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Author(s): Dlaske, Kati; Del Percio, Alfonso

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Kati Dlaske* and Alfonso Del Percio

Introduction: language, work and affective capitalism

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Abstract: This special issue contributes to scholarship on language and affective economy by exploring the role played by affect in shaping work and workers under current configurations of capitalism. We take as a starting point the observation of increased valorisation and instrumentalisation of affect in the contemporary phase of capitalism. In this editorial introduction to the special issue, we set the scene by first outlining our questions, aims and objectives. Subsequently, we situate the contribution made by this issue in a larger social theorisation of affect and capitalism, particularly the notion of affective capitalism, and reflect on how this theorisation can contribute to sociolinguistic scholarship on work. The introduction concludes with an outline of the articles in this special issue, highlighting the way, empirically and conceptually, each article contributes to our understanding of the intersections between language, work and affective capitalism.

Keywords: affect; capitalism; language; work

1 Introduction

How does language, both as ideology and practice, figure in what Karppi et al. (2016) call affective capitalism? In this special issue we address this question by integrating, in ongoing sociolinguistic scholarship on language and work, a theorisation of affective capitalism which has emerged in current debates on the politics of capitalism and affect in and beyond the social sciences. We also intend to impact current social theorisations of affective capitalism by theorising how language is entangled with the vast array of technologies of production, capture, valorisation, commodification and transformation which shape affective capitalism, including workers' bodies, desires, social relationships, practices and affect.

We are not the first in language studies to have contributed to a theorisation of affect, capitalism and work. An influential way of studying these intersections with

***Corresponding author: Kati Dlaske**, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland,
E-mail: kati.dlaske@jyu.fi
Alfonso Del Percio, University College London, London, UK

language was proposed by cultural analyst Raymond Williams (1977), who, with his notions of "structures of feeling" introduced a powerful way to empirically study and understand feelings as the product of the social, rather than the personal, experience, and to acknowledge the institutions, formations, and positions, as well as the history, politics and economy that shape specific feelings. For Williams, structures of feeling are a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones – of feeling more than of thought – operating in otherwise disconnected spaces. Their investigation allows us to make sense of the "affective dimensions of consciousness and relationships," i.e. modes of thinking and feeling that emerge at specific moments of history and "operate in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity."

Inspired by Williams, and by work on affect in feminist, queer, (post)colonial and critical race studies (Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2000, 2004; Brown 1995; Butler 1997, 2004; Cheng 2001; Cvetkovich 2003; Gilroy 2005; Povinelli 2006; Sedgwick 2003), in the last two decades language scholars have enthusiastically responded to the need to develop new understanding of the ways language and affect tie into history, political economy and imperial formations (for an overview of this work see Besnier [1990]; Lutz and White [1986]; McElhinny [2010]; Pavlenko [2005]). In her review of this scholarship McElhinny (2010) argues that an approach to affect attentive to history and political economy considers when and why certain kinds of emotional display emerge as novel, desirable or problematic, and who gets to decide they are such and with what effects. She also invites us to ask why, as scholars of capitalism and inequality, we are interested in affect at this particular moment. She argues that recent preoccupations with affect are inspired by colonial and imperial rule and violence, anxieties and desires about capitalist decline, and the effects of both empire and capitalism on work, global migration flows, multicultural metropoles, settler colonial and postcolonial states. Studying affect, she concludes, both arises out of and extends an affective economy, as well as serving as a critique of it.

Work is one crucial site that language scholars have invested in to study the anxieties and desire for capitalist and imperial decline McElhinny mentioned, and for problematising their effects on affect, inequality and oppression. Gee et al. (1996) were among the first in language studies to argue that, as markets become saturated with consumer goods and industrial work moved to countries located in the periphery of global capitalism, companies began to focus on creating new kinds of customers and new kinds of desires, including new workforces. If work under the old capitalism was alienating, and workers were forced to sell their labour, they are now asked to feel and enjoy work (see Duchêne and Heller [2012] for an elaboration of this point). Drawing on Hochschild's notion of emotional labour (1983), Cameron (2000b) and Hall (1995) argue that much of the affective regulation documented in the workplaces of the new economy serves the

satisfaction of customers' emotional needs (see also Barakos 2022). Workers' ability to put feelings in words is seen by corporate actors and language specialists as an important factor for the management of all sorts of problems, especially those which hinder or complicate client-worker transactions (Cameron 2000a). The idea behind all this is that through strategic communicative choices workers can better connect with others and control their response. Lorente (2007, 2017) adds to this scholarship, demonstrating that affect can also contribute to the stratification of workers. She shows how both emotional and character traits are mapped onto workers and their communicative practices, allowing the use of notions like shyness, passivity and compliance to differentiate between modern and traditional, desirable and undesirable workers.

Drawing on ethnographic and discourse analytical approaches, including analytics of governmentality and inequality in several centres and peripheries of capitalism (including Germany, UK, Chile, Switzerland and the Philippines), the five original pieces of empirical work included in this volume seek to extend – empirically, methodologically, theoretically and politically – research on the interconnections between language, work and affective capitalism. They engage with the following questions: How does language, both as ideology and practice, get entangled with the affective capacities of human beings in the domain of work? How do language, affect and work subjectivities enter circles of capitalist value production, and more broadly, into capitalist structuring of societies? How do intersectional differences, such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or age, become manifest in these processes? What – social, political, personal – consequences do these processes have?

2 Affect and language

The increasing interest in affective processes in cultural studies, social sciences, humanities and beyond has amounted to an interdisciplinary field, labelled affect studies. While sharing a common interest in the productive forces of affective relations, the approaches gathered under the banner of affect studies differ in their theoretical, intellectual and political alignments, their methodological approaches, and not least in the conceptualisation of the object of study itself – the notion of affect. Mapping the field and its complexities is beyond the scope of this introduction; this has been done elsewhere (e.g. Seigworth and Gregg 2010; Slaby 2018; Wetherell 2012). Instead, we will give a broad outline of two opposing conceptualisations of the relationship between affect and language, and highlight a few selected approaches within these strands that provide a background for the contributions in this issue.

In their Introduction *to The Affect Theory Reader*, Seigworth and Gregg (2010: 1) describe affect as follows:

> Affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and to be acted upon. Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities *and* resonances themselves [emphasis in the original].

Affect is characterised here in terms of relational forces, intensities, movements and circulations, but also excess and immediateness. The authors (2010: 1) continue: "Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces – visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion." In other words, affective processes are located here beyond consciousness and beyond linguistic signification. The location of affective processes beyond linguistic meaning making, and consciousness in general, leads to a conceptual separation of affect from emotions that, in this view, can only give a limited (linguistic) expression to the "depth" of our ongoing affective experience (Massumi 2015: 5). This strand of thinking, notably developed by Brian Massumi, can be appreciated for its ambitious attempt at revolutionising the prevailing ways of thinking by centering relationality, non-linearity, openness, becoming and preconscious affective forces. To develop his approach, Massumi (1995, 2015) draws together a number of philosophical sources ranging from Spinoza to Deleuze, and psychological and neurological experiments to evidence the primacy of body-felt affect over conscious meaning making. Inspired by this way of thinking, a body of empirical research has sought to capture and engage with "the visceral forces beneath […] conscious knowing" (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 1; e.g. Clough and Halley 2007; Gregg and Seigworth 2010) some (e.g. McCormack 2003) seeking to avoid the conceptual straightjacket of language altogether.

While understanding affect as embodied, relational and socially productive has become something of a shared understanding in the field of affect studies, locating affect in the realm beyond consciousness and the multiple divisions on which this location is predicated – between mind and body, language and sensation, emotion and affect – have been criticised not only as theoretically problematic, but also as empirically untenable and methodologically unpracticable by a growing number of scholars in the field (e.g. Ahmed 2004; Laurier and Philo 2006; Leys 2011; Wetherell 2013). One of the critics is the social psychology and discourse studies scholar Margaret Wetherell. Most vehemently, Wetherell

criticises the separation of the affective from the discursive, arguing that "human affect is inextricably linked with meaning-making and with the semiotic (broadly defined) and the discursive" (Wetherell 2012: 20). To capture this interconnectedness she proposes a view of affect as affective-discursive practice (Wetherell 2013). Refusing the Deleuzian notion of affect as a force, which gives it a certain autonomy, Wetherell opts instead for the notion of affect as practice, which emphasises human action, but also captures the simultaneously individual, structural, processual and performative dimensions of affect (Wetherell 2012: 22–24). To operationalise this approach, to investigate affect in (inter)action, Wetherell turns to ethnomethodological discourse analysis (Wetherell 2013), i.e. the study of the social order as constituted through processes of social interaction.

Through this theoretical-methodological approach, but also through explicit criticism, Wetherell is positioned at the opposite end of the field from Massumi. If Massumi locates affective processes *beyond* the meaning making, Wetherell (2012: 4) goes so far as to define affect as "embodied meaning making" (see also Slaby 2018). Part of this divide, however, seems to go back to different foci, presocial versus social, suggesting that the two approaches may not be as opposite as appears at first glance (cf. also Borba 2021; Glapka 2019; Slaby 2018). If Massumi views emotions as "partial expressions of affect" (Massumi 2015: 5) "domesticated" by the social (Wetherell 2013: 349), Wetherell considers them realised through the social:

> […] the emotion terms and narratives available in a culture, the conventional elements so thoroughly studied by social constructionist researchers, realise the affect and turn it for the moment into a particular kind of thing. What may start out as inchoate can sometimes be turned into an articulation, mentally organised and publicly communicated, in ways that engage with and reproduce regimes and power relations (Wetherell 2012: 23).

At the same time, as we will elaborate below, Massumi's interest lies in the ways in which "our capacities to affect and to be affected" are brought to engage with relations and regimes of power; a question that inevitably also bends the Massumian view towards the discursive and the social. The discursive and the social are also at the centre of the approach of Sara Ahmed, in whose work the focus shifts from the "embodied meaning making" (Wetherell 2012: 4) to the "emotionality of texts," the movement, circulation and aggregation of affects and bodies, and the performative force of affects/emotions in the cultural politics of world making (Ahmed 2004). Taking up the view of affect and language as inherently intertwined, a growing number of scholars of language and society has explored in recent years the ways in which "affect 'circulates' through semiosis" (Milani and Richardson 2021: 671) and contributes to producing, reproducing and challenging power relations in the realms of political discourse (Borba 2021; Gafter and Milani

2021; Tebaldi 2021), popular and consumer culture (Casey 2018; Dlaske 2017; Thurlow 2020), education (Pratt 2021; Ng 2019) and work (Barakos 2022; Flubacher 2020; Lorente 2017), to give but a few examples.

3 Affective capitalism

Like studies on affect, examinations on the affective dimensions of capitalism draw on diverse theoretical traditions. Although the interconnectedness of capitalism and affect/emotion predates the contemporary moment (e.g. Illouz 2008; Rose 2006), in recent years, scholars of different backgrounds have pointed to valorisation of affect as a distinct feature of the "post-Fordist" or neoliberal phase of capitalism (e.g. Cabanas and Illouz 2019; Hardt and Negri 2004; Gill and Kanai 2018; Massumi 2015; Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012). One influential approach has been developed by the Marxist Italian autonomist movement, represented by the work of Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004). In their account of the changes in the organisation of capitalism, Hardt and Negri highlight the role of immaterial labour, and more particularly, affective labour, as a characteristic feature of the contemporary post-Fordist regime (see also Hardt 1999). "Affective labour," Hardt and Negri explain, is labour that produces or manipulates affects.

> One can recognise affective labour, for example, in the work of legal assistants, flight attendants and fast food workers (service with a smile). One indication of the rising importance of affective labour, at least in the dominant countries, is the tendency for employers to highlight education, attitude, character and "prosocial" behaviour as the primary skills employees need. A worker with a good attitude and social skills is another way of saying a worker is adept at affective labour (Hardt and Negri 2004: 108).

Although acknowledging the way in which "affective immaterial labour is now directly productive of capital" (Hardt 1999: 97), what is intriguing for Hardt and Negri are the new conditions for sociality created by the central role of affective labour – as opposed to the isolated location of the workers on the factory floor of the Fordist era – and the new possibilities they see emerging for workers to create social networks, collective subjectivities and resistance from below (Hardt 1999). Hardt and Negri's account has been criticised, not only for its optimistic outlook on the subversive potential of affective labour in the contemporary phase of capitalism, but also for systemically neglecting aspects of gender, race and ethnicity in relation to the changes of the capitalist regime (McRobbie 2016).

McRobbie critically points to other features of post-Fordism – individualism, precarity and competition – that work against the emergence of "autonomist collective action" (McRobbie 2016: 104) envisioned by Hardt and Negri. These

critiques resonate with Hochschild's (1983) research some twenty years earlier on the "emotional labour" that people, especially women, working in the expanding service sector are required to perform to produce added value for the company, and the potential for this emotional management to contribute to the "estrangement" of workers from their own feelings. Similarly, research in sociolinguistics has interrogated affective labour less in terms of its subversive than its subjecting powers, structural constraints and intersections with gender, ethnicity and class among others (e.g. Barakos 2022; Boutet 2001; Cameron 2000a; Flubacher 2020; Hall 1995; Lorent 2017; McElhinny 2010; Ng 2019; Salonga, 2015; Wu and Del Percio 2019). In this volume, Mi-Cha Flubacher's and Rommy Schaaf's examinations of affective-discursive registers of call centre agents and university teachers, respectively, contribute to this line of critical inquiry.

In the field of affect studies, extending this view outside of the world of work, Massumi has theorised contemporary neoliberal power as power that works fundamentally through affect (also see Dardot and Laval [2017] and Neilson and Mezzadra [2012] for a similar argument). Referring, as do Hardt and Negri (2004), to the saturation of markets and the need for new sources of surplus value, Massumi (2015: 20, 21) asserts: "capitalism starts intensifying or diversifying affect, but only in order to extract surplus-value. It hijacks affect in order to intensify profit potential. It literally valorises affect." Building on these considerations and the Spinozean notion of affect as the capacity to affect and be affected, Tero Karppi and colleagues have coined the term "affective capitalism" and characterised it as

> a particular mode of capture where resonances between bodies – human and non-human alike – enter systems of value and value production. Affective capitalism appeals to our desires, it needs social relationships, and organises and establishes them. Our capacities to affect and become affected are transformed into assets, goods, services and managerial strategies (Karppi et al. 2016: 9).

Affective capitalism, the authors elaborate, "traverses different fields from business to politics, media to decision-making, investment to knowledge production" (Karppi et al. 2016: 1). In this volume, our focus lies on the field of work and the bodies of workers and future workers. Regarding affective processes as inseparably entangled with language, as outlined above, we argue, and hope to show through the contributions in this volume, that the notion of affective capitalism as "a particular mode of capture" helps sociolinguistic research to grasp a crucial dimension of the operation of contemporary power. To this end, in line with an expanding body of sociological and sociolinguistic work, we contribute to a broader theorisation of contemporary capitalism understanding it not only as an economic, but also as a political rationality that is both vehiculated through language and at the same time affects people's communicative practices, that

encompasses the organisation of the society as a whole, including the field of work (cf. Foucault 2006; Harvey 2007; Urla 2019).

4 Contributions to this volume

In our first part of this issue, we offer two pieces documenting how affect contributes to the constitution and regulation of workers, including their communicative practices.

In his “Genealogies of Reflexivity,” Alfonso Del Percio presents a genealogical analysis of the multiple histories of knowledge and power that have informed the emergence and shaping of “reflexive registers,” which encapsulate modes of feeling, managing feelings, and expressing feelings. He takes as a starting point employability programmes documented in his ongoing ethnography of employability in London, UK. He draws on ethnographic and historiographical material to document the processes by which and the circumstances in which theories of affect and the self as well as practices of its regulation have been progressively inserted into spaces dedicated to the management of people and their employability and have contributed to the formation of workers’ subjectivities. He claims that since the invention of industrial capitalism in the 19th century, being a worker has meant being able to feel, reflect on, and communicate feelings. Arguing that from the outset, capitalism has learnt to act upon and capitalise on individuals’ capacity to feel and reflect upon themselves, Alfonso invites us to rethink the ways workers are shaped, the ways they enter systems of value, production and difference, and how work gets tied to notions of selfhood, exploitation and language.

Kati Dlaske also presents insights from work-related training, more specifically an entrepreneurship workshop organised for newly-arrived refugees in Germany. Drawing on ethnographic data, in her “Language, (em)power(ment) and affective capitalism,” she examines how the discursive resource of the “elevator pitch” genre operated as a technology of government that allowed an attempt at modulating the affective states and attachments of the participants. This discursive resource evoked an affective configuration characterised by hardness, resilience and diligence, as well as aspiration, optimism and confidence. She argues that this affective configuration bears considerable similarities to other contemporary subjectification regimes and represents, in resonance with these, a particular manifestation of contemporary affective capitalism. Notably, the orientation evoked in the training marks a partial break with cognitively oriented logics of accumulation (associated with adoption of skills) and points at a shift in the imagination of the ideal type of subject, the entrepreneurial self, from *homo economicus* towards *homo optimisticus*.

The second group of articles documents how language and communication, or specific modes of speaking, allow the enactment of affect and the management of social relations, including the management of the forms of precarity, alienation and exclusion that capital produces.

In her "The Pedagogy of Love," Rommy Anabalon Schaaf examines the imbrication of language, affect, education and work in the ability of precarised middle-class women to imagine a better future. Through an ethnographic account of female English teachers' struggles with a changing higher education industry in contemporary Chile, Rommy argues that the affective-discursive practices used by English language teachers, which they called the pedagogy of love, are constructed around long-standing ideas of how women are supposed to communicate and which are a reflection of women's gendered social subordination. This form of communication includes socially perceived positive and feminine traits such as generosity, nurturance, sweetness, kindness and empathy, mirroring what Lakoff (1973) identified as "woman's language" in the early 1970s. She notes that the pedagogy of love constitutes a register, one of the many available to women and men, which they can manage, negotiate, manipulate and capitalise on. Rommy claims that teachers capitalise on this register in order to navigate a precarious higher education market and that, while this register has become an emblem of teachers' professional and gendered identities, it also contributes to reproducing ideologies which help maintain women in subaltern positions.

Similarly, Aileen Salonga suggests that more than only managing customers and creating economic value, affective dispositions are instrumentalised to allow workers to find value and meaning in their work. In her "Empowerment narratives and sticky affects," she draws on narratives of empowerment that are circulated within the Philippine call centre industry to investigate the ways by which these affective states are evoked, constructed and maintained. Using Sarah Ahmed's (2004) notion of the stickiness of affect, Aileen argues that these narratives evoke a range of affects and emotions, specifically feelings of shame, brokenness and worthlessness that translate into fulfilment, joy and pride as workers find their place and their voice in the call centres, and making call centre work worthwhile. This, she explains, is caused by what she terms affective indexicalities, i.e. a network of affects triggered upon the telling of certain stories, which then leads to other stories and the affects evoked by these stories. This explains why people do the things they do, which, in the case of this paper, means developing an attachment to the job and deciding to stay even if it is alienating or dehumanising.

Finally, Mi-Cha Flubacher explains in her "Scripting Swiss smiles" that in an in-bound Swiss call centre, the managed smile of the agents is fused strategically with the use of the Swiss German dialect in order to produce affective-discursive practices that aim for a projection of quality of service. By revisiting ethnographic

data collected between 2010 and 2011, Mi-Cha explains that embedded in and emblematic of the political economy, these affective-discursive practices are conducive to the company's branding strategies of authenticity and contribute to forms of market distinction and profit generation. Looking back at the transformation of the call centre industry in Switzerland, she claims that this affective-discursive investment in authenticity has its limits in terms of its capacity to ensure long-term economic sustainability. The imagined value of authenticity and affect in the form of dialect, Mi-Cha explains, became contested on the ground when technological innovations (especially the popularisation of smart phones) challenged the role of in-bound call centres in Switzerland's telecommunication service industry, with effects for those workers producing affect through authenticity. She notes that the delocalisation of the Swiss call centre industry to cheaper markets in Eastern Europe and Northern Africa involved a reconsidering of the economic value of affect and linguistic authenticity, and with that the lay-off of the workers that had produced it.

Taken together, focussing on a range of socio-geographical contexts, the contributions in this volume shed light on a variety of ways in which language, figuring as an ideology, as an adopted and habitualised practice, as a means of governance, gets entangled with the affective capacities of human beings in the domain of work, evoking, in so doing, affective states, orientations and attachments that feed into the systems of capitalist value production and the capitalist structuring of societies. Throughout, these articles illuminate the ways in which these processes contribute to the (re)production of social inequalities based on intersecting differences running along the axes of class, gender, ethnicity, age and more.

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