



SPECIAL SECTION

Introduction

Language and political economy, revisited

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This special section constitutes an effort to span the divide between linguistic anthropological approaches to political economy and sociocultural anthropological approaches to contemporary capitalism. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the publication of several key works in anthropology forged a critical approach to language in social action that was attentive to questions of power, inequality, difference, and domination. More than twenty-five years have passed since this articulation of language and political economy as a framework for scholarly investigation and critique. In this time period, research in linguistic anthropology has continued to elaborate how language use and language ideologies (re) produce forms of social difference and inequality within and across interactions. At the same time, critical work in sociocultural anthropology on political economy has become focused on neoliberalism—an ongoing redistribution of social risk, entitlement and responsibility—as a global condition. Research in this vein, however, has on the whole remained relatively unconcerned with language. Inspired by the twenty-fifth anniversary of Susan Gal’s classic essay “Language and political economy,” the essays collected here take seriously the challenge raised in studies of neoliberalism, namely, that political economies, in the empirical and analytic sense, have shifted post-1989. In doing so, they chart new pathways for a cross-fertilization between research in linguistic anthropology and scholarship on neoliberalism and contemporary political economy. Specifically, the papers: (1) identify impasses in the Foucault-inspired analyses of power as governmentality, (2) elaborate how emergent political economic forms compel a retheorization of “institutions” as a category of social analysis, (3) complicate understandings of the place of language in commodification processes, and (4) engage and theorize the specialized forms of reflexivity that often accompany neoliberalizing logics.

Keywords: language, political economy, capitalism, governmentality, institutions, commodification, reflexivity



In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the publication of several key works in anthropology articulated a theoretical and research agenda for the investigation of language and political economy (see especially Woolard 1985, Gal 1989, Irvine 1989, Bourdieu 1991). At the time, in both the United States and Europe, social and cultural anthropology was in the midst of a series of theoretical shifts, inspired not only by *Writing Culture* and the reflexive turn but also by a poststructuralist and postcolonial eclipse of cultural and symbolic analysis. In this context, linguistic anthropologists forged a critical approach to language in social action that was attentive to questions of power, inequality, difference, and domination. This work drew on Peircean semiotics, speech act theory, Goffmanian approaches to symbolic interaction, Bakhtinian notions of (inter)textuality, and Gramscian understandings of hegemony to theorize the inherent politics of language use, while grounding it in concrete historical practices and processes. Out of this literature a series of analytics were (re)formulated to conceptualize the (re)production of political economic structures within and across discursive interaction: indexicality and performativity, metapragmatics and language ideologies, entextualization and interdiscursivity (see Gal 1989; Irvine 1989; Silverstein 1993; Bauman and Briggs 1990, 1992; Silverstein and Urban 1996; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; Kroskrity 2000). The anthropological conversation that emerged on the topic of language and political economy thus proved to be extraordinarily generative.

Of special note is the 1989 publication of Susan Gal's essay "Language and Political Economy" in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Gal's essay provided an early synthesis of the several theoretical currents that motivated linguistic anthropological work on political economy, presenting a framework that moved beyond idealist and materialist dichotomies to theorize and investigate "the links among language structure, language use, and political economy" (1989: 346). At a time when many anthropologists could still view language as epiphenomenal to social action, Gal argued that language does not simply reflect forms of social difference and inequality but performatively constructs them in and across interactions. Reflecting the broader mood of 1980s anthropology, Gal thus illustrated how a language-focused approach to political economy provided one way to move beyond the impasse of a culture concept that many had come to view as dehistoricizing and depoliticizing. With acuity and prescience, her essay set forth a perspective that emphasized the performativity of language, that detailed the mutual mediation of linguistic and social difference, and that took as foundational the processual and conflictual nature of culture and social action. In so doing, the essay, alongside Gal's other works—on gender, on postsocialism, on language ideology and linguistic differentiation, on publicity—and those of her peers, served to bring definition to scholarship on language and political economy and also inspired numerous students and colleagues to join in the intellectual project.

More than twenty-five years have passed since this articulation of language and political economy as a framework for scholarly investigation and critique. In this time period, research in linguistic anthropology has continued to address themes within the problematic, elaborating how language use and language ideologies (re) produce forms of social difference and inequality. Scholarship in the discipline has produced penetrating analyses of new political and economic forms, ranging from publics and publicity (Gal and Woolard 2001, Briggs 2005, Hill 2008, Vidali 2010,



Cody 2011), language and commodification (Agha 2011, Duchêne and Heller 2011, Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012), brands and intellectual property (Moore 2003, Manning 2010, Nakassis 2012, Graan 2016), and democratic practice and promotion (Hull 2010, Greenberg 2012).

At the same time, critical work in cultural anthropology on political economy and power has experienced its own developments. In particular, as many have noted (Ganti 2014, Ortner 2016), work within anthropology on political economy has become focused on neoliberalism—an ongoing redistribution of social risk, entitlement, and responsibility—as a global condition (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, Harvey 2005, Ong 2006, Ong and Collier 2005). Research in this vein, however, has on the whole remained relatively unconcerned with either language structure or language use. Reciprocally, even those linguistic anthropologists who have studied shifting dynamics of language value and commodification in the neoliberal era have tended not to engage the theories of governmentality and affect that have driven scholarship in cultural anthropology. In short, despite some notable exceptions (e.g., Briggs 2005, Gershon 2011; Inoue 2012; Urciuoli 2008, Urciuoli and LaDousa 2013), these two areas of investigation and critique have tended to chart distinct courses of analysis and argumentation.

The articles that form this special section constitute an effort to span the divide between linguistic anthropological approaches to political economy and cultural anthropological approaches to contemporary capitalism. The conversation behind the articles in this volume took shape at a March 6, 2015 symposium, entitled “Language and political economy revisited: Neoliberal frontiers,” that was held at the University of Chicago.¹ The symposium served as a heartfelt tribute to Susan Gal on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of her *Annual Review of Anthropology* essay. The essays collected here thus celebrate, echo, and carry forward the many legacies of Gal’s work and those of her colleagues and collaborators in linguistic anthropology who first formulated “language and political economy” as a research paradigm.

Moreover, in the spirit of Gal’s 1989 essay, the articles in this collection also examine new empirical developments that have come to characterize contemporary political economies and do so by attending to the language forms that are integral to these emergences. The collection therefore takes seriously the challenge raised in studies of neoliberalism, namely that political economies, in the empirical and analytic sense, have shifted post-1989. In doing so, they chart new pathways for cross-fertilization between research in linguistic anthropology and scholarship on neoliberalism and contemporary political economy. Specific articles in this issue thus use approaches from linguistic anthropology to engage concepts and analytics within the anthropology of neoliberalism: information capital (Coombe), governmentality (Cody, Coombe, Graan and Inoue), entrepreneurialism and self-management (Gershon and Urciuoli), the database and the algorithm (Inoue), and politics of publicity (Bishara and Graan).

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In what remains of this introduction, I flag four key provocations for current scholarship on neoliberal political economies that manifest across these articles. Specifically, the papers: (1) identify impasses in the Foucault-inspired analyses of power as governmentality, (2) elaborate how emergent political economic forms compel a retheorization of “institutions” as a category of social analysis, (3) complicate understandings of the place of language in commodification processes, and (4) engage and theorize the specialized forms of reflexivity that often accompany neoliberalizing logics.

Power Beyond Governmentality

One theme that appears across many of the articles is the limitations of the concept and analytic of governmentality. Governmentality, both in its coinage by Foucault and in the ways it has been taken up in anthropology, refers to a form of power that operates not only through limits (i.e., discipline) but also through freedoms (i.e., self-management); and it has been widely used to analyze the redistributions of responsibility and entitlement glossed as neoliberalization (see Ganti 2014, Ortner 2016). Several articles here take issue with the totalizing manner with which the governmentality concept has been deployed in social analysis. Francis Cody questions the efficacy of neoliberal forms of interpellation through his study of a literacy education NGO in India and the modes of address that were used to recruit participants. Instead, Cody argues that a model of reciprocity that is irreducible to a governmentality framework was not only integral to the NGO's success but also points to blind spots in the governmentality-focused analysis of similar projects of empowerment. Rosemary Coombe examines the circulation of intellectual property regimes across Latin America but emphasizes how subjects can respond to forms of neoliberal interpellation in ways that exceed the logics of governmentality. In particular, she shows how indigenous groups involved in projects to register and protect “traditional knowledge” often appropriate and hybridize neoliberal logics toward unexpected ends. In examining how American and European diplomats intervened within the Macedonian public sphere on politics, Andrew Graan argues that governmentality studies smuggle in assumptions about the spatiality and temporality of governmental power that obscure other forms of power and contestation. Finally, drawing on Gilles Deleuze's essay “Postscript on societies of control,” Miyako Inoue examines social change in the wake of Japan's decades long recession and outlines a modality of power based not on governmentality but on logics of modulation situated in the algorithm and the database. In their variety, these papers not only identify analytic constraints of the governmentality concept, but they also suggest alternative analyses—based on models of reciprocity and obligation, circulation and scaling, publicity, and control—that open up new critical approaches to contemporary political economy.

Rethinking Institutions

A key insight of earlier work on language and political economy was to link the interactional and the institutional, that is, to detail the relationship between everyday



quotidian forms of social and linguistic practice and the broader social formations and normed behaviors that they index. However, as the papers by Inoue, Cody, and Urciuoli contend—in differing ways—contemporary forms of power do not necessarily privilege either individuals or institutions as objects and sites of power. Instead, as Inoue develops, contemporary “societies of control” target not the whole subject as an object of management but rather operate through the epistemology of the database, which dissolves individuals into interchangeable characteristics and preferences that can then be subjected to algorithmic modulation. Or, as Bonnie Urciuoli elaborates, neoliberal logics in the US have come to frame “diversity” as a marketable asset and to reconceive individuals as “bundles of skills” (see also Urciuoli 2008) to be variously combined, if all the while such processes continue to racialize subjects and mark difference. In parallel, Cody questions the efficacy and outcomes of literacy activists’ political projects in Tamil Nadu by analyzing how the institutional logics of literacy training depend on and, at times, are superseded by forms of reciprocity premised on fictive kinship relationships.

One provocation of these essays, as Summerson Carr emphasized in her discussant comments at the symposium, is the call to retheorize “institutions” in the wake of the political economic processes that are reshaping what institutions are and how they function. If power relies less and less on conventional institutional logics and authorizing structures and instead operates through processes of dividualization, modulation, and recombination, then the time is ripe to revisit how social scientists have conceptualized institutions. One possible way to approach this task, as Michael Silverstein suggested in the symposium’s concluding panel discussion, is to distinguish between organizational sites, where one can study institutions, and institutions as *processes* of normed behaviors that intersect in particular ways, and come to be typified *qua* institutions. From this perspective, analysis becomes less focused on institutions *per se* and more so on “institutionality,” the achievement of some state of stability such that processes of normed behavior appear as perduring entities. By framing “institutions” in terms of institutionality, one can thus analyze macro-level formations such as “economy,” “family,” and the “individual” as historical achievements, locatable in time and space, that came to have institutional expressions. Furthermore, one can also show—as the papers collected here attest—how, under shifting conditions, these institutions give way to new normed modalities of institutional existence (e.g., dividuality and the database).

Language in Commodification

Previous work on language and political economy has examined how varieties of speech have been objects of commoditization, for example, in advertising and branding (Moore 2003, Manning 2010), in the economic valuation of particular language skills (Cameron 2001, Heller 2010, Duchêne and Heller 2011), and as part of packaged tourist experiences (Duchêne and Heller 2011, Strand 2012). In this issue, both Coombe and Gershon elaborate how language practices and ideologies are always already operative within regimes of commodification. As they demonstrate, not only can commodification take language forms as its object but it is also a process that happens in the medium of discursive interaction that depends

on metapragmatic discourses that pick out objects as tokens of commodity types (see also Agha 2011). The language *of* commodification thus conditions the role of language *in* commodification, which in some cases frames language *as* commodity. Coombe elaborates one such process when examining the legal discourse and inscription devices by which transnational heritage management projects render “culture” as proprietary and as legible within the information economy. Gershon illustrates how, within contemporary labor markets, even the production of one’s “authentic self” emerges through logics that are simultaneously semiotic and economic: through practices of “personal branding,” one formulates his or her “self” as a value-added commodity, as a “solution” that addresses a potential employer’s outstanding need.

Such arguments were echoed by Constantine Nakassis during the symposium’s concluding panel discussion: social worlds are increasingly populated by objects (e.g., trademarks) that do not pre-decide whether they are economic or linguistic objects. From this perspective, a semiotic analysis must not presuppose the economic and linguistic as ontologically different, as levels of analysis to be conjoined. Rather, an opportunity opens for scholars to move beyond models that distinguish meaning and exchange value and to instead explore the complex interdiscursivities (as forged through, e.g., product design, court cases, marketing promotion and advertisement, consumer purchase and engagement and so on) through which forms of value are produced and transformed. Indeed, perhaps one consequence of this shift is a linguistic anthropology that increasingly extends analysis beyond self-evidently “linguistic” objects toward the intersecting and ongoing processes (levels that are ideological, interactional, interdiscursive, material, etc.) that produce semiotic complexity or what Nakassis (2016) elsewhere describes as “total semiotic facts.”

Reflexive Action and Cultures of Circulation

Finally, the essays in this volume document the proliferation of specialized forms of reflexivity that have coincided with and drive forward political economic dynamics associated with neoliberalism. Of course, forms of reflexivity, when understood as social practices that are either oriented to other social practices or that are self-oriented, exist within every society. Neoliberal capitalism, however, appears to privilege varieties of reflexive action that take political economic logics of circulation, exchange, and recognition as their objects (cf. Lee and LiPuma 2002). For instance, brand management exists as a social project that seeks to regiment how commodity objects are represented in publics so as to profit from their circulation in markets (Moore 2003, Lury 2004, Foster 2007, Manning 2010, Nakassis 2012, Graan 2016; see also Gershon this issue, Urciuoli this issue). Techniques of public relations are often deployed, for example in electioneering (Lempert and Silverstein 2012) and among activists (McLagan 2001, Paley 2001), to target audiences and to promote preferred representations within public spheres. And, as Douglas Holmes (2013) has recently argued, central bankers now rely on the public narration of economic analysis and forecasting as a means shape mass economic practice in accord with inflation and growth targets. At the core of such practices



are metapragmatic discourses that frame some semiotic objects and some forms of language as appropriate to a particular market or public while framing others as inappropriate. Authorized brand representations are promoted while unauthorized brand representations are sanctioned; or, one reading of economic data is proffered while other readings are rejected. These practices amount to what could be termed “reflexive engineering,” discursive interventions that aim to regiment how objects, knowledge, and representations circulate and thereby contribute to value formation.

Examples of such strategic, reflexive behavior appear across several of the essays collected here. Amahl Bishara analyzes the differing quality of public protest among Palestinians who live in Israel and those who live in the occupied West Bank. In doing so, she not only draws attention to the differing strategies that protestors in these two locations use to interpellate publics for their activism but also to the differing forms of constraint that the Israeli state has placed on Palestinian publicity and protest in Israel and the West Bank respectively. Gershon’s analysis of personal branding seminars in the US illustrates the labor and strategy that direct jobseekers’ efforts to manage their persona across the artifacts (e.g., resumes) and interactions (e.g. interviews) required by their job hunt. Graan details how American and European diplomats used public commentary not only as a tool to pressure political reform but as a means to shape the contours of mass-mediated publicity in postconflict Macedonia. In these examples, one finds analyses of social practices that are oriented to “cultures of circulation” (Lee and LiPuma 2002), whether focused on labor markets or public spheres. Such behavior takes for granted the reflexive logics by which texts and objects circulate and accrue value and so works to shape the terms through which such processes develop. As Anya Bernstein highlighted during the symposium, insofar as these forms of reflexive engineering seek not only to participate in processes of circulation but to (re)structure them, these studies bring into relief an especially potent site within contemporary political economies.

Conclusion

The essays gathered here attest to the continued vibrancy of language and political economy as a research paradigm, a fact that owes much to Susan Gal and her scholarly oeuvre. Furthermore, these essays illustrate what a semiotically informed cultural analysis can contribute to the larger anthropological interrogation of contemporary political economies. The themes identified here—on power, institutions, commodification, and reflexivity—highlight some of the several ways that these articles work to expand and nuance the conceptual and analytical toolkit with which anthropologists grapple with changing and emergent political economic processes.

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Introduction: Économie politique et langage - Nouveaux Regards

Résumé : Ce dossier spécial tente de faire le lien entre les études de l'économie politique en anthropologie linguistique et les analyses du capitalisme contemporain produites par l'anthropologie socio-culturelle. A la fin des années 1980 et au début des années 1990, la publication d'ouvrages clés en anthropologie établit une approche critique du langage dans les mobilisations, une approche attentive aux questions de pouvoir, d'inégalité, de différence et de domination. Plus de vingt-cinq années se sont écoulées depuis l'élaboration de ce champ d'enquête et de critique problématisant l'économie politique et le langage conjointement. Entretemps, la recherche en anthropologie linguistique a continué d'éclairer comment les usages linguistiques et les idéologies langagières (re)produisent des formes de différence sociale et d'inégalité à travers les interactions. Pendant ce temps, les travaux critiques d'anthropologie socio-culturelle sur l'économie politique se sont focalisés sur le néolibéralisme, la condition globale de redistribution du risque social, des privilèges et de la responsabilité. Ces recherches demeurent cependant peu concernées, en règle générale, par le langage. Inspirés par le vingt-cinquième anniversaire de l'essai fondateur de Susan Gal "Language and Political Economy", les essais rassemblés ici prennent au sérieux le défi posé aux études du néolibéralisme, à savoir le fait que les économies politiques connaissent une transformation, empiriquement et analytiquement, après 1989. Ce-faisant, ils proposent de nouvelles voies bénéficiant à la fois à la recherche en anthropologie linguistique et aux études du néolibéralisme et des économies politiques contemporaines. En particulier, ces



essais (1) identifient les impasses des analyses inspirées par le travail de Michel Foucault qui conçoivent le pouvoir en tant que gouvernementalité, (2) émettent des hypothèses quand à la manière dont des formes politico-économiques émergentes donnent lieu à une nouvelle théorisation des “institutions” comme catégorie d’analyse en sciences humaines, (3) problématisent notre appréhension de la place du langage dans les processus de réification, (4) prennent en compte et élaborent des théories sur les formes spécifiques de réflexivité qui accompagnent souvent la logique néolibérale.

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