CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

HANKUK UNIVERSITY
OF FOREIGN STUDIES

ARTICLE

The Translation Machine: Exploring the Infrastructures of Valorization under Semiocapitalism

Aurora Donzelli (iD)

Alma Mater Studiorum-Università di Bologna, Department of History and Cultures, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
Email: aurora.donzelli@unibo.it

Abstract

In a contemporary global political economy marked by the increasing semiotization of economic production, the commodification of political communication, and the fusion between media and capital, this special issue turns to the notion of "translation" to further our understanding of the role of language and semiosis within contemporary capitalism. Contrary to its conventional definition as inter-linguistic transfer of semantic meaning, we propose to view translation as a metasemiotic infrastructure for speeding up and scaling up production and for crafting forms of sociality and subjectivity conducive to capitalist valorization. The articles in this collection ethnographically explore the working of translation across registers, channels, modalities, semiotic fields, and ontological orders (as well as linguistic codes). Our goal is to analyze how translation affords the global circulation of standardized discursive protocols and institutional policy bundles, and enables the formation of politico-juridical networks of corporate personhood and (neo-)liberal governmentality. Furthermore, we investigate how translation can be resisted, sabotaged, or made invisible, showing how its semiotic metamarks can be alternatively disguised or highlighted within the regimes of uniqueness and seriality underlying contemporary forms of commodity production. This Introduction provides the theoretical backdrop underlying these diverse contributions.

Keywords: capitalism; entextualization; neoliberalism; semiotic ideology; translation; valorization

Swimming in translation

Translation has long haunted anthropological theory and practice. Despite the often-flaunted representation of anthropological work as a form of cross-cultural translation, practitioners' attempts at producing systematic reflections on the topic have generally

resulted in a series of conceptual bottlenecks and dead-end debates.[1] As in "the fish in the water" parable made famous by David Foster Wallace (1996), anthropologists have been immersed in a sea of translation metaphors, translation practices, and translation theories for too long to be capable, until recently, to make translation an object of direct inquiry.[2]

Variously conceptualized as a core data-gathering method of the ethnographic craft (Conklin 1968, 12; Rubel and Rosman 2003, 1), an epistemological pillar of the discipline (Hanks and Severi 2015, 7–8), or a technology of colonial domination (Asad 1987; Rafael 1993), translation is both a central metaphor and an elusive object of the anthropological imagination.[3] At once impossible and unavoidable, translation has been either under- or overtheorized, remaining somehow suspended between a narrow understanding of cross-linguistic glossing and a simultaneously expansive and fuzzy notion of interpretative negotiation across social worlds. If for linguists and language-oriented scholars, translation has long been conceptualized as a "mere heuristic" (Hanks and Severi 2015, 2), remaining a (largely unproblematized) assemblage of methods (such as recording, transcribing, glossing, parsing, and so forth), for sociocultural anthropologists, translation has mainly constituted a hyper-metaphor of sorts. Driven by simplistic conflations between linguistic and cultural translation (Silverstein 2003, 94), sociocultural reflections have often revolved around highly speculative questions such as "is translation possible?" and "is translation ethical?" While the first question entails a cognitive and ontological examination of the relationship between words and world(s) and the relative (in)commensurability between different linguistic systems, the politico-moral debates foreground the power imbalances between languages.[4] In reminding us that translation has been often the terrain of "ethnocentric violence" (Venuti 1995, 20), this second line of enquiry has often resulted in the seemingly irreducible polarization between two main translation strategies (Rubel and Rosman 2003, 7). The first strategy, commonly called "domestication," seeks to minimize the exotic coefficient of the source text, assimilating it to the conventions of the target readers (Nida 1964). The second, instead, is termed "resistive" and aims

---

[1] For excellent recent anthropological discussions of translation conundra, see Rubel and Rosman (2003), Hanks (2015), Hanks and Severi (2015), Gal (2023). Silverstein (2003, 76) offered one the most uncompromising critiques of "millennia of wishful as well as wistful theorizing about 'translation' and its various (im)possibilities."

[2] The story, used as the kickoff of a legendary commencement speech delivered at Kenyon College in 2005, appears in a fictional conversational exchange in Foster Wallace's novel (1996, 445) *Infinite Jest*: "This wise old whiskery fish swims up to three young fish and goes, 'Morning, boys, how's the water?' and swims away; and the three young fish watch him swim away and look at each other and go, 'What the fuck is water?' and swim away."

[3] As Hanks and Severi (2015, 7–8) highlighted, "almost any ethnographer faces the task of translating words and concepts from one language to another, […] because to 'do ethnography' is to make descriptions, judgments, actions, and theories proper to a specific culture understood in the language of social anthropology."

[4] As Hanks (2015, 21) points out, the topic of (un)translatability has been recently revamped by the ontological turn in anthropology, becoming the focus of contemporary debates on comparative ontologies (Descola 2013 [2005]) and perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 2004). For an overview and critical appraisal of these ontoepistemological dilemmas, see Gal (2023, 179), Hanks and Severi (2015), and Silverstein (2003).

at foreignizing a text, by retaining something "of the foreignness of the original" (Shuttleworth and Cowie 2004, 59).

In this Special Issue, we take a different stance. Drawing on linguistic anthropology and allied fields of studies, the contributors to this collection focus on translation as an object of ethnographic investigation. They look at how translation is construed and how it works within specific political economies to unearth its material effects on people's social lives and imagination. Today's capitalism, as Anna Tsing (2015, 133) has shown in her ethnography of matsutake mushrooms supply chain, has increasingly become a "translation machine." Ensuing from the demise of industrial production and the crisis of the Fordist paradigm, the novel configuration of capitalist accumulation and valorization no longer revolves around factory work, as suggested, among others, by neo-workerist theorists (Marazzi 2008; Berardi 2009; Fumagalli 2015). Rather, contemporary capitalism relies on "acts of translation across varied social and political spaces" (Tsing 2015, 62).

This collection of articles is, thus, an invitation to examine more closely (and more literally) the specific acts and ideologies of translation underlying capitalist world-making. Our goal is to explore how equivalents are made or undone, how networks are forged or dismantled under contemporary forms of what Franco Berardi (2009), following Baudrillard (1999 [1970]), calls semiocapitalism. Namely, the progressive extension of the production process to activities that belong to the realm of social life, reproduction, and communication, and the increasing deployment of language and semiotic labor as primary tools for the production of value (see also Lazzarato 1996; Negri 1999, 83; Arvidsson 2006, 126; Agha 2011). Putting linguistic and economic anthropology in dialogue with a variety of different scholarly traditions (Science and Technology Studies, neo-workerist theory, continental semiotics, and Sociology of Translation), the articles contained herein embrace a novel approach to "translation" and propose to use it as a lockpick to examine the role of language and semiosis within contemporary forms of capitalist governmentality, value extraction, and global circulation.

Translation beyond denotation and across semiotic fields

During the last two-plus decades, linguistic anthropologists have developed highly innovative and productive approaches to translation by questioning the "ideological focus on denotational textuality" underlying traditional European construals [of language] (Silverstein 2003, 75–76). In so doing, they have contributed to disentangle the concept of translation from age-old debates over its (im)possibility, opening new perspectives on three interrelated aspects of translation: its embeddedness within culturally and socio-historically specific ideologies of languages and humanity (Keane 2007; Hanks 2012; Schieffelin 2014), its implication in the workings of political economy (Keane 2000; Nakassis 2013; Gal 2015, 2023; Agha 2017), its role as a semiotic infrastructure of circulation mediated by processes of entextualization and re-contextualization (Handman 2018; Gal 2023).

Jakobson's (1959) semiotic reformulation of translation along three different typologies has been key in backgrounding the narrow understanding of translation as a

cross-linguistic form of semantic transfer, highlighting translation's indexical and non-verbal dimensions.[5] Indeed, besides interlingual translation, or "*translation proper* [that is] the interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language," Jakobson's classic tripartition identified two additional typologies. The former, which he termed "intralingual translation" occurs in any instance of paraphrasis, circumlocution, reported speech, or dictionary definition, and entails "the *rewording* or interpretation of verbal signs by other signs of the same language." The latter (called "intersemiotic translation or *transmutation*") concerns "the interpretation of verbal signs by signs of a non-verbal sign system" (Jakobson 1959, 233, emphasis in the original). Seen in this perspective, translation is not a simple form of binary transcodification, but a complex and dynamic form of transformative action.[6]

Silverstein (2003, 83–84) aptly introduced the concept of "transduction" to simultaneously convey the creative potential and inevitable "slippage" underlying the indexical dimension of translation.[7] In the realm of physics, transducers are devices (such as hydroelectric generators; or dynamo hubs) that can be used to convert, not without some degree of dispersion, a kind of energy (e.g., mechanical) into another (e.g., electric). In a like fashion, processes of translation transcend the mere lexico-grammatical plane of interlinguistic denotational overlaps and entail transplanting complex systems of (linguistically and culturally bound) indexical signs into a different context of social indexicalities. While the denotational sense is translatable by means of finding an overlapping (albeit not identical) term, this is not the case for the "indexical penumbra" of words (Silverstein 2003, 89). Bluntly put, as does Gal (2023, 181): "How should an American Southerner, talking to Northerners in a Civil War movie sound in Turkish dubbing? The stereotyped American identities and the speech registers that signal them would have to be reproduced by a different set of signs indicating (somewhat) analogous relationships in Turkish language-culture." As we will see, in denial of the challenges of transductive mismatches and slippages, an important feature of the semiotic ideology of contemporary capitalism concerns the assumption of seamless translatability, complete interoperability of coding systems, and all-encompassing transduction to ensure maximally extensive circulation.

Since the millennium's turn, a similar concern for the metasemiotic processes of calibration and gradual transformation unleashed by translation has infused debates within continental semiotics (Dusi and Nergaard 2000). Driven, at least in part, by Juri Lotman's (2005) theory of the semiosphere, understood as a continuum of semiotic systems, a broadened notion of translation and a renewed interest in the relations between different signifying systems have emerged among European semioticians (Fabbri 2000; Eco 2003). Also stemming from Jakobson's (1959) triadic typology but proceeding

---

[5]Standard definitions frame translation as "the transfer of meaning between languages" (Steiner 1998, 287).

[6]And indeed, it is not by accident that Jakobson (1959) chose as a synonym of intersemiotic translation the alternative term of "transmutation" (Dusi 2015, 182).

[7]It should be noted that Silverstein's (2003) notion of transduction resonates with Hjelmslev's (1969 [1943]) – who also deployed the term to refer to a form of intersemiotic translation "between semiotic systems with different matters, substance and forms of expression" (Dusi 2015, 182) – and with Greimas' (Greimas 1966) concept of transposition, which indicates intertextual transformations from natural language to other "sensorial orders."

without nearly any interlocution with the North American linguistic anthropological tradition, this literature has focused on intersemiotic translations/transductions, seen as "a transferral of content from a source text to a target text by means of (local) structures of stylistic equivalence" (Calabrese 2000, 113–114).

Reflecting, with Jakobson (1959), on the conceptual boundaries of translation and its possible extension beyond the transfer of meaning across two allegedly independent natural languages, these scholars analyze transpositions between literary and audiovisual texts (Costa 1993; Marrone 2009), cinema and theater (Helbo 1997), painting and cinema (Costa 1991), thus exploring multifarious forms of translation across textual constructions. As Dusi (2015, 181) points out, this scholarly field has been primarily concerned with determining to what extent intersemiotic processes can be considered full-fledged forms of translation or whether they should be more properly (and metaphorically) understood as forms of "adaptation" (Eco 2000, 2003, 158), "transposition" (Greimas 1966, 14; Fabbri 2000), or "expressive equivalence" (Calabrese 2000, 113–114).

These sophisticated analyses of the transposition of novels into films, sculptures into poems, paintings into photographs, etc., display, however, little or no interest for embedding intersemiotic translation into political economy. Continental scholarship on intersemiotic translation has, indeed, focused almost exclusively on aesthetic texts. To gain a perspective on translation as a field for the enactment of "trials of strength" (Latour 1988, 201) and as an infrastructure for the extraction and circulation of value we need to turn to semiotically informed works in anthropology and sociology.

Translation as network and infrastructure of global circulation

In a memorable ethnographic study of a controversy about how to remedy the steep decline in the population of scallops (a highly valued delicatessen) in St. Brieuc Bay (Normandy coast), Michel Callon (1984) described the interactions between marine biologists, fishermen, and scallops as they negotiated different interpretations and definitions of the situation. In so doing, Callon (1984) outlined the basic principles of the Sociology of Translation, a novel paradigm which he defined as primarily concerned with the continuous making, remaking (and undoing) of networks of people, ideas, things, and resources around and through which translation processes are produced. Drawing on Michel Serres's (1974) earlier philosophical formulation of translation as the process of making connections between two domains, or simply as establishing communication, Callon (1980, 211) defined translation as a process which "creates convergences and homologies by relating things that were previously different." Together with Latour, Callon developed a vastly expanded notion of translation, which similarly to the forms of transduction and intersemiotic equivalence discussed earlier extends far beyond the interlingual transfer of denotational meaning.

Translation, according to Callon and Latour (1981, 279), thus includes "all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on the behalf of another actor or force." Central to Callon and Latour's conceptualization of translation is the notion of "trials of strength" (Callon 1984; Latour 1988), whereby actants strive to gain speaking authority and enroll others in networks that

can be mobilized to impose their own interests and interpretation of reality. Since, as Latour (1988, 158) points out, "nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else," networks need to be established through equivalences forged through semiotic/material translations of entities aimed at enrolling allies.

In her ethnographic analysis of the matsutake mushroom trade, Anna Tsing (2015, 315) has drawn on Callon and Latour's insights on human and non-human networks emerged through semiotic and material processes of translation to foreground the role of translation as a main infrastructure for the rearticulation of contemporary capitalist modes of production based on control over inventory rather than labor.[8] If, as Latour (1988, 170) has claimed, in order to exist, markets require equivalents and equivalents are to be made through translation, "capitalism is a system of commensuration" (Tsing 2013, 39), which relies on translation for the extraction of value through chain-like sequences of product assessment aimed at purifying the commodity from the non-capitalist "gift-like social relations" (Tsing 2013, 23) that went into its production. While a longstanding tradition within anthropological theory has postulated a radical opposition between societies based on gifts and societies based on commodity exchange (see Arjun 1986, for a review and a critique of this literature), Tsing (2013) proposes to recast this distinction not as an ontological divide between two different modes of sociality and value-production, but rather as a heuristics approach to capitalism's modus operandi, for capitalism depends on transforming non-capitalist objects and social forms (i.e., natural resources, gifts, personal relations of obligation, affection, and reciprocity) into capitalist commodities and transactions.

As Gal (2015, 233) has noted, Latourian translation is imbued with power-laden dynamics of appropriation, incorporation, and subsumption (see Hull, this Special Issue). However, as Bauman and Briggs (2003, 4–10) have highlighted, Latour has paradoxically overlooked the role of language and its modern construction as an autonomous entity in the processes of translation he discussed. The articles in this special issue aim to supplement the Sociology of Translation with a closer examination of the role of specific acts and ideologies of translation within the production of forms of inequality, exclusion, and subsumption that underlie the capitalist production and circulation of value.

Translation and semiotic ideologies

Linguistic anthropology offers a fundamental contribution to further the understanding of the dynamics of power, authority, and legitimacy unfolding between source and target languages within colonial contexts and missionary settings (Duranti *et al.,* 1995; Keane 2007; Hanks 2012; Schieffelin 2014; Handman 2018). These studies have revealed how translation is not a straightforward procedure of transcoding,

---

[8]Unlike traditional forms of capitalist extraction of surplus-value pivoting on exerting control over labor (e.g., by extending working hours or optimizing the assembly line organization), contemporary capitalism requires new forms of subsumption. As Fumagalli (2015) points out, contemporary cognitive bio-capitalism operates through life subsumption, which conflates the distinction between formal and real subsumption of industrial capitalism, producing new forms of subjectivity based on debt (Lazzarato 1996), precarity, and the construction of an entrepreneurial self.

but a culture specific and historically variable construct, entangled within specific semiotic and linguistic ideologies. Indeed, ideas and practices of translation and of (un-)translatability are connected to metalinguistic and ontological concepts of denotation and related models of humanity (Williams 1977, 21).

Analyzing the encounter between Calvinist missionaries and ancestral ritualists in Sumba (eastern Indonesia), Webb Keane (2007) has showed how "semiotic ideology" (i.e., people's cultural assumptions about what signs are and how they function) mediate different conceptualizations of morality, discursive genres, forms of social conduct, and modes of production. Bambi Schieffelin (2014) has explored the encounter between Evangelical Protestant missionaries and Bosavi people dwelling in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, analyzing the moral and epistemological assumptions underlying the missionaries' efforts at translating the Bible into Bosavi and the ensuing linguistic and cultural transformations. A similar focus on translation as a device of cultural and linguistic shift imbues the work by William Hanks (2012, 2015) on the XVIth century missionization of Yucatec people. Departing from the conventional focus on interlingual transfer whereby "authoritative texts in a dominant language are translated into a subordinated language," Hanks (2015, 23) underscores the centrality of intralingual (and intracultural) translation, which, he argues, is always an underlying presupposition of any form of crosslinguistic translation.[9] According to Hanks (2015, 36), Franciscans' translation of Spanish and Latin texts into Maya did not simply revolve around "a binary relation" between the languages of the missionaries and the missionized, rather it entailed, in a way similar to the Bosavi case described by Schieffelin (2014), the production of Maya *reducido*, that is, a "neologistic register of Maya, purged and realigned to suit the needs of Christian practice, governance, and civility" (Hanks 2012, 450). Interestingly, Hanks (2015, 36) compares the neologized version of Maya with the semiotic function of money as a universal equivalent (Marx 1976 [1867]): Maya *reducido* "has elements of both languages, and serves as a medium of exchange between them [...], [functioning in a way] similar to a currency system into which value from incommensurable domains (say, labor and cattle, or Christianity and Post-Classic Maya religion) can be converted and hence compared." The comparison between speech registers and currency systems points to a longstanding analogy between linguistic and economic exchange underlying the connection between translation and capitalism. According to Marx (1973 [1857-8], 93), "ideas [...] have first to be translated out of their mother tongue into a foreign language in order to circulate, in order to become exchangeable." In a like fashion, continues Marx (1973 [1857–8], 93), money functions as an inter-language, which provides a "third, objective entity which can be re-exchanged for everything without distinction." Likewise, in a famous analogy, Saussure (2006 [1916], 79), argued that both linguistics and economics "are concerned with a system for equating things of different orders – labor

---

[9]Human languages are, according to Hanks (2015, 35), endowed with the universal capacity for self-translation: "in order to translate into a second language, that language must be self-interpreting."

and wages in one and a signified and signifier in the other."[10] The arbitrary connection between signifier and signified is thus compared with the notion of money as a universal equivalent, which depends on a socially established convention. In this perspective, translation is not only a technology of conversion entangled within specific ideologies of language and humanity, but also a key infrastructure for the circulation of texts (Handman 2018, 154–155) and values, which pivots on contextually negotiated forms of intersemiotic translation (Latour 1988; Keane 2000; Agha 2017).

In his semiotic analysis of currency as a form of "pecuniary media," Asif Agha (2017, 295) has showed how sociohistorical forms of money (such as coins and currency bills, but also cowries and woodpecker scalps) are tied to culture specific activity routines and "socially recognized registers of conduct" (Agha 2017, 293). In this way, we may better appreciate how the large-scale standardization of pecuniary media (Agha 2017, 297) combined with semiotic ideologies of seamless inter-translatability pivoting on a Saussurean conception of the arbitrariness of signs (Keane 2000, 2007) have been conducive to the regimes of value, market rationality, and pecuniary culture underlying contemporary global capitalism.[11]

Translation, entextualization, and capitalist scalability

Translation plays a key role within the projects of material and linguistic scalability of our present moment. Endowed with the potential to extract and reframe signs, utterances, speech genres, registers, and semiotic activities of various kind, translation is a form of recontextualization (Gal 2023, 179–80) or a citational practice (Nakassis 2013), which operates as a powerful infrastructure of scalability. A fundamental aspect of contemporary capitalism, scalability is the ability to expand without changing the business model (Mintz 1985, 47; Tsing 2015, 40). Epitomized by the colonial sugarcane plantation, scalability entails the dissemination of a standardized mode of production (and consumption) combined with the erasure of context-specific dynamics and interdependence relations (Donzelli this Special Issue). As Mintz (1985) pointed out, colonial monocultural agriculture relied on a sugarcane plant anthropogenically modified for large-scale mass production. This domesticated cultivar is artificially propagated through the planting of cuttings from a parent plant – a process akin to cloning – which results in highly replaceable and genetically identical plants. Recontextualization and serial (re-)production and are thus key to scalability, which is "oblivious to the indeterminacies of encounter [… and] banishes meaningful diversity, that is, diversity that might change things" (Tsing 2015, 38). Linguistic anthropological analyses of capitalism's translation machine inevitably require a close analysis of processes of entextualization and recontextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Kuipers 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996). Indeed, the possibility of extracting discourse from

---

[10]On the analogy between economic and linguistic exchange, see also Irvine (1989) and Manning (2006, 273). For a linguistic-materialist critique of the Lausanne School marginalist value theory, underlying the Saussurean notion of linguistic and economic value, see Petrilli and Ponzio (2020).

[11]Agha (2017, 297) explicitly compares the pecuniary and linguistic processes of standardization.

its original context of production and recontextualize it in a discursive and chronotopic elsewhere through translation and similar procedures is a major technology of scalability.

This line of inquiry is connected to the recent interest in linguistic materialities and the notion of infrastructure along with the impulse to problematize entrenched distinctions between material and immaterial, tangible and intangible, and human and non-human (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2017; Handman 2018; Schneider and Heyd 2024; Keane 2025). In the increasingly digitally encoded backdrop of our late capitalist world systems, the longstanding distinction between (material technoeconomic) base and (intangible linguistic) superstructure has become untenable. Indeed, long before the so-called infrastructural turn (Larkin 2013), Maurice Godelier (1978, 763) called for a reformulation of the notion of infrastructure, which, he claimed, had to be expanded to include all aspects of relations of production – a point that closely resonates with linguistic anthropological analyses of semiotic activities as relations of production.

In this perspective, the articles in this collection aim to provide fine-grained analyses of the working of translation within capitalist production and reproduction. Our contemporary moment is imbued with a distinctive ideology of scale (Tsing 2000, 347) characterized by the aspiration to erase contextual differences and local systems of indexical practice, establish strategic equivalences between individuals and corporate persons (Hull, this Special Issue), enact the global circulation of apparently completely detachable bundles of texts and behaviors, and encode the world into numerical strings of 1s and 0s (Introna 2011). Since the 1990s, transnational lending agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank began to divest in the building of major infrastructures (roads, dams, bridges) and adopted a novel model of infrastructure building aimed at developing procedural protocols to foster transparency and accountability (Tania Murray 2007; Donzelli 2019). In this light, the pragmatic standardization of discursive genres typical of contemporary audit cultures (Strathern 2000) is a core technology of scalability: it operates by translating centrifugal discursive practices into highly regimented protocols to enable the serial reproduction of replicable work templates that can be extended to greater scales, but also sabotaged, resisted, or simply missed or misunderstood (Donzelli 2019, 2023).

One of the defining features of contemporary capitalism is a specific form of pragmatic standardization and a specific metapragmatic attitude towards translation, one which seems to deny the existence of situated networks of indexical relations and aspires to establish regimes of perfect and seamless intertranslatability across codes, modalities, ontological orders to enact projects of extreme scalability, that is, the becoming bigger and bigger of a production unit. In this sense, we are increasingly confronted with institutional logics that operate through a "copycat paradigm" (Donzelli 2023), that is, the borrowing of best practices protocols, processes of assessment and quality assurance (QA), which are tout-court transferred from one context to another, with deliberate indifference to different administrative arrangements, politico-economic conditions, and cultural contexts, as if the original context were irrelevant (Gershon 2011). Of course, as Nielsen (this Special Issue) demonstrates, these dreams of radical entextualization are confronted with a series of local readaptations, failed uptakes, and misunderstandings (see also Donzelli 2019, 2023). Linguistic

and semiotic anthropologists are particularly well equipped to produce ethnographically nuanced critical analyses of the metastatic spread of neoliberal capitalism, of its successes and its failures or lack of grip.

Contributions to this special issue

The contributors to this Special Issue are linguistic and semiotic-oriented sociocultural anthropologists who have analyzed the making and unmaking of translation in disparate settings: rural practices in Central Italy (Donzelli), glass-making and fashion family firms in Venice and Mantua, Northern Italy (Perrino), New Delhi call centers (Nielsen), Paris city council and homelessness outreach programs (Del Percio and Vigouroux), the counterfactual elsewhere of Southeast Asian eco-cities (Luvaas and Chio), and the capitalist semiosphere (Hull). Despite the diversity of locales and phenomena analyzed, we share a commitment to embed translation into political economy. Going beyond the "prototypical case" of translation as the carrying over of meaning across self-contained codes (Gal 2015, 226), we view translation as a metasemiotic infrastructure of capitalist valorization.

Our goal is to explore how apparently disparate processes of assessment, soft-skills training, city branding, municipal censual efforts, digital encoding, and commodity enregisterment all operate through forms of intersemiotic and crossmodal translation, which, by turning quality into quantity, experiences into algorithmic models, individuals into numbers, affects into empathy statements, feelings into architectural renderings, homelessness into infographics, are driven by similar projects of valorization. In so doing, we suggest that there is great analytic promise in the study of the actual operations, whereby capitalism extract value through various forms of translation. Historically driven by profit maximization, capitalism is an ever-changing dynamic system characterized by the continuous search for new ways to generate value. Its current configuration entails the increasing dematerialization of capital and labor, the blurring of the distinction between production and consumption, and the use of signs and information as main infrastructures of valorization (Irvine 1989; LiPuma and Lee 2004; Arvidsson 2006; Manning 2006, 2010; Berardi 2009; Agha 2011; Duchêne and Heller 2012; Nakassis 2013). The papers collected herein suggest that far from being a trite topic or a conceptually fuzzy lens, translation is both an essential device for capitalist value projects and a productive analytic prism for understanding our contemporary moment.

Drawing on fieldwork with small farmers and zero-mile food activists in Central Italy, Aurora Donzelli shows how semiotic interactions around indigenous food production and distribution hinge on performances of (un-)translatability and generate metalinguistic commentaries on two parallel processes: the encompassment of regional linguistic varieties within a national standard and the pragmatic regimentation of rural labor and ways of life. The article discusses how supply chains entail the conversion of vernacular codes into global languages to optimize agribusiness production and look at how the sensuous materiality of regional products may obstruct denotational translatability during sampling and tasting events.

Matthew S. Hull focuses on the semiotics of corporate persons on which pivots the organization of contemporary capitalism. Etymologically derived from the Latin

verb *corporare* ("to form a body"), corporations rely on acts of translation that create unified legal actors and aim at erasing the differences between corporate and natural persons. Hull carefully dissects the juridico-political translations deployed in the making of corporate persons and in the production of strategic forms of incorporation and partitioning (into subsidiary companies) and shows how the semiotic production of equivalences between natural and corporate persons is never complete.

Analyzing the narrative production of regimes of uniqueness underlying the "Made in Italy" brand identity, Sabina Perrino entertains a different reflection on the semiotic production of equivalences between corporate persons and natural individuals. Her analysis shows how such equivalences are instrumental in associating a morally inflected sense of authenticity to the firms' identity and to the commodities they produce. Perrino highlights how practices of intersemiotic translation and ideologies of untranslatability produce regimes of singularity and uniqueness (epitomized by the "cultural DNA" biological metaphor), repurposing scalability toward the production of intimacy and relatedness and hinting at alternative projects of scale-making.

In her ethnographic exploration of the processes of entextualization underlying the global service industry, Kristina Nielsen discusses the translation slippages and the semiotic frictions occurring within outsourcing processes to India. Her analysis of the standardization of empathy statements in soft skill training in New Delhi call centers highlights how translation is at once always generative and incomplete. Brent Luvaas and Jenny Chio discuss a different way in which feelings are translated into commodifiable qualities through novel technologies of architectural renderings. Their article focuses on the visual presentation of eco-city projects spreading in Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia) to analyze how somatic experiences, produced through eco-cities renderings, are deployed as virtual translational technologies for the commodification of sustainability, whereby climate anxieties are combined with "globalized middle-class lifestyle aspirations" and directed to real estate speculative projects.

Alfonso Del Percio and Cécil Vigouroux deal with an outcome of the structural inequalities and sociospatial reconfigurations ensuing from speculative urban renewal projects: homelessness. They examine a different case of crossmodal translation: the homeless census activities undertaken by Paris city council in collaboration with volunteers and show how counting and the "spectacularization of numbers" are a flexible technology of governmentality. Their article discusses the recent implementation of a homeless outreach program in Paris to examine how quantitative and statistical data translate social facts into municipal policies or national political propaganda.

In our diverse ethnographic endeavors, we ask what is considered (un)translatable and when are the semiotic metamarks of translation disguised or highlighted to produce unique prototypes, faithful copies, fraudulent imitations, and strategic subsidiaries. Indeed, in providing fine-grained ethnographic accounts of the work of translation, we also explore situations in which attempts at translation generate frictions and misunderstandings (Nielsen), as well as strategic claims of alleged untranslatability (Donzelli and Perrino). At the same time, we analyze the semiotic procedures whereby translational encompassment or intersemiotic and crossmodal translations are made inconspicuous (Hull) and neutrally unproblematic as in the futuristic aesthetics of sustainable affluence discussed by Luvaas and Chio or in the

spectacularization of census described by Del Percio and Vigouroux. Our hope is that our analyses of the workings of the translation machine in which we are all caught may stimulate further explorations into the dreams and pitfalls of capitalist portability (Ong 2007).

References

Agha, Asif. 2011. "Commodity Registers." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 21 (1): 22–53. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1395.2011.01081.x.

Agha, Asif. 2017. "Money Talk and Conduct from Cowries to Bitcoin." *Signs and Society* 5 (2): 293–355. https://doi.org/10.1086/693775.

Arjun, Appadurai. 1986. "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value." In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 3–63. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Arvidsson, Adam. 2006. *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture*. Oxford: Routledge.

Asad, Talal. 1987. "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Anthropology." In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, 141–64. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1999 [1970]. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. 1999. London: Sage.

Bauman, Richard and Charles Briggs. 1990. "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Social Life." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19: 59–88. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.19.100190.000423.

Bauman, Richard and Charles Briggs. 2003. *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Berardi, Franco. 2009. *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*. New York: Autonomedia.

Calabrese, Omar. 2000. "Lo Strano Caso Dell'equivalenza Imperfetta (Modeste Osservazioni Sulla Traduzione Intersemiotica)." *Versus* 85–87: 101–20.

Callon, Michel. 1980. "Struggles and Negotiations to Define What Is Problematic and What Is Not: The Socio-logic of Translation." In *The Social Process of Scientific Investigation: Sociology of Sciences*, edited by Karin D. Knorr, Roger Krohn and Richard P. Whitley, 197–219. Dordrecht: Springer.

Callon, Michel. 1984. "Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay." *The Sociological Review* 32 (1): 196–233. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1984.tb00113.x.

Callon, Michel and Bruno Latour. 1981. "Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macro- Structure Reality and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So." In *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Toward an Integration of Micro and Macro-sociologies*, edited by Karin Knorr-Cetina and Aaron V. Cicourel, 277–303. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Cavanaugh, Jillian R. and Shalini Shankar. 2017. *Language and Materiality: Ethnographic and Theoretical Explorations*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Conklin, Harold. 1968. "Ethnography." *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 5: 115–208.

Costa, Antonio. 1991. *Cinema E Pittura*. Torino: Loescher.

Costa, Antonio. 1993. *Immagine Di Un'immagine: Cinema E Letteratura*. Torino: UTET.

Descola, Philippe. 2013 [2005]. *Beyond nature and culture*. Translated by Janet Loyd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Donzelli, Aurora. 2019. *Methods of Desire: Language, Morality, and Affect in Neoliberal Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Donzelli, Aurora. 2023. "The Copycat Paradigm: Italian 'Class-A' Journals and the Paradoxes of Excellence." *Language, Culture and Society* 5 (2): 182–98. https://doi.org/10.1075/lcs.00041.don.

Duchêne, Alexandre and Monica Heller. 2012. *Language in Late Capitalism: Pride and Profit*. New York: Routledge.

Duranti, Alessandro, Elinor Ochs, and Elia K. Ta'ase. 1995. "Change and Tradition in Literacy Instruction in a Samoan-American Community." *Educational Foundations* 9: 57–74.

Dusi, Nicola. 2015. "Intersemiotic Translation: Theories, Problems, Analysis." *Semiotica* 206: 181–205. https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2015-0018.

Dusi, Nicola, and Nergaard, Siri. 2000 "Sulla traduzione intersemiotica.". *Versus*. Vol. 85–87: 3–54

Eco, Umberto. 2000. "Traduzione E Interpretazione." *Versus* 85–87: 55–100.

Eco, Umberto. 2003. *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Fabbri, Paolo. 2000. "Due Parole Sul Trasporre." *Versus* 85–87: 271–84.

Fumagalli, Andrea. 2015. "The Concept of Subsumption of Labour to Capital: Towards Life Subsumption in Bio-cognitive Capitalism." In *Reconsidering Value and Labour in the Digital Age*, edited by Christian Fuchs and Eran Fisher, 224–45. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gal, Susan. 2015. "Politics of Translation." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (1): 225–40. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102214-013806.

Gal, Susan. 2023. "Rethinking Translation and Transduction." In *A New Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, edited by Alessandro Duranti, Rachel George and Robin Conley Riner, 178–93. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Gershon, Ilana. 2011. "Neoliberal Agency." *Current Anthropology* 52 (4): 537–55. https://doi.org/10.1086/660866.

Godelier, Maurice. 1978. "Infrastructures, Societies, and History." *Current Anthropology* 19 (4): 763–71. https://doi.org/10.1086/202197.

Greimas, Algirdas J. J. 1966. *Sémantique Structural*. Paris: Larousse.

Handman, Courtney. 2018. "The Language of Evangelism: Christian Cultures of Circulation beyond the Missionary Prologue." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47 (1): 149–65. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102317-050331.

Hanks, William F. 2012. "Birth of a Language: The Formation and Spread of Colonial Yucatec Maya." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 68 (4): 449–71. https://doi.org/10.3998/jar.0521004.0068.401.

Hanks, William F. 2015. "The Space of Translation." In *Translating Worlds: The Epistemological Space of Translation*, edited by Carlo Servi and William Hanks, 21–49. Chicago: HAU Books.

Hanks, William and Carlo Severi. 2015. "Introduction." In *Translating Worlds: The Epistemological Space of Translation*, edited by Carlo Servi and William Hanks, 1–20. Chicago: HAU Books.

Helbo, A. 1997. *L'adaptation: Du Théâtre Au Cinema*. Paris: Colin.

Hjelmslev, Louis. 1969 [1943]. *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Introna, Lucas D. 2011. "The Enframing of Code: Agency, Originality and the Plagiarist." *Theory, Culture & Society* 28 (6): 113–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411418131.

Irvine, Judith T. 1989. "When Talk Isn't Cheap: Language and Political Economy." *American Ethnologist* 16 (2): 248–67. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1989.16.2.02a00040.

Jakobson, Roman. 1959. "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation." In *On Translation*, edited by Reuben Arthur Brower, 232–39. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Keane, Webb. 2000. "Money Is No Object: Materiality, Desire, and Modernity in an Indonesian Society." In *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, edited by R. Myers Fred, 65–90. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Keane, Webb. 2007. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Keane, Webb. 2025. *Animals, Robots, Gods: Adventures in the Moral Imagination*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kuipers, Joel C. 1990. *Power in Performance: The Creation of Textual Authority in Weyewa Ritual Speech*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Larkin, Brian. 2013. "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (1): 327–43. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522.

Latour, Bruno. 1988. *The Pasteurization of France*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press.

Lazzarato, Maurizio. 1996. "Immaterial Labor." In *Radical Thought in Italy*, edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, 133–50. Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press.

LiPuma, Edward and Benjamin Lee. 2004. *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lotman, Juri. 2005. "On the Semiosphere." *Sign Systems Studies* 33 (1): 205–29. https://doi.org/10.12697/SSS.2005.33.1.09.

Manning, Paul. 2006. "Words and Things, Goods and Services: Problems of Translation between Language and Political Economy." *Language & Communication* 26 (3–4): 270–84. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2006.02.010.

Manning, Paul. 2010. "The Semiotics of Brand." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39: 33–49. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.012809.104939.

Marazzi, Christian. 2008. *Capital and Language. From the New Economy to the War Economy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Marrone, Gianfranco. 2009. *The Ludovico Cure: On Body and Music in A Clockwork Orange*. Ottawa: Legas.

Marx, Karl. 1973 [1857-8]. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. Translated by Martin Nicolaus.

Marx, Karl. 1976 [1867]. *Capital, Volume I*. 1976. Harmondsworth: Penguin. Translated by Ben Fowkes.

Mintz, Sidney W. 1985. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Viking.

Nakassis, C V. 2013. "Citation and Citationality." *Signs and Society* 1 (1): 51–77. https://doi.org/10.1086/670165.

Negri, Antonio. 1999. "Value and Affect." *Boundary* 26 (2): 77–88.

Nida, Eugene Albert. 1964. *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating*. Netherlands: Brill Archive.

Ong, Aihwa. 2007. "Neoliberalism as a Mobile Technology." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 (1): 3–8. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2007.00234.x.

Petrilli, Susan and Augusto Ponzio. 2020. "Ordinary Language and Economic Language." *Recherches sé´miotiques/Semiotic Inquiry* 40 (2–3): 81–103.

Rafael, Vicente L. 1993. *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Rubel, Paula G. and Abraham Rosman. 2003. *Translating Cultures: Perspectives on Translation and Anthropology*. Oxford: Berg.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. 2006 [1916]. *Course in General Linguistics*. Chicago: Open Court. Translated by Roy Harris.

Schieffelin, Bambi B. 2014. "Christianizing Language and the Dis-placement of Culture in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea." *Current Anthropology* 55 (S10): S226–S237. https://doi.org/10.1086/677896.

Schneider, Britta and Theresa Heyd. 2024. "Introduction: Unthinking Language from a Posthumanist Perspective." *Signs and Society* 12 (1): 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1086/728243.

Serres, Michel. 1974. *Hermes III: La Traduction*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

Shuttleworth, Mark and Moira Cowie. 2004. *Dictionary of Translation Studies*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Silverstein, Michael. 2003. "Translation, Transduction, Transformation: Skating 'Glossando' on Thin Semiotic Ice." In *Translating Cultures*, edited by G. Rubel Paula and Abraham Rosman, 75–105. Oxford: Berg.

Silverstein, Michael and Greg Urban. 1996. *Natural Histories of Discourse*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Steiner, George. 1998. *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Strathern, Marilyn. 2000. *Audit Cultures*. London: Routledge.

Tania Murray, Li. 2007. *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2000. "The Global Situation." *Cultural Anthropology* 15 (3): 327–60. https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2000.15.3.327.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2013. "Sorting Out Commodities: How Capitalist Value Is Made through Gifts." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3 (1): 21–43. https://doi.org/10.14318/hau3.1.003.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Venuti, Lawrence. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2004. "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation." *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2 (1): 1–22.

Wallace, David Foster. 1996. *Infinite Jest*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.