"You walawala too much!": Chinglish interactions between Chinese and Ghanaian construction workers

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Abstract ITA

A partire da una ricerca di campo condotta in tre cantieri di costruzione di una compagnia statale cinese in Ghana, il presente contributo intende esplorare il tema delle interazioni linguistiche tra lavoratori cinesi e lavoratori locali. Attraverso l'utilizzo di un linguaggio "inventato", il *Chinglish*, o *Chinese English*, gli impiegati cinesi e ghanesi della compagnia sono in grado di comunicare tra di loro, e di creare talvolta anche degli spazi di complicità. L'equilibrio che si viene a generare all'interno di questo contesto è tuttavia estremamente fragile e precario, e ogni malinteso può facilmente generare conflitti ed esacerbare le già tese dinamiche lavorative e di potere in atto. Oltre a suscitare un notevole interesse da un punto di vista linguistico, lo studio delle interazioni condotte attraverso l'utilizzo del *Chinese English* permette anche di indagare sotto una nuova luce le relazioni quotidiane tra lavoratori cinesi e lavoratori locali nei siti di costruzione cinesi in Ghana.

Parole chiave: Interazioni linguistiche; Chinglish; cantieri di costruzione; relazioni Cina–Africa; Ghana

Abstract ENG

Based on fieldwork research conducted at three construction sites of a Chinese state-owned company in Ghana, this paper examines linguistic interactions between Chinese and local workers. Using an "invented" language called *Chinglish*, or *Chinese English*, the Chinese and Ghanaian employees are able to communicate and sometimes even create spaces for complicity. There is, however, an extremely precarious balance that exists within this context, and any misunderstanding can easily cause conflicts and exacerbate already tense work and power dynamics. Beyond arousing considerable interest from a linguistic point of view, the use of *Chinese English* in said interactions also sheds light on the daily relationships between Chinese and local workers on Chinese construction sites in Ghana.

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Introduction

I was sitting under a sheet-metal canopy at the entrance of the Chinese construction site, when Zheng Yin,[2] a Chinese low-level manager working at the site, stepped closer to the Ghanaian workers in front of me. Having observed for a few seconds the workers repairing the machine, he started shouting at the welder: "Simon! You look! This okay*le* no okay*le*? Ah? This no okay*le*! Now me show you, you look, okay*le*?" After the Chinese manager showed the Ghanaian worker how to do the job, Simon walked over to me and said: "You see? This is Chinese English!". He laughed and went back to work.

Chinese English [3] is the language used by Chinese workers with little proficiency in English language to communicate with local workers on the construction site. This language is also used by Ghanaian workers to communicate with their Chinese bosses. In particular, as I show below, this is the language spoken by Ghanaians who have been working with the Chinese company for a long time. The Chinese managers who work in the offices and visit the sites only occasionally or for short periods of time are aware of the phenomenon, but they do not have a thorough knowledge of the language, nor do they use it to communicate with the local workers. Chinese English or *Chinglish* is the name by which speakers refer to the language, as shown in the example above. The use of a language called Chinglish is also reported in Han Huamei's (2013; 2017) studies on African marketplaces in Guangzhou, China, and Chinese trade migrants in Oshikango, Namibia. Thompson (2022) and Deumert and Mabandla (2013), in their research on linguistic interactions between Chinese and African workers and clients in South Africa identified a similar language pattern. Nevertheless, I consider the Chinese English spoken on Chinese construction sites in Africa to be peculiar. Its study should consider the context and the conflicts and the power dynamics that characterise it.

Since October 2021, I have been conducting ethnographic research on Chinese-funded and Chinese-implemented infrastructure projects in

2 Pseudonyms are used throughout.

3 The spread of English in China has led to the emergence of different varieties of the language. According to Shi Xiuhua (2013, p. 99) "the variations of English present in China can be differentiated along a continuum of acceptability and status". The literature on the variants of English spoken in China, and in particular on *Chinglish*, is extensive (see, for instance, Cheng 1992; Jiang 1995; Hu 2004; Poon 2006; Xiao, Zuo 2006; Xu 2006; Orelus, Wang 2012; Basciano 2013).

Ghana. In the time I spent at the sites, I was able to observe the daily working practices of Chinese and Ghanaian workers, converse with them and listen and even participate in Chinglish interactions. [4] As I illustrate in the paper, Chinese construction sites are highly conflictual contexts, and relations between Ghanaian and Chinese workers are often characterized by tension, hostility, and misunderstanding. In the construction sites where I conducted my research, most Ghanaian workers spoke Nzema or Fante as their first language. Some workers from other regions spoke Effutu, Ewe, or Ga as their mother tongue.[5] Ghanaian workers also spoke Twi as a common language among people from different regions. Most Ghanaian workers spoke English.[6] Workers who studied English in school or received higher

4 The following are some examples:

G: "You good*a* no good*a*?"
(Are you okay?)
I: "Me goo*da*!"
(I'm good)

G: "Me walawala you later, okay*le* no okay*le*?"
(I will talk to you later, okay?)
I: "Okay*le* okay*le*!"
(Okay!)

In Chinese English, there is often a final vowel added to some English words, for example good*a*, need*a*, look*a*. In Chinglish interactions between Chinese and Ghanaian workers, "you good*a*!", "you no good*a*!" usually means "you are good", "you are not good", namely "you are a good worker", and sometimes also "you are a good person". Therefore, the question "you good*a* no good*a*?!" asked by Chinese or by Ghanaian workers to others Ghanaian workers usually means "are you good or not?"; it is a sort of rhetorical and ironic question. However, when I was jokingly asked by Ghanaian workers "you good*a* no good*a*?", it also meant "are you okay?", "are you fine?".

In Chinese English, *walawala* means "speak", "talk", and "chatting". The sentence reported in the title, "you walawala too much!", means "you talk too much!". The Chinese workers often say this to the Ghanaian workers. According to some Chinese site managers I spoke with, this term is also used in the Chinglish spoken in other African countries.

5 A wide variety of languages are spoken in Ghana. Although the exact number is unknown, Dakubu (2015, p. 10) estimates it to be between 45 and 50: "Ghana has approximately fifty non-mutually intelligible languages, almost all belonging to the Gur and Kwa branches of the Niger-Congo phylum (the sole exceptions are two small languages belonging to the Mande branch, Ligby and Bisa)" (Anyidoho, Dakubu, 2008, p. 142).

6 As Anyidoho and Dakubu (2008, p. 144) note, "currently English is the official language of Ghana, while about a dozen Ghanaian languages are recognized for certain purposes in education and information dissemination". However, "it has never been clearly stated that all Ghanaians should necessarily become English speaking, although it could be argued that this is the implication of the current education policy" (ibid.). Furthermore, as the authors affirm, "it has never publicly been explicitly advocated that English is or should be a marker of Ghanaian identity" (ibid.). (For further information about Ghanaian Pidgin English see Huber, 1999.)

education or a degree had a high proficiency in Standard British English. Others could only speak Ghanaian Pidgin English.[7] There were only a few of them who couldn't speak English. The Chinese workers spoke *putonghua* 普通话 (the official language of the People's Republic of China) and their own regional dialect, *fangyan* 方言.[8] Many of them, especially low-level workers, did not receive any English training before moving to Ghana or generally to Africa to work, so they have a very low level of proficiency in Standard English. Site managers and engineers have a mid-level proficiency in Standard English, which they mainly acquired at university and upgraded while working abroad. Only a few Chinese managers and bosses have a high level of proficiency in Standard English.

During my research I observed participants using two distinct types of Chinese English. The first type refers to a non-standard use of the English language by Chinese workers, as in the example reported above. This type of Chinese English is characterized by variations in the phonology of the English language, a very simplified use of the language structures and a few elements derived from the Chinese language, such as the *le* [9] at the end of the word *okay*. Taking into account the studies of Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008) on "World Englishes", it can be considered a new variety of English derived from the process of globalization of the English language. The second type of Chinese English I observed is more comparable to that described by Miriam Driessen (2020) as a pidgin.[10] Specifically, it is a contact

7 As Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008, p. 17) point out, "West African pidgin English whose roots lie in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is today more widespread (in the Cameroons, Ghana, and Nigeria) than is English as a second language". The authors note that "the English language remains one of the most enduring legacies of Africa's and Asia's experience with British colonialism. One reason for the hegemony of English is that it became a symbol of a new developing elite in colonial times as well as a medium of the anti-colonial struggles" (ibid., p. 21).

8 Although it is estimated that over 97% of the Chinese population in China understands *putonghua*, the official language is rarely used in informal contexts or during daily conversations, in favour of the local dialects, which are perceived as elements that reflect and reinforce the sense of belonging to one's place of origin, particularly in migration contexts.

9 Driessen (2020, p. 442) also notes that Chinese speakers often introduced Chinese sentence particles in pidgin, such the particle *le* 了, used to stress urgency.

In Chinese, the particle *le* 了, "can be classified as having two functions: a perfective verb suffix and a sentence-final particle. The verb suffix *-le* indicates completed action" (Wen 1995, p. 46). "When *le* is used at the end of a sentence, it is the modal particle (...) indicates that the function of sentence-final *le* is closely related to the mood of the speaker and the listener" (ibid., p. 47). (For further information about the Chinese particle *le*, see, for instance, Van den Berg, Wu, 2006.)

10 As Todd (2005, p. 1) argues: "a *pidgin* is a marginal language which arises to fulfil certain restricted communication needs among people who have no common language". The syntactic structure is simple and not very flexible. When a pidgin becomes the mother tongue of a speech community, a *creole* arises (ibid., p. 2). The *creole* structure is simple "but since [a creole], as a mother tongue, must be capable of expressing the whole range of human

language that emerged in Chinese construction sites in Ghana, and which follows the linguistic structure of the Chinese language by incorporating words from Chinese, English, Ghanaian Pidgin English and some local languages, as well as some "invented" terms. In this article, I present examples of both types of Chinese English.

The emergence of a new lingua franca for communication between Chinese and local workers at the Chinese construction sites in Africa is a still little-studied phenomenon. Cheryl Schmitz (2020) and Miriam Driessen (2020), who conducted ethnographic research on Chinese state-owned enterprises in Angola and Chinese-run construction sites in Ethiopia, respectively, provide important evidence of the emergence of a contact language that facilitates communication between Chinese managers and African labourers. Comparing the data from their research with my own reveals not only that the phenomenon exists in different places, but also that these languages have similar characteristics and sometimes use the same terms, as I will demonstrate below. In applied linguistics and anthropology of language, the nexus of migration and language has recently emerged as significant in the contemporary neoliberal economy and in global labour migration (Canagarajah, 2017, p. 3). According to Driessen's (2020) definition of the language spoken by Chinese and African workers as a pidgin, as well as Velupillai's (2015) study of pidgins and social circumstances of language contact, we can consider this language as a "workforce pidgin". Workplaces are situations where often arise contact languages, especially between foreign workers and local workers or among multilingual workforces (ibid., p. 26). This kind of language can be used in specific situations, such as interactions on construction sites, but it cannot be used at home or for social purposes (ibid., p. 17).

Beyond its undeniable relevance from a linguistic and sociolinguistic point of view, this phenomenon also has important implications for an anthropological analysis of the daily interactions between Chinese and African workers. Since the early 2000s, Chinese construction firms, especially state-owned enterprises (SOEs), have expanded their business operations in Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa is now the second-largest overseas market for Chinese construction companies (Oya 2019; Wolf, Cheng 2018). In large part, the projects entrusted to the Chinese SOEs are financed by Chinese policy banks. Between 2000 and 2019, "Chinese financiers have committed US $153 billion to African governments and state-owned enterprises" (Acker, Brautigam 2021, p. 2). In 2019, alongside South Africa, Egypt, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria, Ghana received the largest amount of Chinese loan commitments (ibid.). Moreover, Chinese construction SOEs have also

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experience, the lexicon is expanded and frequently a more elaborate syntactic system evolves" (ibid.).

entered the international market through international cooperation projects. In Ghana, for instance, Kernen and Lam (2014, p. 1058) report that "more than ten Chinese SOE arrived after 2000 through winning Chinese cooperation projects". In recent years, an increasing body of ethnographic literature has focused on the topic of workplaces and employment dynamics between Chinese and local workers in Africa (see, for instance, Driessen 2019; Lee 2009, 2017; Schmitz 2017; Wu 2021; Oya 2019; Giese, Thiel 2011; Kernen, Lam 2014). The analysis of Chinese English and its uses can offer insights into the study of the everyday relationships, the power dynamics and the strategies and tactics (De Certeau 1984) adopted by Chinese and African workers in their daily interactions. On Chinese companies' construction sites, a tense and conflictual setting, language is used to negotiate, interact and pursue individual and collective interests. Indeed, as Bourdieu (1977, p. 648) underlines, "language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power". However, Chinglish interactions at the sites suggest that rather than producing a dynamic of imposing a language over another by one group over another, Chinese and Ghanaian workers can create a new language by adopting everyday creativity and accommodation strategies.

In this article I demonstrate how misunderstandings, attempts to escape dialogues, and the failure or success to carry out linguistic exchanges are all part of a more complex bargaining dynamic between Chinese and Ghanaian working on Chinese construction sites in Ghana. In these contexts, language is both a cause of conflict and a tool for negotiation. On the one hand, one of the main complaints of both the population living in the contexts in which Chinese firms operate and the local workers working for those companies is the inability of most of the Chinese workers and managers to speak English. Indeed, many people complain about the difficulty of communicating with the Chinese. It was often said to me: "We want to talk to them [the Chinese], but they don't understand us." On the other hand, playing and joking through the language enables the local workers to challenge the Chinese managerial authority and the sociopolitical asymmetries (Driessen 2020, p. 433) within and outside the construction site. This paper aims to provide a broad description of the linguistic situation outlined by presenting a relatively unknown language-contact situation, as well as laying a foundation for future research, rather than concentrating on one particular linguistic phenomenon. The dialogues and terminologies described in this article were collected by the author during fieldwork research conducted at three Chinese construction sites along the Ghanaian coast. Observations of interactions were transcribed in the researcher's ethnographic diary directly or at a short distance.

Misunderstandings and/in intercultural communication

Many scholars have noted that Chinese–African organizational contexts face intercultural communication challenges, such as ineffectiveness, inappropriateness and misunderstandings (Chigwendere 2019, p. 71; Sun 2019; Arsene 2014; Men 2014). Taking the premise that linguistic misunderstandings "predominantly result from limited proficiency in one or more of the languages of the participants in the interethnic encounter" (Piller 2012, p. 11), "including limited awareness of different contextualization cues" (ibid.), I suggest that linguistic misinterpretations can cause frictions between Chinese and Ghanaian workers or exacerbate latent conflictual conditions.

During a lunch break, when I was walking with some Ghanaian workers along the road connecting the construction site with their home, where we would soon have lunch before returning to the site, some of the workers started complaining about their Chinese supervisor. "He every time says, 'I know, I know', he knows everything, every time he just knows." Anthony, agreeing with Will's thoughts – and supporting the idea of bringing complaints against the Chinese in my presence, continued by saying: "Yes, 'I know, I know'" – imitating the Chinese manager's way of speaking. "He knows everything. If he knows everything why he is asking us to explain him something?"

I have heard several times the workers complain about the way the Chinese managers treat them and talk to them. They have also told me many times how annoying it is that their Chinese supervisor always replies to their statements using the expression "I know". They explained that they think he does not really listen to them and that he ignores their words because he believes that he already knows everything and that he has nothing to learn from them. According to him, they continued, he is the one who has to teach them: "Me show you, you look"- a phrase that he always repeats. "I show you" how to do the job, and "you look" carefully at what I show you so that you can learn. Having listened many times to Will, Anthony, and other workers discussing this trend, and having seen first-hand how Zheng Yin replies with a decisive "I know" while or after listening to someone speak, it occurred to me that it could be some sort of linguistic misunderstanding.

In Chinese, the expression "*Wo zhidao* 我知道" can mean both "I know" and "I understand". Linguist Huang Shuanfan (2003, p. 436), for instance, points out that "*Wo zhidao* 'I know' is seldom used as an epistemic clause (…), but more likely used as a continuer, or as a change-of-state formula meaning, 'Oh I see; now I understand'". *Zhidao* has a wide variety of uses, most of which are formulaic prefabs, stored as processing units. *Wo zhidao* is either a continuer, or a change-of-state expression" (ibid., p. 437). Therefore, the misunderstanding resulted from transferring pragmatic fea-

tures from Chinese to English construction. This use of "I know" is not grammatically incorrect, but pragmatically expresses a different stance from what was intended. In this case, "I see" would seem more appropriate to match the Chinese discourse marker. However, in a tense context like that of Ghanaian–Chinese relations on the construction site, the incorrect translation was interpreted as another attempt by the Chinese superior to insult and discredit Ghanaian workers.

Conflicts at construction sites are often caused by mutual grievances and claims by Chinese and Ghanaian workers. Chinese workers complain that the local workers talk too much, interrupt one another, arrive late, or do not finish their work on time. Ghanaian workers, on the other hand, claim they need higher wages, to be paid on time – and not a few weeks after the scheduled date, to receive paid holidays and sick leave and not to work on Sunday or during public holidays like Christmas, New Year, Easter, and national festivals. In this setting, Zheng Yin's use of "I know" exacerbates the hostility between Chinese managers and local workers, confirming the Ghanaians' belief that Chinese workers have a bad attitude towards them. In his study of Chinese firms in Uganda, for instance, Muhangi (2019) describes conflicts between Ugandan and Chinese employees and reports that "the Ugandan employees accuse the management (most of whom are Chinese) of disrespect, especially of their cultures and religions" (p. 162), and that they "stereotype them as lazy" (ibid.). On their part, however, one of the Chinese managers interviewed by Muhangi "acknowledges that the firm has staff conflict challenges, which in his opinion are caused by cultural misunderstandings, with the language barrier being the overriding factor" (ibid.). As we have seen, even here, linguistic misunderstandings exacerbated the already strained relationships between Chinese and local workers. At the same time, Ghanaian workers, by making fun of Chinese people – imitating and commenting their way of speaking, as shown above – attempt to mitigate these negative stereotypes and to challenge the authority of their Chinese supervisors.

Pretending not to understand

As mentioned above, although Chinese workers' poor proficiency in English may lead to some misunderstandings, thereby generating tensions and conflicts, misunderstandings can also result from pretending not to understand, as I show in this section. In the case of the Chinese managers, avoidance strategies can include, for example, circumventing uncomfortable conversations about salary increases, late payments and money in general.

I was sitting in a Chinese company car with some Chinese and Ghanaian workers when a policeman stopped us at a checkpoint. The policeman first

looked at the local driver before turning his attention to Wang Yi, a Chinese worker in the front seat. As soon as the policeman started speaking to him, Wang Yi began shaking his head and repeating: "*Wo tingbudong* 我听不懂, *tingbudong* 听不懂" ("I do not understand"). In response to the policeman's apparent irritation, the driver intervened. He spoke to the policeman first, then turned to Wang Yi: "You, money, money." "Me no money", replied Wang Yi. "You big boss, you money", continued the driver. "Me no big boss. Big boss tomorrow cama[11], big boss money", replied Wang Yi. "You everyday tomorrow, everyday tomorrow", intervened the policeman. After insisting for a while longer, the policeman walked away and let us go. When we were back on the road, Wang Yi told the driver: "You tomorrow money." "Me no money. Zheng no give me money, me no give money police. Me no money", the driver responded promptly. "Tomorrow no money police?" asked Wang Yi. "Tomorrow Sunday, tomorrow not same same", replied the driver, meaning that the day after there will be a change of police officers and therefore when they come back, they will not run into the same ones. "Tomorrow tomorrow?" asked again Wang Yi, referring to Monday. Laughing, Chu Yan, another Chinese worker who was sitting in the rear seat, replied: "Tomorrow tomorrow *bu dong* 不懂!". (In other words, "On Monday we will say again that we do not understand what they tell us".) Everyone inside the car started laughing.

By taking advantage of their inability to understand English, the Chinese workers avoided the policeman's demands for money. Throughout the dialogue between the Ghanaian driver and the Chinese workers, it was evident that they were pretending not to understand through the mutual understanding of the use of Chinese English. Chu Yan's words reveal that this dynamic has clearly consolidated and that it will be repeated. In fact, to paraphrase his words, "next time we will say again that we do not understand". In these linguistic interactions, Chinese and Ghanaian workers always exhibit tension and complicity. There is a fragile balance in interactions like these since neither party completely understands the other and because neither party is able to fully explain themselves. Since the language is simplified and words are limited, communication is not great but sufficient for discussing fundamental issues. It is important to note, however, that any external agents that interfere with these communications can easily disrupt the delicate balance created by these interactions, as illustrated by a further example below.

I was writing some field notes in my diary on the construction site when Wang Yi walked up and sat beside me. Harry, who was nearby, put down the iron pieces he was holding and turned to Wang Yi: "Me, *Maria*,[12] no

11 This is the Chinese English pronunciation of the English word "come".

12 In Chinese English, the word *Maria* means "girl", "woman", "wife" or "girlfriend".

goo*da*", trying to imitate someone who is ill, "Me three o'clock go", pointing with his fingers at the number three. Wang Yi then turned to me and asked: "*Ta shuo ta laopo shengbingle ma*? 他说他老婆生病了吗?" (Did he say his wife is sick?) "*Shi de, danshi wo juede ta zai kaiwanxiao* 是的, 但是我觉得他在开玩笑" (Yes, but I think he's joking), I answered. Then, turning to Harry, I asked: "Are you joking?" He replied seriously: "No, no. My girlfriend. She is sick. I have to go to the hospital at three o'clock." "Oh, okay", I said, then, turning to Wang Yi: "*Ta shuo zhen de*他说真的" (He is serious). Around 3pm, Harry approached me before leaving and said: "I was lying. I don't have a girlfriend, you know. I just wanted to have half a day off to rest. That's why I lied to the Chinese". Chinese English is an efficient communication tool between Chinese and Ghanaian workers. Paradoxically, its efficacy derives precisely from ambiguity. The communication between Harry and Wang Yi was immediately successful, as Wang Yi understood what Harry was saying.

My intervention, however, risked uncovering his attempt. As a result, even when communication is difficult, interpreters may not be required or at least could be a hindrance. Rather than merely translating between two languages, the interpreter's role involves engaging in multiple levels of meaning and interpretation, which can lead to a variety of risks. What should be translated? Is there anything that does not need to be translated? As some Ghanaians working as interpreters on construction sites told me, translation is a demanding and complex job. Moreover, not everyone is in favour of it. As Muhangi (2019, p. 164) reports, even though Chinese managers seem comfortable working with interpreters, this method is becoming unpopular since African employees want to communicate directly with their bosses. In this context, the question arises as to whether it is better to have an interpreter mediate the conversation or whether it is better to communicate directly through a *broken* but effective and widely established language. That is, whether it is better to always understand everything and always make everything clear or whether it is better to be able to manage the conversation and, if necessary, to be able to pretend not to understand. Similarly, Dustin, a Ghanaian excavator driver, pretended not to understand when Zheng explained to him how to use a simultaneous translation app. Since he had no intention of downloading and using that app, he pretended not to understand. Indeed, the app could facilitate his conversations with his boss. Nevertheless, he preferred to continue speaking Chinese English and communicate through minimal interactions. He decided to continue to understand what he wanted to understand – the instructions on how to do the job – and to pretend not to understand what he didn't want to understand.

Learning how to communicate

From the perspective of both Chinese and Ghanaians, learning how to communicate, that is, finding the most effective way to express what needs to be said, arises from the desire to pursue their own interests. Chinese English perfectly suits this purpose. As already stated, it is a highly simplified language. However, it must be learned. Workers who have only just started working on the construction site do not know this language and cannot interact with Chinese bosses. There are therefore some "cultural mediators", the Ghanaian workers who have been working with the Chinese for a long time (with the same company, on the same or different sites or for other Chinese companies).

While I was exiting the Chinese construction site where I was conducting my research, I encountered one of the Chinese workers I had met throughout the day with whom I had not yet been able to speak. Staring at me, he whispered to the Ghanaian worker sitting beside him. After listening to his words carefully, he stood up and invited me to come closer. "My boss wants to talk to you. I can translate for you", he said. Since I knew that some Ghanaian translators worked for the Chinese company, I immediately asked him if he could speak Chinese and if he was an interpreter. Surprised, the worker responded no and explained that he and his boss had been working together for some time, so they understand each other well. When I introduced myself to Mr Cheng in Chinese, he also explained that, because he could not speak English well, he often asked that boy to help him. Although neither Mr. Cheng speaks English nor the Ghanaian worker Chinese, they are finally able to understand each other after a long time. I provide below a few brief examples of linguistic interactions between Chinese and Ghanaian workers:

C: Anthony, you where? Me long time no see you! You where?! Today work!
(Anthony, where have you been? I haven't seen you for a long time. Where have you been? You were supposed to be at work today.)
G: Bossa, me hausa,[13] me now cama.
(Boss, I have been at home, I have just arrived.)
C: You hausa? Why you hausa? Today work!
(Did you stay at home? Why did you stay at home? You were supposed to be at work today.)

G: "Bossa, bossa, me hungry, me today no chafan.[14] You bossa give me small money chafan."
(Boss, I'm hungry, I didn't eat today. Boss, give me some money to buy food.)
C: "Me no money. You everyday money money, me no money, no

13 This is the Chinese English pronunciation of the English word "house".
14 This is the Ghanaian pronunciation of the Chinese word *chifan* 吃饭, "to eat".

money chifan."
(I do not have money. Every day you ask me to give you money, I do not have money, I do not have money to buy you food.)
G: "You no money? You bossa! You plenty money!"
(How can you not have any money? You are the boss! You have a lot of money!)

C: You walawala Amigo[15] guolai![16]
(Tell Amigo [the name given by the Ghanaian workers to one of the Chinese workers] to come here.)
G: Okay, bossa, Amigo cama.
(Okay boss, he is coming)

C: Simon! You finished no finished?!
(Simon, have you finished?)
G: Me kuaidianr[17] kuaidianr, small time finished!
(I will work quickly and finish soon)

G: Maria, Maria cama.
(The girl is coming.)
C: You, you Maria.
(It is you who always has girls.)
G: Me? Me no Maria. Me no money no Maria.
(Me? I do not have any girlfriends. Since I do not have any money, I cannot have girlfriends)
C: You no money no Maria? You plenty Maria!
(Do you not have girlfriends because you do not have money? You have a lot of girlfriends!)

As already mentioned, Chinese English is particularly interesting to understand relationships, interactions, negotiations, and jokes between Ghanaian and Chinese workers. Through this language, they constantly play with hierarchies, asymmetries, and cultural distance, always finding precarious balances. As illustrated in the examples, this is a language that uses an imperative grammatical structure, a language of orders and affirmations. However, it can sometimes be used for joking interactions. The recurring themes include the demand for money by Ghanaian workers, claiming that the Chinese earn much more than they do for doing that job; Chinese workers requesting faster execution of work and punctuality in working hours; and jokes and teasing that mainly revolve around women. The ex-

15 The term may have originated in some Portuguese-speaking African countries.
16 In Chinese, *guolai* 过来 means "to come over"
17 In Chinese, *kuaidianr* 快点儿 means "to do something more quickly" or "hurry up!". Often the Chinese workers tell the Ghanaian worker "kuaidianr, kuaidianr!", "hurry up!".

amples reported illustrate the two variants of Chinese English. The first example represents the first variant, where English is the dominant language. It is a variant of English with Chinese characteristics, which draws on the linguistic structures of the Chinese language and makes variations of the phonology of the standard English language. The second variant, shown by the other examples, incorporates English and Chinese terms as well as new "invented" terms into the syntactic structure of the Chinese language. There is not much evidence of inserted terms from the local languages.

The subject also raises relevant questions from a linguistic and sociolinguistic perspective: Are there different languages spoken at different construction sites? Does each Chinese company on its construction sites have a different variety of Chinese English, or is it a common language to all Chinese companies? Are there similarities and/or differences in the language spoken in Chinese construction sites of different companies in the same country? And in different countries? The Chinese state-owned companies I examined, as well as many others, have projects in different African countries and in different regions of the same country, and it is common for Chinese workers to move from one country to another and from one construction site to another. Does Chinese English move along with them?

Additionally, some terms I heard on construction sites have also been reported by Schmitz (2020) and Driessen (2020). *Alibaba* is one of them.

In the morning, the safety officer at the construction site informed me that some local workers stole some boxes of nails. It is not the first time that something has been stolen from the construction site. This episode caused tension and discontent among the Chinese and Ghanaian workers. On Chinese construction sites, thieves are referred to as *alibaba*. After telling Simon, one of the Ghanaian workers who has worked with the Chinese for a long time, about the incident, he confirmed that it is not the first time someone has stolen materials or machinery from the Chinese. He told me that about a year ago, a worker stole welding machinery. The Chinese managers immediately suspected it was one of the welders who used to operate that machine, so one of them went to the police to report the incident. A few days later, the police found the machinery of the Chinese company in the home of that worker. Since then, the Ghanaian boy who had stolen the machine, in addition to losing his job and being reported to the police, has been called by all the Chinese working at that company "Jeffrey *alibaba*". To confirm what he was telling me, Simon turned to Xie Han and asked: "Bossa, Jeffrey *alibaba* or not *alibaba*?" Hearing the worker's name, Xie Han immediately responded: "Jeffrey? Jeffrey *alibaba*!". Simon laughed and continued: "Jeffrey *alibaba*, me no *alibaba*." Also laughing, Xie Han replied: "You? You *alibaba*!" Continuing to laugh, Simon said: "Me? Me no *alibaba*. Simon no *alibaba*." Cheryl Schmitz (2020, p. 475) also documented the same meaning for the term *alibaba*:

> "I worked here for five years! Since 2009! I never stole anything! It wasn't, 'Francisco here, alibaba! Francisco there, alibaba!'". He hopped from side to side as he spoke, and he used a term alibaba, with which Chinese expatriates in Angola commonly referred to thieves.

In an endnote, she affirms that "Chinese interlocutors claimed that alibaba was an 'African' way of referring to thieves", "though it was certainly not common in Angola except among Chinese-speakers or those working with Chinese" (ibid.). It is possible that "Chinese migrants in Arabic-speaking parts of Africa encountered it as a reference to 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves', and it later circulated among Chinese communities elsewhere" (ibid.). The same term appears also in Driessen (2020, pp. 445–446):

> On construction sites across Ethiopia the concept is ascribed various grammatical functions, but mostly appears as a noun. It remains unconjugated. In plural one says, for instance, *Mehoni too much alibaba alle* ('There are too many thieves in Mehoni town'), as said by an Ethiopian, or 'Too much *alibaba* no good' (It's a nuisance that there are so many thieves), as said by a Chinese. […] Used as a verb, the word appears in sentences such as 'No *alibaba*!' meaning 'No stealing!'

As she reports, when she asked the Ethiopians workers, "they insisted the term comes from Chinese, whereas most Chinese asserted that it must be an Amharic word. Only two interlocutors referred to its Arab origin" (ibid.). Similarly, when I asked some Ghanaian workers why they used that term to refer to thieves they replied: "We don't know, the Chinese taught us." According to some of the Chinese site managers I spoke to during my research and who worked for the Chinese construction company in different countries around the world, *alibaba* is used to define one who steals in Chinglish interactions with local workers not only in Africa but also in Asia and the Middle East.

As mentioned above, Chinese English is an effective language for communication between Chinese workers and local workers at construction sites. Even though the terminology is rather sparse, it is not surprising to find a specific word for *thief*. Indeed, as documented by many authors (Driessen 2014, 2019; Wu 2014, 2021), theft is a frequent occurrence on Chinese construction sites in Africa. As one of the Ghanaian workers told me: "Everybody steals something here at the site… At the end of the day, drivers and operators increase their salaries by selling fuel taken from the tanks. Carpenters and steel benders often take home iron and other construction materials." As one of the safety managers also explained, "the Chinese know people steal. Sometimes they even tell workers that if they need it, they can take some of the materials we don't use." However, as he said: "when

it's too much it is not good. In some cases, I have to cover the workers so that the Chinese will not notice that some things they just bought are already missing." At the same time, however, he admitted, "many workers steal because the Chinese always pay late. If you have a family, how do they expect you to survive?" As a result, even in a sparse language such as the one used by Chinese and local workers, it is natural to find a specific word to translate the term *thief*. It would be of interest to understand why the same term is used across all the contexts mentioned, namely Ghana, Angola and Ethiopia, and perhaps elsewhere.

Conclusion

On construction sites, communications that seems impossible due to the apparent lack of a common language between Chinese and Ghanaian workers is made possible thanks to Chinese English. Those who witness linguistic interactions between Ghanaians and Chinese for the first time may find these communications impossible. What are they saying? How do they understand each other? Chinese English, just like other languages, needs to be learned. To learn Chinese English, it is necessary to spend significant time at Chinese construction sites. In this context, the longest-working employees play the role of "interpreters" between the Chinese bosses and new local workers. However, as mentioned above, the interpreter's role is complex and risky, and workers prefer to be able to communicate directly with their Chinese bosses. Nevertheless, some communication remains impossible, simply because it is more convenient to continue not understanding or to pretend not to understand. This is perhaps one of the reasons why many Chinese are reluctant to acquire or do not consider so useful the acquisition of good proficiency in Standard English. And this is also the reason why, sometimes, even those with good English skills are reluctant to use them.

The presence of a lingua franca creates spaces for collaboration between workers at the construction site, especially between the new workers and the workers who have been working with the Chinese company for a long time. The "old workers" teach the new workers how to speak Chinese English, help them at work, and explain to them how to "deal with" the Chinese. It also creates a sense of community among Ghanaian workers, who jokingly use and comment on Chinese English even among themselves.

In this paper, I provided a brief description of some linguistic interactions I observed on Chinese construction sites in Ghana. Future studies could examine in depth the lexicon, syntax and semantics of this new language. Chinese English used on Chinese construction sites for communication between Chinese and African workers might also be examined in comparative

terms, as it presents many similarities and connections across different cultural and geographical contexts.

In conclusion, in this paper I also illustrated how by studying daily linguistic interactions between Chinese and Ghanaian workers it is possible to examine the use of strategies, and even more the use of tactics, described by De Certeau (1984, p. 37) as "an art of the weak", by the subjects involved, and analyze their meanings. Through a *tactical* use of the language, both Chinese and local workers are able from time to time to find spaces for interaction and pursue their own interests, in a context characterized by strict hierarchies and structures of power that shape and go beyond the everyday face-to-face relations at the site.

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