



# Words and things, goods and services: Problems of translation between language and political economy

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## Abstract

This paper explores two non-intersecting discourses, discourses on language and discourses on political economy, to explore the reasons for the apparent non-existence of language discipline of the political economy of language. Abortive attempts to encompass economic categories by categories of linguistics and semiology were suggested by Saussure's only initial analogy between linguistic and economic 'value'. Such an attempt to assimilate the economic to the linguistic order tends to dematerialize commodities. From the other perspective, the apparent exclusion of language from political economic discourse revolves around definitions of wealth and productivity. Linguistic performances were excluded from the category of wealth, the object of political economic discourse, by being assimilated to the category of perishable 'services' rather than durable 'wealth'. In order to understand the possible articulations of language and exchange, we need to accept the historicity and cultural locatedness of both language and exchange: to understand whether language can be considered a form of wealth or value, we need to investigate what is considered to be wealth or value in each historical case.

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## 1. Introduction: linguistic and economic value

On the face of it, no two human disciplines (and their corresponding objects) stand further apart than the science of language and the science of wealth. A phrase like ‘political economy of language’ seems paradoxical in a way that ‘philosophy of language’ or ‘anthropology of language’ does not. Perhaps this is because their respective objects appear to be locked in incommensurable universes, language trapped in a world of ideas far apart from the world of material goods that form the object of analysis of classical political economy. To unite these opposed worlds becomes something like an act of alchemy, a magical overcoming of the familiar dualisms of words and things, ideas and goods, idealism and materialism, in the same act (Irvine, 1996; Keane, 2003). For others, however, drawing comparisons between linguistics and economics had less to do with overcoming antinomies than defining disciplinary boundaries. Where 19th century thinkers often assimilated language to natural sciences like geology or biology (see for example Manning, 2004b), by the 20th century economics (formerly political economy) alone among the social sciences had established a kind of respectability and disciplinary autonomy that could serve as a model for others. Saussure was quite explicit in his desire to create an integral science of language, linguistics, part of a larger science of signs, semiology, and he was equally explicit that his model for this autonomous discipline of language was economics, and certainly not the natural sciences. According to Saussure, what linguistics and economics had in common was that they were both sciences about ‘value’, and this suggestion, in various forms, has tantalized many in the years since. Saussure may have been wrong in the specifics of his comparison, in the sense that his notion of linguistic value ultimately has very little in common with any of the forms of value posited in economic theory, whether classical political economy (use value versus exchange value) or economics, but in other respects, as disciplines, linguistics has a lot in common with the economics: both are social sciences in name only, their basic presuppositions make their objects quasi-natural, immune to human intentionality. Critiques of Saussurean structuralism (Keane, 2003; Stasch, 2005) and critiques of economic theorizing share this element – that they are both objective sciences of humanity, in which the human subject appears in a rationalized form with limited agency. The subject of linguistics, the idealized speaker–hearer, a native speaker with a perfect knowledge of a language, resembles the subject of economics, the rational actor with an encyclopedic knowledge of commodities, and so on.

So, it seems clear that part of what both sciences have in common is their drive to isolate an integral object (language, economy) that can be studied apart from other considerations, and their consequent tendency to naturalize that object on the basis of purportedly universal human tendencies (talk is apparently as natural to humans as the propensity to truck and barter). However, on a rather more basic level, each science tends to construe their respective objects as being somewhat different in kind. This, of course, can be attributed to the other aspect of Saussure’s legacy, and frequently has been, namely, linguistics is a science of ideal types, *langue*, making it a species of idealism, which studied concrete material tokens of those types, actual utterances, only as a secondary aspect of *parole* (important to subsidiary fields involving historical change or more recently pragmatics, but otherwise not really central to linguistics). But economics is surely primarily concerned with concrete material things, goods and services, whose primary defining feature is that they are *scarce*, that is, the quantitative dimension always looms large. This quantitative dimension which is always absent from linguistic consideration, because,

on a basic and intuitive level, talk, considered as a form of production, really is cheap, that is, if you have the skills (access to *langue*), the raw materials of the material sign (sound waves propagated through the air) are plentiful wherever breathing is also possible. Saussure's isolation of 'value' as the basis of comparison precisely glosses over the main difference between his concept of value, which is all about abstract, non-material, and non-spatiotemporal relations of similarity and difference between types in *langue*, and economic value, which as an abstraction is *emergent* from facts about production and exchange, the economic equivalent of *parole*.

In spite of these problems, Saussure's analogy between the fields has often been developed into a full scale reduction, that is, a view of the commodity as viewed from the sign, economic value read as if it were linguistic value, a discussion of which occupies the first part of the paper. The second portion of this paper will investigate another, more neglected, perspective, namely, how language looks when viewed from the perspective of classic political economy, what words look like viewed from the perspective of material wealth. I would like to suggest that while political economists like Adam Smith have no explicit separate discussion of language in relation to political economy, one can learn rather a lot from looking at how language and linguistic performances do or do not enter into political economy in terms of the categories of classical political economy, namely, wealth, and more specifically, the opposition between goods and services.<sup>1</sup> I have chosen Adam Smith because, like Saussure for linguistics, his discussion of political economy sets the stage for many later debates, especially his definitions of wealth and productivity. I would like to suggest that it is precisely by understanding the complicated ontology of wealth underlying political economy that we can understand how language is implicitly, rather than explicitly, rendered marginal to political economy. This, I would like to suggest, is because language is difficult to theorize as a form of wealth. Rather, language tends to be assimilated to a marginalized object of economic exchange which is itself difficult to theorize in terms of classical political economy, namely non-durable performances, services, rather than durable objects, goods. From Smith's work emerges a rather different implicit conceptualization of language from that of Saussurean structuralism, one which focuses on the durability of the tokens of linguistic production, specifically in terms of oppositions between texts and performances. I wish to suggest, then, that a more fruitful approach to the problem of 'words and things', language and economy, would be one that starts not with comparisons between signs and commodities, but between intermediate categorizations like the opposition between texts and performances on the one hand, and goods and services on the other.

## 2. Words and things: the view of political economy from language

In her now classic article on language and political economy, Judith Irvine took the division between language and political economy, the 'radical separation of the denotational sign (qua sign) from the material world' to be one of the 'most durable legacies' of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (Irvine, 1996 [1989], p. 258) As she noted in that article, such a division does not begin or end with Saussure, because similar

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Smith did write on language in a separate writing, titled *Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages, and the Different Genius of Original and Compounded Languages* (1761). As the title suggests, this work does not touch on the matters at issue in this paper.

ontological divisions that could serve as an enabling condition, between mind and body, words and things, between properties of subjects and properties of objects, have a long history in the Western tradition (Irvine, 1996; Keane, 2003). We could call this entire idealist trend of thought, heavily indebted to Humboldtian as well as Saussurean thinking about language, a ‘dematerialization’ of language. One result of such a dualist tendency has been a radical separation of language from its social ground, most particularly the most seemingly ‘material’ of such social grounds, the economy.

But if Saussure is frequently taken to be a major source of the radical separation of words and things, language and political economy, at the same time Saussure’s work sought to unite the science of linguistics and the science of economics as both being ‘sciences of value’: ‘both sciences are concerned with a *system for equating things of different orders* – labor and wages in one and a signified and signifier in the other’ (*Course* III.1). One of Saussure’s many misleading analogies sought precisely to connect language to political economy *metaphorically*, this being his explanation of linguistic value in terms of economic value in exchange (*Course* IV.2). Now the analogy in question is the famous one where the abstract exchange of signifier and signified, that is, an exchange of dissimilars (one on the order of form, the other on the order of meaning) is compared to a rather more concrete exchange of material dissimilars (money for food). In both cases, he argues, there is a sense of value that is generated at the intersection of this exchange of dissimilars (sign for signifier, money for food) as well as the comparison of things that are similar (one franc coin versus five franc coin, one loaf of bread versus five, as opposed to the differentiation of *sheep* versus *mutton* referring to the live, inedible and dead, edible conditions of the same animal). Dissimilar things are rendered similar in exchange (signifier [sound] for signified [concept]), whereas similar things are rendered distinct by comparison (different sounds, different concepts).

The analogy leads to many problems (Holdcroft, 1991). The linguistic ‘exchange’ is an abstract one, an atemporal relation between disembodied types, the economic one concrete, a concrete temporal and spatial relation between concrete tokens. Worse, while both sides (signifier and signified) in linguistic exchange are qualitatively differentiated from other things of the same substance (phonologically, *sheep* is qualitatively different from *mutton*, and they mean different things too), economic value in the sense of exchange value is a quantitative dimension (one franc versus five), whereas only use-value is qualitative (a loaf of bread, a jug of wine. . .). That is sort of the whole point of exchange value, to act as a unitary quantitative measure of qualitatively incommensurable things (use-values). The moments of value in the sign relation are quite unlike those in the commodity, it would seem. And even the qualitative side of sign and the commodity are different. Phonological qualities of signs are only important *negatively*, to create differences between signifiers, whereas the sensuous qualities of commodities that make up use-values are positive, sensuous qualities (Keane, 2003; Stasch, 2005, for example). For example, bread as use-value must have sensuous qualities consistent with edibility, taste and nutrition, not merely diacritic qualities sufficient to differentiate it from ingots of pig iron, very much unlike the corresponding linguistic expressions ‘bread’ and ‘pig iron’ (Keane, 2003).

Since values are relations, they always imply totalities, systems, of some kind (Stasch, 2005). But if the kinds of value implied in the Saussurean sign are different on first blush from those in the commodity, then it stands to reason there might be a principled ground to argue that the totalities which these values mediate might be different in kind as well. Let us remember that value is a fact of *langue*, that is, signs considered as abstract types

indifferent to their manifestation as concrete tokens, which is part of what *parole* is. So *langue* as a system is a system of types, and it is a type-mediated system where all the parts, or moments, are simultaneously co-present. A change anywhere in the system does not merely send ripples through the system, it must perforce change the whole instantaneously. *Langue* is not a storehouse (unless it is a storehouse of types, since that is something that can be quantified), though this is another unfortunate metaphor Saussure employs (*Course* I.2), it is really an abstraction across whatever typifications different speakers have, it is whatever happens to be shared. It is not in one head (individual psychological competence), it is a relation of statistical comparability between various heads (similar to a Durkheimian ‘social fact’, under one interpretation, see Holdcroft, 1991). *Langue* is, moreover, a bounded totality, a system of internal relations where every element qua *langue* is constituted by relations of similarity mediating difference and difference mediating similarity. Any change in such a system leads to a new system. At least, that is one reading of Saussure, one I find persuasive (Holdcroft, 1991).

But commodities are not abstractions, they are actual specific things, material objects, and their comparison is ultimately token-mediated, actual exchanges of commodities are required for value to arise, value is something that does indeed produce a totality, but it is completely different kind of totality. On one level, it presents itself ‘immense collection of commodities’ (Marx, 1990, p. 125), a quantitative totality that is mediated by actual circulation of things, not abstract comparison in the first instance (however much ‘taste’ or ‘distinction’ is such a system, as imperfectly modeled by the *langue*-like legal imputation in bourgeois orders of an ‘encyclopedic’ knowledge of commodities to idealized consumers (Marx, 1990, p. 126n5)), things that, unlike Saussurean signs, know the dimension of quantity as well as sensuous quality. And they know it insofar as they are in fact not only comparable but concretely compared in exchange. Circulation, which involves concrete motion, and concrete exchange, is crucial to make these comparisons happen. *Langue* as imagined by Saussure does not really involve concrete exchange and certainly not circulation of sign tokens the way commodities do: circulation in language involves constant commutation between types and tokens, *langue* and *parole*, which is not the same as the circulation of a commodity, which remains a token level entity through the whole process of exchange. Commodities in a market, as texts in a public, however, circulate, and in so doing they help to delineate a ‘culture of circulation’.

Now, I grant that Saussure himself never actually sought to reduce economic markets to linguistic communities (communities defined by abstractly sharing a *langue*) nor speech communities (communities of linguistic practice, of *parole*) (on the distinction between linguistic and speech communities, see Silverstein, 1998). However, many Marxian (and *marxisant*) analyses, hoping to find a monistic equation that would overcome the dualism of words and things, idealism and materialism, (ironically) saw in Saussure, the arch-idealist, a way of overcoming these oppositions (Baudrillard, 1981; Rossi-Landi, 1983). Usually this involves acts of translation in which economic exchanges and linguistic exchanges are seen to be essentially identical or at least homologous. The analysis can go either way, material categories of production, exchange or consumption can be read as semiological categories, or semiological and linguistic categories can be read in terms of categories of political economy. Such analyses essentially seek to ground language in economy by a theoretical reduction, usually based in a productivist theory of the economy in which linguistic production is merely a special case of production in general, and therefore of human self-fashioning (Rossi-Landi, 1983), or production and consumption are

understood in semiological terms, sometimes reductively to the point where the materiality of the product disappears entirely (Baudrillard, 1981, at some points). Equations of (or homologies between) the categories of language and those of the economy happen at various levels, ranging from the ‘sign’ = ‘commodity’, to ‘verbal competence’ = ‘skill’ or ‘human capital’ (Bourdieu, 1977; Rossi-Landi, 1983). One such equation that deserves special attention is equation ‘national language’ = ‘national market’, certainly one that both Rossi-Landi and Bourdieu both trade heavily in, so to speak.

As Irvine’s classic article shows, language pervades the economy by helping to organize the division of labor by denoting the persons, objects and activities within it (‘propositionality’, Irvine, 1996, pp. 261–262), and, at the same time, language signs index differentiation into social groups, organizing the differential recruitment of such groups into the division of labor and therefore the reproduction of class (‘indexicality’, Irvine, 1996, pp. 262–268). At the same time, language, that is, skills, utterances, texts, performances, are also incorporated into the economy among the skills, goods and services transacted within it (Irvine, 1996, pp. 268–273).

So one way language is integrated into a market is by being transacted within it, as part of an aggregate of other commodities. This system of commodities is more of an aggregate, rather than a langue-like totality. Also, it is an aggregate in motion, and the qualities of the objects in motion and the trajectory in which they move delineate a potential totality graspable in the imagination, a ‘culture of circulation’ (Lee and LiPuma, 2002). As Lee and LiPuma argue, many modern social imaginaries (the market, the nation, the public) are totalities constituted by a reflexive, typifying component, they are *imagined* as after-images of the concrete circulation of certain *kinds of* objects. Moreover, the intrinsic semiotic properties of circulatory media as objects have a co-constitutive effect on the way that that totality is imagined, for example, commodities within a national or international market, print commodities and the nation, print commodities in a certain language and a corresponding linguistic community, and so on. The concept of value of such a culture of circulation is different and the totality in which this value is locatable is different from Saussurean *langue* because it involves dimensions of quantity as well as space, time, and motion, which is something only tokens (*parole*) know anything about, types (*langue*) are abstract entities and therefore lack these properties. Roughly, imaginary totalities like the market and the nation are products of the circulation of sign objects (token-level) grasped *reflexively* in the cultural imagination as totalities (type level), whereas a language is a type-level totality (*langue*) that *directly* reproduces itself through the production of sign objects (*parole*). So markets and languages are different kinds of totalities, particularly if languages are considered in the light of Saussurean *langue*.

So, in general, Saussure’s promissory note of a general science of signs, semiology, grounded in his theory of linguistic signs, leads to ‘reading’ material objects as dematerialized signs (Keane, 2003). Later analysts, developing what was originally an inept *metaphor* into a systematic *metonymic* relation, saw precisely in Saussure a way of doing a ‘political economy of the sign’. The resulting conflation of incommensurable ideas of value, those of the sign and the commodity, took the dematerialization of the sign and made it a property of the commodity as well.

Yet, for all the purported monism of such accounts, they fall within the same general idealist trend, a trend that sees the *linguistic* or *semiotic* as being essentially *immaterial* (Keane, 2003). To semiotize the commodity on the analogy of a dematerialized linguistic sign is to dematerialize it, so one ends up with perhaps deliberately performative, if

essentially meaningless, claims to the effect that we consume values, and not things. The opposite solution, a straightforward reduction of the semiotic or linguistic to the economic, leads to similar problems. To compare incommensurables on this basis leads to at the worst to the multiplication of all manner of artefactual problems, scholasticism, and theological conundrums.

Whatever the relation is between language and political economy, signs and commodities, it is not one of immediate identity. Language as system and the system of commodities are in an external relation, not an internal one. That is, on an abstract level, the duality of the linguistic sign between signifier and signified is not even all that similar to the difference between use-value and exchange value. However, there is no question that individual linguistic signs represent use-values and therefore can have exchange value. If a Saussurean notion of the sign divided the idealized sign of *langue* strongly from the mere material realization of the sign in *parole*, it follows that any semiology of exchange based on such a science of the sign would tend to dematerialize its object. Hence, either result, either the wholesale division of the universe into meaningful and material elements, or the reduction of material meaning to immaterial meaning, are both enduring legacies of this idealist trend, the view of political economy from language.

### 3. Goods and services: the view of language from political economy

The idea of property is not readily attached to anything but tangible and lasting articles. . . . The still more evanescent results of personal service are still more difficult to bring in under the idea of wealth. So much so that the attempt to classify services as wealth is meaningless to laymen, and even the adept economists hold a divided opinion as to the intelligibility of such a classification. In the common-sense apprehension the idea of property is not currently attached to any but tangible, vendible goods of some durability. This is true even in modern civilized communities, where pecuniary ideas and the pecuniary point of view prevail. (Veblen, 1898–1899, p. 363)

If linguistic sciences since Saussure at least have excluded the material world from language by their definition of the sign, the sciences of political economy banished language from the world of wealth, with their definition of ‘the product’ and ‘production’. This exclusion of language from political economy was, in fact, part of a more general original exclusion by which the order of goods was opposed to the order of services as wealth to non-wealth. Language, insofar as objectified in textual commodities, might participate in the order of goods, perhaps in an exemplary way as print commodities, but otherwise, as part of the intangible and perishable universe of services, it had no such place.

This is partly because Adam Smith’s initial definition of wealth depends not merely on use value or exchange value, but on a third thing, the materiality of the product, the substrate of wealth, which is expressed in durability or permanence. In a sense, durability as a quality of wealth is not intended to characterize all the use-values exchanged as commodities, which would include services along with goods, but only those that best instantiate the productivist idea of wealth. Productivism, as I am using it, is a whole social ontology that locates the relative worth of social groups in terms of their relative productivity, the worth of persons is measured in terms of the value of the things they produce (Rabinbach, 1990; Postone, 1996; Manning, 2002, 2004a). Productivism of one kind or another is characteristic of many social formations from the nineteenth to the 20th century, ironically

shared in one form or another by liberal bourgeois capitalism as well as Stalinist socialism. Productivist definitions of material wealth are often as much arguments about relative worth of social groups writ large as they are cogent descriptions of the sorts of things transactable in an economy. In productivist imaginaries, the value of persons follows from the value of the things they produce, social worth derives from producing material wealth.

How does durability represent productivity? Durability of products allows the commodity to circulate, allows wealth to accumulate, and allows styles and fashions to propagate and resist change. The way durable goods resist destruction in the act of consumption makes them exemplars of bourgeois parsimony and productivity as opposed to aristocratic prodigality and consumption. Durable goods not only circulate in larger and larger circuits of space and time, space-times for short, but also accumulate over time, and disseminate from higher to lower orders of society, augmenting the ‘wealth of nations’. At the same time, durability allows the style or form in which the producer fashioned the product to resist the vagaries of fashion and corrosion by time and consumption.

However, this definition of wealth as involving durability rather than vendibility, while it has a specific logic, which is not incoherent in itself, has consequences for how language and linguistic products can be viewed. If we look at durability in relation to language, we find that Smith classifies linguistic products quite differently depending on what notion of durability he is applying. In the *Wealth of Nations* (henceforth *WN*) he is thinking of language as services rather than goods, perishable performances rather than durable products. In this work, examples from language form the bulk of all his examples of unproductive labor, and they tend to be linguistic performances: ‘the declamation of the actor, the harangue of the orator, the tune of the musician’. However, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*TMS*), linguistic products are the acme of durability, for here durability focuses not on the strict materiality of the object but rather the ways in which the ‘form’ or ‘fashion’ of the object is durable, whether it is propagated in a series of oral performances or inscribed in a durable text. The examples here are all of poetry, that is, texts that are have dense internal structuring, entextualization, that renders them into integral entities that are maximally autonomous from the context of performance (Bauman and Briggs, 1990).<sup>2</sup>

Part of this difference seems to be related to a slightly different notion of production in each case. In *WN*, Smith regards production primarily in terms of objects of use, while in the *TMS*, he is rather thinking about production of objects of taste. In the first case productivism locates the value of human subjects in the properties of objects they produce, namely that they are useful, whereas in the second it locates the value of objects in whether they realize and embody attributes of subjects, namely that they are expressive of the producer’s taste or skill. However, in both cases, durability is that property of objects that allow subjective properties of the producer to be durably propagated in time and the social

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<sup>2</sup> To the extent that a text is poetically organized, it comes to seem to have ‘hard’ and ‘clear’ boundaries between the text and what is not text, the context. An entextualized text, say, a poem, seems like a unified and discrete object opposed to any situation in which it is uttered. Remove part of the poem, and the poem seems to be incomplete, lacking something. To the extent that a text is *autonomous* from its context, that its form makes no reference to context, we say it is *entextualized*. The reverse situation, in which a textual figure makes many explicit references to its contextual ground, or its boundaries are not clearly defined, is called contextualization. The opposition between entextualization and contextualization cross-cuts the distinction between text and performance.



and geographic space of the nation (hence, *Wealth of Nations*). That is, just as wealth consists of ‘labor’, a subjective property of the producer, which is ‘fixed and realized’ in some particular object, so too the stuff of fashion (‘objects of taste’) is the ‘form according to which it was made’ or ‘fashion of their make’, again, a category of production, propagated by the durability of the objects in which they are embedded. Both utility and fashion ultimately derive from the producer, but it is the durability of the product that determines the extent to which these categories can disseminate or ‘trickle down’ through the social hierarchy within the horizontal space of the nation.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4. Language in ‘The Wealth of Nations’: texts and performances

It is a characteristic of productivism as a kind of social ontology that its key term, production, is recursively applicable to all the other terms of political economy, hence we can speak of ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ uses of property, income and consumption. Even labor, the principle of productivity itself, is itself subjected to the recursive division between productive and unproductive. But what is productive? The almost tautological response, ‘that which results in a product’. And a product is a thing, a useful thing, but a thing. By extension, that labor that does not result in a thing is unproductive. Linguistic performances, like menial service, are therefore unproductive, because there is no product. Things, and only things, constitute wealth. And thingness resides specifically in durability.

This particular definition of productivity is notoriously contested. Smith’s definition emphasizes accumulability over vendibility in his definition of wealth, it is the durability of the product that constitutes it as wealth. The numerous critics of Smith’s idea of wealth, especially Say (1836, pp. 50–54), prefer to locate the hiatus between production and consumption in the act of exchange itself, since in this case a use-value is produced for someone other than the one who produced it, and is vendible, regardless of the durability of the product (see Moore, 2003, for a discussion of Say’s treatment of language as immaterial products).<sup>4</sup> Since Smith’s definition of wealth restricts wealth to a proper subset of objects of exchange, it is worth exploring what this definition of wealth and productivity gets him.

For Smith, productivity is itself gradiently realized in terms of its relationship to consumption, the ‘destructive antithesis of production’ (Marx, 1973 [1939], p. 90). At either end of a continuum of productivity, production and consumption are more or less identical, the highest degree of productivity is consumption as part of production, and the least productive is production for immediate consumption. Durability appears as a property of products only where production and consumption do not immediately attend one another, measuring the elapsable time between production and consumption. Durability is the next best thing to productivity, because durability allows an object to be consumed without being destroyed, or at least allows the deferral of consumption. Durability is a property of the thing that is most like production in the sense that it is least like consumption. Just as production is the opposite of consumption, so in products, durability is the opposite of

<sup>3</sup> This is different from the otherwise seemingly similar ancient Greek conception of production (*poiesis*), for example, in which the form or use of the product is always located not in relation to the efficient cause (producer) but final cause (consumer) (Kurke, 1991, p. 193).

<sup>4</sup> Since I am dealing with an earlier productivist phase of imagining the economy, I will have nothing to say about the current proliferation of immaterial forms of wealth (on which see Coombe, 1996; Coombe et al., forthcoming), save to note that on a vernacular level many still would agree with Veblen (above).

perishability. Thus, the materiality of wealth is actually temporal durability, and not physical materiality *per se*.

Durability, and not utility or vendibility, forms the basis for the distinction between the productive labor of the manufacturer and the unproductive labour of the menial servant, between goods and services. While ‘the labour of the manufacturer fixes and realizes itself in some particular subject or vendible commodity, which lasts for some time at least after that labour is past’, ‘The labour of a menial servant, on the contrary, does not fix or realize itself in any particular subject or vendible commodity. His services generally perish in the very instant of their performance, and seldom leave any trace or value behind them, for which an equal quantity of service could afterwards be procured’ (Smith, 1976a, book II, pp. 351–352).

Here the productivist definition of wealth becomes the immediate basis of a critique of inherited feudal orders, aristocracy and their servants, which are constituted by reciprocal services, from the perspective of capitalist ones, bourgeoisie and working class, constituted by commodity exchange. For the unproductive orders defined by ‘service’ are both the most exalted and the most humble, both the landed aristocracy and the menial domestic servants who form their retinues. Primarily, these groups are defined by prodigality of consumption and not production, and what little they do produce is usually perishable performances. Meanwhile, the productive orders are the middling ones, whose stolidity, alongside their parsimony in consumption, is reflected almost totemically in the material durability of their products. The very word ‘service’ is redolent of aristocratic connotations, necessarily entailing hierarchy (Horkheimer, 1974), while commodity exchange at least appears to involve egalitarian exchanges of things (Manning, 2002). Prodigal consumption and perishable production go together for the highest and lowest estates just as parsimonious consumption and durable production for the middling ones.

Having distinguished unproductive labor from productive labor as being equivalent to the distinction between perishable and durable products, services and goods, Smith turns his attention from production to consumption, and here recursively sub-divides durables into two classes based on relative durability in consumption. Items which are durable in the sense that consumption does not destroy them are preferable, more ‘productive’, so to speak, than those which perish in the act of consumption, no matter how long this is delayed. These relatively durable commodities, houses, furniture and clothing of the rich, latterly become the wealth of middling and lower ranks, thanks to their durability, increasing the wealth of the nation as a whole. The consumption of durable commodities, even if prodigal and wasteful, is therefore not as prodigal as consumption of perishables.

Therefore, durability is like productivity in that while durability does not produce wealth, but it does resist consumption of wealth, thereby allowing accumulation. Since the aristocracy are the exemplary consumers just as the middling orders are exemplary producers, aristocratic habits of consumption also have a powerful effect on the wealth not only of their own households, but on the aggregate wealth of nations. Since a non-productive group of consumers by definition cannot make a nation wealthy by producing goods, durable or otherwise, for them, consumption of durables is the next best thing to actual productivity, in that it is that form of consumption that most resembles productivity. Hence, not only are durable goods able to be accumulated within households, but also within nations, as cast-offs of the higher orders circulate second-hand within the lower orders, propagating useful labor for the longest period through both social and geographic space: ‘The houses, furniture, the clothing of the rich, in a little time, become useful to the

inferior and middling ranks of people. They are able to purchase them when their superiors grow weary of them, and the general accommodation of the whole people is thus gradually improved, when this mode of expense becomes universal among men of fortune' (Smith, 1976a, book II, p. 369).

The result of this critique of social orders on the basis of their characteristic forms of wealth is that linguistic performances and texts are the most typical form of 'unproductive' labor:

Churchmen, lawyers, physicians, men of letters of all kinds; players, buffoons, musicians, opera-singers, opera-dancers & c. . . Like the declamations of the actor, the harangue of the orator, or the tune of the musician, the work of them all perishes in the very instant of its production. (Smith, 1976a, book II, p. 352)

Here Smith conflates two orders of linguistic product, performances (linguistic products which are not materialized in durable forms) and, implicitly, texts (linguistic products materialized in durable form). Nor does he attend here to the distinction between performances that are entextualized, that is, which can be reproduced in similar forms from one performance to the next, like the reciting of a poem, from those that are more context-bound, such as a conversational exchange. Different orders of linguistic activity, texts or performances, all end up classified as perishable and therefore unproductive. The best he will allow is that, alongside 'noble palaces, magnificent villas, . . . , statues, pictures, and other curiosities', which belong to his category of wealth, are included also 'collections of books' (Smith, 1976a, book II, p. 369). Linguistic products enter into *WN* primarily as 'unproductive', as if all that was language was perishable performances, and only as an afterthought do we find durable texts included in the lists of durable goods.

## 5. The theory of moral sentiments: forms and fashions

If *WN* locates linguistic products on the 'perishable' end of the continuum of 'goods versus services', it is interesting that they are among the most durable from the perspective of *TMS*. In this work the category of durability again comes to the fore, but now with respect to durable habits of consumption, specifically, fashion versus custom.

For Smith, fashion, unlike custom, is established in the first instance by reference to the consumption practices of the upper estates. Fashion, then, is associated with the performative and opulent consumption patterns of the prototypical unproductive consumers. Fashion occurs by empirical association of objects and persons, and is therefore arbitrary. Any form of an object comes to be imbued with 'fashion' by virtue of its association with the higher orders of society:

That is not the fashion which every body wears, but which those wear who are of high rank, or character. The graceful, the easy, and commanding manners of the great, joined to the usual richness and magnificence of their dress, give a grace to the very form which they happen to bestow upon it. As long as they continue to use this form, it is connected in our imagination with the idea of something that is genteel and magnificent, and though in itself it should be indifferent, it seems, on account of this relation, to have something about it that is genteel and magnificent too. As soon as they drop it, it loses all the grace, which it had appeared to possess

before, and being now used only by the inferior ranks of people, seems to have something of their meanness and awkwardness. (Smith, 1976b, pp. 194–5)

Fashion, then, is a matter of the ‘uptake’ of certain *forms* of product by a certain privileged group of consumers, objects of certain types come to be imbued by association with the subjective properties of a prototypical group of conspicuous consumers. Things, even indifferent ones, worn by a genteel person, become genteel themselves.

But fashion for Smith is a matter of the uptake by certain groups of consumers of certain *forms* of products, not specific objects as such. It is not a simple token-level transference of properties from one single person to one associated object, but rather from a certain type (estate, class) of person to a certain type (‘form or fashion’) of object. Therefore, fashion is connected not only to properties and habits of the users but also to the properties of the objects themselves. Smith’s terminology here becomes confusing, because *fashion* can also mean the *form* or *style* of a product, as in, ‘how it was fashioned’, something expressive of the skill, taste, or style of the producer. Here Smith’s views of fashion move from a focus on the constitutive role of exemplary consumers to a focus on the role of producers and the products themselves. Once again, it is the *durability* of the objects of consumption, in the absence of any changes in patterns of elite consumption, that determine the cyclicity of fashions here. Roughly, the more durable the object in consumption, the more durable the fashion, the more perishable, the more mutable the fashion, for example ‘The modes of furniture change less rapidly than those of dress; because furniture is commonly more durable’ (Smith, 1976b, p. 195). Durability of products ‘propagate’ the ‘forms according to which they were made’ as ‘fashions’ (Smith, 1976b, p. 195).

To review, *fashion* as a category of consumption is conferred by association on a certain *form* of product by a certain privileged group of consumers, subjective properties of certain groups of consumers are transferred to certain forms of objects by association. *Fashion* can also mean the same thing as the *form* or *style* of a product, as in ‘how was it fashioned’, which is a subjective property of the producer, such as style or skill, expressed in the product. The *fashion* or *form* conferred by the producer becomes *fashion* or *vogue* by virtue of the uptake of the consumer. Cyclicity and mutability of *fashions* is partially a product of the degree of *durability* of the *form* in the product, which mediates between the producer and consumer. Insofar as these *forms* are propagated by durable objects, they are durable themselves as *fashions*. The durability of the object propagates the form, which links producers (fashion as a category of production) to consumers (fashion as a category of consumption). Durability is a category that preserves fashions against mutability, but also allows them to ‘propagate’, that is, circulate.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> One can see here the language of class and the language of estate as different social imaginaries criss-crossing in Smith’s work. The orders that are defined by production and durable goods are the bourgeoisie and proletariat, what we would now call ‘classes’; the orders that are defined by consumption and services are the highest and lowest orders, aristocracies and servants, what we would now call ‘estates’. Invidious distinctions within classes are produced recursively too on the basis of oppositions between kind of product (goods or services, for example). In WN we see the opposition between the two cast as production of durable wealth (goods, parsimony) and consumption of perishable wealth (services, profligacy); here we see it in two senses of the word fashion, the *durable* form of the product intended by the non-aristocratic producer, versus the whimsy of ever-changing *fashions* of the aristocratic consumer. In a sense, taken together, the bourgeois category of class is a category of production (subcategorizing producers), the aristocratic category of estate is a category of consumption (subcategorizing consumers).

The hierarchy of durability of products here is the same as the hierarchy found above in his discussion of productivity, though Smith does not consider foods to be an object of taste, presumably this is because he is British. When Smith turns his attention to still more durable forms which lead to durable fashions, he begins with architecture, which is materially more durable than moveable goods like furniture and dress, but in a breath he also adds many linguistic products, which turn out to be the most durable of all.

The productions of the other arts are much more lasting, and, when happily imagined, may continue to propagate the fashion of their make for a much longer time. A well-contrived building may endure many centuries: a beautiful air may be delivered down by a sort of tradition, through many successive generations; a well-written poem may last as long as the world; and all of them continue for ages together, to give the vogue to that particular style, to that particular taste or manner, according to which each of them was composed. (Smith, 1976b, p. 195)

This is virtually the opposite of his categorization in *WN*, what is he thinking of? Clearly it is not the distinction between linguistic performances and written texts, because here he classifies both orally transmitted texts ('a beautiful air') alongside written texts ('a well-written poem'), as being among the most durable, and therefore most resistant to changes in fashion. So it is not a matter of whether they are inscribed in any durable material, rather, it is because the *form* (the fashion of it making) is itself durable in some way. Here Smith seems to be thinking primarily of those genres, like poetry, which are highly entextualized, that is, in which the autonomy of the text from its contexts of performance is maximized, so that the distinctions between any single performance of the text are minimal.

In both works, when considering both objects of wealth and objects of fashion, durability plays a crucial role in delineating a privileged class of products. Durable forms of wealth, on the one hand, more resemble production because they resist being destroyed in consumption. On the other hand, durable objects of fashion resist the mutability which is based in the whimsy of consumers, and for longer periods express the producer's style or taste in their form. Both categories of durability delineate a similar hierarchy of privileged goods, architectural the most durable, through furniture, down to clothing. The differences in these hierarchies are exclusively those having to do with language, resulting from the question of whether the linguistic product is an object of immediate utility, more like a perishable performance which you enjoy and then go home, or more like an object of taste, like a recitable, memorizable, poem which you can appreciate over and over again. The net result is the same, in classical political economy, language can become wealth in precisely those situations where in its material substrate or its form it most approximates wealth, meaning that it has the property of durability. This tends to mean that it is either a durably inscribed text, or its internal formal structure has text-like properties allowing repetition of performance, thereby emphasizing its autonomy from contexts of performance (entextualization).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For historical comparison see Kurke (1991, pp. 192–194) on 'the materiality of poetic discourse' and local notions of the durability of wealth in the poetic 'political economy' of Pindar's Greece; for an excellent discussion of the historical rise of the opposition between notions of textuality and performance in relation to European theatre and print culture, see Peters, 2003. For an analysis of the politics of textuality in relation to forms of linguistic 'scarcity' created in situations of language obsolescence, see Moore, 2005.

The place to look, then, for a linguistic point of departure for relations of language and political economy is not the relations of ‘value’ purportedly shared by the sign and the commodity, but rather, something more like the opposition between texts and performances, on the one hand, and goods and services, on the other. But such a theory will tell us only about language in relation to a historically specific, and itself continuously changing, form of exchange, capitalist exchange. Since capitalist exchange in itself is often periodized on the basis of the typical emblematic form of wealth characteristic of each period (material versus immaterial wealth; goods versus service economies, industrial versus informational capitalism, etc.), this will have obvious consequences for how and when language is, or is not, treated as a form of wealth. For example, the global extension of intellectual property rights (IPRs) in the last couple of decades has taken immaterial signs (which by nature are not scarce and therefore ‘non-rivalrous’ (Coombe et al., forthcoming)) at not only the token (concrete instantiations, *parole*, texts, performances) but also the type (*langue*) level and redefined them as a form of wealth that can produce rents (Coombe, 1996; Coombe et al., forthcoming; Moore, 2003). This extension of the category of wealth into the ‘immaterial’ world of signs has taken the form of an immense new set of enclosure acts that has created ‘generative conditions for struggles over significance’ in which linguistic and non-linguistic signs are ‘simultaneously shared in a commons of signification and jealously guarded in exclusive estates’ (Coombe, 1996, p. 2003). More generally, this means that we cannot formulate a single universal theory of the relations of signs in general (semiology) to a theory of exchange in general (economics), but rather, in each case, we need to link an indigenous theory of signs (notions about texts, performances, etc.) in their historical and cultural particularity to an indigenous theory of wealth and exchange that is equally particular and historically situated and contested.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For an excellent example of such a nuanced linking in the case of the poet Pindar’s poetry of praise and changing world of exchange of archaic to classical Greece, see Kurke (1991); for a more recent ethnographic discussion of the subjection of talk and services to a regime of modern industrial labor discipline, see Cameron (2000, chapter 4); see Irvine (1996) for a comparison with Kurke (1991) of incorporation of linguistic texts and performances in different (Greek and Wolof) ‘economies of praise’.

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