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Transidiomatic practices: Language and power in the age of globalization

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Abstract

This article seeks to assess the communicative mutations resulting from the intersection between mobile people and mobile texts. Sophisticated technologies for rapid human mobility and global communication are transforming the communicative environment of late modernity. Until recently the majority of linguistic studies which concerned themselves with global phenomena tended to depict the worst possible scenarios: linguistic imperialism, endangered languages, language death. In this paper, I argue that the experience of cultural globalization, and the sociolinguistic disorder it entails, cannot be understood solely through a dystopic vision of linguistic catastrophe, but demand that we also take into account the recombinant qualities of language mixing, hybridization, and creolization. Using communicative data from the Adriatic region, this paper calls for a reconceptualization of what we consider the communicative environment, which must be no longer restricted to its default parameters (focused, monolingual, and face-to-face), but should also account for communicative practices based on multilingual talk (most of the times exercised by de/reterritorialized speakers) channeled through both local and electronic media.

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1. Of flows and spreads (and penetrations)

I.A. Richards, one of the main popularizers and supporters of Basic English,¹ wrote in an introduction to this language, “A common language must spread as the automobile, the electric light, and the telephone or airplane have spread” (Richards, 1943, p. 9). In the literature on language contact, languages “spread”.² They do not encroach, pervade, or scatter. They certainly do not “flow,” as cultures, commodities, and knowledge are supposed to do according to the dominant, neo-liberal paradigm of globalization.³

Flows and spreads – these are the master metaphors evoked by the two discourses, distinct and parallel, in charge of representing the cultural mutations of late-modernity. On one hand we have the discourse on forced linguistic assimilation into global markets, increasing disappearance of local vernaculars, language standardization; and on the other, that of cultural pluralism, hybridity, popular democratization. These discourses reproduce the old habit of distinguishing between language and culture: languages spread, cultures flow.

While flows evoke a discontinuous world of fractured terrains carved by gushing streams or of weather fronts driven by the jet stream, spreads conjure a world of smooth surfaces composed of layered planes or open expanses uniformly laid out. Flows, by carving into a “smooth space” (the element constitutive of the nomadic war machine that Deleuze and Guattari oppose to the “striated space” of the state, 1987, p. 380), seem to represent the multiple possibilities available to travelers in a discontinuous world. One can avoid an impetuous flow by finding a different route, stepping over it, or ignoring it. But the occupants of a “striated space” cannot avoid contact with something (from small pox to foot and mouth disease) slowly enveloping them. Like an oil spill spreading across an Alaskan sound, this metaphor is one of progressive occupation of all available space and evokes the inevitability and totality of the diffusion process. As a dystopic image, spreading is forever tied to contagion, catastrophes, disasters, discontent, panic, or mistrust.

The neo-liberal discourse on globalization commandeered the positive semantics associated with the flow metaphor to account for the complex connectivity and

¹ Basic English was created by Ogden (1932) in the late 1920s as an auxiliary language for international communication. Its central idea was the identification of a limited vocabulary (only 850 words) and grammar (only 16 verb forms) which could be used to serve all communicative purposes. The entire language could thus be listed on a postcard, to be carried around by its speakers and easily consulted during their cosmopolitan interactions. Although it never developed as an auxiliary language, it nevertheless played a very influential role in both the development of functional linguistics and in the emergence of English as an international language (Halliday, 1978; Goodman and Graddol, 1996).

² For all, see Fishman et al. (eds., 1977).

³ This is a field of ever-expanding dimensions and perspectives. In anthropology alone, it can fill entire libraries. Some of the references consulted for this discussion are: Giddens (1990), Featherstone (1990, 1995), Appadurai (1996), Hannerz (1996), Sassen (1996), Clifford (1997), Scott (1997), Jameson and Miyoshi (1998), Tomlinson (1999), Held and McGrew (2000), Lechner and Boli (2000), Tsing (2000), Nederveen Pieterse (1995, 2004).

circulation of all global processes. As Tsing argues (in an article that for polemic's sake tends to present the field in crude Manichæen terms):

‘Circulation’ is in global rhetoric what the ‘penetration’ of capitalism was in certain kinds of Marxist world-system theory: the way powerful institutions and ideas spread geographically and come to have an influence in distant places. The difference is significant; where *penetration* always evokes a kind of rape, a forcing of some people’s powerful interests onto other people, *circulation* calls forth images of the healthy flow of blood in the body and the stimulating, evenhanded exchange of the marketplace (2000, p. 336).

The euphoric, utopian thrust of neo-liberal globalization theory reveals itself in its singular obsession with flows: mediated flows, global cultural flows, migration flows (“postmodern celebration of difference and differentiation” as Jameson, 1998, p. 56 characterized it).⁴ Should we attribute the neo-liberal literature’s lack of (or at best myopic) attention to linguistic issues to the undesirable connotations of language spreads? How else can we account for the fact that this literature on globalization seems unable to come to terms with the global phenomenon of language contact that should take center stage in any discourse on cultural connectivity, global processes, and deterritorialization?

Fortunately, the euphoric, neo-liberal, “cultural” perspective that favors the metaphor of “flows” represents only one end of a continuum of positions in the blossoming literature on culture and globalization. On the other end, we find a dystopic, neo- or post-Marxist, political economic critique that still tends to employ, among others, the metaphor of “penetrations” (a close cognate to “spreads”). This pole presents a distinctly critical assessment of globalization (from its theoretical impact to its social effects), focusing on the tendency of global relations (between different nations, regions, zones, and groups) to be antagonistic and asymmetrical. It is inclined to assess critically the impact of globalization, “in some gloomy Frankfurt School fashion, as the worldwide Americanization or standardization of culture, the destruction of local differences, the massification of all the peoples on the planet” (Jameson, 1998, p. 57; see also Abu-Lughod, 1991; Hardt and Negri, 2000). Interestingly enough, the social theorists who engage with linguistic issues are almost all more or less positioned at the dysphoric pole (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Smith, 1990; Tenbruck, 1990; Mignolo, 1995 – however Mignolo, 1998 and 2000 is somewhat more nuanced).

Two poles then, clearly marked by opposing attitudes vis-a-vis globalization.

If we then turn to linguistics and related fields (linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, but interestingly enough not language studies or comp lit⁵), we

⁴ In this context, Tsing speaks of the “futuristic charisma” that globalization studies have injected into the social sciences, and the resulting excitement and intellectual investment in studying “newness” (2000, p. 332).

⁵ There are some excellent treatments of the globalization of literary creations, such as Spivak (1988), Bhabha (1994), Pollock (2000), Mignolo (1998, 2000), Apter (2001), Aravamudan (2001) to name just a few.

find that the majority of scholars have been, until recently, quite unwilling to find zones of engagement with globalization theory. When they do, the dominant discourse has privileged the dystopic pole, thus depicting the worst possible scenario: linguistic imperialism, endangered languages, language loss, and language death (Dorian, 1989; Krauss, 1992; Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994; Crystal, 2000; Nettle and Romaine, 2000; for a critical review see Silverstein, 1998).⁶

Even in the context of language contact, the discipline where the spread metaphor was first developed (Hymes, 1971; Fishman et al., 1977; Thomason, 1997, 2001), case analysis has remained obstinately local, concerned with face-to-face interactions, unmediated experience, physical proximity. These studies have been especially preoccupied with linguistic areas and demarcating boundaries. Linguistic research has examined migrant and minority speech communities as isolated entities inside a nation-state, and analyzed their communicative patterns in opposition to a clearly identifiable, well-structured entity: the dominant, standardized national language (Fishman and Das Gupta, 1968; Labov, 1972; Crowley, 1989). By strictly delimiting their object of study to structural systems, linguistic studies have paralleled nationalistic concerns over linguistic sovereignty (Crowley, 1989; Gal, 1998). They have reified the notion of language, relegating it to bounded areas, clear confines, and homogeneous communities (here again some exceptions must be noted, such as Pratt, 1987, 1991; Rampton, 1995, 1998; Pennycook, 1998; Silverstein, 1998; Woolard, 1999; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2002; and most contributions in Coupland (Ed.), 2003, (especially the introduction, Coupland, 2003, and final commentary, Blommaert, 2003).

These ideas about language (and consequently the dystopic treatment of language spreads) originated at a time when the social world was conceptualized as made up of small-scale clusters of people, confined within geographical boundaries and structured by local imaginings of their social identity. Early modern philosophers of both the French Enlightenment (especially Condillac) and German Romanticism (especially Herder) identified a language with a people and a place and, consequently, understood peoplehood according to the criterion of linguistic and territorial unity. Throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, the legacy of this linkage between territory, cultural tradition, and language pushed scholars interested in language to focus on local, small-scale populations and face-to-face encounters, which led the discipline to think of human populations as bounded entities – entities that are culturally, linguistically, and territorially uniform. A people came to be viewed as a social formation held together by shared behavioral norms, beliefs, and values mediated by a common language spoken over a contiguous territory. In so doing, the majority of scholars interested in language failed to investigate

⁶ Among the diverging voices we must count researchers interested in world languages, mainly “World English” (Bailey and Gorlach, 1982; Kachru, 1982, 1986; Graddol, 1996, 1997; Gorlach, 1991; Goodman and Graddol, 1996; Schneider, 1997; Crystal, 1997). These authors tend to gravitate toward a more neoliberal pole. Honorable mention merits Coulmas (1992) who argued that since language is a purely means of exchange, language adaptation – in most cases to English – is the inevitable working of the market.

the linguistic mutations resulting from communicative practices happening in the multiple crevasses, open spaces, and networked ensembles of contact zones.⁷

In this paper, I argue that contemporary studies on language and communication must address the progressive globalization of communicative practices and social formations that result from the increasing mobility of people, languages, and texts. They must, in other words, be able to talk about flows, while shying away from a power-free, neo-liberal vision of globalization processes, that it, without forgetting to address the asymmetrical power relations and penetrations engendered by such flows.

Sophisticated technologies for rapid human mobility and electronic global communication (in its economic, political, and cultural modes flowing through such media as high-capacity planes, cable lines, television networks, fixed and mobile telephony, and the Internet) are advancing a process of constructing localities in relation to global sociopolitical forces – a process, started with the formation of empires and nation-states, which produces an intrinsically asymmetrical political economy of talk (Irvine, 1989). Three of the most significant outcomes of this process are: (1) the sustained development of diasporic social formations, in which people bear multiple linguistic allegiances and cultural belongings; (2) the emergence of media idioms (such as the use of global English in news broadcasting, advertising, or electronic mailing lists) that presuppose translocal modes of production and reception, enabling social groups to access procedural knowledge of the world through the media; and (3) the formation of global power elites and locally based semiotic operators that use knowledge of international languages as commodities and tools to secure, in the former case, a dominant position in the world, and for the latter, to engage in a process of social and geographical (mostly south–north) mobility.

These outcomes are the logical consequences of the intersection between mobile people and mobile texts – an intersection no longer located in a definable territory, but in the deterritorialized world of late modern communication. An increasing number of people around the globe learn to interact with historically and culturally distant communicative environments through new technologies (including the asynchronous channels of e-mail and voice-mail, the abridged idioms of cellular digital messaging, and the multi-media capabilities of web pages) and use newly acquired techno-linguistic skills (control of English, translation capabilities, knowledge of interactional routines in mediated environments). In so doing, they gain, or increase, their social worth. They achieve power, in other words, by learning how to interact in a deterritorialized world.

⁷ For a critical reading of this tradition, see Woolard (1999). It must be noted that scholars such as (Gumperz, 1964; Gumperz and Hymes, 1972) recognized speech communities' essentially unbounded nature, but even in their case the focus has always been in how the "local" community strive to maintain internal boundaries through code-switching, linguistic awareness, and ideological patrolling; thus keeping a localized and perimetric focus (see esp. Gumperz, 1964; Blom and Gumperz, 1972).

2. Deterritorialization and reterritorialization

In the 1990s, the anthropological notion of “culture” gradually moved away from identification with a naturally contiguous territory (both geographical and social), and towards an association with social environments freed from the constrictions of face-to-face interactions in the localities of pre-modern societies. This move allowed anthropologists to study social relations stretched across time and space by people’s perpetual transition between places, institutions, and groups (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, 1997; Giddens, 1990). This anthropological turn was heavily influenced by the philosophical concept of *deterritorialization* developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987). The notion of deterritorialization provided an alternative vision of the subject that contrasted with the dominant understanding of subjectivity as contained within the territorial confines set up by centralized powers. Deleuze and Guattari explicated the displacement and dispersion of a subjectivity unrestrained by territorial control. Deterritorialization served as the cornerstone of a “nomadic” theory, in which the “nomad,” “migrant,” and “gypsy” became the figures for a generalized poetics of displacement.

This concept has been criticized for its metaphorical, universalistic bias (Mignolo, 2000), for its inability to account for transnational power relations as well as its indulgence in nostalgic, colonial fantasies about nomadic movements (Spivak, 1988; Kaplan, 1996). Nevertheless, it remains a powerful metaphor for representing globalization’s central social fact: the dissolution of the supposedly “natural” link between place/territory and cultural practices, experiences, and identities. As such, the concept of deterritorialization has been adopted by social theory to account for the cultural dynamics of people and practices that either no longer inhabit one locale (finding themselves in borderlands, diasporic groups, or mixed cultural environments) or inhabit a locality radically transformed by global cultural phenomena (Hall, 1992; Bash et al., 1992; Hannerz, 1996; Clifford, 1997; Tomlinson, 1999).⁸

Through the electronic media, people confront new rules and resources for the construction of social identity and cultural belonging (Appadurai, 1996). When the rapid, mass-mediated flow of images, scenarios, and emotions merges with the flow of deterritorialized audiences, the result is a recombination in the production of modern subjectivity. When Moroccan families make videotapes of their weddings to send to relatives who migrated to Italy (Jacquemet, 1996), when Hmong refugees in the US produce documentaries about their “homelands” by staging them in China (Schein, 2002), or when Pakistani taxi-drivers in Chicago listen to sermons recorded in mosques in Kabul or Teheran (Appadurai, 1996), we witness the encounter of mobile media practices and transnational people. In this encounter, a new, deterritorialized social identity takes shape, light-years away from the corporate logic of the

⁸ These global cultural phenomena range from access to “industrial global food” (Goody, 1997) to international sport events (Maguire, 1999; Armstrong and Giulianott, 1997; Miller, 1997; Miller et al., 1999), from fashion and music trends (Feld, 1995, 2000; Erlmann, 1996; Gross et al., 1996) to global English (Crystal, 1997).

nation-state. This new identity coagulates around a sentiment of belonging that can no longer be identified with a purely territorial dimension, and finds its expression in the creolized, mixed idioms of polyglottism.

However, the most important social implication of deterritorialization is not the dissolution of identities, cultures, or nation-states in a global environment (as some critics of globalization theory would lead us to believe, see their contributions in [Scott \(1997\)](#), [Held and McGrew \(2000\)](#), [Lechner and Boli \(2000\)](#)), but the interplay between global and local processes, and the reconstitution of local social positionings within global cultural flows. Since all human practices are embodied and physically located in a particular lifeworld, the dynamics of deterritorialization produce processes of reterritorialization: the anchoring and recontextualizing of global cultural processes into their everyday life ([Tomlinson, 1999](#)).

These practices have the broadest range of social effects: at one extreme, they can produce an ideological hardening of the local, “indigenous” identity/code/language in opposition to translocal phenomena; at the other, they can just as well initiate a much more creative process for the production of recombinant identities.

Unfortunately, more often than not social formations faced with transnational movements of people and flows of cultural practices not easily understood locally may react with an ideological hardening of the social boundaries of their “community”. Locally dominant ethnic groups strengthen in-group identities by raising the membership bar through practices of intolerance and exclusion. As noted by Garcia Caslini in his ethnography of Tijuanians, “the same people who praise the city for being open and cosmopolitan want to fix signs of identification and rituals that differentiate them from those who are just passing through”. ([Canclini, 1995, p. 239](#)) Among the most pernicious practices is the imposition by socially dominant groups, of limits on the linguistic rights of transnational, lower class, or minority subjects. From the English-Only movement to the worldwide phenomenon of eradicating minority languages in favor of national ones, we find a motley crew of different forces and groups animated by various and at times antagonistic desires, such as preserving “a common language,” avoiding ethnic strife, imposing a sense of national unity and civic responsibility, or exploiting a national mood of isolationism and xenophobia.⁹ Meanwhile, minority groups respond with their own strategic ideological retreat to defensive positions, such as re-identification with cultures of origin, reliance on symbolic membership in strong counter-ethnicities, revival of cultural integralism and traditionalism, and defense of the “purity” and “integrity” of their “communal” language ([Hall, 1992](#); [Hill and Hill, 1986](#); [Silverstein, 1996](#)). At the base of all these cases, we find people who, feeling threatened by the linguistic diversity

⁹ An interesting twist to this process of linguistic hygiene by nation-states is offered by Singapore’s initiative for a perfect society: the “Speak Good English Movement,” a campaign to eliminate Singlish, “a patois that has spread through our nation like a linguistic virus” according to Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s senior minister (quoted in the *New York Times*, July 1, 2001). Underneath the by-now familiar viral “spread” metaphor representing the dystopic scare, we could see smoldering a serious class struggle pitching Singapore’s middle class and state bureaucrats against the working poor, identified as the main speakers of Singlish.

and communicative disorder (among other unsettling changes) brought about by deterritorialization, activate an exclusive linguistic ideology to raise the membership bar (Anderson, 1983; Crowley, 1989; Crawford, 1992; Silverstein, 1996; Errington, 2000).

Hopefully not all social formations respond in such a negative fashion: there is some evidence that global/local interactions are also producing a new form of reterritorialization that give rise to recombinant identities, usually produced through encounters between global and local codes of communication. Diasporic and local groups alike recombine their identities by maintaining simultaneous presence in a multiplicity of sites and by participating in elective networks spread over transnational territories. These recombinant identities are based on multi-presence, multilingualism, and decentered political/social engagements.

I want to argue that the lenses we usually adopt in looking at language must be significantly altered to accommodate for communicative phenomena produced by recombinant identities, even if these phenomena lack grammatical and syntactical order, or cannot even be recognized as part of a single standardizable code. To elucidate a different approach to language, the following section of this paper will introduce a new term, *transidiomatic practice*, and will explore how it could account for some of the communicative mutations I witnessed while conducting fieldwork in the Adriatic region in 1999–2000.

3. Transidiomatic practices

One of the most significant breakthroughs in language studies in the late 20th century has been the introduction of the notion of *communicative practice*. Under the influence of European political philosophers such as Foucault and Bourdieu, linguistic anthropologists have adopted the notion of practice to deal not only with communicative codes and ways of speaking (some of the rallying concepts of the first wave of the ethnography of communication) but also with semiotic understanding, power asymmetry, and linguistic ideology. A practice-oriented approach by focusing on the “socially defined relation between agents and the field that ‘produces’ speech forms” (Hanks, 1996, p. 230), can then explore speakers’ orientations, their habitual patterns and schematic understandings, and their indexical strategies. Hanks defines *communicative practice* as constituted by the triangulation of linguistic activity, the related semiotic code or linguistic forms, and the ideology of social and power relations. He invokes a poetic image of practice as “the point of conversion of the quick of activity, the reflexive gaze of value, and the law of the system” (1996, p. 11).

This triangulation of linguistic activities, indexicality, and semiotic codes needs to be complexified to account for how groups of people, no longer territorially defined, think about themselves, communicate using an array of both face-to-face and long-distance medias, and in so doing produce and reproduce social hierarchies and power asymmetries. I propose to use the term *transidiomatic practice* to describe the communicative practices of transnational groups that interact using different

languages and communicative codes simultaneously present in a range of communicative channels, both local and distant.¹⁰

Transidiomatic practices are the results of the co-presence of multilingual talk (exercised by de/reterritorialized speakers) and electronic media, in contexts heavily structured by social indexicalities and semiotic codes. Anyone present in transnational environments, whose talk is mediated by deterritorialized technologies, and who interacts with both present and distant people, will find herself producing transidiomatic practices.

Consider, for instance, the growing phenomenon of customer call centers located thousands of miles away, multiple times zones apart, and in different nations from the serviced area, such as those present in South Asia, and in particular in Bangalore, India.¹¹ The key to the success of Indian calling centers is, for the most part, the phone operators' ability to reterritorialize their cultural and communicative practices to match the expectations of callers that they will be serviced in a nearby location by a peer (Hardin, 2001). In a quest for seamless connection with their clients, these operators – most of whom young college graduates – study American or British popular culture, and managers drill them about food, habits, and popular TV shows in their customers' areas (one reported exercise consists of listening to the soundtrack of "Friends," "Ally McBeal," and the like, and then reconstructing the dialogue, Landler, 2001). Most importantly, operators' talk must be contextualized, and experienced, within the spatio-temporal environment of their customers. For instance, their computer screens show not only a customer's time zone but also the local weather sport scores and traffic report, so that each call can be answered with the appropriate temporal greeting ("good afternoon" when India is already in the dark) and with small talk about, for instance, the miserable snow storm and the resulting horrible commute, while India is enjoying another day of tropical bliss (Landler, 2001). At the same time Indian operators interact with co-workers in the next cubicle, take break to eat local food, and may occasionally check local news and personal email. The result of this combination of multiple languages and simultaneous local (with co-workers) and distant (with clients) interactions, is thus the production of a transidiomatic environment.

Most "international" settings (from the offices of an international organization to airport lounges or the board meetings of international companies) clearly resemble

¹⁰ By "idiomatic" here I don't mean "an expression that has a meaning contrary to the usual meaning of the words (such as 'it's raining cats and dogs')" (OED), but the more generic meaning of "the usual way in which the words of a particular language are joined together to express thought" (OED).

¹¹ India is the most remarkable example, but many other areas have immersed themselves in global networks. In spring 2001, the NY Times published an article about how Ireland is becoming the phone message center for many German firms. Germans (from E. Germany, where there is still high unemployment) go to Ireland to work and answer phone calls from German customers. Since it is too expensive to pay Germans German wages in Germany, firms pay workers Irish wages in Ireland, and save money. America On Line (the online branch of AOL-Time Warner), on the other hand, currently prefers an Asian country with an English-educated population: the Philippines. Its voice hotline (800 number) takes you to an office somewhere in the Philippines, where all questions are answered by local people. For a first-rated analysis of call centers, albeit within a single country, see Cameron (2000).

these calling centers, but I would argue that nowadays we find an increasingly number of settings (from living rooms to hospitals operating rooms or political meetings) experiencing a translocal multilingualism interacting with the electronic technologies of contemporary communication. The world is now full of locales where speakers use a mixture of languages in interacting with friends and co-workers, read English and other “global” languages on their computer screens, watch local, regional, or global broadcasts, and listen to pop music in various languages. Most of the times, they do so simultaneously.

Moreover, transidiomatic practices are no longer solely contained in areas of colonial and post-colonial contact, but flow, using the multiple channels of electronic communication, over the entire world, from contact zones, borderlands, and diasporic nets of relationships to the most remote and self-contained areas of the globe. These communicative resources are most employed by people with the linguistic and cognitive skills to operate in multiple, co-present and overlapping communicative frames. The “language” they use to communicate depends then on the contextual nature of their multi-site interactions, but is necessarily mixed, translated, creolized. Transidiomatic practices then usually produce linguistic innovations with heavy borrowing from English (a reminder of the global impact of contemporary English, see [Crystal, 1997](#)), but any number of other languages could be involved in these communicative recombinations, depending on the reterritorialization needs and wants of the speakers.

Through transidiomatic practices, diasporic and local groups alike recombine their identities by maintaining simultaneous presence in a multiplicity of sites and by participating in elective networks spread over transnational territories.

While individual creativity must be acknowledged in this process of recombination, I do not want to idealize the agency (both social and communicative) of most people involved in a process which is, after all, imposed upon them. Political, social, and cultural supremacy is now in the hands of transnational governmental bodies, multinational companies, international relief organizations and churches, and various multinational military forces – in other words, in the hand of a globalized governmentality that scholars are starting to call “mobile sovereignty” ([Sassen, 1996](#); [Cheah and Robbins, 1998](#); [Hardt and Negri, 2000](#)). This mobile sovereignty is still assessing what kind of transidiomatic practices are welcomed (such as those of Indian phone operators forced to speak the local English of the area they serve) and what are considered “broken English” or gibberish.

This communicative asymmetry is tied to the emergence of two new layers in the international division of intellectual labor: a class made up of cosmopolitan elites (multinational corporate executives, UN bureaucrats, the staff of international NGOs, international media producers) and a class made up of either local semiotic operators (secretaries, computer technicians, interpreters, local politicians, and so on) under their direct or indirect control or of transnational migrants forced to commodify their linguistic knowledge to enter the global workforce. These semiotic operators still occupy the lowest step in the hierarchy of cognitive labor: simple “chain workers” of the information system, “in-person servers” servicing the needs of others (under the direct supervision of “symbolic analysts,” the “brainworkers” in

charge of the production of immaterial goods and services, see Reich, 1991; Gee et al., 1996; Ritzer, 1996, 1997). Among the skills most desired by these chain workers, knowledge of global languages takes center stage. This linguistic knowledge constitutes the best – and sometimes the only – opportunity currently available to many bright people (especially the youth) for social and geographical mobility.

Both global elites and local/transnational semiotic workers represent a new, moving frontier in class, language, and power relations, and as such, their communicative practices have a significant impact on their everyday life and in the lives of people with whom they interact, both near to them and in the deterritorialized environments of late-modern economy. They are at the frontline of contemporary capitalism's deterritorialized advance, finding themselves on the cutting edge of the creation of new ways of speaking and communicating. Their transidiomatic practices are an instance of how new discourses and modes of representation are reterritorialized within the local environment, and as such must be taken into account in any assessment of the impact of globalization on languages.

To ground this argument, let me turn to the ethnographic evidence of how transidiomatic practices are activated in a region that experienced only in the last decade of the 20th century a particularly sudden encounter with global cultural flows: the Adriatic ethno/mediascape.

4. Adriatic transidiomatic environments

The Adriatic region has recently become a peculiar observatory for the communicative dynamics of late modernity. In this context, the relationship between Albania and Italy deserves a particularly close scrutiny. These two nations are in fact rediscovering their proximity after the total interruption of contacts caused by the Cold War and by Albania's totalitarian regime, which almost managed to completely erase centuries of continuous interactions and about twenty years of Italian colonization (Vickers, 1995; Morozzo, 1997). For almost half a century (1945–1991), Enver Hoxha's dictatorship cut off 3.5 million Albanians from contact with the outside world, turning Albania into a nightmarish experiment of autocratic self-reliance and cultural insularity. People were not allowed to travel (even movements from town to town had to be authorized in advance by the government), foreign broadcasts were jammed, any attempt to reach the outside world was punished with a long detention (Pipa, 1989; Kasoruh, 1997; Martelli, 1998). Many Western books (both fiction and non-fiction) were banned, while the study of foreign languages was tightly regulated, insuring that only the state elite had access to them (principally French and Russian).

Then, in 1991 – with the fall of the totalitarian regime that had survived for five years after Hoxha's death – the wall of isolation suddenly collapsed. At this time Albanians, were flooded with the now completely uncensored programs offered by European channels – Italian commercial networks above all. Albanians' impressions of the “West” came from advertisements promoting commodities unavailable in the local economy, from game shows that simulated a reality of wealth in easy reach,

from newscasts more interested in entertainment than information. This skewed representation would later be modified through out-migrants' narratives about their host countries, through the influx of their remittances into the local economy, through the increasing penetration of global media conglomerates, and through local contacts with the international community (representatives of the EU and UN organizations, international NGOs, and businesses). These interactions with the Western world led Albanians to believe that their life after communism would reach Western standards in no time. This not only produced unrealistic expectations of the new democratic state (which led to two catastrophic political crisis and full-scale anarchic revolts) but also prompted people to develop skills perceived as valuable in a free market – including linguistic skills.

Since the fall of the Hoxha regime, knowledge of foreign languages has become one of the few commodities with a reliable value in the job markets open to Albanians, and the best opportunity for social and geographical mobility. By 2000 a growing number of Albanians (especially the youth) were fluent in the Western languages perceived to provide them with the best opportunities: English, Italian, German. These foreign languages had achieved a remarkable presence in the area and could be heard, in various degrees of competence, in almost all communicative environments.

In June 2000, I found myself in the middle of the Xhemali family reunion. The Xhemali children who had migrated to the States were back home, and this was cause for celebration. The oldest daughter, Drita, left Tirana in the early 1990s, settling first in Germany, then in New York City, where she now lives in Astoria, a Queens neighborhood with a high concentration of Christian-Orthodox Greeks. Her Albanian husband, Gencit, chose this residence after having converted to Orthodoxy in Greece. Drita speaks fluent Albanian, German, and English, and understands and can make herself understood in Italian. Gencit speaks fluent Albanian, Greek, English, and Italian.

Also reunited with the family in Tirana was Drita's brother, Idlir, who lives in the same apartment building in Astoria as Drita, two floors up, with his wife, Helga (also present at the party). Helga is from Germany, the daughter of a German mother and a Turkish father. She lived for 6 months in Tirana some years ago, and now can speak Albanian, English, and German. Last summer she went on vacation to her father's hometown, in an area of Central Turkey which saw, over the centuries, the settlement of different waves of Albanian migrants. At that time she met Turks of Albanian origin who still spoke their forefather's language. Thanks to her stay in Tirana, she could communicate with them.

Busily serving food was Emeraldal, the only sister who still lives in Tirana. She works as a translator for an international organization and speaks English at work all day. After work she interacts with her friends in Albanian and Italian. Every night she watches South American soap operas (dubbed into Italian), listens to Italian pop music, and surfs the English-saturated Internet.

Drita has invited a girlfriend, Kristina, to the party. Kristina migrated to NYC at around the same time as Drita and in June was also visiting relatives in Tirana. She currently lives in the Bronx with her husband Georges, a third generation American,

descendant of an Albanian–Italian family that migrated from Sicily to the States at the turn of the century. At home Georges' family speaks Arberesh, the variety of Albanian brought to southern Italy in the 15th century by Catholic refugees from Northern Albania, fleeing the Ottoman invasion. In public Georges' family speaks English. They communicate with their daughter-in-law in a mixture of Arberesh, English, and southern regional Italian.

In the Xhemali's apartment, the Albanian language blended with English, Italian, and occasionally German (for Susan's sake). The TV was on, broadcasting in Spanish, while from another room you could hear the beat of Nuyorican hip hop (some Puerto Rican New Yorkers had introduced Ildir to their music and he had promptly copied the tapes).

I was attracted to the TV set and to the Spanish chatter it irradiated, although nobody else seemed interested in it. The presence of foreign languages on national media was by then a taken-for-granted phenomenon. Most of Albanian TV stations could not afford to produce local programs, so they resorted to pirating shows broadcast via satellite by global/regional networks (such as CNN, BBC, MTV, ITN, Eurosport, or RAI International, the satellite division of Italian public television). Until very recently, they did so without even bothering to translate the shows. Albanians' desire to follow these programs resulted in an increase in foreign language exposure.

After the passage in fall 1998 of a new law requiring local stations to broadcast at least 70% of their programs in Albanian or lose their licenses, some of the stations began to subtitle foreign programs. (The law, as of 2001, has not yet been enforced, however, having vanished for the time being in the halls of the Ministry of Telecommunications). These TV stations added to their staff a disproportionate number of translators (in some cases amounting to one-third of the entire staff). These translators (almost all women) monitor satellite broadcasts, selected the relevant material, and copied, edited, and translated it. The final product was a transidiomatic jumble of languages and codes, where most of the times the producers elected to keep the original language while providing Albanian subtitles.

In 2000, soap operas (or *telenovelas*) were among the foreign programs most subject to transidiomatic intervention for local rebroadcast. The most interesting local channel that rebroadcasts soap operas was Tele Norba Shqipetarë (TNSH), the local affiliate of an Italian company, properly Tele Norba (TN), which has an extensive network in South-East Italy. TN has been active in Albania since 1996, initially simply relaying its signal over the Albanian territory (using the relay antennae of the Albanian national network, RTSH – which had the advantage of being under Army surveillance 24 h a day, a very valuable service in a country where people routinely steal such metal products as phone wires or manhole covers). In 1999 TN installed a local production team in Tirana, in charge of producing a 30-min news program and of translating the soap operas. TNSHs soap operas were originally produced in Argentina; then imported into Italy by Mediaset (owned by media mogul and current Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi), which dubbed them in Italian and broadcast them nationally in 1994; and finally resold to TN for local broadcasting in SE Italy (thus also Albania). In 1999, under the threat of Albania's new media law, TN

started subtitling the dubbed telenovelas in Albanian. In order to do so, they hired a team of 12 young women, all recent college graduates or senior students. These translators work in two shifts of 5 h each, for a monthly wage of \$150–200 (depending on speed, ability, and seniority).

The translators viewed the shows in VHS format, created subtitles on a computer, then sent the subtitled files by e-mail to Italy, where they were edited, synchronized with the images, and broadcast via the relay stations. The telenovelas were broadcast twice daily (between 8 a.m. and 12 p.m. and again between 3 and 7 p.m.) thus comprising 90% of local programming by the station. The other 10% was the TNSQ newscast, produced by directly lifting content from foreign satellite broadcast or from news agencies on the Internet – without worrying about copyright or royalties issues.

TNSQ soap-operas rapidly became incredibly popular. According to a recent estimate (ISB, 2001), TNSQ has the highest audience share in the late afternoon time slot (4:30–7:30 p.m.), when it broadcasted telenovelas. By 2000 some other TV stations wanted a piece of the action. Another well-equipped outfit, TV Klan, decided to compete directly with TNSQ by broadcasting the same telenovelas, this time translated directly from the original Spanish by a translator familiar with this language. In by-passing the Italian intermediate step, they could offer to Albanian audiences more recent shows, allowing them to know the future development of the plots being shown on TNSQ. At the time, it seemed quite a cunning strategy to cut down one's competitor, but shortly after I saw one episode in the Xhemalis' living room, TV Klan had to discontinue the broadcasts for lack of interest, audience, and prospective advertisers. It turned out that people preferred to hear Italian while reading the Albanian subtitles. All Xhemali' siblings pointed out to me that they did not really care for the soap-operas plots (although their mother would have a different opinion), what they wanted was to hear Italian, since they perceived acquisition of this language as the ticket out of their dire situation.

This desire to learn Italian (and English) influenced every-day decisions of a majority of Tirana's under 40 generation (the people who did not experience directly Hoxha dictatorship). They tended to congregate around foreign staff of international organizations and returning migrants, and were constantly scouring the news stands and the few bookstores for foreign language materials. They crowded the only movie theater in Tirana, which specialized in English-language movies; aptly named Millennium, this operation managed to show subtitled versions of movies recently released in America's theater, thanks to an extraordinarily efficient underground network for DVD distribution – again without any worry about copyrights. Finally, in their peer group they displayed these newly acquired linguistic skills in a mixed idiom of Albanian, Italian, English, and personal slang.

As a result, transidiomatic practices such as Xhemalis' were spreading like wild fire in contemporary Tirana – an area that only fifteen years ago was in tightly limited contact with the outside world. The Xhemalis, however, as an example of a multilingual group, were not a new phenomenon. After all, social groups in reciprocal contact have always learned and borrowed from each other's language(s), a tendency that accelerated as colonization and international trade gave rise to linguafrancas,

pidgins, and creoles. What is new and impressive is the extraordinary simultaneity and co-presence of these languages produced through a multiplicity of communicative channels, from face-to-face to mass media.

Albanian transidiomatic practices usually produce linguistic innovations grafted on both English and Italian linguistic forms (although German could also be present in these recombinations). The evolution of a particular popular saying could provide another example of these transidiomatic recombinations.

I became aware of the Albanian saying “ska problèm” (no problem) in 1996 through some migrants I met in Italy. It was routinely and often evoked in conversation as a way to assure each other about the positive development of some worrisome affair. In 1998, during my first stay in Albania, it surrounded me, being used by drivers who lost the way, restaurateurs dealing with my hungry pleas during a black out, or informants responding to my requests for help. I came to the conclusion that “ska problèm” had spread to interactions between Albanians and foreigners, and played a major role in the cross-cultural repertoire of Albanian stranger-handlers. However, by the end of 1999 it had almost disappeared, replaced by one of the first transidiomatic floaters regularly used in everyday interaction: “don uorri” (the Albanian pronunciation of the English “don’t worry”).

It is worth noting that Albanians could have opted to hybridize “ska problèm” by simply pronouncing it with the English stress on the first syllable “ska problèm”. This anglicized pronunciation might still have evoked the semantic connotation of the English language, while maintaining the local vernacular. The switch to a full English form (“don’t worry”) reflected, in my view, a desire to display full control of a foreign language and to index the speaker’s superior social position, at a time when, as I have already pointed out, knowledge of foreign languages was perceived as a valuable tool for social mobility.

The floater “don uorri” sometimes was immediately followed up by another one: “be heppi,” a clear testimony to the penetrating power of American pop music and the pervasive influence of Bobby Mc Ferrin’s rather annoying vocalizations (his song and video were released in 1988, but reached Albania only in the mid 1990s). When I first heard this popular refrain, I ascribed this linguistic shift to the global penetration of American pop culture and filed it away. However, the situation may be somewhat more complex.

In 1998 TNSQ started rebroadcasting a parody of the telenovelas genre – produced by its Italian home stations, Tele Norba. This parody, called “Melensa,” which became quite popular in both Southern Italy and Albania, included among its characters an Anglican priest named “Don Uorri”. (His partner was a Catholic priest, specializing in romantic confessions, thus aptly named “Don Brek Maiart”). Moreover, in 2000 an Italian website (altavista.it) advertised itself with a testimonial from a fictional character, also called “Don Uorri,” who had the typical features of a Mafia Don [see image]. This advertising campaign ran in most national newspapers, including *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, which publishes a sister edition in Albania (*Gazeta Shqiptarë*).

In Tirana, some people recalled these shows in commenting on the popularity of Tele Norba and its local affiliate TNSQ.

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Since Italian media holds a strong influence over Albanian popular culture, the use of “don uorri” by Albanians was most likely precipitated in part, by exposure to these Italian Don Uorris (in itself a transidiomatic process, where the Southern Italian local title of respect “don” was creolized by the English “don’t worry” to produce fictional characters with ambiguous qualities). When Albanians speak this transidiomatic floater, especially while interacting with Italians (including this researcher), they mark not only their knowledge of foreign languages but also awareness of Italian TV shows and advertising. In so doing, they display their familiarity with and desire to belong to a cosmopolitan milieu immersed in global cultural flows (such as tongue-in-cheek stereotypes about Italians as mafiosi).

While more research will be needed to substantiate the full significance of “don uorri” in Albania (I happened to run into the Italian Don Uorris in the last days of fieldwork in Tirana), I would venture that more likely than not, the Albanians who use this transidiomatic floater had been exposed to its multiple sources – the song, the comedy, and the ad – and applied this new twist to their habitual way of reassuring stressed-out Westerners.

We are now witnessing in Albania daily interaction between Albanian and foreign languages, especially Italian and English through mobile people and mobile texts. As



Fig. 1. Don Uorri. (from altavista.it)

I have explored in this paper, foreign media and returning migrants have become the new language pushers for thousands of young people (and their families).

The interaction between these two forms of mobility produces a social imagination of and desire for the rich world that inevitably leads to fantasies and projects of out-migration. Albanians engaged in transidiomatic practices use their newly acquired multilingualism not only to access wealth but also to display the end of their isolation, their desire to be incorporated into the contemporary world, and their ability to imagine a better life.

5. Conclusion

“Language diversity has been historically under the influence of two contrasting myths: in the name of Babel, humankind has been punished with the confusion of the languages. In the name of Pentecost, the plurality of languages is on the contrary understood as a gift to humankind. Political power, in both its aristocratic and democratic modes, has always strived to force us to abandon the Pentecostal swarm of plural tongues for a single language, before Babel” (Roland Barthes in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, January 7, 1977).

Most contemporary linguistic studies are still under the influence of the Babel myth: of the ideological desire to maintain a linguistic boundaries, allocate people to their respective territories, connect languages with the emergence of the sense of national identity. In this essay, as instructed by Barthes, I have taken the side of Pentecost: of the xenoglossic need to share and communicate to all.¹²

I have argued that the problematic indexicality of cellular communication, the fuzziness of machine translation, the transidiomatic practices of deterritorialized speakers, and the emergence of recombinant identities problematize our taken-for-granted, common-sensical knowledge of what is a “language”.

First, the experience of de- and reterritorialization, and the sociolinguistic disorder it entails, requires a serious reconceptualization of the connection between communication and shared knowledge. We can no longer assume that such shared knowledge exists to provide a common ground from which to negotiate conflicts and agendas. The identification and establishment of common ground itself must be understood as a major challenge in the process of communication (Rampton, 1998; Gee, 1999).

Second, deterritorialization forces us to look at the ideological process of making and patrolling the boundary of a social formation that is no longer territorially confined. Linguistic anthropology has investigated the ideological formation of social identity through shared knowledge (Gumperz, 1982), national consciousness (Gal,

¹² As Eco (1995) remarked, the apostles’ gift at Pentecost was not *glossolalia* (the ability to express oneself in an ecstatic language that all could understand as if it were their own native speech) but *xenoglossia*, that is, the ability to speak many languages, or polyglottism.

1979; Woolard, 1989; Irvine, 1998), and political activism (Urban and Sherzer, 1991; Urla, forthcoming), but it must now raise the question of how groups of people no longer territorially defined think about their multiple voices, transidiomatic practices, and recombinant identities.

It is now time not only to conceptualize a “linguistics of contact” resulting from the “randomness and disorder of the flows of people, knowledge, texts and objects across social and geographical space, in the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and in fragmentation, indeterminacy and ambivalence,” (Rampton, 1998, p. 125; see also Pratt, 1987, 1991) but, more importantly, to examine communicative practices based on disorderly recombinations and language mixings occurring simultaneously in local and distant environments. In other words, it is time to conceptualize a linguistics of xenoglossic becoming, transidiomatic mixing, and communicative recombinations.

In this logic, we should rethink the concept of communication itself, no longer embedded in national languages and international codes, but in the multiple transidiomatic practices of global cultural flows. This will allow our imagination of linguistic exchanges to escape dystopic (neo-colonial, ecolinguistic, and anti-globalization) discourses of penetration, rape, and extinction, and instead take shape within the discourse of cultural becoming, social mutations, and recombinant identities. We will then be able to evoke the flow metaphor in the contexts of the contested words, mixed codes, simultaneous communicative frames, and metalinguistic struggles of a globalization “from below” (Appadurai, 2000).

Finally, this transformed paradigm will allow us to begin to understand late-modern communication as the tactical deployment of transidiomatic practices by social formations able to imagine themselves, interact, and mutate while tossed about in a whirlpool of electronic, communicative turbulence.

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