

Transnational trajectories of multilingual workers: Emerging geographies and spatializing practices of mutant sovereignty

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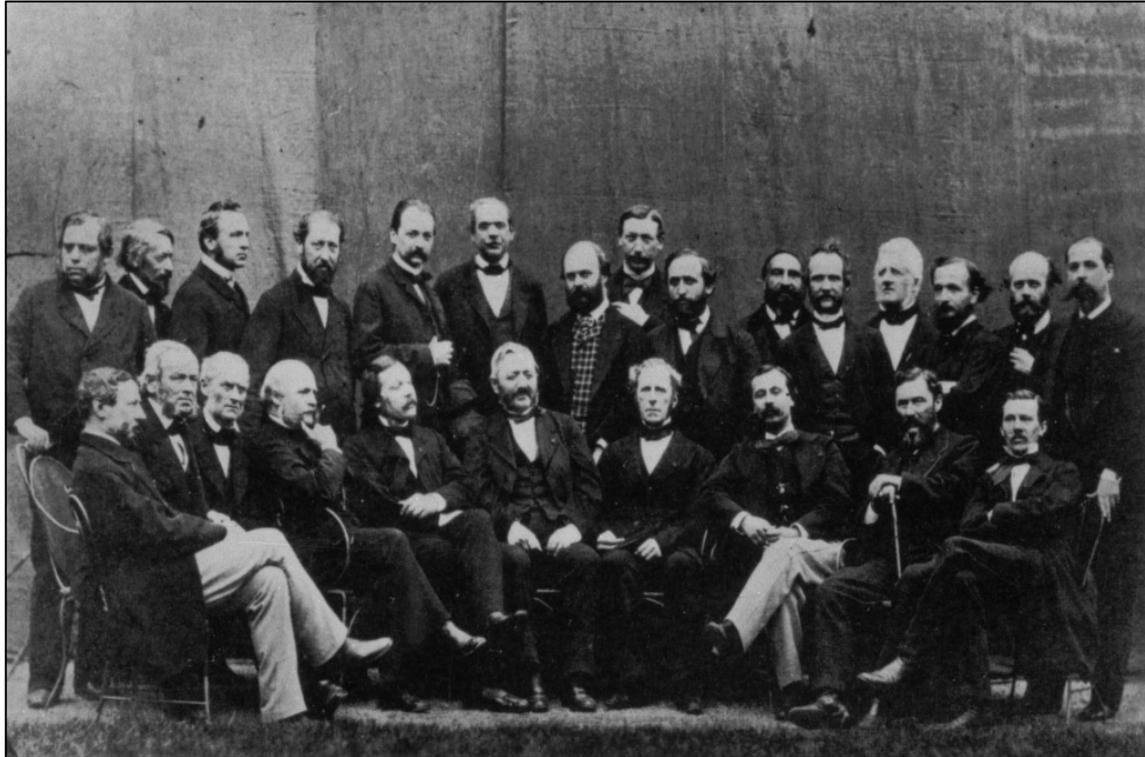
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Bionote

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The image above captures the 1865 Meeting of the International Telegraph Union (ITU) in Paris. The group photo, with only (white bearded male) national representatives seated as members, is used by Easterling (2016) to epitomize ideas of international endeavors as a matter of nation-states coming together as they did for the peace of Westphalia (p. 139). On its website, ITU accompanies this photo with an explicit account of the conditions under which this meeting took place:

“Telegraph wires soon linked major towns in many countries. A submarine telegraph wire (coated in protective gutta percha) was laid between Britain and France in 1850, and a regular service inaugurated the following year. In 1858, the first transatlantic

telegraph cable was laid. But there was a problem. Where lines crossed national borders, messages had to be stopped and translated into the particular system of the next jurisdiction. To simplify matters, regional agreements began to be forged, and in Europe, representatives of 20 States gathered in Paris at an International Telegraph Conference to find ways to overcome barriers and make services more efficient. They would create a framework to standardize telegraphy equipment, set uniform operating instructions, and lay down common international tariff and accounting rules. On 17 May 1865, the first International Telegraph Convention was signed in Paris by its twenty founding members, and the International Telegraph Union (the first incarnation of ITU) was established to supervise subsequent amendments to the agreement” (<https://www.itu.int/en/history/Pages/ITUsHistory.aspx>).

Both artefacts, the photo and the accompanying narrative, can also be regarded as calling into being a set of indexical relationships between land, nationhood, manhood, and the development of global technological infrastructures of knowledge and communication led by European organizations. The story of ITU is also packaged on its website as one of international cooperation among governments, private companies and other stakeholders. More than representatives of the board of an organisation, the white bearded males on the photo can then be seen as signifying what would later become a major expanding form of cultural, political and socioeconomic organisation, one fuelled by institutions and corporations that operate globally while administering nation-based territorialized spaces, labor, knowledge, and life.

Take now the articles in this special issue. With a focus on transnational trajectories of multilingual workers in the 21st century, the volume immerses us into logics emerging out of both historical continuities and disruptures over the last two centuries since ITU’s foundation.

The economic liberal ambition to “overcome barriers and make services more efficient” has certainly driven the integration of national markets into larger cultural and material frames that, as in the case of ITU, have productively iterated the parameters for “uniform operating instructions” and “common international tariff and accounting rules”. It has thus contributed to re-create a globalizing labor market that is increasingly shaped by the activities of a highly complex network of multinational corporations and the regimented flows of workers and capital upon which this network capitalizes.

Such conditions are hardly the outcome of a steady progression, though, and the body of literature engaging with political economy within the social sciences and humanities provides us with key shifting forms of governmentality and accompanying epistemes that have permeated all domains of the everyday life since the end of the Second World War (see, for instance, Harvey, 2005; Foucault, 1978, 1982 [2003], 2008). Of specific relevance are the flexibilization economic policies of the last decades – and their channelling of massive transnational flows of capital via derailing the Keynesian project of national economic steering, for these are frequently linked to new modes of governmentality that are said to be re-ordering social relations away from nationally-centered territorialized spaces, labor, knowledge, and life. And although these matters are becoming apparent, national forms of ordering are far from disappearing, as Fraser reminds us (2003): they just become reconfigured, and sometimes decentered, as the state’s regulatory mechanisms are articulated with those at other levels (2003: 165).

It is in this context, Fraser insists, that studying governmentality with a view to the rational ordering of ground-level social relations remains a vital project, for which she proposes investigation of the objects of intervention, the modes of subjectification, and the mix of repression and regulation (p.167). This is so because, in her view, self-regulated citizens no longer understand themselves just as members of a single integrated national

community; instead, the preferred subject is expected to operate according to a market-based logic whereby she is “obligated to enhance her quality of life through her own decisions. In this new ‘care of self’, everyone is an expert on herself, responsible for managing her own human capital to maximal effect.” (p.168). But this all is far from constituting a backdrop or backgrounding facts against which we scholars in the language disciplines address our objects of research, Blommaert & Bulcaen (2000) would warn us.

As articulated by Garrido & Sabaté-Dalmau (2020) in their introduction to this volume, language and communication are profoundly entrenched with these logics, which in my view keeps calling into question compartmentalized approaches under the rubric of different disciplinary domains of academic knowledge production – as in “this is politics, that is linguistics”. And indeed this globalizing labor market outlined so far is necessarily (re)constituted in the daily (re)production of everyday activities and social relations, these in turn mediated semiotically and communicatively. It is precisely here where Garrido and Sabaté-Dalmau argue for the relevance of sociolinguistic, discourse-analytic and linguistic anthropological approaches: they provide useful lens with which to document the ways in which language both mediates and becomes object of explicit attention/talk in institutionalised arrangements and subject-formation processes that enable (and are enabled by) such arrangements and the wider networks that these are part of. Garrido & Sabaté-Dalmau put it more concisely: “language is here understood as practice and as ideology; that is, as situated, historicized practices in which individuals organize and get organized in society, and as indexes of the norms which get materialized, shape and govern individual/collective sociolinguistic behaviour” (p. ??).

This push for a sociolinguistic, discourse-analytic and linguistic anthropological agenda is in fact well warranted, since there is already a long-established tradition that foregrounds large- scale historical shifts indexed by terms like “the new economy”, “late capitalism” or

“neoliberal globalisation” within such subfields. Among them, those using Foucault as a foundational and repeated reference point have amounted for decades now (see Martín-Rojo, 2017, for an in-depth review), including research on: language ideologies (e.g. Schieffelin, Woolard & Kroskrity, 1998; Kroskrity, 2004); power/knowledge regimes in action (e.g. Goodwin, 1994; Mehan, 1996; Briggs, 2002, 2005); the production of expert discourse on language (Duchêne & Heller, 2007; Duchêne, 2011); the conversationalisation of public discourse (Fairclough, 1989); the technologisation of discourse (Pennycook, 1994); the circulation of texts (Blommaert, 2005); social representation (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Martín Rojo & van Dijk, 1997); linguistic minorities (Jaffe, 1999; Heller, 1999; Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001; Urla, 2012); or language, neoliberal governmentality and subjectification (Urciuoli, 2008; Park, 2011; Flores, 2013; Rampton, 2014; Dlaske, Barakos, Motobayashi & McLaughlin, 2016; Allan & McElhinny, 2017; Del Percio, Flubacher & Duchêne, 2017; Del Percio, 2018; Martín Rojo, 2018; Martín Rojo & Del Percio, 2019).

The latter in the above (non-comprehensive) list is the particular strand in which this special issue is situated, although the contributors in this volume offer new light by bringing about an epistemological focus on *trajectories* in order to “problematize the newer strategies (communicative and otherwise) whereby transnational multilingual workers comply or self-discipline into, and adapt or even subvert ‘fused’ work-language-personhood regimes interplaying at local, national and supranational levels in order to gain access to particular entrepreneurial, labor and citizenship profiles” (Garrido & Sabaté-Dalmau, 2020: p. ???). But the notion of trajectory is always conceptually slippery, and the 5 empirical articles in this volume offer at least two productive ways of angling it in the examination of multilingual workers and entrepreneurial selves. At times, trajectory is epistemologically addressed as a biographical object of analysis, one that is particularly focused on social actors’ professional activities and experiences as these unfold in space and time. On other occasions, trajectory is

taken to be a metapragmatic construct that emerges out of situated social encounters in which social actors enact, negotiate and make sense of meaning and stances. The opportunities of this ambivalence are vast, for it opens up avenues for ethnographic and discourse-based studies of meanings, social categories, experiences and hierarchies of “multilingualism”, “transnationalism” and “work”.

The accounting of trajectory as biography entails, on the one hand, what Heller, Pietikäinen & Pujolar (2018) call “ethnographic tracing”, that is, focusing “on the processes involved in how people and resources circulate over space and time, and how activities persist or change. We pick specific categories of people, practices or phenomena and we follow them: we examine where they appear, when, how often and in what conditions or with what implications” (p. 111). In tracing the links between events across space and time in the analysis of professional trajectories, the contributions to this special issue draw on close ethnographic monitoring of how what happens in specific professional settings contribute to their participants’ access (or lack of it) to subsequent events and thus to the symbolic and material resources that are bounded with them. Considering trajectory as a metapragmatic entity, on the other hand, privileges the analysis of practices whereby models, ideas and categories about biographies get socially recognized as emblematic of social personae as participants involved negotiate social relations. That is to say, this approach reconceptualises trajectory as an explicit object of attention, a narrative practice through which social actors bring about space/time configurations, enact stereotypic figures of personhood (such as that of a given type of “citizen”, “worker” or “speaker”), and foreground the social stances that often come with such configurations and personae (Park, 2017).

Taken together, this twofold approach to trajectory allows the contributors in this special issue to reveal specific alignments of market rationality, sovereignty, and citizenship that mutually constitute distinctive milieus of labor and life at the edge of emergence. I propose in

this discussion to think of these alignments through the lens of Ong's (2006) analysis which I believe constitutes an adequate point of reference with which to articulate the set of paradoxes and contradictions that I see transpiring from the articles in this issue. Certainly, the entrepreneurial self is the recurrent theme of the volume, but more generally the trajectories documented in the 5 empirical articles necessitate of a kaleidoscopic framing of neoliberalism whereby the analysis of semiosis goes hand-in-hand with explicit focus on dynamics of mutations in citizenship and sovereignty.

The need for closer attention to conditions of mutation are outlined by Ong when she claims that [t]he articulation of neoliberal exceptions, citizenship, and sovereignty produces a range of anthropological problems and outcomes (2006: 4). This is so because "populations governed by neoliberal technologies are dependent on others who are excluded from neoliberal considerations" (p. 4). Ong focuses on dynamics of neoliberalism as exception and exceptions to neoliberalism in order to account for daily experiences in settings where neoliberal reforms and exceptional areas of labor regulation (e.g., special economic zones) coexist with pre-existing economic public policies protecting social safety nets (e.g. the preservation of subsidized housing or certain social rights, in Russia and China, even when neoliberal techniques are introduced in urban budgetary practices): "the sovereign exception marks out excludable subjects who are denied protections" (p.5), she highlights, but "the exception can also be a positive decision to include selected populations and spaces as targets of 'calculative choices and value-orientation' associated with neoliberal reform" (p.5). As such, it is necessary to explore "the interplay among technologies of governing and of disciplining, of inclusion and exclusion, of giving value or denying value to human conduct" (p.5).

Although we are focusing on Europe now (see Pérez-Milans & Guo, forthcoming, for an analysis of these issues in China), Ong's analysis of variegated modes of neoliberal

governmentality is still of use to our understanding of how citizenship and sovereignty mutate in this special issue. Since neoliberal interventions of optimization often interact with regimes of ruling and citizenship in ways that change administrative strategies and citizenship practices, thus the constitutive elements of citizenship – rights, entitlements, territoriality, a nation – can get disarticulated from one another and rearticulated under an economic logic that defines, evaluates, and protects certain categories of subjects and not others. Ong qualifies (2006) this point: “the neoliberal exception gives value to calculative practices and to self-governing subjects as preferred citizens” (p. 16), while “other segments of the population are excepted from neoliberal criteria and thus rendered excludable as citizens and subjects” (p. 16).

At the same time, the territoriality of citizenship, traditionally confined to the national space of the homeland, is now embedded in the territorialities of globalizing markets. That is to say, the neoliberal logic in governing produces political spaces that are differently regulated, including spaces “mapped by the interventions of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)” (Ong, 2006: 7), this creating the conditions “for diverse claims of human value that do not fit neatly into a conventional notion of citizenship” (p. 7). And so “[v]ariations in individual capacities or in performance of market skills intensify existing social and moral inequalities while blurring political distinctions between national and foreign populations (p. 16).

The production of overlapping political spaces and administrative orders is clear if we examine together the findings in Sabaté-Dalmau (2020), Flubacher (2020), Hassemer (2020), Garrido (2020) and Kraft (2020). They all document emerging logics whereby their focal participants actively engage with, and self-discipline themselves into, the academic, professional, linguistic and ethical profiles of the entrepreneurial worker; it is through the performance of this type of personhood that these participants carve social distinction as they

compete with others in gaining (or keeping) access to differently territorialized labor niches and the rights and entitlements that get associated with them.

In some cases, the labor niche in question is spatialized more prominently within a transnational territory, as in Sabaté-Dalmau (2020) and Garrido (2020) where the trajectories ethnographically tracked down and metapragmatically analyzed are seen as contributing to enact cosmopolitan selves. These selves, semiotized in their studies as subjects whose lifestyles blend ways of being, working and enjoying leisure that favor hypermobile multilingual open-minded yet ego-centered identities, are valued as desirable skills for maximizing market competition both in the European Higher Education Area and the International Committee of the Red Cross, respectively. This is also played out in the terrain of language, as in these settings multilingual repertoires, including French and English with bits and pieces of other languages of the wider world, index cosmopolitanism and facilitate geographical and sometimes socioeconomic mobility.

The accounts in Flubacher (2020), Hassemer (2020) and Kraft (2020), however, make more salient spatialization practices where the relevant labor niches are territorialized in national domains. In these cases, techniques of the self and practices of activation of the individual are mobilized through self-monitorization of linguistic choices and discourse registers that help social actors perform desirable (Flubacher, 2020) and indispensable (Hassemer, 2020; Kraft, 2020) worker selves who are worth of (either paid or unpaid) labor. In Hassemer (2020), this is done via volunteer unpaid work in which asylum seekers support the activities of a local NGO in Vienna (Austria) in the handling of the cases of other asylum seekers, by providing interpreting services. This work, regulated and valued by the NGO as proof of these workers' efforts to integrate in the "host" society, constitutes a key active form of entrepreneurial citizenship for asylum seekers as they perform the roles of both applicants for asylum and precarious unpaid laborers at the NGO. A similar practice of investment is

found in Kraft's (2020) where some migrant workers on temporary contracts position themselves as brokers bridging communication between different teams of speakers in the construction market of Oslo (Norway). This tactic, although does not translate into permanent contract, at least gives the broker value in the company and thus access to (still temporary) contract renewals.

Flubacher (2020), on the contrary, focuses on a program on job search training in the monolingual environment of officially bilingual Fribourg (Switzerland), in which French is the dominant language, and shows how unemployed applicants are socialized into cultural forms of action that require narrative practices of "selling oneself". This, she highlights, contributes to the resignification of job-interview as sales pitch, one in which: a) narrated trajectories get packaged in a desirable manner for the labor market by way of turning "trajectory" itself into mere diacritics of "becoming a desired employee"; and b) desire becomes in itself an instrument for the responsabilization of individuals if and when they fail to be employed. Ironically, "trajectory as biography" is hardly considered in the employment process as reported by Flubacher (2020); instead trajectory as a metapragmatic object, or "narrative trajectory" in the "here and now" is what becomes explicitly regulated and (de)valued, thus contributing to "misrecognizing" (Bourdieu, 1989) the role that socioeconomic and historical backgrounds (i.e. the biographical trajectory of subjects as they are intersected with networks and resources) play in the re-constitution of social inequality: "it is not of primordial importance what the trajectories actually entail, but rather how they are packaged" (Flubacher, 2020: p. ??).

But differences apart, the studies by Flubacher (2020), Hassemer (2020) and Kraft (2020) contrast with those by Sabaté-Dalmau (2020) and Garrido (2020) in that multilingualism is valued differently: rather than cosmopolitanism linked to geographical and sometimes socioeconomic mobility, the linguistic repertoires of the focal participants in Flubacher

(2020), Hassemer (2020) and Kraft (2020) are taken to reinforce spatializing practices of national territorialisation. These repertoires are either erased (Flubacher, 2020) or backgrounded as a stepping stone to the dominant language in the local linguistic market via interpreting-related frames of reference that help asylum seekers in the process of applying to national citizenship – while at the same time allowing companies to extract free labor from the “multilingual speaker” (Hassemer, 2020; Kraft, 2020).

And yet, my account so far – my way of making sense of the contributions in this special issue – leaves us with (at least) one unresolved question: how do we map this set of trajectories onto the wider patterns of circulation of professionals, ideas about language and resources through which the above-described emerging geographies and spatializing practices of mutant sovereignty get instituted and re-constituted? I would like to argue that this is an important line of enquiry for sociolinguistic research in that the semiotic practices that we document and track down are always embedded into materialized configurations of space that provide the conditions for certain activities to take place. As such, these materialized configurations require explicit analytical and theoretical attention, which necessarily forces us to engage more explicitly with intellectual developments stemming from the so-called spatial turn. Lefebvre’s (1991), for example, notes that

social relations do not disappear in the ‘worldwide’ framework. On the contrary, they are reproduced at that level. Via all kinds of interactions, the world market creates configurations and inscribes changing spaces on the surface of the earth, spaces governed by conflicts and contradictions. Social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial*. In each particular case, the connection between this underpinning and the relations it supports calls for analysis. Such an analysis must imply and explain a

genesis and constitute a critique of those institutions, substitutions, transpositions, metaphorizations, anaphorizations, and so forth, that have transformed the space under consideration (p. 404; emphasis from the original source).

But he also reminds us:

Space's hegemony does not operate solely on the "micro" level, effecting the arrangement of surfaces in a supermarket, for instance, or in a "neighborhood" of housing-units; nor does it apply only on the "macro" level, as though it were responsible merely for the ordering of "flows" within nations or continents. On the contrary, its effects may be observed on all planes and in all the interconnections between them. The theoretical error that consists in restricting the import of space to a single discipline – to anthropology, political economy, or sociology, for example – has been dealt with (p. 412).

Take the photo that I opened this discussion with, once again: away from global infrastructures arranged on the basis of nation-based distributed configurations, such as that of ITU, the global circuits along which contemporary labor market organizations seem to get (re)arranged following a different logic, as discussed by Sassen (2001) in her work on the so-called "global city" where she argues that it is "precisely because of the territorial dispersal facilitated by telecommunication that agglomeration of certain centralizing activities has sharply increased [, but] [t]his is not a mere continuation of old patterns of agglomeration" (p.5). Global cities, then, are "not only nodal points for the coordination of processes (...); they are also particular sites of production" (p.5), and in fact "a systemic discontinuity

between what used to be thought of as the national growth [is] evident in global cities since the 1980s” (p. 8-9).

These cities, Sassen remarks, “constitute a system rather than merely competing with each other. What contributes to growth in the network of global cities may not well contribute to growth in nations” (p. 9), leading to “a systemic relation between, on the one hand, the growth in global cities and, on the other hand, the deficits of national governments and the decline of major industrial centers in each of these countries in the 1980s” (p. 9). Based on these observations she asks how the greater income polarization that new global circuits contribute to generate is constituted socially: “is it merely a change in the income distribution, or are there new social forms associated with an increase of high-income and of low-income workers? What is the social geography emerging from this transformation?” (p. 251). This volume has already addressed some of these aspects, as I have tried to show throughout this discussion. However, more work on specific circuits of circulation of multilingual professionals, ideas of language, and capital, may take us further into this inquiry.

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