Jie Dong*

**Toward an ethnographic materialist semiotics: spatial scope, indexicality, and chronotope in a Chinese academic institution**

In memory of Jan Blommaert

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**Abstract:** Jan Blommaert had a profound impact on studies of language in society, pushing many concepts, theories, and research approaches to the center of sociolinguistics. Materialist semiotics is one of the theories and research approaches that he argued for forcefully. Blommaert’s approach to semiotics aligns with Kress’s social semiotics and Scollon and Scollon’s geosemiotics, with an emphasis on the social and materialist nature of signs. By theorizing materialist semiotics, Blommaert argued against the traditional abstract view, which saw meaning systems as timeless and context-less. This paper discusses three core elements of materialist semiotics — spatial scope, orders of indexicalities, and chronotopicity — and presents an ethnographic landscaping case study of a Chinese university’s on-campus bilingual signage, in order to illustrate materialist semiotics and to attract more scholarly attention to Blommaert’s œuvre, which offers a wealth of theoretical and empirical potential, and continues to inspire us to do more, to go further.

**Keywords:** centering institutions; ethnographic linguistic landscaping analysis; order of indexicality; polycentricity; timespace

1 **Introduction**

Upon the passing of Jan Blommaert in January 2021, obituaries appeared in major journals and newspapers, with journals also publishing articles and special issues that reviewed his lifetime contribution to sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, explored the theories and concepts he introduced or dealt with, and most importantly, paid tribute to Jan Blommaert himself, who had a profound impact on studies of...
language in society as well as on the lives of many scholars and students. Indeed, Blommaert pushed many concepts, theories, and research approaches to the center of sociolinguistics, among them language ideology, scale, superdiversity, chronotopicity, order of indexicality, ethnographic linguistic landscaping analysis (ELLA) – to name just a few – and challenged us to continue with these unfinished tasks.

Materialist semiotics is one such research approach in his oeuvre that not only has gained increasing scholarly attention but also offers much research potential to explore. Blommaert’s materialist semiotics aligns with Kress’s social semiotics (2003, 2009) and Scollon and Scollon’s geosemiotics (2003):

A study of signs that sees signs not as primarily mental and abstract phenomena reflected in ‘real’ moments of enactment, but sees signs as material forces subject to and reflective of conditions of production and patterns of distribution, and as constructive of social reality, as real social agents having real effects in social life. (Blommaert 2018: 77)

In other words, Blommaert’s approach emphasizes the social and materialist nature of signs, distinguishing it from the traditional view, which sees the meaning systems of signs as timeless and context-less. While Saussurean-inspired semiotics defines the sign as the signified and the signifier, based on the imagination of an abstract meaning-making system, for Blommaert, semiotic meaning systems are necessarily historical, materialist, and real; they have to have a real existence in observable material features and to bring historical coherence to seemingly isolated signs.

Blommaert’s materialist approach shares similar social and multimodal focuses with Kress’s social-semiotic theory. In theorizing social semiotics, Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) define multimodality as the co-occurrence of text and non-textual elements such as shapes and colors, and argue that in social semiotics, different modalities have different affordances. They propose two types of affordances: (1) the “association” that non-textual elements can carry significant symbolic value in specific sociocultural contexts and (2) the “distinctive features” that have meaning potentials from which the audience can choose according to their communicative needs in a given context.

Blommaert (2018) illustrates multimodal affordance with the analysis of a “no entry” traffic sign and argues that the different modalities of the sign can fulfill different functions (2018). The sign is placed in London’s Chinatown; it has a textual element of “entrance prohibited” (不准進入) in traditional Chinese characters, as well as non-textual elements including colors and shapes. While the text in Chinese writing typically selects a Chinese-speaking audience, the conventionalized iconicographic shape is widely understood as having the meaning of “do not enter.” Thus, the shape supports, explains, and emphasizes what is meant by the text, and vice versa; the textual and the non-textual elements are of different modalities and have different affordances: they “speak” to different addressees. This is what Blommaert calls “semiotic scope”: different modalities select different audiences (2018: 81).
Furthermore, Blommaert’s materialist semiotics draws on Scollon and Scollon’s geosemiotics, especially their notion of emplacement, in theorizing the relations between space and the sign. Geosemiotics studies the “social meaning of the material placement of signs […] in the material world” (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 2). They argue that emplacement is the key to geosemiotics, and it is about the question of where the sign, symbol, or image is placed in the concrete, physical world. It is important to answer this question when analyzing signs, as the meanings of the signs are largely generated from where they are located and how they are placed (2003: 2, 142). Blommaert (2015, 2018) further develops the notion of emplacement in his theorization of historical space and spatial scope (these notions are discussed in the following sections).

Blommaert’s materialist semiotics places great importance on empirical observation and sketches a theoretical framework based on historical and ethnographic approaches. In what follows, I first discuss the core concepts of materialist semiotics and, second, illustrate this approach with ELLA data collected from a Chinese university. The university is an instance of public space filled with multilingual and multimodal signs and is turned into spatial scope and chronotopes by the order of indexicalities of the signs.

2 Spatial scope, order of indexicality, and chronotopicity: toward a materialist theory of signs

This section discusses three core notions of materialist semiotics and demonstrates how materialist semiotics studies signs and their ordered indexical meanings in socially agentive space (spatial scope) and through intrinsically connected time and space (chronotope).

2.1 Space and the spatial scope

Signs reflect and regulate the spaces in which they are situated (Blommaert 2005, 2018). On the one hand, the sign is defined by social, cultural, historical, and political features of the space: how the sign looks, how it works, and what the messages it gives can tell us about who occupies the space, what the space is used for, and what has happened in the space. This relationship between the sign and the space is illustrated by the Polish van example (Blommaert and Maly 2014), which depicts a non-permanent sign on the back of a van. This sign – the professionally lettered Polish name of the company “ELSTUK” and a Polish–Dutch bilingual text – explains that “plastering” is the activity
of the company. The authors argue that the sign reflects rapid sociocultural changes of the superdiverse urban neighborhood in Belgium and points to the various migration waves that have been stratified into layers of the community, some relatively stable, such as Turks and Bulgarians, and others changing and moving rapidly, such as the Polish immigrants.

On the other hand, signs regulate and organize the space by selecting addressees, offering invitations, articulating norms, and imposing restrictions (Blommaert and Huang 2010). For example, a multilingual sign demarcates and selects audiences through the comprehensibility of the different languages and language varieties. A “no smoking” sign in a restaurant articulates a norm of conduct and imposes a restriction on the diners who use the space. In the aforementioned case, the “no entry” sign is placed at the entrance of a parking garage in London’s Chinatown, a specific location, and the meaning of the sign is specific to that location. Blommaert and Huang (2010) stresses that signs always occur in a particular space and are defined by as well as agentive of the space. For them, the “no entry” sign not only derives its meaning from the specific location, but also constructs the space as a place where unauthorized entering is prohibited, and, with its written Chinese text, as a place expected to have a Chinese population residing there.

Blommaert (2018) provides the term “spatial scope” to describe this intertwining relationship between the sign and the space: signs operate in particular spaces, derive their meanings from the spaces, and define these spaces. One function of spatial scope is demarcation, i.e., signs or different elements of the sign demarcate a space into micro-spaces where different rules and norms operate. These rules and norms can be in line with each other, but sometimes can overlap or contradict each other. The “no entry” sign demarcates the garage entrance as a specific space by articulating the traffic rule; within this demarcated space, the textual part further demarcates a micro-space in which only those who are literate in Chinese are included and addressed.

2.2 Order of indexicality

Blommaert (2005) proposes “order of indexicality,” a concept coined after Foucault’s fashion of “orders of discourse” (Foucault 1982) and Silverstein’s (2003) “indexical order.” Apart from referential or denotational meaning, a sign also points to the social meaning which is interpretive within the particular social occasion in which the sign is produced and emplaced. A sign often indexes something about the producer (gender, ethnicity, age, social class, etc.), about the relationship between the producer and the audience, and about the social context (Agha 2007; Blommaert 2005; Blommaert and Dong 2010a, 2010b; Dong 2020; Silverstein 1996, 2003). The
textual part of the “no entry” sign, for example, indexes not only the ethnicity of the producers and addressees but also the historical background of immigration, in the way that it uses the traditional Chinese character 進 rather than its simplified form 进; the imperative form “不准” in the textual part, not the usual “禁止” used in mainland China, indexes an early wave of Chinese immigration typified by those originating from Hong Kong and other southeastern Asian regions. These indexical meanings are not randomly attributed but are “ordered” – hierarchically organized – in relation to other social and cultural factors of the social group: some indexicalities are higher than the others; some are prestige, while others are stigmatizing; some are markers of in-group membership, whereas others are considered as outsiders’ signs; some are globally understood, others only valid in local contexts. Therefore, the notion “orders of indexicality” captures the fact that indexical meanings are organized in a stratified system, and people orient toward different orders of indexicality when they move across different social and physical spaces.

The systematically reproduced orders of indexicality are often tied to “centering institutions,” which are specific, authoritative actors imposing normativity of language use in a particular group (Blommaert 2005; Silverstein 1998). For instance, in the public space, a “no smoking” sign orients toward official authorities – the centering institutions – that impose restrictions on the use of space, while the textual part of the “no entry” sign of London’s Chinatown orients toward a locally embedded and grassroots immigrant community of which the norms of interpreting the sign are locally valid. The centering institution articulates “central” values, measured against which people can be qualified as, for instance, the “good” parent/child, the “ideal” teacher/student, the “real” man/woman, the “good” citizen in a group, a system, or a society. Orienting toward such centering indexicality often involves homogenization, uniformation, and reduction of differences. Centering institutions exist at all layers of people’s social life: from the family and peer groups, to workplace communities, the state, and all the way to the world system. Consequently, one’s social life is always polycentric and stratified: polycentric because there are multiple centers one orients to, and stratified because these centers are hierarchically organized with differences in range, scope, power.

2.3 Chronotopicity: the historical dimension of signs

In recent years, Blommaert paid increasing attention to historicity and made repetitive efforts to theorize chronotope, a notion coined by Bakhtin (1981: 84), in sociolinguistic

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1 Part of this section originates from a draft I wrote in 2021. I am grateful to Jan Blommaert, who inspired the paper and spent time commenting on it in 2019.
studies. In his literary analyses, Bakhtin propounded the inseparability of the temporal (the chronos) and the spatial (the topos) as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” and defined chronotope as “one carefully thought-out, concrete whole” (1981: 84). While recognizing some exceptions, Bakhtin stated that every semantic representation, even a mathematical formula, had to “take on the form of a sign” that was audible or visible to people in order for the meaning to be understood. This token had to occur in timespace (1981: 256–257).

The concept of chronotope has inspired a body of literature in studies of language in society (for a detailed summary and discussion, see De Fina and Perrino 2020; Lempert and Perrino 2007). Blommaert (2015) conceptualizes chronotope as an “invokable chunk of history” and argues that the most productive aspect of the concept lay in its connection to historical and momentary agency. Blommaert and De Fina (2017) quote Bourdieu and Passeron’s example of university students’ lives to illustrate chronotope: the students live in a specific time, which can be measured by academic years, semesters, lecturing sessions, exams; they also live in specific spaces, such as the university campus, its buildings, lecture halls, libraries, theaters, cafés, and their rooms. Due to these specific timespace frames, students may acquire a shared sense of experience – “in my student days” – which may enact a sense of cohort belonging with others. An old song, a movie, or a kind of smell may also invoke a particular timespace and lead to a similar sense of belonging.

Chronotope has increasingly been used in analyzing signs in various localities and societies. Kroon and Swanenberg (2020) include eleven papers offering theoretical discussions of the notion and reporting empirical studies with evidence from Mongolia, Indonesia, China, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The studies show a burgeoning interest among sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists who see the theoretical potential of chronotope and apply it in interpreting textual and visual signs, such as online inverted youth language, selfies and self-presentation in social media, and the transformation of a tourist site.

Blommaert’s materialist semiotics (2018; Blommaert and Huang 2010) emphasizes the historical dimension and argues that in a particular space, people expect to see particular signs; in a railway station, one can expect to find train timetables, while in a university, academic posters are normal display. If a sign is “out of place,” for instance an academic poster in a railway station, one has to draw on extra knowledge or information to make sense of the sign because it does not meet normative expectations. This normalcy is rooted in the historical usage and historical understanding of the space in its given society. This historically shaped space, or chronotope, is an essential understanding of Blommaert’s materialist semiotics.
3 Chinese–English bilingual signs on campus: an ELLA materialist semiotic case study

The current study is an ELLA of the public spaces at a Chinese university\(^2\) in Beijing. An ethnographic approach to semiotics, argued by Blommaert and Huang (2010), is essential in the study of signs:

This social or materialist semiotics, thus, adopts an ethnographic point of departure: that social and cultural phenomena are situated, and that to understand them means that we have to understand their situatedness. Other exercises are, to adopt Greimas’ words again, rather pointless (Blommaert and Huang 2010: 13).

Blommaert’s argument for an ethnographic approach echoes Kress (2003, 2009) and Scollon and Scollon (2003), as well as Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) and Pennycook (2010); an increasing number of studies, such as De Fina and Perrino (2020), Dong (2020), and Kroon and Swanenberg (2020), show that the ethnographic approach is crucial in collecting and analyzing linguistic landscaping data.

3.1 Ethnographic linguistic landscaping analysis

Linguistic landscaping (LL) research has been established at the intersection of applied linguistics, urban geography, and other social sciences traditions since the 1990s. Early LL studies followed quantitative approaches that counted and mapped urban multilingual signs to their distribution in a specific area (for a summary, see Blommaert and Maly 2014). Although the quantitative approaches can indicate the presence and distribution of languages, they are not capable of explaining why a language is presented in a given space, who produces and uses it, and what social interactional meanings can be drawn from the signs. As a consequence, recent studies increasingly adopt qualitative approaches and attempt to interpret the meanings of signs and to explain their functions as well as other communicative aspects (Blommaert and Dong 2010a, 2010b).

Drawing on the ethnographic approach, Blommaert and Maly (2014) propose ELLA, which is characterized by the following features. First, ELLA sees public spaces as social arenas subject to institutional control, discipline, and regulation; in other words, official authorities impose restrictions on the use of space. Second, and as a consequence of the first point, communication in the public space becomes communication in a field of power, and people orient to authoritative patterns of

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\(^2\) The university is anonymized.
normative conduct. Third, signs ought to be analyzed on three “axes” that signs point to: the past, to their conditions of production; the future, to their intended audiences and preferred uptake; and the present, to their location and their relative position to other signs. Fourth, LL signs have to be studied ethnographically and historically because they index social practices, relationships, and interests in a space replete with intersecting and competing norms.

3.2 The public space

The data for this research were collected from public spaces at a Chinese university in Beijing between November 2020 and November 2021. Similar to most universities across the world, the public spaces of Chinese universities consist of faculty buildings, teaching buildings, libraries, canteens, sports grounds, gyms, dormitories, and lawns, supplemented with shops, bars, and restaurants. However, most Chinese universities have a campus surrounded by walls or fences (e.g., Figures 1 and 2), in contrast to many European universities that do not have a clearly demarcated campus, i.e., their faculty buildings, teaching areas, accommodations, and sports grounds are scattered across the city or town.

The particular university (hereafter “the university”) under investigation is located in the northwest part of Beijing city. Bilingual signs are an important feature of the university’s public spaces; these signs can be useful for international scholars, students, and visitors who are not literate in Chinese, and more importantly, they reflect the university’s ambition of becoming internationalized and thus of attracting

Figure 1: Campus wall.
more international scholars and students. The university pays great attention to the correctness of the English on bilingual signs. For instance, after a few months of renovation, a popular student canteen reopened, and students were eager to try out the new menu. Within a few minutes of reopening, students spotted a typographical error on a bilingual sign which hung over a canteen counter (Figure 3). Facilitated by the Chinese SNSs such as Weixin (WeChat) and Weibo, this image had gone viral online. Surprisingly, within an hour, the “snake” had been covered (Figure 4), and that afternoon, it was replaced by a new sign (Figure 5).
This swift “correction” of the “wrong” sign shows the university’s determination to make the bilingual signs “right,” although the appropriateness of “Chinese Snacks” is subject to further discussion. During the ethnographic fieldwork, I collected 53 pieces of bilingual data, of which 38 were from the teaching and office areas, and 15 were from the dormitory and residential areas. This section presents and analyzes several examples to demonstrate (1) the way that signs demarcate spatial scope, (2) the orders of indexicalities of signs, and (3) chronotope and the making of historical space in materialist semiotics.

3.3 “No alarm”: spatial scope and demarcation

Figure 6 shows a warning sign 1.5 m tall and 2.5 m long, with a blue background and white Chinese and English texts. Its layout is in traffic sign style, but the texts are longer than those on traffic signs; the Chinese texts are at the top and the English texts are at the bottom. The Chinese texts read “您已进入静音区” (You are entering a quiet zone) and “禁止使用各种报警装置” (Alarm devices of any kind are prohibited). The English texts of the sign roughly correspond to the Chinese texts, but “No alarm” could be ambiguous and confusing to most English speakers. The visual part is a “No honking” sign with a silhouette-like horn inside a red circle with a red backslash line crossing through it.
The sign is located at the boundary of the teaching area which hosts several teaching buildings and libraries. This sign thus serves to mark the boundary between the teaching area and the rest of the university. The presence of English constructs a semiotic scope in which English speakers are addressed, and the bilingual texts select audiences through the comprehensibility of the different languages. The visual part of the sign is a widely recognized traffic sign, and the addressees of traffic signs are usually vehicle drivers. While the bilingual texts address all road users, pedestrians, cyclists, and motorcar drivers, the visual part seems to address motorcar drivers in particular.

It is of practical concern to remind people of keeping quiet in the teaching zone; but more importantly, the sign reflects the nature of the space as a strictly disciplined social arena. It regulates its addressees’ behaviors by articulating the norms of what they can and cannot do, i.e., they should be quiet and cannot make noises while entering the space. Further, the sign constructs the space as a “field of power,” because, as Blommaert (2018: 78) argues, the sign functions as an instrument that turns the space into an institutional object controlled and regulated by official authorities. Therefore, in addition to semiotic scope, the sign has a spatial scope; it derives its meanings from the space – the teaching zone – and defines the space. The space, meanwhile, is not a neutral background but is agentive in shaping people’s communicative behaviors and patterns (see also Dong and Blommaert 2009).

3.4 Polycentricity and order of indexicality

Figure 7 is a Chinese–English bilingual sign hanging at the entry to the campus sports grounds. The title of the sign is “场地内禁止以下行为活动” (Activities Prohibited on the Sports Grounds) and below it, the English text is rendered as “Prohibited Activities in the Field.” Similar to that of the “No alarm” sign, the function of this sign is to articulate
the rules of using the sports ground, and following what Blommaert (2018) argues about the sign's semiotic and spatial scope, it reflects the structure of the space in which the sign is placed: the local authorities' power and control over the public space are demonstrated by their restrictions on how people should or should not use the place.

Different from the “No alarm” sign, which follows a blue-white traffic sign style, this sign is in purple (top) and yellow (bottom). There are 18 icons accompanied by bilingual texts in the yellow area; some of the icons are internationally recognizable, such as the “No smoking” and the “No pets” icons, whereas others are locally meaningful. Figure 8 zooms in to one of the locally meaningful icons and shows a red banner with several Xs in it. The Xs are symbols for a short text, usually a slogan in the Chinese context, that calls on the addressees to do or not do something. Figure 9 is
an example of a red banner mounted on campus by the local authorities; it encourages people to do volunteer work and to contribute to the development of the urban environment. This kind of red banner is frequently found on campus, as well as across the city and in other cities, and serves as a characteristic feature of Chinese urban areas.

The “no banner” icon (Figure 8) imposes restrictions on the mounting of banners (by private persons) on the sports grounds. Although red banners are usually produced and mounted by authorities (e.g., Figure 9), occasionally private persons can put up red banners, especially during students’ festivals, as shown in Figure 10. The icon in Figure 8 implicitly refers to private persons not being allowed to put up banners in the space, and this hidden message can only be inferred by local addressees, who are familiar with the norms of using banners in particular social contexts.

Multiple layers of indexicality can be observed in this example. In the same way as the English text displayed in the “No alarm” sign, the English texts suggest that there may be a global audience on campus, and further point to the producers who are literate in English, in that materialist semiotics sees signs as material forces subject to and reflective of conditions of production and patterns of distribution (Blommaert 2018). In their process of designing the sign, the producers would have attempted to orient themselves toward a global “centering institution” that imposes the norms of “correct English” and “good English,” even though the English translation of the title
may sound less ambiguous and more “natural” if rendered as “Activities Prohibited on the Sports Grounds.” Nevertheless, the English texts and the globally recognizable icons, apart from their practical value, i.e., of being practically useful for those who do not read Chinese, have important indexical meanings; they mark English as an important global language, the only language other than Chinese used on the sign (also in the first example), and moreover, they demonstrate the university’s effort to make itself more globalized than before.

At a local level, the aforementioned “No banner” icon entails an implicit local understanding of prohibiting the private person, not the official authorities, from mounting red banners on the sports ground, and this understanding is largely inaccessible to a non-local audience, even if it is accompanied by an English text. Between the local and the global, various intermediate levels can be identified. A national historical and cultural level, for instance, is observed in the “No kite flying” icon, as kite flying is a traditional culture, sports game, and entertainment in China; the “No firecrackers” icon also points to one of the traditional ways of celebrating Chinese New Year.

On these different scale levels, the semiotic signs and icons index different meanings and values; these systematically produced indexicalities are ordered and stratified, being tied to specific centering institutions authoritative in generating and imposing recognizable normative meaning (see Blommaert and Maly 2014 on a Turkish shop window in Belgium). It is worth emphasizing that the indexicalities of the sign are polycentric and stratified, that the sign orients to multiple centering institutions, and these institutions are not equal in range, scope, and depth: a university-level local centering institution is ranked lower than a state or a global one.

3.5 Chronotopicity

Figure 11 shows a bronze sign embedded above the main entrance of a faculty building. The faculty building is in a European style and located at the center of the campus. The sign “Science Building” is made of copper and is in English; below it the Chinese version “科学” (kē xué, or literally “Science”) appears in traditional Chinese characters and in a right-to-left reading path. The most remarkable feature of the sign is its “v” in “Building,” not the usual “u” as in “Building.” This spelling was reported as a mistake by a local newspaper some years ago and was discussed in

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3 Although some of the English signs may sound unnatural or ambiguous or potentially cause initial confusion, an English-speaking visitor would probably not expect the signs to be perfect and would find the wordings part of their “Chinese experience.”

online platforms such as sina.blog.com, \(^5\) qq.com, and Weibo.com.\(^6\) While some bloggers wondered whether it was a “wrong” spelling, others gave explanations, and, for example, it was said to be classical Latin script, in which the “v” and the “u” were not distinguished. The university website marks it as old English.\(^7\)

Two kinds of arguments are frequently observed in relevant online discussions. One is to show how it is used in English-speaking contexts or in other European societies (e.g., Figure 12). By connecting this sign to other signs with the same or similar linguistic and semiotic features (usually on magnificent European or American architectures), the bloggers align the space in which the sign is emplaced to other spaces, and through this spatial alignment, the sign is upscaled to a global level and acquires emblematic meanings beyond its immediate spatial and social contexts.

The other kind of argument is to position the sign in multiple shorter and longer histories and historical frames. For example, in the following extract of an online discussion, the blogger relates the sign to the university’s one-hundred-year history and its prestige in China, arguing that the word reflects the university’s culture and history:

Extract 1:

It is a historical piece of architecture and a landmark of the university. The building was constructed in 1917, and the sign has been spelt that way since that time. In order to pay respect to its history and to protect its historical architectural heritage, the university has decided to keep the sign in its original form, even after several major renovations.\(^8\) (My translation)

The sign here invokes the university’s history, and as part of one of the four earliest buildings on campus, the sign of the historical building indexes the university’s rich


\(^{6}\) https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=science%20building (last viewed on 15 December 2021).


\(^{8}\) The online data was collected from http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b9086050100pn23.html (last viewed on 15 December 2021).
culture and prestige. It further aligns with a specific chunk of national history when the country was transformed by the “New Culture Movement” (新文化运动); the then intellectuals and social elites believed that Western advancement in science and technology could save the nation from civil wars and foreign invasions. The university was seen as a concrete attempt at Western learning, and, apart from aesthetic reasons, this might explain the unusual sequential arrangement of the English and the Chinese versions in this case: usually Chinese signs are on top, in front, or at least more prominent than their English translations; in this case, however, the English sign is on top and is bigger than that of the Chinese sign in size.

Moreover, the sign is related to a longer worldwide history by using the classical Latin letter “v.” Extract 2 presents a discussion of “v” in the American context:

Extract 2:

Question: Why is it spelt V instead of U on MIT building 10?

Answer: Because it is made to look like a Roman inscription. In Latin v and u are the same letter […]. It was only in the early modern age […] that some people started to split the ‘V u’ letter into two letters: ‘V v’ and ‘U u’ […]. [I]t was not accepted by everybody until the early 1700’s […]. The inscription on the façade of Building 10 is written according to the old fashion, to make it look more ancient.9 (My translation)

Figure 12: An example of “Bvilding.”

9 The online data was collected from https://www.quora.com/Why-is-it-spelt-V-instead-of-U-on-MIT-building-10 (last viewed on 15 December 2021).
In the same fashion as MIT Building 10, the sign at the Chinese university adopts a classical Latin letter to signal its “ancientness.” The invocation of a particular time-space (i.e., that of ancient Rome) triggers an ordered complex of attributions, as argued in Blommaert (2015), that defines the space, the ways that the sign is uptaken, and the audience who can make sense of the space in its intended or expected manners.

The historically shaped space, or chronotope, is an essential understanding of Blommaert’s materialist semiotics. When we observe linguistic and semiotic signs, such as the “v” in this case, we only see them in their synchronic here-and-now deployment; we must realize that what we see is “synchronized” (Blommaert 2005), that it is an interplay of different chronotopic frames in one situated sign. The synchronization of historicities demonstrated in this case questions some of the long-held sociolinguistic understandings of context and contextualization: Does context refer to the locally situated when, where, and how description, or should we look beyond the language-in-situ, up to the laminated and complex understanding of the social-historical dimension of signs? This is not only what Blommaert, Silverstein, and Gumperz argued for, but also what Bakhtin inscribed in his dialogue with Marxism (Blommaert 2018).

4 Discussion and conclusion

I would like to use an anecdote to conclude this memorial paper. The anecdote serves as a summary of Blommaert’s materialist semiotics and a reflection of the three aspects – spatial scope, orders of indexicality, chronotopicity – of this less studied materialist approach of semiotics. During one of Jan Blommaert’s early trips to China in 2006 or 2007, I accompanied him to visit Tiananmen Square. He was very excited by the visit, and in addition to sightseeing, he gave me a spatial and temporal analysis of the space on the spot. I did not know it was the moment when he conceptualized materialist semiotics, and in particular the notion of timespace in sociolinguistics, but simply was amazed by his ability to apply academic understandings in mundane, trivial, everyday activities. Jan Blommaert saw Tiananmen Square as a particular space or spatial scope full of emblematic objects and loaded with indexical meanings, a chronotope aligned with China’s ancient history (the Tiananmen Tower and the National Museum), revolutionary victory (the Monument to the People’s Heroes and the Memorial Hall to Chairman Mao), and the future (the Great Hall of the People). As a linguist, he was particularly attracted to the inscription on the back of the Monument to the People’s Heroes and asked me to translate it for him. He was impressed by the complex of chronotopicity invoked by the inscription when he learned that the inscription was in memory of the People’s Heroes who gave their lives in the past three years, in the past thirty years, and over the past one hundred years of struggles for her national independence and for the people’s freedom and happiness. His
observation and analysis of the spatial scope, orders of indexicality, and the synchronization of chronotopes on Tiananmen Square, I believe, contributed to his thinking and theorizing of materialist semiotics.

In this paper, each case is analyzed to illustrate one aspect of materialist semiotics. However, it is important to remember that they are not separate entities but are multiple facets and laminae of one meaning-making process. In the “No alarm” case, for instance, the sign demarcates a spatial scope and projects particular indexical meanings and values into the space – teaching being a core business of a university and attending classes being a significant part of a student’s life. Further, the sign has to be understood within multiple chronotopic frames ranging from a student’s personal life to the history of the university and the historical development of Chinese modern universities (i.e., universities following a Western style). Blommaert’s materialist semiotics is, of course, much more than these three concepts discussed in this paper. There is much more to uncover and to push forward.

Blommaert’s oeuvre offers a wealth of theoretical and empirical potentials, both for conceptualizing language in society and for analyzing language in conjunction with knowledge, power, ideology, and the historical rise of institutions. Much of his oeuvre remains untapped and continues to inspire us to explore.

References


**Bionote**

**Jie Dong**
Tsinghua University, Beijing, China
dong-jie@tsinghua.edu.cn

Jie Dong (b. 1975) is Professor of Sociolinguistics at Tsinghua University. Her research interests include language and identity, language in globalization, language and the new media, and linguistic ethnography. Her publications include “Chronotopic linguistic landscaping and the making of working-class identities” (2021), *The sociolinguistics of voice in globalising China* (2017), *Discourse, identity, and China’s internal migration* (2011), “The Enregisterment of Putonghua in practice” (2010).