

global  
china  
pulse.



02  
24

## CHINA'S LINGUISTIC FRONTIERS

This text is taken from *Global China Pulse: Volume 3, Issue 2, 2024.*



**Duck Express**

Wooden Duck. Source: @andersbachmann (CC), [Flickr.com](#)

# Playing with the Rules at Duck Express: Workplace Banter at a Chinese Restaurant in Nairobi

Amanda KAMINSKY

*At Chinese restaurants in Nairobi, interactions between Kenyan employees and Chinese customers are often tense and minimal, hampered by the significant language barrier. In this ethnographic examination of linguistic flexibility at a small takeaway restaurant in Nairobi's burgeoning Chinatown, a creative employee uses pidgin English to relax the rules and make her customers laugh. Her use of humour brings unspoken tensions into the open, thereby disarming them. By privileging conviviality over grammatical norms, these joking interactions can spark fleeting moments of affinity between strangers.*

**I**'m getting good at dealing with these Chinese guys,' Grace (a pseudonym, as are all other names of people and businesses in this essay) told me one day after joking around with a customer. Grace was one of two full-time Kenyan employees working the counter at Duck Express, a small takeaway Chinese restaurant in Nairobi. The Chinese chef ran errands outside when he was not in the kitchen and the owner, a Chinese businessman from Sichuan, was rarely around. Daily life at Duck Express was often very boring. Evenings and weekends would come alive with crowds of drinkers and diners, but the long weekdays tended to stretch with tedium. The monotony would only be broken by the arrival of a customer or sometimes a supply delivery. These interactions could be a source of great amusement for the Kenyan employees, particularly Grace, who was gregarious, funny, and sharp-tongued.

Grace's jokes and playful exchanges not only kept her entertained, but also served to disrupt what Nowicka (2024) calls 'thin conviviality'. This term, Nowicka explains, embodies the tenuous peace kept by suppressing or downplaying differences to produce polite consensus. At businesses like Duck Express, most Kenyan employees spoke minimal to no Chinese, and most Chinese bosses, cooks, and customers spoke minimal to no English or Swahili. Polite consensus among Chinese and Kenyans was often precariously achieved only through minimal interactions and awkward silences. To joke and play successfully across such a conspicuous cultural and linguistic barrier was no easy feat. At Duck Express, jokes often took the form of a unique pidgin that rarely

failed to elicit smiles and laughs from everyone present. By blending preconceived linguistic boundaries, creative interlocutors like Grace could unsettle the tedium of thin conviviality.

Tens of thousands of Chinese people live, work, eat, and shop in Nairobi; some sources claim that about 50,000 Chinese live in the country, but this number is difficult to verify (Doublethink Lab 2022). Their presence in Kenya is a manifestation of the many trade and development partnerships that have flourished between the Chinese and Kenyan governments over the past decades, particularly since the launch of China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 under President Xi Jinping. While official rhetoric between China and Kenya often emphasises South–South solidarity in the face of neoliberal Western hegemony, on-the-ground relations between Chinese and Kenyan people can be tense. Mutual suspicion, racial stereotypes, and a significant language barrier can make it difficult for Kenyans like Grace to form deep or lasting friendships with their Chinese customers, co-workers, and bosses. During 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Nairobi's burgeoning Chinatown, I observed how daily life at Chinese businesses like Duck Express often passed in the form of fragmented communications and minimal transactions.

## Utilitarian Speech Varieties

Given the lack of common language between many Kenyans and their Chinese employers, colleagues, and customers in the restaurant industry, an English-based pidgin was sometimes used to get a point across. This utilitarian speech variety is less widely spoken than similar pidgins documented elsewhere, including at Chinese-owned worksites in Ethiopia (Driessen 2020) and Zambia (Haruyama 2023). Nevertheless, it shares features with other pidgin varieties worldwide, including a simplified grammar, reduplication of words for emphasis, and elements from multiple languages—in this case, English, Mandarin, and sometimes Swahili. For example, when serving a Chinese customer, Grace's co-worker asked: '*Lajiao* small small [Do you want a small amount of chili pepper]?' A different Chinese customer asked Grace: '*Jitui* have no have [Do you have chicken legs]?' Grace mirrored the customer's Chinese-inflected syntax when she replied: 'No have.'

The dynamics of pidgin use at Duck Express differ from those documented in other accounts of African–Chinese pidgins. Miriam Driessen (2020), for example, describes a pidgin used among Chinese employers and Ethiopian employees at construction sites in Ethiopia. There, the Chinese bosses were structural authority figures and lacked a

common language with their employees. No-one spoke standard English and everyone involved had ‘no choice but to make do with pidgin’ (Driessen 2020: 436). This eroded the hierarchy by putting all parties on common ground. By ‘playing’ with this malleable new code, the Ethiopian employees were able to subvert and challenge the inequalities of the workplace. Justin Lee Haruyama (2023) also describes a form of pidgin used at a Chinese-owned mine in Zambia. There, Zambians who spoke a standard variety of English looked down on the pidgin English used by their Chinese bosses. The Zambian employees denigrated this so-called shortcut English and used it mockingly, feeling that its simplified features justified a racialised resentment of their Chinese employers.

In Nairobi’s Chinatown shopping centre, as at the Zambian mine studied by Haruyama, most of the Kenyan employees could speak and understand standard English. Pidgin English was therefore not a necessity, as it was at the Ethiopian construction site documented by Driessen. Instead, the Chinese in Chinatown were the ones usually expected to accommodate local Kenyan norms by using English to the best of their ability. This accommodation came about not in the context of the boss–employee hierarchy, since the bosses were rarely around during the middle of the day, but rather between Kenyan employees and Chinese customers. This is a very different power dynamic from the ones usually examined in cases of China–Africa relations.

In China, service encounters have been described as marked by directness—sometimes interpreted as coldness by non-Chinese (Pan 2000; Sheridan 2018). Usually customers, not employees or servers, must initiate the interaction. This was observable at Duck Express, where the Chinese customers were often the ones who spoke first and assumed the burden of attempting to use English, often with perceivable difficulty and embarrassment. In contrast, across many African contexts including Kenya, service encounters have been described as analogous to traditional host–guest relationships (Hinson et al. 2024; Brown and Rammidi 2014; Callahan 2006). Here, the worker/host assumes a position of accommodation or even deference to the customer/guest. I saw this when the employees of Duck Express would make an effort to communicate with their customers in a way that would be understood, such as with basic Chinese or pidgin English, rather than using standard English or Swahili. Given these norms, the use of pidgin English at Duck Express might represent a mutual accommodation or convergence to the language preferences of the other. When Grace or her co-worker replied to their customers’ overtures in pidgin English rather than standard English, they encouraged a relaxing of the rules and a lowering of the boundaries of grammatical ‘correctness’ that stood between speakers without a common language. The mood lightened and everybody usually laughed.

## Creative Banter

Sometimes, Grace's use of this pidgin veered from the utilitarian and became creative for even greater humorous effect. When a customer asked for a discount, for example, instead of replying with a simple 'no', Grace said: 'I get that small money where? No *sawa*, bossu check me money [Where will I make up the difference? It's not okay, the boss will check my money].' She and the customer both laughed.

In another example, Grace riffed with a Chinese customer: 'You madamu China, come here get madamu Kenya. Kikuyu? Kikuyu money big [You have a Chinese madam/wife, but when you come here you should get a Kenyan wife, maybe a Kikuyu. Kikuyus have lots of money].' The Chinese customer laughed.

Grace seemed to take delight in speaking this way. I was continually impressed by her ability to unleash a fluent torrent of speech in a language that, presumably, she had never explicitly learned or practised. Her riffs often hurtled across sensitive topics that would have been difficult to speak about in a non-joking frame. In the above example, she acknowledged widespread extramarital relations between Chinese men and Kenyan women in Nairobi while controlling any potential sexual tension on her own terms. She made a joke about the Kikuyu ethnic community—Kenya's largest group, constituting approximately 17 per cent of the total population. Kikuyu people are often stereotyped for their business savvy and desire to acquire wealth. As an ethnic Luo herself, Grace may have been strategically creating distance between herself and the Chinese customer, while maintaining a joking frame.

In another example, two older Chinese men approached the counter to ask about the price of the roast duck. They asked in Mandarin, which Grace understood. She was able to reply with the price in Mandarin, after which she said: '*Beijing kaoya* [Mandarin: Beijing roast duck].' This is a phrase she had likely picked up due to the iconic fame of the Chinese dish, even though it is not a technically correct description of the product at Duck Express.

One of the men replied (in Mandarin): 'No, this isn't Beijing roast duck.' Grace seemed not to understand, so instead she changed the subject. She asked in pidgin English: 'You, madam in China?' The man shook his head.

Grace said, 'No *sawa* [English/Swahili: Not okay]! I am your madam. We go eat *lamian* [Mandarin: noodles].' She pointed to the noodle restaurant next door and mimed eating with chopsticks.

The man laughed and pointed, too, saying: 'Okay, *gen wo zou ba* [English/Mandarin: Okay, let's go together].' Grace laughed and mimed walking away in that direction. They continued laughing and joking until the order was served and the men walked away.

In this example, Grace's use of pidgin brings attention to several key sources of stress underlying her encounters with Chinese customers. First, is the language barrier itself. As a potent source of awkwardness and conflict in Chinatown, stress about the inability to effectively communicate underlies every cross-boundary encounter.



Given the norms of employee–customer relations, many Chinese customers approached the counter at Duck Express with obvious trepidation, feeling the burden of needing to express themselves using their limited English. Whenever Grace replied in pidgin English—whether her utterance was utilitarian or playful—she switched the frame from a minimal economic transaction into a meta-communication about language use. Within this new frame, the usual boundaries between linguistic codes went out the window in favour of new rules, which stated that conviviality mattered more than formal grammar.

Grace demonstrated these rules in the example above by deftly navigating the language barrier using her own language abilities. She used the Chinese words she knew (the price, followed by *Beijing kaoya*), then changed the subject when she reached the limit of her understanding to keep the conversation going. The only Swahili word she used, *sarwa* ('okay'), is often the first Swahili word learned by Chinese. The employees of Duck Express sometimes joked about this, mimicking how their boss and his wife would always say 'sarwa'. The Chinese customer, who might have completed the transaction in silence and left feeling like an outsider, was instead drawn into a playful and friendly interaction that elicited laughter from all involved.

### Chinese Takeaway in Nairobi

A display of Chinese takeaway snacks offered by Duck Express in Nairobi. Source: Amanda Kaminsky.

## Gendered Power Dynamics

I should also draw attention to the sexual overtones of Grace's banter, which bring to the surface the racialised and gendered power dynamics that simmer throughout Nairobi's Chinatown. Speaking openly—but jokingly—about flirtation and extramarital relations acknowledged that the Chinese customers saw her not only as Kenyan, but also as a young and attractive woman. Informal sex work is very common in Nairobi's Chinatown. Grace told me she had refused offers from many Chinese men since coming to work in Chinatown. Right at the beginning of her employment, she was propositioned by the chef of Duck Express. She turned him down by demanding an outrageously large sum of money in return, which she knew he could never afford. Since then, the chef had asked her to set him up with other women, acting as his broker. She refused every time and her dislike of the chef grew and deepened.

The chef was not alone in his expectation of finding transactional sex among the Kenyan employees of Chinatown. Grace told me that such relations were very common. Many of her colleagues in Chinatown were engaged in transactional relationships. Beyond Chinatown, too, a thriving sex industry could be found throughout Nairobi, visible in the not-so-subtle posters hung on telephone poles advertising 'massages' with photographs of scantily clad Kenyan women. When Grace told me she was 'getting good at dealing with these Chinese guys', then, this meant pre-empting inappropriate or threatening advances by controlling the limits of flirtation on her own terms. One way she accomplished this was by keeping her pidgin interactions within a joking frame, bringing the tension out into the open and thereby disarming it.

## Double-Edged Jokes

The introduction of humour into an interaction always entails some risk. Cross-linguistic jokes can backfire, cause offence, or simply fail to be understood. Often, Grace's attempts at banter fell flat with unreceptive or uncomprehending interlocutors. Many transactions were silent and cursory. Grace often complained to me of feeling tired and immensely bored during the workday. Occasionally, Grace would make a joke with her Kenyan co-worker at the expense of a Chinese customer, such as making fun of an English grammatical mistake. These moments illustrate the darker side of humour, which has as much potential to exclude and divide as it does to extend a welcoming hand.

When a joke succeeds, however, it can bring unspoken tensions to the surface, provide an outlet to express otherwise repressed feelings, and spark unexpected moments of shared affinity. 'Like a flash', African literature scholar Tina Steiner (2021: 144) writes, humour 'can connect strangers who have very little in common ... It is an irresistible mode of social interaction, if somewhat volatile and unpredictable.' Even if for only an instant, 'thin conviviality' (Nowicka 2024) can give way to something more empathetic.

In Chinatown in Nairobi, it is easy to see all the ways that Kenyans and Chinese live separate lives, eating different food, speaking different languages, and returning home to different neighbourhoods at the end of each day. A closer look, however, reveals complex interpersonal connections as people try to make sense of each other, maintain their dignity, and make the long, boring workday more bearable. ●