3. Units of interaction order (single, with, file or procession, queue, contact, service encounter, conversational encounter, meeting, people-processing encounter (interview, screening, examination), platform event, celebrative occasion)	1. Pictures (represented participants modality, composition, interactive participants) 2. Material aspects of visual semiotics (moved from <i>place semiotics</i> , because they are intrinsic to the visually displayed language): code preference, inscription, emplacement	1. Perceptual spaces (moved from <i>interaction order</i> , because these can be independent from the human interactants): visual, auditory, olfactory, thermal, haptic 2. Use spaces: frontage or public (exhibit/display, passage, special use, secure), backstage or private, regulatory spaces (vehicle traffic, pedestrian traffic, public notice), commercial space (e.g. holiday market, shelf display of goods), transgressive space (e.g. homeless hangouts)

in addition to English and Cantonese. Second, since the mid-1970s, during the two decades leading up to 1997, the number of speakers of Putonghua has been gradually increasing (Bacon-Shone and Bolton 1998). In 1991, it was the usual language of 1.1% of the population, 3.2% in 2013; and Putonghua has been systematically introduced into the secondary school curriculum (Pierson 1998). Third, despite the decline in the number of speakers, English is still the most sought-after second language, followed by Putonghua (Axler, Yang, and Stevens 1998; Lai 2001). The past few decades have also seen some rises and falls in the social prestige accorded to these two languages, often in tandem with the rather precarious relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China.

Along with the shifting language situation, there has been an increasingly urgent search for a distinctive Hong Kong identity since 1997. The “rejuvenation” of a unique local identity is argued to be a response to the encroaching Chinese national discourse (Fung 2001). Yet, the label “Hong Konger” is commonly conceptualized as a hybrid of the local, the national, and the global (Brewer 1999; Lock 2003; Tsui and Tollefson 2007), or, in the words of Mathews (1997), different clusters of “Chineseness plus something else.” As Scollon (1998) observes, “the essence of Hong Kong identity lies in the ambivalence that comes with learning to be a speaker of Ch’i in a land of Ch’u speakers” (277), i.e. learning to use the “high” variety or varieties while maintaining the vitality of the “low” variety in a diglossic situation.

Sociolinguistic research on the multiplicity and contradictions embodied by the word “Hong Konger,” however, has been few and far between. Notable exceptions include Chen’s (2008) study of code-mixing practices and identity negotiation of returning bilinguals, Jaworski and Yeung’s (2010) analysis of residential property names in Hong Kong, and research by Pan and Scollon (2000) and Lai (2013) on the varieties of written and spoken language along the borders between Hong Kong and mainland China. Hence, the larger study informing the current analysis aims to contribute to a better understanding of the connections between language practice and geopolitical identity in the context of everyday life.

## Data and methods

Between 2013 and 2016, 21 individuals participated in this study, including 8 Hong Kong Chinese residents, 10 international residents, and 3 visitors from mainland China, the United States, and Singapore. In total, 18 interviews were conducted, with 3 participants who chose to be interviewed in a small group setting. During 15 of these interviews, the participants also agreed to draw sketch maps of Hong Kong and were encouraged to talk about the places at the same time as they were drawing. I was also able to walk with six of them through some parts of Hong Kong to observe how they interact with linguistic landscapes during their daily commutes or yearly visits. For the other participants, I visited and photographed the places they mentioned during the interviews, attempting to look at the linguistic landscapes from their perspectives.

These interviews provided me with three main types of information. First, I gathered from them the predominant elements in the participants’ image of Hong Kong, whether they are node, path, landmark, or district according to Lynch’s (1960) typology. In addition, the interviews and maps helped me delineate approximately the activity

spaces of these participants, which I followed in subsequent visual ethnographies. Third, the interviews also included direct questions about their language choices and attitudes, which informed my understanding of their everyday language practices.

The analysis presented in this paper focuses on the interactions in three markets recorded either by me or by the participants themselves as they walked around the city. This methodology was inspired by a growing body of research on linguistic landscape that have employed ethnographic and/or participatory methods, in particular, Garvin's (2008) walking tour interviews, Stroud and Jegels's (2014) narrated walks, and Hult's (2014) drive-thru landscaping, as well as mobile video ethnography (McIlvenny 2015; Pink 2007). As a "phenomenological research method that attends to sensorial elements of human experience and place-making" (Pink 2007, 240), mobile ethnography is well aligned with the conceptualization of landscape as temporal (Ingold 1993) and mobile (Berger 1990; Chmielewska 2005). It also allowed me to "look alongside" rather than "look at" my participants (Kindon 2003).

Now I will turn to analyze the geosemiotic aggregates of three markets which have emerged as key sites in the everyday activity spaces of three participants.

## **Analysis and findings**

The three markets under analysis below are located in the New Territories, Hong Kong Island, and Kowloon, respectively. While they are spread across the three main geographic areas of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, it should be noted that this selection is not intended to be generalized about the markets of each area. Rather, they exemplify different types of markets: wet markets,<sup>2</sup> supermarkets, and ethnic shops in Hong Kong, without the intention to obscure the heterogeneity within each category.

### ***Wet market in Taipo***

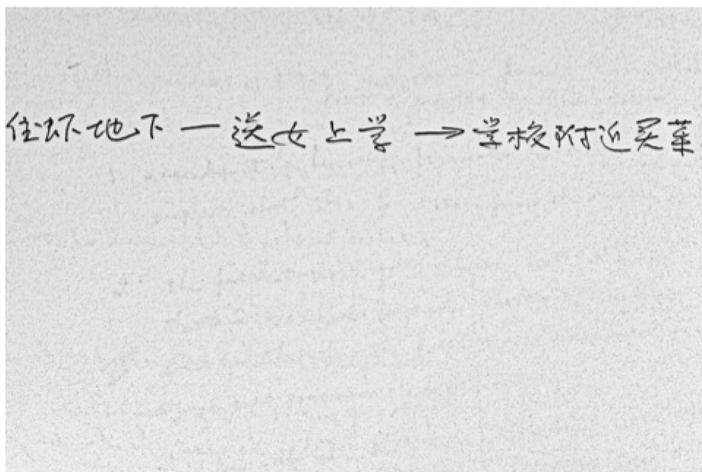
The first market that we will look at is a wet market in Taipo, where my participant, Mrs. Lai, shops for fresh meat, fish, and produce nearly on a daily basis. Mrs. Lai is a homemaker and mother of two in her early 40s. Originally from the Canton region of China, Mrs. Lai is of Hakka ethnicity and moved to Hong Kong with her husband after marriage. They have lived in several places around the Taipo area in the New Territories, and settled in a Hakka village in Taipo as it was more affordable. She speaks Hakka with her neighbors in the village, and near-native Cantonese with her husband and daughter at home, and fluent Putonghua with the researcher. Her husband provides the main source of income by working as a store manager for a supermarket quite far from home. During the week, Mrs. Lai is responsible for sending their two daughters to school and kindergarten in Taipo town center, about 10 minutes away from her village on a mini bus. She then does some shopping in the town center, mainly in the wet market, but sometimes from street hawkers as well, and returns home and prepares for dinner. She goes to the town center again in the late afternoon to pick up her daughters. During the day, in addition to various household chores, she enjoys gardening, growing vegetables in a garden patch in front of her village home, and gathering fruits from the wild papaya and banana trees in the village. She also has a pleasant relationship with her neighbors especially the elderly, as she is always ready to help others when they need. Her family qualify for the

low-income requirement for public housing in Hong Kong and is currently on a long wait-list, but for the time being, she enjoys her idyllic life in the countryside as it is reminiscent of her old way of life in her rural hometown in Canton. As demonstrated in the “map” that she drew for me during our hour-long interview,<sup>3</sup> her village, the schools in town center, and the market in town center constitutes important nodes in her daily itinerary. This also reflects a sense of detachment and isolation from the rest of Hong Kong, which she rarely visited, as she related to me during the interview that the English signs posted in the wash-room of shopping malls made her feel quite uncomfortable. Such experiences reassured that her place was in the countryside (Figure 1).

After having known her for several months through a friend’s introduction, Mrs. Lai agreed to be interviewed in her village home. As she knew that my main grocery shopping was done in supermarkets, which was, in her opinion, much more expensive and less fresh, she insisted on taking me on a tour of the wet market in Tai Po town center before heading to her village together.

The wet market in Taipo is an example of many modernized wet markets (in Cantonese, *gaai si*, literally “street markets”), which were originally open markets in the street, with individual stalls specializing in different types of products, such as vegetables or meat. Due to hygiene reasons, many of these markets have moved into air-conditioned buildings. In these modern wet markets, stalls are often grouped together in distinct areas, according to the types of produce they sell. And the wet area, selling seafood, fish, and meat, is further separate from the dry area, selling vegetables, fruit, and dried goods. The wet market in Taipo spreads over three floors connected by escalators, with fish, meat, poultry, and newspaper stalls on the ground level, frozen meat, barbequed meat, vegetables, fruit, and other sundries stalls on the first level, and a cooked food center and an outdoor podium garden on the second level. My visit with Mrs. Lai was mainly on the ground level, with a quick tour of the cooked food center on the second level.

As soon as we stepped into the air-conditioned wet market from the bright sunshine outside, I was overwhelmed by a cacophony of lights, sounds, and smells. Each stall has



**Figure 1.** “Map” drawn by Mrs. Lai.

several typical Hong Kong market lamps with red shades hanging right above the produce, putting them in spotlight while projecting a pinkish glow to the back of the stall, relegating the staff to the background (Figure 2). While I was rather disoriented and watching my steps on the wet tiled floor covered by footprints, Mrs. Lai headed straight to a fish stall without having to look where she was going. Later during the interview, when I asked for the stall's name, she could not recall. Each stall, in fact, does have a sign printed in Chinese calligraphic style, but it is installed on top edge of the stall structure, above the lamps, and thus cast in the shadow. Unless one was deliberately looking up and search for them as what I was doing habitually as a researcher, one's attention is naturally directed towards the produce displayed below.

The fish stall that Mr. Leung brought me to had several customers gathered around it when we arrived. We peeked between their shoulders at the types of fish that were available that day. The fish were separated into piles on a bed of ice, and in each pile was a white foam board with a handwritten number, indicating the unit price. Two women and a man behind the L-shaped counter were briskly descaling the fish on their cutting boards, looking up occasionally to answer customers. In the short video-recorded segment analyzed below, two customers, a Filipino domestic helper and a middle-aged Chinese woman, were standing side by side, each served by a different stall assistant behind the counter. The fish that the domestic helper picked was already on the scale, it was almost inaudible in the recording due to background noises, but she asked how much, and the woman behind the counter said 50 followed by a gesture of 5.



**Figure 2.** Fish stall in Tai Po wet market.

*Interactional segment 1*

SA1: Stall assistant 1; PC: Philipino customer; CC: Chinese customer; SA2: stall assistant 2; SA3: stall assistant 3

Cantonese: *italics*; English: plain

		Transcription	Translation	Non-verbal notes
1.	PC	<i>gei tsin</i>	How much	With headphones noticeable in her ear
2.	SA1	<i>ng sap</i>	Fifty	Gesturing five
3.	PC			Turning around to look for money in her bag
4.	SA1			Handing a bill to FSW
5.	SA1			Handing back the change to FDH, and immediately flipping the fish from the scale and starting to descale
6.	PC			Looking down at her mobile phone, typing a message
7.	SA2			Handing wrapped fish to CC
8.	SA3	(??)		Descaling fish at the same time

At the same time as the Filipino customer was waiting, the Chinese customer standing next to her received her fish wrapped up in paper along with some change from another stall assistant and left. Simultaneously, the man working behind the other side of the counter was descaling the fish and speaking to a customer, but the words were inaudible in the recording.

Such fast-paced, overlapping interactions were commonly observed in the market. The actions of descaling the fish were skillfully interspersed with the actions of handing or receiving money and occasional conversational exchanges between the person working behind the counter and the customer. As captured in another video recording made by my research assistant, when the customer asked for advice regarding the quantity of fish she would need to cook for a family of four, words were economically exchanged. The sound of human voice was overpowered by the rhythmic sound of descaling, mixed with the sound of stainless steel pan clanking against the tabletop. Except for the numbers on the foam boards, there was no other information available regarding the species and origins of the fish. A competent customer such as Mrs. Lai would have this knowledge in addition to the skill to complete a transaction without interrupting the rhythm of the place, for example, handing over a bill at the same time as ordering what kind of fish that you want and in what quantity.

The rhythm of shopping considerably slowed down in the dry area on the second floor, where vegetables, fruits, and flowers were sold. The spatial layout, the lighting, and the lack of written text remain more or less the same. Yet, the different type of produce sold here changed the olfactory sense of the place, and without the bloodiness that was inevitable in the fish stall and the butcher shop, the scene here is less visceral but more colorful. Another participant who went to the market on a different day even observed a lengthy interaction during which a young mother was using the opportunity of shopping to teach her daughter numeracy, which the elderly stall owner happily obliged.

In a nutshell, the space inside the wet market in Taipo is characterized by economical face-to-face service encounters, minimal use of written language, prominent display of commodities, and variable rhythms of interactions in different areas. [Table 2](#) summarizes its geosemiotic aggregate using the modified framework outlined earlier in this paper.

**Table 2.** The geosemiotic aggregate of Taipo wet market.

Interaction order	Visual semiotics	Place semiotics
1. Service encounters typically involving economical use of words	1. Prominent display of commodities enhanced by lighting	1. The coalescing of visual, auditory, and olfactory senses
2. Variable rhythm from fast-paced fish stall to quiet vegetable stands	2. Minimal use of written language	2. Work stations overlapping with interactional space over the counter

### *Fusion (Park'n'Shop) in Sheung Wan*

The second market that I turn to discuss now is a supermarket called “International” (now “Fusion”) in Sheung Wan, Hong Kong Island. “International” is one of the branded lines of the Park’n’shop supermarket chain. On the corporate website, the brand is defined as “an international supermarket concept that provides different flavors of East and West, catered for International Asian and Western customer segments.” There are currently only six individual stores around Hong Kong under the International brand, all located on Hong Kong Island, which has a higher concentration of the expatriate population than Kowloon or the New Territories. The store under study is located on the first floor of a residential building and can be accessed from the lobby on the ground level from Queen’s Road Central.

This supermarket came to my attention during an interview with a British expatriate who has lived and worked in Hong Kong for more than 30 years. Henry, in his 50s, lives in a flat on the upper floor of a high-rise apartment building on Queen’s Road. A university professor, he enjoys wandering the streets and back alleys of Sheung Wan with his camera. During the interview, when I asked him about the changes in the neighborhood that he had observed since he moved there in 2003, he mentioned the growing number of expats moving into this older area to the west of the Central financial district. In particular, he noticed that since his local Park’n’shop had changed name to “International” (Figure 3, left), more varieties of cheese, especially French cheese, have become available (Figure 3, right).

Since Henry was not able to participate in a video walk due to his busy schedule, I visited the supermarket by myself after our interview. It was not difficult to identify the store, as the shop sign with the brand “International” in a light green handwritten font could be easily seen across the street. Once inside the lobby, I was greeted with large posters on the wall near the entrance in the same vibrant green color scheme as I took

**Figure 3.** “International by Park’n’Shop” in Sheung Wan.

the escalator to the store on the first floor. The poster has the brand, opening hours, and slogan “We make your day” in English only (Figure 4, left). More English words were found in larger signs inside the store, such as the phrase “Fresh from around the world” fixed on the wall behind baskets of New Zealand kiwis, South African melons, and Thai grapefruit (Figure 4, right). By contrast, the smaller labels as shown in the cheese picture in Figure 3 named the product and origin in both English and traditional Chinese and the price in a slightly larger font.

The store was quiet with only a few customers having the leisure of doing grocery shopping on a weekday afternoon. They pushed their shopping carts and walked between the aisles of commodities clearly categorized and labeled in the directory signs hanging overhead. Even when there were conversations, they tended to be between costumers who were shopping together as a family. There was little interaction between the customers and the store staff until the checkout, where a standard service encounter including scanning the products, naming the price, and bagging the products happened in a predictable manner. And if you are using your own shopping bag, the cashier will thank you using a standard Cantonese phrase (*do ze nei zi ci waan bou*, “Thank you for supporting environmental protection”), identical across all large supermarket chains in Hong Kong.

There was an unusual event though that was observed by my research assistant during a second trip to the same supermarket. Two middle-aged ladies were standing still in the frozen food corner chatting away, as another friend of theirs was checking the quality of celery in the fresh produce section. She pulled the plastic wrapping paper halfway down to smell the celery, put it back, and did the same again with other stalks. Both the chatting and the rigorous examination of the celery struck me and my research assistant as odd occurrences in the supermarket, which further confirmed that there were an implicit set of norms regulating behaviors and interactions that are appropriate in the supermarket. However, what this group of women were doing would be perfectly fine if it had been a street market or wet market as described in the previous section. In fact, they would not need to remove the wrapping around the celery to smell it; the smell would have come right at you in a wet market. In the supermarket, the packaging protects the freshness of the produce during transportation from their global origins, but it also shields the produces away from touching and smelling and other direct observations by the customers. Instead, they were translated into words printed on the packaging or the store



**Figure 4.** Large English signage inside “International by Park’n’Shop.”

**Table 3.** The geosemiotic aggregate of “International by Park’n’Shop.”

Interaction order	Visual semiotics	Place semiotics
1. Service encounters using routine expressions	1. Prominent display of texts along with produce	1. The dominance of the visual sense
2. Same rhythm across sections	2. Frequent use of written language	2. Invisible backstage (e.g. warehouse, etc.); shopping activities spatially separated from transactions

labels. With clear signage, knowledge about food is also externalized. One would not need to be able to identify the type of produce or tell the freshness of produce by looking or smelling it; one would only need to be able to read the words and expiry dates.

The geosemiotic aggregate of this supermarket then contrasts with that of the wet market in all of the three dimensions, emphasizing literacy over orality, segregating activities spatially, and maintaining a regulated rhythm across the store. At the same time, the varieties of produces and the English signage all indicate a much more global orientation (Table 3).

### ***Nepalese shop in Sham Shui Po***

The last market in this comparative study is a Nepalese shop located in Sham Shui Po, an older, working-class district located on the Kowloon Peninsula. Sham Shui Po is also well-known for electronics malls, textile wholesale shops, and grassroots restaurants and cafés. It was picked by a Nepalese participant-researcher, Sasmita, during the interview as an example of the ethnic minority shops in Hong Kong. She had not visited this store, but she was curious to know more about it because her mother would sometimes go there for shopping. Sasmita also invited a Philipino-Chinese friend – Amelia – along to the store so as to show her where some of her favorite sweets came from. In her early 20s, Sasmita is a university student majoring in English. She was born to Nepalese parents in Kathmandu, and moved to Hong Kong when she was about eight. She considers herself most fluent when speaking in English, but could also carry out everyday conversations in Nepali and Cantonese.

The name of the store “Dragon Store” echoes the name of the nine-storey shopping mall – Dragon Centre – across the street. The store name is printed in blue, with the Nepali equivalent in red above, and a fine print of address and telephone number below. A clock was mounted facing the street in the empty space below the sign, which seemed to have hold the space for another sign in the past. Below the clock is the entrance to the store covered in transparent PVC curtains flanked by a wooden shelf of alcoholic drinks on the right and a glass shelf of Indian hair dyes on the left. Through the transparent curtains, one could also see the types of goods sold in the store, partially blocked by the stack of cardboard boxes. Sasmita commented in her notes that it looked like a warehouse and rather unwelcoming from the outside (Figure 5).

Once inside, they quietly browsed the shelves of food arranged into different varieties. As there were no price tags or labels, they took the products off the shelf and read the labels. Amelia found a kind of Nepalese sweets that Sasmita had brought to school. As she was paying for it, a Nepalese customer, who also appeared to be a friend of the female storekeeper, recommended another sweet as transcribed below.



**Figure 5.** Dragon store in Sham Shui Po.

### *Interactional segment 2*

MK: male shopkeeper; FK: female shop keeper; NC: Nepalese customer; SN: Sasmita, Nepalese university student; AH: Amelia, Filipino-Chinese university student

Cantonese: *italics*; English: plain; Nepali: **bold**

		Transcription	Translation
1.	AH	uh ... excuse me	
2.		how much is this?	
3.	MK	fifteen dollars	
4.	AH	fifteen?	
5.		Oh	
6.		thank you	
7.	NC	<i>leng mui lei goh yiu ng yiu?</i>	Little girl do you want this?
8.		<i>ho tim oh</i>	It is very sweet
9.		<i>lei yau mo sig gwo ah</i>	Have you tried it
10.	AH	<i>yau ah yau ah</i>	I have, I have
11.	NC	<i>yau ah</i>	Oh, you have?
12.		<i>Si joh la</i>	You have already tried it?
13.	SN	(Giggles)	
14.	AH	<i>yau ah</i> (Giggles)	Yes, I have
15.		<i>ho mei ah</i>	It's very yummy
16.		<i>lei go gei tsin</i>	How much is it?

Even though Amelia initially spoke English with the male Nepali shopkeeper, the female customer standing by the counter interjected with a recommendation in Cantonese (line 7), perhaps because Amelia looked Chinese. Amelia accommodated to the code-switch for a few more turns, when Sasmita suddenly asked in Nepali (line 1 in segment 3) if they had any momo, Nepalese dumplings.

*Interactional segment 3*

MK: male shopkeeper; FK: female shop keeper; NC: Nepalese customer; SN: Sasmita, Nepalese university student; AH: Amelia, Filipino-Chinese university student  
Cantonese: *italics*; English: plain; Nepali: **bold**

		Transcription	Translation
1.	SN	<b>momo pani dinu huncha ho?</b>	You also sell momo here?
2.	MK	<b>hajur?</b>	Pardon?
3.	SN	<b>yehha momo pani bech cha?</b>	You also sell momo here?
4.	MK	<b>ah, cha</b>	Yes, we do
5.	NC	<b>eh, baini harulai ta China bhaneko ta Nepali raicha ta babrai =</b>	Ah, we thought you guys were Chinese, turns out you're Nepali
6.	AH	<b>=ma neplai ho, uh Chinese</b>	I'm Nepali, she's Chinese
7.	FK	((Laughter)) Oh ...	
8.	NC	<b>eh, ho.. eh ...</b>	Ah, so it's like that ...
9.		<b>momo chane</b>	Yes, have momo
10.	FK	<b>ah paucha</b>	Yes, you can buy momo
11.	SN	<b>momo kati ko lagi ... katima ho?</b>	For how many people is the momo ... How much is the momo?
12.	FC	<b>kati ho babu?</b>	How much is it, little brother?
13.	MK	<b>tish doller</b>	Thirty dollars
14.	SN	<b>hajur?</b>	Pardon?
15.	MK	thirty	
16.	SN	thirty	
17.		do you want to eat momo?	
18.	AH	right now?	
20.	FK	<b>time lagcha tara</b>	But it will take time to make it
21.	SN	<b>kati time lagcha?</b>	How long does it take?
22.	FK	twenty five minutes	
23.		<b>pachis minutes jasto</b>	Around twenty five minutes
24.	SN	oh ...	
25.		that's long	
26.		uhh, never mind	
27.		anything else?	
28.	AH	I don't think so ...	
29.	NC	<b>timro sathi ho?</b>	Is she your friend?
30.	SN	<b>hajur</b>	Yes
31.	NC	<b>kaha parchau ne?</b>	Where do you study?
32.	SN	City University	
33.	NC	<b>Eh ho?</b>	Oh really?
34.	SN	<b>Ah.</b>	Yes
35.		Okay	
36.	AH	Thank you	
37.	NC	<b>ramro sita padah</b>	Study well

When we compare interactional segments 2 and 3, it is evident that the Nepalese shopkeepers and customer immediately showed more interest in these two young customers once Sasmita inquired about momo in Nepali and thus revealed her true ethnicity identity. The code-switch initiated a change in the interaction order. A regular service encounter briefly shifted into small talk in line 5 about the customers' ethnicity and again in line 29 about their place of study. It also brought a shift in participant roles. While initially Amelia and Sasmita were making inquiries as customers, they now also had to answer personal questions. The interactional hierarchy based on age was clearly felt by Sasmita, as the Nepalese customer asked them to study well, a typical way to close conversations with students. While the interaction in segment 3 continued mainly in Nepali, Sasmita stumbled in the choice of the right question word for "how much" (*kati ko lagi* vs. *katima ho*) in line 11. This seemed to have signaled her limited fluency in the language to the shopkeepers, who in turn answered her subsequent questions in both Nepali

**Table 4.** The semiotic aggregate of dragon store.

Interaction order	Visual semiotics	Place semiotics
1. Service encounters flexibly morphing into small talks depending on the language and ethnicity of customers	1. Bilingual shop sign with a smaller Nepali name on top above the larger English name	1. The dominance of the visual sense as in the display of material goods and cultural artefacts, such as the calendar
2. Variable rhythm	2. Window displays of ethnic food and drinks and hair dyes	2. Amalgamation of frontstage and backstage spaces in a single store
	3. Categorical display of products without labels	
	4. Lack of literate signage other than packaging	

and English (lines 15, 22, and 23). Their accommodation to Sasmita's bilingual repertoire transformed the store into a space that was simultaneously Nepalese and international.

Another interesting thing to note in segments 2 and 3 is that the Nepalese customer in the shop acted as if she worked there by suggesting other sweets to Amelia and participated fully in the conversation.<sup>4</sup> It appears that she was a friend of the female shopkeeper, and they moved on to chat about the futility of arranged marriages nowadays, as Sasmita and Amelia were about to leave the store. This ambiguous relationship though did not appear strange to Sasmita but rather reminded her of a typical store in Nepal where customers can be seen hanging around in the stores and simply socializing with the shop keepers.

While Dragon Store is similar to the wet market in its lack of literate signage, the interactional rhythm is much slower, allowing the topics of conversations to go beyond the routine transactions, especially when the shopkeeper and customer share the same ethnic identity and language. The spatial arrangement of products on the shelves are similar to a supermarket, but the functional spaces, including the kitchen, cashier, warehouse were less clearly separated. While it serves customers from diverse ethnic backgrounds except Chinese, the store is also unmistakably Nepalese, as reflected in the Nepali store name, a wall calendar with a picture of a Hindu god displayed in a prominent position in the shop, and a variety of Nepali goods and cooked food. Table 4 summarizes the geosemiotic aggregate of the store.

In summary, the geosemiotic aggregates of the three markets analyzed here display variable configurations of the three components, each embodying a different kind of interactional rhythm, emphasizing literacy or orality, and highlighting some sensory experiences over the other. In the conclusion, I will discuss how these various semiotic and material constructions of spaces of consumptions are linked to the senses of place.

## Conclusion

In his seminal essay "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages" Malinowski (1953 [1923]) argues that language should be examined as a mode of practical action embedded in a context of situation. Since then, linguistic anthropologists and interactional sociolinguists have demonstrated through countless studies the dialogical relationship between language and context – language is shaped by, and in turn, shaping context.

The practical action which Malinowski studied on the Trobriand Islands was fishing and he observed the fishermen's language directly while they were doing their work on

the boat. This paper examines shopping in the everyday contexts of shops, markets, and supermarkets. By employing the geosemiotic framework (Scollon and Scollon 2003) in the analysis, this paper seeks to understand how spaces of consumption are constructed by language in its various modalities and material forms and at its relationship with other semiotic resources, such as visual display and spatial arrangement. While on the one hand, the prominent display of written words, regulated interactional rhythm, separate functional spaces characterize the “International” super market as a global, “non-place” (Hutton 2011), on the other hand, we have observed a high level of orality and variable interactional rhythm and conflated functional spaces in local, vernacular spaces such as the wet market. Between these two extremes, other spaces could fall anywhere in the continuum. Thus, the sense of place in the markets emerges from the human interactions with semiotic (including language) and material resources.

To some extent, the geosemiotic aggregates of these three markets are aligned with the linguistic and cultural repertoires of the customers. Just as Mrs. Lai’s communicative competence and knowledge about food were indispensable in the wet market, Henry’s dietary needs could only be fulfilled in the global supermarket. A shift in any component of the aggregate tends to give rise to a different sense of place as shown in Sasmita’s encounter in the Nepali store. As key activity spaces in these individuals’ lives, their interactions with language, signs, and material products inside these spaces of consumption further reinforce their relationships to the place. Where they shop becomes a part of who they are, and who they are informs them where to shop. By observing interactions situated in the everyday spaces of consumption, it is hoped that this paper has shed some light on the complex relationship between language, space, and place.

## Notes

1. In some cases, the participants offered to video or audio record themselves as they went about their everyday activities and provided the researcher here with detailed observations. They are therefore referred to as “participant-researchers” for their initiatives and insights enriched the analysis of this paper greatly.
2. In Hong Kong, Singapore, and many parts of South East Asia, wet markets refer to markets that sell meat, seafood, and fresh produce.
3. Mrs Lai’s “map” shows how these places are related in her mind on a timeline. It also points to the limitation of map-drawing as a research method, as it assumes the participants’ familiarity with this highly specific and technical literacy practice.
4. Based on her observation, Sasmita was certain that this customer was a friend of the shopkeeper, but it is also common in her experience with Nepalese stores that a regular customer would make recommendations to other customers.

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to Winnie Wei Wu and Sneha Thapa for their invaluable assistance with the fieldwork. I am also grateful to Zhu Hua and Kasper Juffermans for their close reading of the manuscript and to Li Wei and John O’Regan for their constructive comments on an earlier version of the paper presented as a talk at the UCL Centre for Applied Linguistics. Any remaining errors are my own.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

The fieldwork reported in this paper was conducted during a larger ethnographic project supported by two City University of Hong Kong Strategic Research Grants from 2013 to 2016.

## Notes on contributor

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