

## The Creative Web of Languages

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### Of Language and the World

“*Die Grenzen meiner Sprache* bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt”.<sup>1</sup> *The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world. *Les frontières de ma langue* signifient les frontières de mon monde. *Los límites de mi lenguaje* significan los límites de mi mundo. *Le frontiere del mio linguaggio* sono le frontiere del mio mondo. *Nyelvem határai világom* határait jelentik. 01000100 01101001 01100101 01000111 01110010 01100101 01101110 01111010 01100101 01101110 01101101 01100101 01101001 01101110 01100101 01110010 01010011 01110000 01110010 01100001 01100011 01101000 01100101 01100010 01100101 01100100 01100101 01110101 01110100 01100101 01101110 01100100 01101001 01100101 01000111 01110010 01100101 01101110 01111010 01100101 01101110 01101101 01100101 01101001 01101110 01100101 01110010 01010111 01100101 01101100 01110100 00101110.

Despite all the criticisms raised against Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, including by the author himself, and even though I can admittedly experience things in “my world” that I cannot express verbally and that I would not necessarily find mystical or nonsensical, as Wittgenstein qualifies that which cannot be said, this proposition still grasps something fundamental with a renewed relevance in the Digital Age: the inextricable entanglement of language and the world. Rather than trying to trace their outer limits, which serves as a starting point here, we will indeed focus on the intricacies of this intertwining.

“*Nyelvem határai világom határai jelentik*”, then. This is my mother tongue. But what is “my language”? Is my mother tongue (still) “my language”? Has it ever been? And does “my language” stop where my mother tongue does? I am already transgressing its limits here, writing in another language, typing “foreign” words that undeniably make part of “my world”, and sentences that are becoming part of it as I write them. I “have” (learned) several languages, but none of them is “mine”, none of them has ever been or will ever be. I do “have” “a” language I speak, which no one else does exactly the same, which exists only in and through me, without that I own or fully control it: it is an ever-changing ever-shifting amorphous hybrid of a handful of languages I can identify by name, and all that comes out of their unruly cohabitation in my brain and life – themselves embedded in, and impacted by, a world around them. *Les frontières de nyelvem* bedeuten los límites del mio mundo. *The limits of világom* sono anche die Grenzen de mi langue.

This experience invites to follow Yasemin Yildiz in questioning the “monolingual paradigm” that sanctified the (single, clear-cut) “mother tongue” as a primary mode of access to the world and the ultimate token of authenticity.<sup>2</sup> And we can note with Derrida that any(one’s) language, even the sole mother tongue of a (so-called) monolingual person has never been quite their “own” either.<sup>3</sup> Even without the complexities of a (post)colonial relationship or other (linguistic) power structures, (“natural”) language is always already shared by some Other. It only lives in and through and for

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus | Side-by-Side-by-Side-Edition*, ed. by Kevin C. Klement, containing the original German, alongside both the Ogden/Ramsey, and Pears/McGuinness English translations, 2019 [1922] [Online] <https://people.umass.edu/klement/tlp/> [accessed 18 April 2020], \$5.6.

<sup>2</sup> Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2011, p. 6 sqq.

<sup>3</sup> “I only have one language; it is not mine”, says Derrida’s provocative (hypothetical) monolingual (Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, translated by Patrick Mensah, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 1).

and thanks to sharing, through the language games we play with others – to move from the primary concern of the early Wittgenstein to that of the later one,<sup>4</sup> and from a static and solipsistic view of language to a dynamic and social one – and only as long as it keeps changing. And in any not hermetically isolated culture, sharing also means that language evolves through contact and mixing with other languages.<sup>5</sup>

Today, “this” language of “mine”, and many other (written) languages throughout the world live increasingly also in and through digital modes of sharing that can reach much farther, much quicker, and many more people than the analogue ones. Languages also share virtual spaces as they travel through the same supercomplex rhizomatic information superhighway. And even though I don’t “speak” binary code, it underpins these very words too somewhere, somehow. As does a series of programming and mark-up languages and protocols that help bring this text from my keyboard to your screen. There is no doubt that on many accounts, code *is* “the language of our time”,<sup>6</sup> acting as an indispensable vehicle for all the others when they go digital.

New linguistic formations also emerge from this crossing and coexistence of “natural” and “other” languages in cyberspace. “[We nooses tous des bastardi elettronici che usano lingue globali](#) [...] We are all e-strangers, all nomads that use globish bastard languages”, writes Annie Abrahams in a performance text<sup>7</sup>. David Crystal highlighted already in 2001 how participating in a global network changes language, pointing out the creative potential of the encounter between language and network – even if his perspective remained monolingual on the (then still even more) dominant English and somewhat essentializing “the language of” e-mails, chatgroups, and so on.<sup>8</sup> We can still only agree with him when a decade later he writes: “What I, as a linguist, see on the Internet is a remarkable expansion of the expressive options available in a language – far exceeding the kinds of stylistic expansion that took place with the arrival of printing and broadcasting”.<sup>9</sup> This is true of individual languages as well as to their encounters. Our languages mix and we mix them, now quite naturally not only orally but also in writing.<sup>10</sup> While some observers came to alert us against the dangers of a dumbed down “digitalk”, more and more people have access to more language and more languages – even if it is still true that “support varies widely from language to language” and that “the Internet currently serves the native languages of only a small proportion of the world’s population”.<sup>11</sup> We routinely combine different media and modes of expression through their digital translations, with spoken or written language being only one component in this mix, which itself

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<sup>4</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1958, p. 5 *sqq.*

<sup>5</sup> “1. We only ever speak one language.

2. We never speak only one language”, writes also Derrida (*Monolingualism of the Other*, p. 7).

<sup>6</sup> This was the title of the 2003 Ars Electronica Festival. See the catalogue Gerfried Stocker and Christine Schöpf (eds), *Code: Code – the Language of Our Time. Code – Law, Code – Art, Code – Life*, Ostfildern-Ruit, Hatje Cantz, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Annie Abrahams, “Ours Lingages – Documentation”, 2017 [Online] <https://aabrahams.wordpress.com/2017/10/31/ours-lingages-documentation/> [accessed 25 April 2020].

<sup>8</sup> David Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> David Crystal, *Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide*, Florence, US, Routledge, 2011, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> See Mark Sebba, Shahrzad Mahootian, and Carla Jonsson (eds), *Language Mixing and Code-Switching in Writing: Approaches to Mixed-Language Written Discourse*, London, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> John C. Paolillo, “How Much Multilingualism?: Language Diversity on the Internet”, in Brenda Danet and Susan C. Herring, *The Multilingual Internet: Language, Culture, and Communication Online*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

becomes a language<sup>12</sup> – thus also latently expanding our idea of language. Just think of the emoticons that have become a common feature of our everyday written communication.

When they pass through digital tools and networks, our languages are no longer just the stand-alone single-layer spoken word or series of handwritten or printed symbols either that would incarnate a single-layer material channel between emitter and receiver. As Lev Manovich explains, “[a] computer program written by a programmer undergoes a series of translations: high-level computer language is compiled into executable code, which is then converted by an assembler into binary code”.<sup>13</sup> Any text written or digitally recorded by the user – by definition using such a computer programme – also undergoes that series of translations between the input and the output device. Any linguistic formation thus becomes a multi-layered string produced by a set of simultaneously ongoing processes of translation and transformation between layers of code and the invisible materiality of nanoscale binary switches, before they re-materialize as sensible representations on the output interface. The complexity of the semiotic processes and systems our words pass through in the digital medium is beyond the understanding of most users, and the traditional social and discursive frameworks of communication<sup>14</sup> are partly replaced, partly complemented by these technical frameworks.

This complexity is by definition a site of transformation and manipulation. Manipulation is its essence. The manipulation can be directed, diverted, exploited in ways and for purposes visible and invisible from the user’s end. The regular user – speaker, writer, emitter of a “message” – is in control of only a tiny portion of the process, the visible tip of the growing digital iceberg, and only to the extent that one can be in control of language and representation at all. But that language here (now) also needs to (be) fit into materially and digitally predefined frames. And the tools we use to communicate no longer only shape the message, moulding them into those pre-set forms derived from previous messages by the same and other users and making us think in those very forms, but also observe and analyse our input to extract information about the individual sender, user groups, patterns of language, and patterns of practice and preference, to generate data about markets and ultimately monetize our every word. As Pip Thornton puts it, “[w]hether through keyword targeting, email, search engine optimisation techniques, or the dissemination of news or status updates, the words that circulate through digital space are increasingly laden with economic value”<sup>15</sup>. As a result, “[j]ust like art in the age of mechanical reproduction, language in the age of algorithmic reproduction is therefore part of a process of distancing, decontextualisation and monetisation that has profound political and social consequences.”<sup>16</sup>

Some users – professional programmers and self-taught geeks, hackers, artists, and other curious individuals are able to intervene in deeper layers and code, using programming languages to manipulate or generate texts in human-readable “natural” languages. That doesn’t stop other manipulations from taking place elsewhere in the discourses of the same manipulators of language,

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<sup>12</sup> See Sirpa Leppänen and Saija Peuronen, “Multilingualism on the Internet”, in Marilyn Martin-Jones, Adrian Blackledge, and Angela Creese, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Multilingualism*, London, Routledge, 2012, p. 398.

<sup>13</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Pip Thornton, “Words as Data: The Vulnerability of Language in an Age of Digital Capitalism”, *Crest Security Review* 9, 2019 [Online] <https://www.crestsecurityreview.com/article/words-as-data-the-vulnerability-of-language-in-an-age-of-digital-capitalism> [accessed 5 April 2020].

<sup>16</sup> Pip Thornton, “Language in the Age of Algorithmic Reproduction: A Critique of Linguistic Capitalism”, unpublished doctoral thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2019, p. 24. [Online] [https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/language-in-the-age-of-algorithmic-reproduction-a-critique-of-linguistic-capitalism\(06a016fc-6f1b-4880-abb8-d139b5d49d60\).html](https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/language-in-the-age-of-algorithmic-reproduction-a-critique-of-linguistic-capitalism(06a016fc-6f1b-4880-abb8-d139b5d49d60).html) [accessed 26 April 2020].

however. Nothing does. Yet the cyberspace also remains a place of resistance with relative freedom. Some of the exploitative manipulations can be hijacked, revealed, distorted, fed false or useless information. Any freedom or resistance is partial and temporary, to be carved out in the interstices of surveillance, just like guerrilla gardening,<sup>17</sup> surfing on manipulation and tinkering with systems that ultimately remain beyond “our” control.

But who are “they” who control? People built the systems – we can even name a few – some of them remain in charge of various areas and aspects and can intervene at more fundamental levels. But no one is “in control” anymore. As Galloway puts it: “*The quandary is: no one controls networks, but networks are controlled.*”<sup>18</sup> “They” still design algorithms, usually based on what “we” do and what “they” think we like or dislike or should or should not do, and this usually based on further algorithms too, which translate our languages and gestures and actions following their own predefined and inevitably biased logic, with the equally inevitable and unknown translation losses and gains. Yet the new algorithms based on this will also often lead to unpredictable results that escape their designers and divert from the original intentions behind them. The languages we/they have invented and keep (re)inventing without knowing quite well what we are creating underpin and shape the world we live in – and vice versa.

“*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” – an equation in two unknowns, then. And more clearly than ever, the two prove to be tied up in one complex amorphous and evolving unknown – without nevertheless turning the proposition into a tautology. Our globish bastard languages have deep, long, and impossibly entangled rhizomatic roots connected to a world-wide network of cables crossing oceans and continents which help them feed on the world and feed back into it.<sup>19</sup> This is the material face of our language-world which “my” language-world is plugged into, in which it grows (or shrinks) and which it grows. This is the primary playing field of our language games today, even though these continue in analogue spaces as well, face to face and on paper. The rules are increasingly set and shaped on that field, through and by our language games. Language and the digital network is a chicken-and-egg problem. This issue of *Hybrid* reflects on this entanglement, with a focus on creative frictions “between” networks and languages, among the languages of networks, among the networks of languages, and among languages in the networks.

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<sup>17</sup> “Guerrilla gardening refers to ‘the illicit cultivation of someone else’s land’, as Richard Reynolds puts it, although the land in question has usually not been much cared for by its owner. Guerrilla gardeners plant tulips on roundabouts, vegetables on roadside verges, and daffodils in neglected parks. These non-confrontational activists take pleasure in the secret and anonymous process of their work; their ongoing efforts to make the world a nicer place through small but beautiful interventions; and their sense of connection with the illicit planting community in particular, gardeners and environmental activists in general, and with nature itself. They gain pleasure from what they have done, but it is the doing it which really counts.” David Gauntlett, *Making Is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity, from DIY and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0*, Cambridge, Polity, 2011, p. 70.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander R. Galloway, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*, Minneapolis, Minn., University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 39; emphasis in the original.

<sup>19</sup> A fascinating French radio documentary provides insight into the scale and material aspects of building the intercontinental network: François-Charles Domergue (dir.), “Dans la tuyauterie d’internet”, *France Culture*, 13.03.2020. [Online] <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/grand-reportage/cable-internet> [accessed 28 March 2020].

### “Between”: space and process

In Bruce Sterling’s definition from 1992, cyberspace is “*the place between the phones*”.<sup>20</sup> Now between mobile phones, computers, and all sorts of smart objects. And between the people who use them. It’s the edges between the nodes, to use the terminology of network theory,<sup>21</sup> which constitute a space. Yet this “between” is not (just) a gap that separates each two things, but the space that connects them. In 1984 William Gibson imagined the forthcoming cyberspace as a “consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators”.<sup>22</sup> As such, it will also be a space where languages, forms, modes of expression, discourses, interests, powers, commands, and algorithms meet and mingle, transition from one to another, shape one another. Although this does technically and physically happen within individual computers and servers, it is their connectedness that requires and enables most of the mingling. The “conversation” among computers makes that this “between” is process as much as space; a distance with a temporal and active dimension. We have seen that traversing this “between” entails translations and transformations. It is a space and process that doesn’t belong to either or any of the objects or subjects that constitute it – the nodes – but its nature is ultimately defined by those “entities” as much as it defines them. The connected “entities” and “identities” cannot be abstracted from the “betweens”, the spaces and processes that surround, connect, and shape them. They are, to use again this term that will keep coming back, entangled – and as Annie Abrahams and Emmanuel Guez remind us that Karen Barad reminds us, “[e]ntanglements are not unities. They do not erase differences; on the contrary, entanglings entail differentiatings, differentiatings entail entanglings”.<sup>23</sup>

Our reflections in this issue revolve around the dynamics of such betweenness, relationality, tension, and processuality linking (kinds of) languages, modes of expressions, media, platforms, and identities. The articles tackle a series of interconnected questions, with a number of threads running through various sets of papers. They thus establish a network of relationships between concepts and phenomena while resisting a single grouping under individual headings, as different keywords highlight different connections and call for different arrangements. The table of contents would indeed best be presented as an interactive tag cloud linked to an interactive cloud of article titles, where each tag would call all related articles and each article title all the relevant tags.

In the rest of this introduction, I offer just a few pointers about some of the most important relationships and tensions explored in the papers, acknowledging that the arrangement of concepts here presented is also just one possible way through the connected clouds.

#### 1. Language, writing, code

Digital networks and the World Wide Web live in and through languages, both in the sense of *langage*, semiotic systems invented for specific purposes (programming languages, binary code), and *langue*, natural languages that the users speak and write. While John Cayley, whose contribution to this discussion was published as an interactive app, insists that code is *not* (like

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<sup>20</sup> Bruce Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown*, Adelaide, The University of Adelaide, 2014 [1992] [Online] <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/sterling/bruce/hacker/complete.html> [accessed 27 December 2018], emphasis in the original.

<sup>21</sup> See ex. Albert-László Barabási, *Linked: The New Science of Networks*, Cambridge, Mass., Perseus Publishing, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, London, HarperCollins, 1995 [1984], p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> Karen Barad, “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart”, *Parallax*, 20.3 (2014), p. 176, cited in Annie Abrahams and Emmanuel Guez, “‘The Machinic Author’ Artist’s Statement: The Reading Club”, *Journal of Creative Writing Studies*, 4.1 (2019) [Online] <https://scholarworks.rit.edu/jcws/vol4/iss1/8> [accessed 18 April 2020].

natural) language, which is “an evolved faculty ... unique to our species”,<sup>24</sup> **Jean-Pierre Balpe** highlights the importance of the distinction between *langue* and *langage*, erased in English with the use of a single term for both, when it comes to explaining the creative performance of his text generator. The generator’s algorithm hijacks the writing process by drawing on lexicons imported from the web to translate abstract linguistic structures into natural language outputs that constitute horizontal, networked anoptical text worlds enacting a “permanent snapshot of human literature” (Balpe). For Cayley, “writing is a practice of language-as-such, something that subsumes writing without impugning either entity’s integrity”, and he argues that “as social human practice, (a) writing (system) partakes of the constitutive faculty for language just as fully as any particular natural language does”.<sup>25</sup>

Serge Bouchardon offers a perspective which can bridge these two approaches by proposing to look at digital literature (such as Balpe’s text generator or his own interactive fictions) as a privileged form of digital writing which explores our relationship to writing more generally.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Balpe’s work shows that interrogating our relationship to digital writing is inseparable from interrogating language – both the *langues* we speak and the *langages* we create and use to manipulate natural languages digitally – while Cayley highlights how writing constitutes both *langage* and *langue*: both a faculty and an instance of its practice.

**J. R. Carpenter** continues this line of thought by unpacking the complex relationship between various modes in which programming and human languages intertwine in her work and constitute meaning together. “What happens when the source code rises to the surface of the screen? How might the syntax and grammar of code languages begin to inflect screen and page-based poetics?”, she asks. The creative interferences, with which Carpenter experiments across the digital medium, print, and performance, produce a new kind of writing with an idiosyncratic syntax and mode of meaning making. They accordingly invite a mode of reading that also carries over aspects of the logic of one medium and language to the other, both highlighting and resolving the tensions between them through the hybrid, transitional forms that emerge.

## 2. Code, AI, translation

Carpenter’s reflections underline the multi-layered textual and translational nature of digital literature. On the visible surface of the work, the readers might see one distinct language or more, a hybrid in which they recognize more than one language – as in some of Carpenter’s own work – or they might be able to choose one language among several available options when they enter the work. This is the case of Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckaert’s [Loss of Grasp](#), created in 2010 in French, which now exists in no less than ten languages – making it the most translated work of electronic literature – all accessible from the same homepage. The original Flash version, which is to become obsolete with Flash’s planned end-of-life at the end of 2020, has also been recreated in JavaScript (2018) and for Android and iOS smartphones (2019). What does it mean to translate and transcode a work that already involves complex multimodal textualities and translation processes into other tongues and other programming languages? If all (literary) translation entails transcreation, this is all the more the case here. And if creating and “reading” electronic literature opens new perspectives and avenues to writing and reading, translating and transcoding it shed

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<sup>24</sup> John Cayley, “The Future of -Writing -Vilém Flusser +Language +John Cayley”, *Digital Review*, June 2020 [Online] <http://thedigitalreview.com/issue00/future-of-language/index.html> [accessed 24 July 2020].

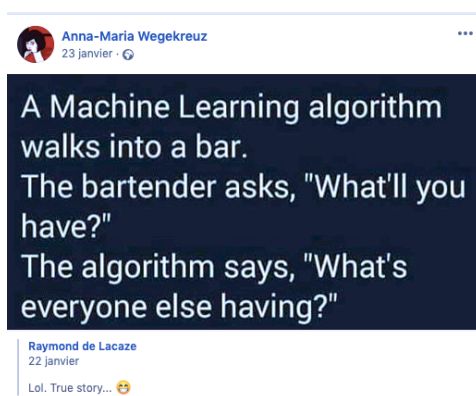
<sup>25</sup> John Cayley, “The Future of -Writing -Vilém Flusser +Language +John Cayley”, *Digital Review*, June 2020 [Online] <http://thedigitalreview.com/issue00/future-of-language/index.html> [accessed 24 July 2020].

<sup>26</sup> “On pourrait avancer que la [littérature numérique] est la forme privilégiée d’écriture numérique qui questionne notre rapport à l’écriture.” (Serge Bouchardon, *La Valeur heuristique de la littérature numérique*, Paris, Hermann, 2014, p. 107 sq.)



new light on the sometimes yet unsuspected complexities of the work, the interdependence of language and code in its structure, and latent assumptions about the translation and coding process that become visible and disrupted when the two are intertwined. **Serge Bouchardon and Nohelia Meza** present the challenges met in the translation process, a close collaboration between the authors and the translators in thinking the text as an integral part of the interactive interface. They point out that in order to achieve a similar effect in other languages, the original code also needed to be modified, just as the transcoding couldn't leave the original processes intact. "Original" and "translation" thus also become entangled and mutually impact one another, questioning the most basic assumption about their respective "identities" as usually conceived in analogue translation.

It is not only translation that can impact code, however; code is also impacting what we mean by translation and how it is done. From the individual human artist's, coder's, and translator's perspective **Claire Larsonneur** leads us to that of writing bots, artificial intelligence (AI), natural language processing (NLP), and neural machine translation (NMT). She reminds us of the (unforeseen?) implications of digital networks not only for cultural practices and identity, but also for linguistic diversity, as the technology amplifies economic and political power relationships among languages and language variants, with the data-hungry machine learning algorithms further favouring those already big, as this Facebook meme sums it up:



While Google's massively multilingual NMT solution gives a better chance to smaller languages, it is not without serving the primary purposes of expanding the company's linguistic capitalist empire.

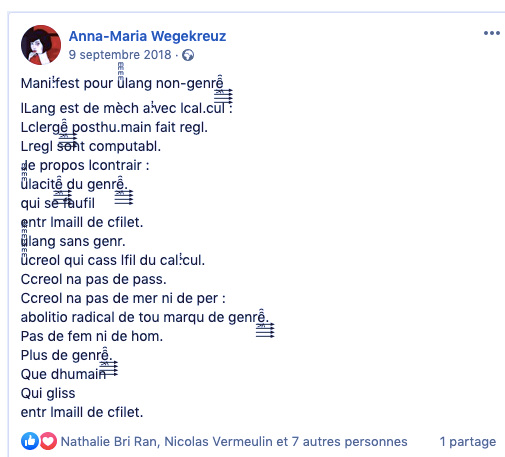
The logic of linguistic capitalism and surveillance is also the primary concern of **Alexandra Saemmer**, who investigates Facebook's strategies both through research and a creative project, the "collaborative dystopia" titled [Nouvelles de la Colonie](#) [*News/Stories from the Colony*]. Saemmer presents some of Facebook's tools in controlling users' linguistic practices, among which its machine translation occupies an important position. Not only does it rely on statistical analyses drawing on the data collected from users as well as on external databases and use an algorithm as pivot language between source and target, but it also employs users' knowledge, inviting them to amend the translation produced. In this way, the website's apparatus works towards a linguistic normalization that feeds on user data, feeds back to the users the dominant forms, and uses users to perfection its functioning. And all this serves the purpose of constantly enhancing its database and algorithms in order to better interpret and exploit users' linguistic expressions. Our every act of self-expression, encouraged by the social network, increases its hold over our language. The implications go far beyond language, as Pip Thornton points out:

The systemic manipulation and monetisation of digitised language is a threat to the security and stability of modern society. The very words we use to communicate, learn, debate, and critique have become compromised by opaque algorithmic organisation and optimisation, and the market-driven profits of private companies such as Google. We might therefore ask ourselves, just how resilient and

secure is language in the digital age? Indeed, how can we even talk about security when we cannot talk securely?<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Translation, writing, resistance

The task is then to keep (re)inventing language so that it eludes algorithms. Recognizing the inescapability of the networked condition, the members of the Colony use writing creatively to denounce and resist the platform's power from inside. **Jean-Pierre Balpe's** *Un Monde incertain*, an important inspiration for *Nouvelles de la Colonie*, already hijacked writing and keeps flooding Facebook with generated texts mixed with human interactions. Saemmer also points out that Facebook is built on a utopic idea – and ideology – of consensus and community, in the name of which its algorithms seek to eliminate dissent. The resulting mechanism relegates divergent voices into invisibility. The role of the “committed literature” and “political art of language” that these projects and profiles embody and practise is then to resist the normalizing, homogenizing – but also polarizing – and rationalizing – but paradoxically also emotionalizing and maddening – tendency of linguistic capitalism. This happens through a number of experimental forms, including modes of writing that make texts unreadable to algorithms:



These “tiny protests” – the title of Leonardo Flores’s similar micro-resistance Twitter bot project would fit the entire phenomenon<sup>28</sup> – manage to employ the “tactics of the weak”, as Saemmer puts it, to stretch the individual’s wiggle room by exploring the forms of freedom still possible in the virtual space colonized by social media moguls.

Translation and writing, deeply intertwined, are also key in resisting diffuse but well engrained dominant discourses, such as gender inequality, and generally the essentialization and rejection or oppression of the (linguistic, cultural, political, religious...) “Other”. **Canan Marasligil** and **Lou Sarabadzic**, both authors, bloggers, feminists, activists, and translators highlight how living between, among, across, and through languages can make one aware of the need to resist the power of any single or uniform voice that claims authority over the interpretation of phenomena. “Being, accepting, living a multilingualism is a political feminist stand,” as Annie Abrahams also writes in her paper here. **Marasligil** works in five languages and considers translation to be a form of activism. She mainly translates Turkish literature and comics into French and English to carry the voice of politically committed authors across linguistic borders and show the little-known richness and diversity of contemporary Turkish culture abroad. Among her numerous web-based and participatory projects, [City in Translation](#) explores the often unseen omnipresence of multiple

<sup>27</sup> Pip Thornton, “Words as Data”.

<sup>28</sup> See @TinyProtests, and @Protestitas for the Spanish edition.



languages in urban spaces across countries. **Sarabadzic**, living and writing in French and English, shares her experience with OCD, depression, and grief in two bilingual blogs, [Predicted Prose](#) and [Tel Père](#), and on social media, tackling social taboos head-on. While her tweets are in either language, she makes a point of translating every post published on Facebook in order to reach the largest possible audience. Her posts express her political commitment to the feminist case and against discrimination of all sorts, also often citing the work of less known authors to counter the dominant literary establishment that marginalizes them. Blogs and social media thus serve an important activist function, and translation is a key tool not only in reaching farther, but also in highlighting the limitations of any single language, discourse, or perspective and resisting the temptation of easy, reductive positioning.

#### 4. Resistance, (plat)forms, identities

The flexibility of the digital medium in enabling the copresence of several languages in a shared space can facilitate such translational writing practices of betweenness. Platforms and websites also prescribe certain forms, however: they have their “architextes”, to use Yves Jeanneret’s and Emmanuel Souchier’s term cited by Alexandra Saemmer, which impose their logic and system of values. **Jean-Pierre Balpe** injects his generated texts into Facebook through a bunch of profiles of fictional characters that have become active members of the network with many “friends” and followers comprising mostly real persons. *Un Monde incertain* thus enacts a resistance not only to the traditional roles and mechanisms of literary communication, but also to Facebook’s terms and conditions, which requires every profile to belong to a real person and allow only one profile per person. Similarly, the contributors of *Nouvelles de la Colonie* are avatars with often ostensibly invented names, managed by various people who presumably all have their “real” profiles as well. Fictional profiles – from Facebook’s perspective, fake and fraudulent – posting often confusing discourses about fictional lives and worlds corrupt the quality of the data the company collects and sells, undermining its marketing strategy. While such deliberate sabotage of the system through “‘disingenuous’ data, or data in camouflage as not-yet-data”<sup>29</sup> admittedly constitutes only a tiny drop in the ocean of clueless and obedient Facebook subjects and every single well-connected and active profile, real or fictional/fake, also participates in and strengthens the network, it is an indispensable component of the “tactics of the weak” that make the power mechanisms visible and contribute to corroding them in their small but significant ways. Working overtly “from within the system”<sup>30</sup> and “staying with the trouble”<sup>31</sup> is a conscious response to the “paradox of resistance”<sup>32</sup> we are faced with in the network that even our resistances strengthen. It is also a mode of resistance that rather than opting for “stasis or retrograde motion” and “destroy[ing] technology in some neo-Luddite delusion”, proposes “to push technology into a hypertrophic state, further than it meant to go”, which Galloway suggests to be the most productive way forward.<sup>33</sup>

Less of a resistant but no less perspicacious, **Charlie Gere** focuses on Facebook’s younger sister, Instagram’s impact on perception, and explores the discrepancies between the experience of time and the self as (re)presented in modernist literature and contemporary image-based social media respectively. Spanning life writing from Proust to Instagram through his own experience of two journeys to India in 1987 and 2019 respectively, he observes a shift from the modernist view through the (dis)continuity of duration to a postmodern “episodic condition”, emblemized by

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<sup>29</sup> Galloway, *The Exploit*, p. 136.

<sup>30</sup> Thornton, “Language in the Age of Algorithmic Reproduction”, p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Thornton, “Language in the Age of Algorithmic Reproduction”, p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Galloway, *The Exploit*, p. 98.

Instagram, in which the self appears as a “series of unconnected fragments”. Gere attributes this perception to the exposure to digital culture, which he claims made him lose “any sense of debt” and turned him into a “shallow postmodernist”. While for Proust and the narrator of his *Recherche*, life is most fully experienced through writing – even if writing also means the inevitable pastness of the moment being written about – Gere’s instagrammatology presents a theory of contemporary “writing” based on the present condition where experiencing equals capturing an image and posting it on Instagram.

## 5. Identities, translation, language(s)

The episodic condition questions the static concept of identity through time. Despite the affordances and algorithms of popular platforms of self-expression and self-representation that work to fix and sort identities into manageable patterns, the digital medium can then also help to resist such reduction and facilitate (the representation of) the experience of the non-essentialist reality of a self in flux. In her reflections on one of her works, J. R. Carpenter explains how JavaScript’s management of variables and memory, for instance, follows such a logic of transitoriness:

*TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* sends and receives dialogue on and through source code and associated media haunted by generations of past usage. This haunting may be understood, in part, to be the result of an operation of memory. In a programming language like C, “var=” refers to a specific location in memory. *A location is always both a place and the act of locating that place.* Thus, a location always exists before it is located. Yet, rather than assigning variables to a specific location in memory, JavaScript distributes the operation of processes including memory across networks and devices. *Until it is referred to, the location of a variable may be anywhere.* Once it has been referred to, through a process known as garbage collection, a variable may disappear. Or, the reference to it may disappear. *This mode of dispersed, temporary, and transitory memory allocation suits the performance of a narrative text of place and displacement nicely.*<sup>34</sup>

Location, memory, and language are all in movement in these operations, and in this case also in their output, which is itself “a” “text” that changes every minute or so, allowing only for a quick read that can never quite arrive at fixing its meaning.

Carpenter’s description could also act as a metaphor for the geographical locations, belonging, and memory that constitute a person’s identity through time. Variability, displacement, and dispersed memory are very much at the core of the multilingual experience, especially when lived through movement and migration, which underpins Carpenter’s work, just as that of **Lou Sarabadzic**, **Canan Marasligil**, and **Annie Abrahams**. **Sarabadzic**, who, as we have seen, “live[s] between languages” and as such, in translation, affirms the most directly how the digital space has been not only a communication tool, but constitutive of the kind of linguistic, cultural, social, gender, etc. “identity” she feels comfortable with: “My identity as Lou Sarabadzic started online, as it allowed me to be fragmented, composite, hybrid: this is precisely how I consider myself to be.” **Marasligil**, of Turkish origin, grew up in Brussels, where she learnt French and Dutch and studied Spanish and English at university. She now lives in Amsterdam and speaks of “translation as movement”, both inseparable from her personal (hi)story: “My reality is rooted in motion: between places, languages, emotions. It is constant and unpredictable.” As she emphasized in a translation workshop for students, one translates with one’s biography. The only “fix” “location” where she remains present wherever she is and while in movement is the diffuse and distributed cyberspace, which itself never stops. The space between the phones. Last but not least, **Annie Abrahams**’s entire oeuvre has been a

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<sup>34</sup> J. R. Carpenter, “Translation, Transmutation, Transmediation, and Transmission in TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]”, *Cahiers virtuels du Laboratoire NT2*, 7, 2014 <<http://nt2.uqam.ca/fr/cahiers-virtuels/article/translation-transmutation-transmediation-and-transmission-transmission>>, my emphasis.

performative experimentation with digital communication mobilizing every possible kind of language to counter reductive and essentialist approaches to presence, identity, the Other, and communication. As she writes in her article in this issue:

I'm invisible, I'm exotic, unidentifiable, blurry, fuzzy, shifty, rude, vulgar, uncouth, rough, crude, insolent, naive and alienated,

I am queer, I am hybrid, complex, malleable, pliable, often alone, silent, distorted, deformed, subversive, lonely.

Sometimes I am also abject, offensive, often incomprehensible and impolite.

I speak a broken tongue, my tongue is bastard, wobbly, twisted, turned, tortoise, torte, tortuous.

An e-stranger lives between cultures, is nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

We are complex, translated (woe)men [...]

"In 1996", she notes in her book *from estranger to e-stranger* (2014), "when I started surfing on the Internet [...] I was very happy to be able to go to a place where all were nomads, where being a stranger to the other was the status quo". And five years in her paper here later she adds: "No longer bounded by one language area, I could move in several. No(t) more borders, no(t) more nations, no one could claim me anymore. I started to enjoy multi-linguism and didn't consider myself handicapped anymore."

Borders and nations continue to exist, as do linguistic and other borders, of course. Jannis Androutsopoulos – himself a Greek linguist living in Germany and often writing in English – has nevertheless also argued based on the observation of many speakers that "*networked multilingualism*" is a distinctive mode of multilingual experience enabled by the digital environment, which facilitates "'fluid' and 'flexible' relations between language, ethnicity and place as well as between linguistic practice and the ownership of language".<sup>35</sup> Let's hold on to the last point: if there is some shared overall conclusion we can draw from the diverse explorations in this issue of the various kinds and modes of presence and (inter)action of language(s) in "the space between the phones" as well as those of the digital space between languages, it is perhaps best expressed precisely in terms of what happens to ownership. To that possessive "my" in Wittgenstein's proposition, marking a relation to both language and the world, and making the link between them.

Firstly, despite all the advances of linguistic capitalism, both the artists' creative interventions and the scholarly analyses suggest that in a world increasingly intertwined with digital networks, ownership of any kind over language by anyone – individuals, speech communities, societies, but also by the owners of the most powerful tools to monitor, exploit, and control others' language use – seems less possible than ever. Various degrees of control can be exercised, and also greater control than before, but a complete Orwellian linguistic dystopia remains impossible because the larger and more complex the network of networks gets, the more spaces and opportunities it offers to pockets of resistance as well, be it in the form of large-scale movements, "tiny protests", or everyday creativity that eludes predefined patterns. Among the modes of such creativity we find mixing and moving between several languages in a fluid way, distorting them, shifting media and forms and embedding them in one another, and so on. While modes of thinking and expression evolve with technology, the increasing awareness of surveillance and exploitation, as well as the proliferation of new tools and frameworks also make users reinvent language, always a step ahead of those trying to take control of it. But more generally, AI and the rule-based machine interpretable algorithmic languages can never really *take over* living languages, in either sense of the verb. Whatever fast and powerful, the digital Achilles is forever stuck behind the tortoise, even as he tries

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<sup>35</sup> Jannis Androutsopoulos, "Networked multilingualism: Some language practices on Facebook and their implications", *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 19.2 (2015), p. 185 sq.

to predict its trajectory or set one for it. It is not, in fact, in his interest: there is no finish line to reach in this competition; the aim is to keep it going. If Achilles won, the game would be over and lost for everyone.<sup>36</sup> Not to mention that what the machines and algorithms end up doing and producing also increasingly elude the very humans who invent and use them. “My” language then, which I don’t own or fully control, can never be entirely (under) anyone else’s (control) either.<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, when read in terms of ownership, “my” presupposes the existence of both an autonomous subject that can and wants to exercise rights and control, and that of a finite, identifiable object – even if immaterial – which can be possessed. If already at the beginning we questioned the possibility of possessing (a) language at all,<sup>38</sup> the experiences and analyses here presented counter the interest and validity of such a clear-cut dualist approach to “subject-and-object” (our digitally networked) reality in general. Instead, they highlight that “my” is best understood as the marker of a *position* within and in relation to the world and language(s), a position which is itself unstable, shifting and drifting, and multiple because embedded in several overlapping and entangled networks at the same time. This is in fact also the sense in which Wittgenstein uses the possessive: it refers to the position from which the “subject” sees the world, without being able to see itself. A position which delimits a world accessible to the subject, rather than expressing possession.<sup>39</sup> If networks are usually conceptualized in terms of nodes and edges, represented as neat dots and lines, the nodes here appear nebulous, with the “blurry, fuzzy, shifty” (post)human (digital) subjects. And if, as Alexander Galloway observes, “[i]ndividuated subjects are the very producers and facilitators of networked control”, where individuation means “posit[ing] both the specific and the generic”,<sup>40</sup> ascribing an identity and categorizing, then the best way to resist control is indeed to resist predefined identities and categories. Rather than letting the edges define our place, we can take advantage of the dynamism of those intertwined processual “betweens” that connect us and that involve transition, translation, and manipulation to affirm and maintain our blurry, fuzzy, shifty nature singular to “each” subject.<sup>41</sup> Galloway himself observes that

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<sup>36</sup> The analogy is obviously imperfect (aren’t all analogies?). The racing tortoise could also be the World Turtle here, which carries the elephants that underpin our world... “We” are both the tortoise and the turtle, and the turtle and the world, while Achilles and the elephants are both “them”, stuck behind and in-between “us”, inciting “us” to keep moving so “they” can exploit our every step. But again, this is rather a symbiosis where the opposition between “us” and “them” is just an oversimplifying distinction giving “us” the illusion that “we” are (the) victims and could somehow extract ourselves from it; that our symbiosis with “them” is not deep and organic and works only because “we” do like and want (some of) it...

<sup>37</sup> This is obviously an optimistic view. “They” don’t need full control to crush it, to crush us. But we don’t need to be crushed either to accept carrying “their” weight and keep feeding “them”. They have already done it; we are already doing it. But so are “we” also still continuing our “tiny protests”...

<sup>38</sup> As Derrida wonders again: “Is language in possession, ever a possessing or possessed possession?”, before establishing that “there is no natural property of language, language gives rise only to appropriative madness, to jealousy without appropriation”, and that there is not even such thing as *one* language, because “it is impossible to count languages” (*Monolingualism of the Other*, p. 17, 24, 30). But one doesn’t need to be a deconstructionist to admit this impossibility; there is no scientific consensus either: “How many languages are spoken in the world? The most honest answer is that nobody really knows, although the estimates of experts range from a low of about 4,000 to a high of about 7,000”, notes Paolillo, listing the difficulties ranging from census to consensus about the status of certain dialects/languages (“How Much Multilingualism?”).

<sup>39</sup> This even if we don’t follow Wittgenstein all the way through his argument that “[t]he subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world” (*Tractatus* §5.632, in Odgen’s translation), and rather maintain the (perhaps contradictory) position that the “subject”, while being in some sense the limit of “its” world, also belongs to it.

<sup>40</sup> Galloway, *The Exploit*, p. 41 and 37.

<sup>41</sup> There is of course a problem with the term “subject” in the first place, as it continues to carry its baggage of static identity politics and suggests an independent entity with clear contours. As Yasmin Yildiz writes: “we

“the distinction between nodes and edges will break down” and that “nodes are nothing but dilated edges, while edges are constricted, hyperkinetic nodes”.<sup>42</sup> While in his otherwise clear-sighted, thought-provoking, and forward-looking theory of networks, Galloway manages not to cite a single female author,<sup>43</sup> and also only hints at what he might envisage as possible strategies of resistance through hypertrophy, this questioning of the dualist approach gestures precisely towards the alternatives proposed by radical feminist, queer, and posthumanist thinkers such as Donna Haraway Karen Barad, or Rosi Braidotti. “Boundaries don’t hold; times, places, beings bleed through one another”, as Barad puts it.<sup>44</sup> This is not a novel kind of subjectivity, but rather a (not-so-)new understanding of our embeddedness, which has simply become exacerbated and visible with digital networks. The outer limits of “me”, “my” world and of *the* world, just as that of “my” language and of language as such, as *langue(s)* and as *langage*, and the “edges” that link us, therefore remain just as blurry, fuzzy, shifty.

In short, what this issue of *Hybrid* presents and invites is a non-essentialist understanding of the agents and components of this complex game, including not only the abstract formations of language, linguistic and cultural identity, creativity, agency and authorship, but also processes such as writing, coding, and translation, and even the infrastructures, media types and platforms, their providers, and the tools of power, exploitation, and resistance. Rather than trying to pin down the shape or contours of this language-world, these articles call for experimenting and exploring its dynamic and creative potentials that may help us in “reclaiming language from the algorithmic marketplace”<sup>45</sup> and counter the attempts at defining “our” world.

**Keywords:** Language, langue and langage, digital networks, linguistic capitalism, networked multilingualism, multilingual creativity

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need to reimagine subjects as open to crisscrossing linguistic identifications, if not woven from the fabric of numerous linguistic sources. Such multiplicity breaks with the monolingual premise so often hidden in the notion that language correlates to identity. Languages do indeed relate to identities, but not in any predetermined, predictable way” (*Beyond the Mother Tongue*, p. 205).

<sup>42</sup> Galloway, *The Exploit*, p. 99.

<sup>43</sup> There is a passing mention of Ada Lovelace and Francesca Nori.

<sup>44</sup> “Diffracting Diffraction”, p. 179.

<sup>45</sup> Thornton, “Language in the Age of Algorithmic Reproduction”, p. 24.

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