Language use in the peripheries and centres of megacities: Comparing Hong Kong and Moscow

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Sub-communities in megacities emerge and dissolve as residents move to, from and within the urban space trying to get access to "the symbolic centre of the city" (Saunders 2011: 3) but possibly ending up at the periphery. Some communities are spatially connected, others segregated. Some districts offer traditional living space, others are transitional. Studies in the field of urban sociolinguistics have so far underestimated these urban dynamics and focused on a restricted number of cities located in 'Western nations', particularly where English is the native language of most residents, even though megacities are largely situated in Asia, Africa and South America. This paper tries to bridge this gap by investigating the interrelationship of language and space in Hong Kong and Moscow.

Both these cities are culturally and linguistically diverse. With Cantonese spoken as a mother tongue, and English and Putonghua known already before school by a large number of residents (Bacon-Shone et al. 2015: 18), multilingualism is a widespread phenomenon in Hong Kong. The same holds for Moscow which may appear monolingual at first sight but proves to be much more multifarious: a considerable amount of Muscovites, for instance Tatars, Greeks, Lithuanians, Uzbeks, use more than one language and many Russians who moved to Moscow from other cities or areas speak regional varieties (Baranova et al. 2018, Kitajgorodskaja & Rosanova 2010). Concerning space, Hong Kong has developed into "a wealthy commercial and entrepreneurial powerhouse" since the 1960s, attracting international businesses and immigration (Bolton 2000: 268); Moscow has experienced similar social, political and economic changes. In this context, housing scarcity and redevelopment projects constitute issues that currently affect the dynamics in both cities.

Using a web-based questionnaire, we study sociolinguistic background and accent perception of inhabitants of different districts in both megacities. Moreover, we investigate how residents construct their identities within space by eliciting reports on their living conditions, position in society and aspirations. With this combination of sociolinguistic and discursive methodologies, we aim at making residents' thoughts, emotions and sense of belonging visible, and revealing patterns in the urban dynamics of Hong Kong and Moscow. Taking a comparative approach, the results of this study will also shed light on the interaction between local and global processes that shape language and space today.

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