BOOK REVIEW

Luisa Martín Rojo & Alfonso Del Percio (eds.), *Language and neoliberal governmentality*. New York: Routledge, 2020. Pp. 242. Pb. £38.99.

Reviewed by Joseph Comer
Centre for the Study of Language and Society, University of Bern
Muesmattstrasse 45, Bern 3012, Switzerland
joseph.comer@faculty.unibe.ch

Published in the year just preceding the Covid-19 pandemic, it is perhaps faint praise to suggest that this aspect of Luisa Martín Rojo and Alfonso Del Percio's edited collection—that is, the precise timing of its release—is one of the book's few shortcomings. It is not exactly a compliment, since this timing was an unfortunate, unintended accomplishment. Obviously, such devastating *force majeure* could hardly have been predicted by Martín Rojo, Del Percio, their contributors, nor anyone else. Nobody could have foreseen the myriad impacts of the pandemic across multiple scales of sociocultural and political-economic relation (e.g. from individual to state, from local to geopolitical, from our smartphones to our public squares). Yet the book's timing nevertheless strikes me as highly relevant to any assessment of the landmark contribution Martín Rojo & Del Percio have made—not least because of the book's two outstanding 'Afterwords' by Jacqueline Urla and by Monica Heller. These afterwords' respective attention to 'uptakes' of neoliberal ideology and transitions in 'regimes of truth' merit some meta-commentary on how the passage of time and creation of space (including entire worlds) impacts the ways we map alternative, post-pandemic futures.

Before that, however, to state it upfront: this is an excellent book. Perhaps more than any other publication devoted to the intersection of neoliberal capitalism and linguistic/semiotic practices, this book captures the *malaise* of contemporary life under neoliberalism, and its scale. As implied by the collection's overt commitment to a Foucauldian theoretical framework and *governmentality*, its chapters nicely underline the totalising nature of neoliberal(ising) processes. Non-violent 'conducting of conduct' (to use Foucault's (2007:7) definition of governmentality) is 'total' not just for its global spread but following theorising by Dardot & Laval (2014:18), for its 'deployment of the logic of the market as a generalized, normative logic, from the state to innermost subjectivity'.

It is precisely this attention to matters of compliance, agency, and even complicity with neoliberal power—and what Foucault called 'technologies of the self'—which distinguishes *Language and neoliberal governmentality* from key texts about

language and (neoliberal) political economy which preceded it, such as Duchêne & Heller (2012), Holborow (2015), and Block (2018). In Urla's words, for the editors neoliberalism is 'more than a kind of unbridled commodification, more than the triumphant reign of an ideology of the free market' (211). Rather, it is a particular way of understanding the self as increasingly entrepreneurial, and of seeing social institutions as vehicles for advancing and reinforcing (if not ENFORCING) this entrepreneurial subjectivity.

The editors' introduction is a comprehensive account of the collection's chief concerns with 'HOW and with what effects neoliberal governmentality is exercised' (3) as a political rationality. They examine these effects and the techniques for achieving them through considering the circulation of discourse/s in particular settings, and the production of particular subjectivities, that is, modes for understanding/monitoring conduct for oneself and others. Language education, metalinguistic awareness, discourses ABOUT language (i.e. 'metadiscursive regimes') and possible oppositions to the neoliberal governance in/of language are all implicated within eight studies across two sections devoted to language and 'the neoliberalisation of institutions' and 'the 'neoliberal subject'.

Overall, the chapters in Parts 1 and 2 provide highly interesting case studies—well integrated with the expressed aims of the book to investigate how neoliberal governmentality HAPPENS, providing compelling and richly illustrated analyses of this HAPPENING in action. Del Percio & Sze Wan Vivian Wong's chapter provides a neat summary of all that precedes it, noting how contemporary subjectivity seems wholly defined by experiences with managerialist terminologies and technologies of selfhood. All told, the discourse itineraries tracked in this volume are seen to establish disciplining routines targeting peoples' minds, souls and 'capacity to be affected and dream about a better future' (206).

The collected ethnographic accounts demonstrate how governmentality is not homogenous or monolithic. It is instead 'a set of practices, activities and configuration of spaces' (216). These empirical accounts of 'the how' of governmentality are limited, however, by the collection's limitation of scope to education and employment. While work/labour is surely a central concern in neoliberal society (and thus reasonable to focus on) a more expansive overview of governmentality's impact on other social milieus and (meta)discursive formations (e.g. leisure, travel, tourism, and mobility; development and humanitarian assistance, cf. Tabiola & Lorente 2017; feminism and/or rights-based activism) might have lent more depth to the editors' claim to present a 'new understanding… [of neoliberalism's entrenchment with] longer-standing histories of colonialism, modernity, and capitalistic exploitation and dispossession' (4). Nor should issues of economic justice be detached from gender/sexuality as a 'dense transfer point for relations of power', Foucault 1990:130). To do so is to engage a 'liberal tactic', because sociocultural inequalities 'are not only produced by neoliberal capitalism [but are] in turn productive of it' (Smith 2001:103). Only Nelson Flores' excellent chapter really engages with matters of post-colonial positionality—yet Southern epistemologies

and their relationship with governmentality are unfortunately not discussed. Ultimately, regardless of these minor issues, this volume's major contribution is to demonstrate ways in which understanding governmentality (and crafting genealogies thereof) is a central task for overcoming the messes we are in, staying 'epistemologically vigilant' in the face of them (63) and collectively clambering out.

By 'malaise' above, I refer not simply to neoliberalism's quicksand-like quality of feeling inescapable, but also how 'enterprise… [as] a model of subjectivation' (17) often feels relentless: banally punishing, self-flagellating, never-ending. For many subjects (though not all, and not always) neoliberalism often FEELS BAD, and this is by design: the self-fulfilling prophecy of a compulsorily self-reflexive project in which subjects are 'maximally responsible for their failures' (Gershon 2011). Del Percio & Wong's chapter particularly well demonstrates this sad, messy condition: how 'language is both object and medium of governmentality and is therefore at the core of a biopolitical practice that creates compliance' (193). Searching for work is depressing enough itself. By enshrining MORE depressing processes of introspection and self-reflection WITHIN job seeking, however, neoliberal projects like employability programs inculcate principles of self-discipline and an ethics of rigid (yet supposedly 'satisfying') self-governance.

Governmentality is well-evidenced in the everyday practices and 'taken-for-granted communication routines' (215) directed at subjects and which they are directed to participate in (i.e. direct at themselves) illustrated by this collection's case studies. However, these illustrative studies raise further complicated questions regarding personal responsibility, affective resonances of this 'compliance', and biopolitical distinctions between discipline and control (which I do not go into here). Some of these questions could have been addressed more fully. This collection refers to governmentality's mode of conduct with stirring references to the 'performance/pleasure apparatus' (especially Martín Rojo; Dardot & Laval 2014) and makes repeated mentions of 'desire', yet it could have more profoundly explored how affects become value-adding resources within managerialism and 'flexible' post-Fordist production.

All contributors should regardless be commended for navigating the material covered here—not least because it can certainly often FEEL BAD (or be precarious) paying any scholarly attention to society's neoliberalisation at all. As the editors put it, 'as researchers, we are called upon to produce knowledge at a pace that barely allows reflection, and to compete for resources, in accordance with a business logic that is turning us into entrepreneurial scientists' (1). I would suggest as well that one can struggle to apprehend this material because of the confronting 'agreeability' of neoliberal discourses of happiness (Ahmed 2010). A growing number of critical, ethnographic analyses of semiotic practice have shown how reflexive metadiscourses of POSITIVE affect—success, aspiration, pride—are central to the entrenchment of neoliberal 'good personhood' (e.g. Del Percio 2022). Overall, this book's case studies demonstrate many ways this 'new way of the world' (Dardot & Laval 2014) seems to quell (indeed, devour) even the very capacities

to desire and hope which would sustain our imagination and creation of alternative modes of conduct. (However, I am mindful of Urla's (2019) reminder that robust description itself positions us to combat the 'gravitational pull' of singular hopelessness.) This point about feeling could have been teased out more fully in exploring this 'whole-scale cultural shift' (211)—after all, 'feeling is what makes the social and moral orders stick' (Heller & McElhinny 2017:5).

Speaking of whole-scale shifts, I close this review by returning to my opening remark on the absence of the pandemic from this book. Of course, this is not a criticism. Rather, first, it highlights that the book is testament to how a groundswell of literature on neoliberalism, capitalism, and political economy within sociolinguistics built up prior to 2020. Second, it highlights it as a standout contribution: a culmination following years of collective endeavour, bridging social-theoretical division. Yet at the same time, because it 'invites us to see our historical moment as one of transition between regimes of truth' (225) and focuses on how neoliberal governmentality is THOUGHT and 'on the role of language as ideology and practice in each of these processes' (20) the volume must confront the (inarguable) ways that 2020 was 'a year that changed everything' (Klinenberg 2024)—including our relationship with breathing itself, and 'aspiration' by extension (see Ahmed 2010). Following Lazar's (2022) recent description of 'timescapes' as a way of upholding the interconnected, interdependent relationship of time and space, in short, the question is: is now the same (global) timescape that Martín Rojo & Del Percio have described?

Scholars have only just begun to account for possible/actual 'post-Covid transformations' (Gray & Gills 2022)—if we accept we are 'post' at all. For those working in sociocultural/applied linguistics and linguistic anthropology, the pandemic prompts us to account for (among other topics): rampant erosions of trust in states, science, media institutions, and fellow citizens; meteoric rises in videotelephony, (fragmented) online interaction and remote work; altered landscapes (and remnant palimpsests) of 'locked down' urban, rural, and digital spaces (Lou, Malinowski, & Peck 2022); and 'virality' of the pandemic AS an organism and IN mediated discourse (Jones 2021). Furthermore, and alongside, as Kelly-Holmes (2022) points out, sociolinguistics urgently needs to deepen accounts of our increasingly 'technologised reality'—not just of the entrenchment of digital media or the 'digital economy', but recent (and habitual) intensifications in artificial intelligence and 'algorithmic personalisation' (Chun 2017; Lury & Day 2019). These personalisation processes' integration as 'the default social' (in Mark Zuckerberg's words) enhance the benefits digital platforms derive from the recursive financialisation of everyday life (Lury & Day 2019).

We live ever-more in a world of distrust, fake personae, and false realities. Yet however inauthentic, ineffective, or 'pseudo' a neoliberal discourse may seem does not necessarily limit the perceived value of its uptake as a technique for (self-)talk, as Bonnie Urciuoli's chapter demonstrates. It is all but certain that the techniques and technologies of self-governance challenged by this volume are strengthened and reshaped not just by post-Covid intensifications of algorithmic life, but deep

entanglements of neoliberalism with ALL discourses of the world as mid-/post-crisis (or otherwise). As this book shows, neoliberal governmentality's compulsion is not just to extend market logics everywhere, but to make the resolution of problems a matter of profit-seeking and individual willpower(/blame). The impact of Covid-19 on youth practices—on language-learning, digital interaction, hope, and otherwise—must be a central concern for scholars of language and neoliberal governmentality going forward.

It is hard to look at the world I write in today as the same as that of Martín Rojo & Del Percio's 2019, a world not just of an ONGOING pandemic which has killed AT LEAST seven million people,[1] but one ever-more defined by discord; displacement; seemingly intractable conflicts between many states (and immeasurably one-sided state belligerence represented as 'conflict'); tenuous democracy in Europe; democracy in freefall in the United States as the 45th President plots his return; rising authoritarianism worldwide; preventable famine; and last but not least, current and future catastrophes wreaked by the climate crisis. Perhaps most importantly in the context of this review, obstinate inequality and pervasive uncertainty further complicate the way neoliberal governmentality 'infiltrates subjectivity' and affects institutional and individual engagements with risk in a post-Covid world. And yet, it IS the same world (same timescape)—it's just a world that seems even further along the path of atomising, if not falling apart. Martín Rojo & Del Percio's collection directs us toward much of the HOW of governmentality and the HOW of escaping it. But how can we do so in the world wrought by 2020—not just ever-more encouraged to think of ourselves economistically but ever-more existentially threatened? Jones (2021) asked at the height of Covid-19, 'can discourse analysis save lives?'. In the pandemic's wake, this book prompts a reworking of this question: can discourse analysis (and by extension all sociolinguistic and linguistic-anthropological analysis) save hearts and souls? Rather than diminishing the great value of Del Percio & Martín Rojo's volume, I ask this only in the hope we see a second edition sooner rather than later.

NOTE

1https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/deaths?n=c

REFERENCES

Ahmed, Sara (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Block, David (2018). *Political economy and sociolinguistics: Neoliberalism, inequality and social class*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong (2017). *Updating to remain the same: Habitual new media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Dardot, Pierre, & Christian Laval (2014). *The new way of the world: On neo-liberal society*. Trans. by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso.

Del Percio, Alfonso (2022). Genealogies of reflexivity: Register formations and the making of affective workers. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2022(276):41–67. Online: https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2021-0090.

Duchêne, Alexandre, & Monica Heller (eds.) (2012). *Language in late capitalism: Pride and profit*. London: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel (1990). *The history of sexuality, volume 1: An introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.

——— (2007). *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*. Ed. by Michel Senellart. Trans. by Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gershon, Ilana (2011). "Neoliberal agency". *Current Anthropology* 52(4):537–55. Online: https://doi.org/10.1086/660866.

Gray, Kevin, & Barry Gills (2022). Introduction: Post-COVID transformations. *Globalizations* 19 (3):369–79. Online: https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.2049063.

Heller, Monica, & Bonnie McElhinny (2017). *Language, capitalism, colonialism: Towards a critical history*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Holborow, Marnie (2015). *Language and neoliberalism*. London: Routledge.

Jones, Rodney H. (ed.) (2021). *Viral discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kelly-Holmes, Helen (2022). Sociolinguistics in an increasingly technologized reality. *Sociolinguistica* 36(1–2):99–110. Online: https://doi.org/10.1515/soci-2022-0005.

Klinenberg, Eric (2024). *2020: One city, seven people, and the year everything changed*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Lazar, Michelle M. (2022). Semiotic timescapes. *Language in Society* 51(5):735–48. Online: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404522000641.

Lou, Jackie Jia; David Malinowski; & Amiena Peck (2022). The linguistic landscape of Covid-19. *Linguistic Landscape. An International Journal* 8(2–3):123–30. Online: https://doi.org/10.1075/ll.00031.int.

Lury, Celia, & Sophie Day (2019). Algorithmic personalization as a mode of individuation. *Theory, Culture & Society* 36(2):17–37. Online: https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418818888.

Smith, Anna Marie (2001). Missing poststructuralism, missing Foucault: Butler and Fraser on capitalism and the regulation of sexuality. *Social Text* 19(2):103–25.

Tabiola, Honey B., & Beatriz Lorente (2017). Neoliberalism in ELT aid: Interrogating a USAID ELT project in southern Philippines. In Mi-Cha Flubacher & Alfonso Del Percio (eds.), *Language, education and neoliberalism*, 122–39. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Urla, Jacqueline (2019). Governmentality and language. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48(1):261–78. Online: https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102317-050258.