



INTERNATIONAL
ICON
STUDENTS' CONFERENCE MAINZ

Identities and Representations

Reaching One Another Language as Interface and Performance

Joined Proceedings of the 3rd and 4th
International Students' Conference ICON
2020/21

Edited by Jan Jokisch



Bundesministerium
für Bildung
und Forschung



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Identities and Representations

Reaching One Another Language as Interface and Performance

**Joint Proceedings of the 3rd and 4th
International Students' Conference
ICON 2020 and 2021**

Edited by Jan Jokisch
In collaboration with Dr. Daniel Schmicking.



2023

Acknowledgements

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From a student perspective, ICON is indebted to Dr. Daniel Schmicking, who not only founded ICON but, to this day, serves as a driving force of the program and a constant source of motivation and support. Dr. Schmicking is a true ally to students.

About ICON

ICON Mainz is an interdisciplinary and international students' conference at the University of Mainz. ICON offers students from all over the world a platform to exchange ideas and broaden their horizon by connecting with other students across all borders.

The ongoing goal of ICON is to further the recognition of students within academia and beyond. We want to prove that students and their research can make important and valuable contributions to science and the world. Thus, we strive to provide students with a stage to present and discuss their findings and network across disciplines.

What is special about ICON is that the organization team is made up of students from different disciplines and nationalities: It is a conference organized by students for students.



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ICON MAINZ

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Cover art (left): *Head* by Elena Syvokonyuk.

Cover art (right): *Phone.png* by Vassilis Cooper.

Preface

The following volume contains the proceedings of the ICON conferences 2020 and 2021. The reason for this odd compilation lies quite frankly in the fact that we were overwhelmed. As a team of students—no matter how dedicated—we were always short on time, resources, helping hands, and money. The financing through LOB running out in 2020 and the pandemic wearing us down and repelling formerly potential new members ultimately were too many anchors on the already painfully slow moving vessel of scholarly editing. This progressively worsening strain did not just affect this volume, however. We, likewise, had to cancel the conference 2022 under the promising topic **Privacy—Media—Isolation** due to a shrinking team, the growing pile of unfinished tasks, and the resulting low number of abstract submissions.

This volume, furthermore, is, aside from a showcase of outstanding works of student scholarship, my personal farewell to ICON. It is an attempt to tie up the remaining loose ends and provide a new generation of motivated students with a clean slate on which to develop their own ideas and organize their own conference. For me personally, as the currently *de facto* last ICON member, it is also a necessary step to move on. The unfinished ICON proceedings are resting on my hard drive like an imp on my chest. Hardly does a day pass, hardly do I work, do research for my PhD thesis, teach, or take a Sunday afternoon off, without this nagging feeling of unfinished business and unfulfilled promises overcoming me. It is just time that I finish them, time to take the last skeleton out of ICON's closet.

The 2020 conference **Identities and Representations** was held digitally on November 20 and 21. It featured 15 student presentations from England, Germany, Italy, Morocco, Poland, and Russia. The conference was framed by two keynote speeches, one by PD Dr. Heike Delitz (Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg) on “Collective Identities: Impossible and Necessary” and one by Prof. Kath Woodward (The Open University) on “Changing Identities, Changing Identifications: What is the Relevance of the Search for Certainties?”.

The 2021 conference **Reaching One Another: Language as Interface and Performance** took place November 17-19 as a hybrid event on the premises of the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. Of the ten presentations from students from England, Germany, Italy, Norway, Poland, Spain, and Turkey, only three were given in Mainz. The event was preceded by a digital keynote titled “Communication before Language” delivered by Prof. Dr. Michael Tomasello and accompanied by the digital gallery *Aleph Null* by the Greek artists Vassilis Cooper and Stef Stafylopati. For the week of the conference, ICON additionally hosted eight Students from the Universitat de València (Spain), Università degli Studi di Palermo (Italy), and the Jyväskylän yliopisto (Finland) as part of the FORTHEM¹ Alliance. The students participated in a German crash course taught by me, the performance workshop “Performance as Language: The semiotic System of the Body” hosted by Laura Wiesinger (University Hildesheim), the online interpreting workshop “Performing Translation & Interpreting”

¹ Fostering Outreach within European Regions, Transnational Higher Education and Mobility.

hosted by Prof. Cristiano Mazzei (University of Massachusetts Amherst), and a workshop preparing the keynote speech titled “Cognition and Communication in Human and Nonhuman Primates” given by JGU’s own Prof. Dr. Nicole Altvater-Mackensen, Prof. Dr. Anja Müller, and Dr. Daniel Schmicking.

Of the 25 student presentations given these two years only four are published here. This is partially due to chiefly personal reasons on the side of the authors, but more so due to admittedly blatant mismanagement on the side of ICON. Reliably publishing yearly conference proceedings with a team of student volunteers and without financial backing is a hard task to begin with and ended up a task too strenuous for us to handle. In recognition of the authors not included in this collection, and for the sake of completeness, I want to take a moment to list their names and their presentation titles:

ICON 2020: Identities and Representations:

- Milena Bryła: Self-Representation as a Persuasive Strategy: Case Study of Huxley’s *The Door of Perception* and Leary’s *The Politics of Ecstasy*
- Roberto L. Ellis: Processes of Identification: An Inquiry into the Constraints and Consequences of Conventional Possibilities and Subjectivization
- Monika Firych: Female Representation on Corporate Boards of Directors—A Global Perspective
- Ismail Frouini: Reeling Bad Moroccans: Gender, Identity and Space in Colonial Cinema
- Norman Darío Gómez Hernández: Language Teaching and Translation in Colombia and Argentina: Shaping or Distorting Identities?
- Andreas Hohmann: Professional Self-Image of Social Workers as Narrative Identities
- Liliia Hrytsai: Environmentalism without Borders or Positive Impact of the Global Citizens Identity on the Environmental Awareness of People
- Zhenya Koroleva: Self-Presentation Theory Visualization
- Sara Kusz: The Woman Knight—Between Femininity and Masculinity. The Case of Poland
- Anita Kwiatkowska: Identity Extension in Social Media in the Context of the Experiences of Polish High School Students—Between Individual and Collective Identity
- Lena Schnapp: Creating Conflicts and Easing Tension—Personal, National. And Supranational Dimensions in the Construction of Identities; The Case of Anti-EU and Anti-LGBT Resentment in Contemporary Poland
- Johann Friedrich Spindler: Art, Algorithm, and Identity
- Alba Eugenia Vásquez Miranda: New Ethnicities: Tactics of Representation of Indigenusness in Mexico
- Malin Christina Wikstrøm: The Search for an Identity: Trans and Non-binary Gender Representation in Literature

ICON 2021: Reaching One Another: Language as Interface and Performance:

- Jan Bielak: The Language of Prelude BWV 870—What Bach’s Music Tells Us and How We Can Talk about it
- Xavier Dalmau Martínez: Dance and Corporeal Communication in Medieval Catalan Literature: A Moral Perspective

- Norman Darío Gómez Hernández: Should Translation Students Know Their Language Beforehand?: Implementing the Scaffolded Language Emergence (SLE) as a Naturalistic Approach in Translation Programs
- Marta Kwasniewska: Climate Wars—Military Metaphors in the Headlines of Polish and American Newspapers
- Mala Mahadevu: Modelling Topics over Time with Neural Networks
- Alfredo Tosques: Politics in the Roman Theater? The Case of Terence’s Adelphoe at Paullus’ Funerals
- Malin Christina Wikstrøm: Communicating the Incommunicable: Is it Possible to Represent Trauma in Literature?

Lastly, I would like to extend my gratitude to a special contributor to the ICON project. Vassilis Cooper has worked as our unofficial graphics department since 2021. With no relation to ICON other than our friendship, they have produced the cover for the 2019 proceedings, the poster for the 2021 conference, which forms part of the cover of this volume, and have supported me immensely in the creation of advertising material. Without them, ICON wouldn’t look nearly as good. I am happy to feature on of their latest artworks at the end of these proceedings.

Jan Jokisch
Frankfurt am Main, Germany, September 2023

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Introduction: Identities, Language, and Editing

Jan Jokisch

Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, Germany

Wie nämlich Scherben eines Gefäßes, um sich zusammenfügen zu lassen, in den kleinsten Einzelheiten einander zu folgen, doch nicht so zu gleichen haben, so muß, anstatt dem Sinn des Originals sich ähnlich zu machen, die Übersetzung liebend vielmehr und bis ins Einzelne hinein dessen Art des Meinens in der eigenen Sprache sich aneignen, um so beide wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes, als Bruchstück einer größeren Sprache erkennbar zu machen.

Walter Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”

Me hospedé en una módica pensión a espaldas del Museo Británico, a cuya biblioteca concurría de mañana y de tarde, en busca de un idioma que fuera digno del Congreso del Mundo. No descuidé las lenguas universales; me asomé al esperanto —que el Lunario sentimental califica de “equitativo, simple y económico”— y al volapük, que quiere explorar todas las posibilidades lingüísticas, declinando los verbos y conjugando los sustantivos. Consideré los argumentos en pro y en contra de resucitar el latín, cuya nostalgia no ha cesado de perdurar al cabo de los siglos. Me demoré asimismo en el examen del idioma analítico de John Wilkins, donde la definición de cada palabra está en las letras que la forman.

Jorge Luis Borges, “El Congreso”

Writing an introduction for a volume of conference proceedings always comes with its own set of challenges. Besides introducing the topic, framing the scholarly papers, and creating a narrative that makes the collection feel like a structured whole instead of disparate traces, it is supposed to be a scholarly contribution in its own right. This complexity is heightened in the current case, where I am writing an introduction not just for one volume, but for the joint proceedings of two conferences with two different topics. Instead of writing about both topics separately, I want to use the opportunity to discuss the intersection between language and identity in the light of editing and scholarly publishing.

There is, undoubtedly, a connection between identity and language. Most groups, subgroups, generations, and even states rely on sociolects and official languages to define themselves and establish a concept of in- and exclusion. For the Ancient Greeks, already, a barbarian simply was any non-Greek speaker. Scholarly communities and disciplines function similarly through the introduction of technical vocabulary, by crafting specific specialized terms that allow us to communicate more precisely in one area but do not

exist or maybe even conflict with the vernacular. The differences between a humanities scholar and a biologist emerges, not least, in whether the word “rhizome” makes one think of Deleuze and Guattari or of bamboo and ginger.

This is already posing the first problem to editing. Since ICON is an interdisciplinary conference, the different papers stem from different writing cultures. Texts from different disciplines—or even just from different movements within the same discipline—can diverge greatly in structure, style, and argument. This problem multiplies when we consider national and regional writing tradition, as well.

A good example of this divergence can already be found in the way the table of contents for books from the same discipline but from different national traditions can be structured. At least for Literary Studies, English and especially US-American publications follow what could be called the *bon mot* approach. Chapter titles are short, playful, elusive, alluding, and cryptic. They don’t exactly tell you what the chapter will be about and instead rely on puns or quotes, evoke vague ideas, and will often only reveal their intention after reading the chapter itself. Take, as an example, Andrew Piper’s groundbreaking study *Enumerations: Data and Literary Studies* (2018). The six actually counted chapters—introduction, conclusion, and the classic appendixes are excluded from the enumeration—are: 1. Punctuation (Opposition), 2. Plot (Lack), 3. Topoi (Dispersion), 4. Fictionality (Sense), 5. Characterization (Constraint), and 6. Corpus (Vulnerability). The titles are short, the parenthetical structure inspires association—in the case of “Plot (Lack)” even operates with a pun—and we are only given a tiny glimpse into what each chapter might be about.

A thematically comparable publication in German is Thomas Weitin’s *Digitale Literaturgeschichte: Eine Versuchsreihe mit sieben Experimenten* (2021). Both were published around the same time, cover topics of digital humanities and literary history, fall into a number of separate experiments that stand fairly independently, and have similar lengths—Piper with 256 pages and Weitin with 176. Yet, Weitin’s table of content is structured entirely differently. *Digitale Literaturgeschichte*—again ignoring the introduction, conclusion, and appendix—has five chapters, with their titles ranging in complexity from single word like “Stilometrie” to full descriptions like “Vergleichende Korpusanalyse als Erkenntnisinstrument der Literaturgeschichte.” Where they differ most from *Enumerations*, however, is in the, for German tables of contents typical, almost obsessive use of sub-chapters and even sub-sub-chapters. There are no 10 subsequent pages in this book that are not interrupted by a chapter heading. The entire book with its unassuming 176 pages makes it to an astonishing 71 headings—*Enumerations*, all headers considered, to 12. In most of German academic writing, the structural division introduced by chapters (over-)determines the whole book. You almost always know what can be found in which chapter. There is, as one of my professors in Amherst once phrased it, an almost suffocating level of rigidity, and as I would like to add, an almost painful lack of surprises.

Regarding my stylistic proficiency, I would consider myself relatively fluent in different styles of writing from Literary Studies, Philosophy, Translation Studies, maybe some Linguistics, and that in German and English variants with some incipient knowledge of Spanish ones. However, in editing a paper from a Polish sociologist, for example, I would be blind to any structural part of the text that might stem from a Polish or sociological writing tradition. They would appear to me as noise, as mistakes that need to be corrected to fit into my own myopic understanding of scholarly writing. The result of that process should be clear: I am reducing the cultural and disciplinary identity of the

author in the text by forcing the paper into a form that more closely aligns with my expectations of what English papers from a pitifully small fraction of the disciplinary spectrum look and read like.

Language is also the primary tool of self-expression, a way to structure the experiences of my life into a coherent and compelling narrative that allows a feeling of self to emerge, allows me to present myself to others. We can find an interesting example of this in the short biographies at the end of this volume. They are showcasing the academic careers of the authors, appealing literally *ad hominem* to the truth and insight of the published papers. What makes them especially interesting is the fact that they are third-person autobiographical writing. The authors are talking about themselves from an outside perspective. There is an illusion of objectivity. They appear merely as the presentation of facts, omitting that, while they are factual, the specific episodes they contain are carefully curated. They are inscribing the authors into specific roles that are expected of them as researchers. Identity through language, through a compelling narrative, frames here the proceedings and establishes confidence in the authors and their work.

In the context of an international conference published in English, language and identity develop an even more complicated relationship. Knowledge of a specific language suddenly becomes a prerequisite for participation. Internationality tacitly is reduced in scope to an English-speaking international community. Either consciously or unconsciously, your abstract submission will be judged on its style and expressiveness, i.e., on your grasp of the English language. Some of the most interesting topics and hypotheses might be culled at the peer review stage because the language of the abstract made them seem dull and—since we judge intelligence largely on language usage—made the author’s experience and education seem lacking.

This might appear like an unproblematic commonplace. Attending an English conference simply presupposes knowledge of English. Attending a Czech conference, I would likewise be expected to speak Czech. The difference, however, lies in the economic power of the English language. Learning Czech might be a way to give my academic profile an edge. Learning English, however, is akin to a necessary requirement. If I want to be read, want to be cited, become a member of the discourse, and thereby increase the slim chance of getting funding or a position, I will have to write in the language that allows for the biggest potential dissemination: English.

English has *de facto* become the *lingua franca* of most of the Western world—if not the globe—and most of the academic world. ICON, not least, is a testimony to this. There is a reason we aren’t the *Internationale Studierendenkonferenz*, the *Conferencia Internacional de Estudiantes*, or the *Παγκόσμιο Φοιτητικό Συνέδριο*. English provides an accessibility that—aside from Mandarin, Hindi, Spanish, and Arabic, through the sheer number of their native speakers—is virtually unmatched by any other language. No other language is expected to be understood almost anywhere in the world, to the point, where the touristic accessibility of a country unofficially is determined by the general English proficiency of its inhabitants. The academic equivalent of this particular phenomenon is the tendency to translate abstracts into English. Still shut out from engaging with the text in any meaningful depth, we are afforded a glancing summary, a precursory reading with no follow-up; the nice storeowner from the small Italian village who spoke enough English to provide his services and wish you a nice day.

Different from the actual historical Mediterranean Lingua Franca, however, which was a pigmy of Romance languages, Arabic, Berber, and Turkish, or the Latin kept alive

by the Church and coopted by intellectuals during the medieval and early modern period, English is a language that is in use outside of being an auxiliary. That means that some people, by virtue of acquiring their native tongue, acquire the *lingua franca* and with it all the social, economic, and academic perks that it provides. It is a symptom of the inherent inequality that is also expressed by the appeal of US-American and British universities, the disproportional wealth of the West, the value of the Dollar, and the fact that the first 128 characters of UTF are identical to ASCII.

Scientific traditions in minor and even most major languages are slowly dying. The ideal to participate in an international discourse and the pressure to achieve a good citation score mean that publishing in a minor language can become a liability. Graduate classes in the Dutch-speaking world, for example, have come to be taught predominantly in English in an attempt to stay internationally viable.¹ Educating researchers from minor languages means educating them not in their own academic tradition, but enabling them to participate in an economically stronger one. Academia mirrors here other capitalist mechanisms: Italian nurses go to Germany; Rumanian nurses go to Italy.

The opposite development—or lack thereof—is just as problematic and can be seen in French, another former *lingua franca*. The unwillingness of many French researchers to write in English or acknowledge any non-French discourse—I am obviously simplifying here—has led to the development of its own academic microcosm. The world is shut out to artificially preserve the former intellectual and artistic capital of the French language and culture. There is a legitimacy in this refusal to give up one’s own writing as well as academic tradition but it ultimately just stifles the dissemination of ideas.

I am not trying to single these two languages out. The situation in other countries is not much better. Germany, for example, seems to take no strong stance one way or another. There is no attempt to offer English taught degrees in German universities systematically, yet English is nevertheless ubiquitous on our reading lists and in our academic writing. Germany has surrendered itself to the international currents, letting itself be drawn by outside forces and denying responsibility, neither committing to the “Dutch” nor to the “French solution”—possibly the worst of all options.

Obviously, languages and discourses like German and French keep some of their importance because of their foundational quality. The literally discipline-making role they performed until the mid-20th century is undeniable. This and their economic potential means that German and French departments still exist quite numerously in universities around the globe, that they are still studied and read. Yet, we shouldn’t kid ourselves: they are barely staying afloat on their slowly deflating former importance. Foreign language proficiency decreases as the global English proficiency increases.

Then again, why engage with the original in the first place? All the classics are translated anyway, and anything that is important enough to merit widespread reception is bound to be translated. For Comparative Literature, one of the central rules used to be to engage with a text in its original language. Translations—no matter how good or how appreciated even by the greatest hardliners of the discipline—were at best a preliminary tool, certainly not the object of serious scholarly inquiry. David Damrosch broke with this taboo in founding his Institute of World Literature at Harvard. Damrosch suggested that the only way to approach something as complex as “world literature,” the global system of literary exchange and dissemination, is to read literature in translation, and that

¹ At the moment of writing this, Robbert Dijkgraaf, the Dutch minister of education, is proposing to limit the non-Dutch—meaning English—taught classes in Bachelor’s degrees to one-third of course credits in an attempt to limit the Anglicization of Dutch universities.

de facto means in an English translation. In creating a new canon, we are not including works from all over the world, but their English translations. The canon does not become more international, but more English. After all, the quickest way for a book to travel around the globe is in English translation.

I am not in a position to suggest a “solution” nor could I begin to fathom how one could begin to untangle the political, economic, and historical factors that have led to this point. In editing the ICON proceedings, however, I had to make decisions that—for better or for worse—had to take a stance on these issues. My approach, to borrow a concept from Friedrich Schleiermacher’s theory of translation, was *verfremdend*. According to Schleiermacher, a translator always operates on a spectrum between the poles of *einbürgern* and *verfremden*, between naturalizing and alienating. A translator can decide to render the translation in a way that masks its traces as a translated text or they can preserve syntactic or semantic structures of the source texts that seem odd in the target language and thus explicitly render the translated text as translation. Schleiermacher’s approach—he strongly suggests the second alternative—has fallen into discredit in contemporary translation studies and for good reason. Yet, for the monotextual translation that is editing, I have employed it multiple times as a useful guiding metaphor.

In editing texts written in a foreign language, there is a similar tendency to remove everything foreign from the text, to naturalize it. Aside from syntactical and grammatical corrections, there is the custom to change expressions and metaphors to their, in our case, English equivalents, or to change the structure and style, as mentioned above. This can be helpful and the author appreciates this mimicry quiet frequently. However, it can take a strictness that one would not impose on a native speaker. Academic writing, especially in the humanities, has a certain almost literary flexibility that goes beyond the text as a mere functional vessel, as a receptacle for information. Scholarly papers are a pedagogical tool and as such, they are written to be engaging, to capture the attention of the reader, lead them through the argument, illustrate it, and make it memorable. One of the strategies to achieve this is deviation: a slight twist on the structure of a paper, a fresh metaphor, an unexpected combination of words and concepts, or a witty or humorous remark. My fear is that we afford this to the native author as a stylistic choice, while we suppress it in the foreign author as a mistake. I tried my best to strike a balance and preserve some of the more peculiar but oddly descriptive choices of words that I was offered.

Likewise, foreign texts—generally in the form of citations and quotations—are reduced or removed. It seems reasonable to ask for translations of non-English quotes, but the majority of publications today omit the original all together. Reading a publication from the late 19th and early 20th century, it always strikes me how liberal the use of languages is. The same text can seamlessly glide from a Portuguese quote into a Swedish one and then illustrate its point with a Spanish example. There are no translations. An almost unfathomable level of linguistic flexibility is simply assumed. To be frank, I am not sure how the reading practice for these texts used to look like. Was assumed that everyone possessed at least incipient knowledge of 10 languages? Were certain quotes simply omitted in reception? Did everyone have a background in Classic Studies that allowed them to translate the quotes with a dictionary, a short grammar, and endless patience? Regardless, it was a time when engaging with an international discourse meant engaging with different national discourses, not just with an international English-speaking community.

Throughout my time as an editor for ICON, I have always encouraged my authors to cite all non-English sources first in their original language and only then provide a

translation. It was important to me to have texts, though primarily written in English, be interlaced with other languages. It felt to me a simple yet powerful resistance against the omission of non-English languages, aside from the certain *je-ne sais-quoi* appealing to the *gestalt* of foreignness by means of using a single *suave* loan word for *prestigé*.

The non-English quote—especially when substantial—disrupts the texts with a national discourse that the usage of English was trying to repress. The text starts embodying its linguistic and cultural otherness. English loses part of its hegemonic position and becomes an auxiliary tool, merely a window into a rich discourse situated outside its reach. There is a productive feeling of exclusion here, one that both humbles us and motivates us to learn: Maybe English isn't enough. Maybe I need to invest the time to learn a new language, to engage with another discourse not through the crooked lens of translated excerpts but eye-to-eye.

Ultimately, those exercises are futile and do not accomplish as much as my theoretical discourse pretends. Then again, nobody expects the introduction to the proceedings of a student conference to restructure the mechanisms, strategies, and principles of the global scientific community. ICON is a stepping-stone and I would hope ultimately a useful one for the researchers we had the pleasure to host. As an editor, I also hope that I was able to help them find a voice in the cacophony of international scholarly publishing, and not silence their expression and identity to appeal to my ideals of academic writing.

The texts collected in this volume engage with these and similar issues, but also go beyond what I, or this introduction, could have possibly provide in interdisciplinary insight and complexity. It is my pleasure to present them here:

With [“One of the Family’: Social Role and Subjectivity Negotiation of Migrant Domestic Workers in Italy”](#) Margherita Di Cicco provides a perceptive sociological account of the situation of migrant workers in Italy. Based on interviews conducted by her, she gives an insight into the lives and conditions of domestic workers and cleverly analyzes the social, economic, and psychological mechanisms underlying their precarious conditions, while avoiding a victimizing representation of these social actors. It is a brutal and honest study on foreign determination and imposed social roles, the racialization and commodification of domestic services, and the people who persevere in these inhuman conditions.

Ebrahim Al-Khaffaf’s [“Looking through the Lens of Language: How Early Muslim Intellectuals Tried to Reach Hidden Truths by Examining the Arabic Language”](#) is a tour de force through the scientific breakthroughs in the early Muslim world. Each of these discoveries is cleverly connected to the Arabic language and the Muslim religion and illuminates the historical theories of language in the light of the Qur’ān as well as actual linguistic characteristics of Arabic. Expecting to find hidden truth in Arabic as the language of the Qur’ān, these thinkers embarked on lengthy analyses of Arabic, allowing them to make advances in algebra, semiotics, metaphysics, and the interpretation of dreams.

In my own contribution to this volume, [“Should You Let Your Computer Do The Reading? A Discussion on the Benefits of Distant Reading for Literary Studies, with a Quantitative Study on the Development of Stage Directions in European Drama,”](#) I am engaging with the topic of employing computational and statistical methods in Literary Studies. As my first bigger project in the field of Digital Humanities, it is also a reflection of a classically trained literary scholar breaking and reconciling with their academic

upbringing. My ultimate stance is that distant reading is not a method that will make close reading obsolete, but a useful tool that, if anything, can complement and improve the close engagement with texts to which we are accustomed.

With “**Communication and Oppression: Fake News as an Instrument of Propaganda**” Davide Versari offers a theoretical approach towards two of the biggest challenges to the political discourse today: fake news and propaganda. Unhappy with the fact that both phenomena, though intuitively linked, generally are theorized separately, he creates a theoretical framework in which fake news deductively is a form of propaganda. Versari’s work draws heavily from his deep familiarity with established theories of propaganda—most notably Jason Stanley’s *How Propaganda Works*—as well as from 20th and 21st century approaches in epistemology and the philosophy of language. Though ultimately just a sketch hindered by the spatial limitations of this volume, it points the way towards a better understanding of propaganda as a whole.

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**Part I:
Identities
and
Representations**

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“One of the Family”

Social Role and Subjectivity Negotiation of Migrant Domestic Workers in Italy

Margherita Di Cicco

University of Milan, University of Turin

Nowadays, the employment of private domestic services is increasingly common among Italian families, and the demand continues to grow as a result of broad transformations of social, economic and demographic character.¹ The marketization of domestic work is connected to women’s participation in the labor market, the aging of the population, and a lacking welfare systems, which tend to neglect the implementation of services in favor of direct economic transfers to indigent households (Ambrosini, *Sociologia* 138). Up until thirty years ago, the labor offer was mainly national, while between the 1960s and 1970s, the native workforce began to abandon this sector increasingly, as Eritrean, Filipino, and Cape Verdean women became the pioneers of extra-European female migration into the country (Marchetti). The presence of international domestic laborers in Italy continued to grow in the following decades, leading to the ethnicization and segmentation of the workforce which characterize the domestic sector today (with the only exception being babysitting, which is still largely carried out by local laborers). Domestic labor has come to be perceived by the collective Italian imagination as a work for exclusively non-native women, generating ethnic and gender stereotypes that link migrants’ occupational concentration to alleged cultural characteristics.

Many migrant laborers face discrimination in the receiving countries, but the case of domestic workers is especially telling because racist and sexist stereotypes merge here. This ascribes an old-fashioned kind of femininity to migrant women, making them appear as if they were inherently inclined to reproductive labor (Grilli 143). This process clearly emerges in everyday language: it is not rare to hear the term ‘Filipino’² informally used synonymously for maid and the term ‘Romanian’³ as a label to identify an elderly caretaker (Casula 10). Thereby, the collective representation of a certain ethnic group becomes dominant over individual characteristics, further reducing professional mobility (Ambrosini, *Sociologia* 79). This bias also contributes to reinforce an undervaluation of domestic labor as unskilled, unproductive, and closely related to women’s subordinate role within society.

This paper presents an anthropological account on the experiences of depersonalization, precariousness, and social exclusion that affect many migrant

¹ In 2009, more than 10% of Italian families (about 2.671.000) employed paid domestics (Catanzaro and Colombo, 14). Although we lack access to updated statistics due to the widespread presence of irregular work in this sector, which tends to involve undocumented migrants, this trend seems to be supported by the recent reports of the International Labour Organization (King-Dejardin 33).

² *Filippino* (male noun) or *Filippina* (female noun).

³ *Rumena*, which in this context is used remarkably only in the female form.

domestic workers⁴ in Italy in relation to the specific features of their working environment. The analysis is based on in-depth interviews and one focus group that were conducted in Bologna and Rome from June to November 2019, with sixteen migrant women with various geographical backgrounds, aged twenty-eight to sixty-five, employed as co-resident domestic workers.⁵ This research emerged from the consideration that their experiences could be taken as a privileged vantage point to analyze not only the transformations of labor migration flows and the production of subjectivity enhanced by contemporary forms of global mobility (Mezzadra and Neilson 134), but also the cultural and social changes that occur in the country of destination in relation to the presence of migrant workers (Ambrosini, *La fatica* 50).

There is ample evidence that migrant domestic workers in Italy (and elsewhere) tend to be underpaid and easily exposed to exploitation and abuse. The study participants described their experiences in vivid terms, using metaphors such as ‘living in a cage,’⁶ ‘being in prison,’⁷ and ‘feeling like a slave’⁸ to describe their professional environment. The ethnographic pieces of evidence will show that domestic work is not substantially characterized by a set of tasks but, first and foremost, in terms of the social role implicitly assigned to the worker (Anderson 113). Docility, compliance, and full availability are often regarded as necessary by employers. The inherently servile role attributed to the worker is what justifies employers’ excessive demands and the subtle contempt for their personal aspirations and needs. Such denigration of the worker’s identity is constructed around stereotypical conceptions of class, gender, and ethnicity. Consequently, the working environment molds the worker’s whole personality as she is expected to embody a social role defined in terms of domesticity and familiarity (Akalın 222).

The representation of the worker as ‘one of the family’ is functional in hiding the asymmetry of power between employer and employee and enhancing the exploitation of the worker’s subjectivity (Marchetti 344). As a result, migrant domestic workers are involved in constant processes of identity negotiation without the availability of an alternative environment where one’s personal sense of self can be expressed (Cvajner 142). Finally, the analysis will stress how national immigration policies enhance the vulnerability of migrant domestic workers and increase the power asymmetry in professional relations. Indeed, the possibility to obtain and renew the residence permit is

⁴ With the term “domestic work,” we refer to reproductive labor in a broad sense, including both cleaning and home-based caretaking.

⁵ All names are altered to protect the privacy of the research participants.

⁶ In a respondent’s words: “Manca la libertà: noi siamo come dentro una gabbia.” (“[We] lack freedom: we are like in a cage”). The interview was conducted on November 3, 2019. Darya is a 58-year-old Ukrainian woman who works as a live-in caretaker.

⁷ “Per me è stato come se fossi in prigione! Era una cosa soffocante, io non potevo resistere” (“It felt to me as if I was in prison. That was a suffocating thing, I couldn’t bear it”). This account is taken from the focus group conducted on November 3, 2019. Maryna is a 54-year-old Ukrainian woman who currently works as a part-time domestic worker after a brief experience in co-resident caretaking.

⁸ “A fare questo lavoro, [la] badante, alla fine ci si sente come una schiava, sai?” (“In doing this work, caretaking, eventually you feel like a slave, you know?”). The interview was conducted on October 17, 2019. Valeria is a 40-year-old Ukrainian woman who works as a part-time domestic, volunteers for non-profit organizations that support migrants, and has recently opened her own facility. A former professor of mathematics in Kiev, she moved to Italy to work as a live-in caretaker for many years. Later, she attended university, received a master’s degree in Cultural Mediation, and focused her research on East European female migrations. I had the opportunity to interview her and to be introduced to some members of her social network, who also participated in this research in one-to-one interviews and as part of the focus group. Valeria’s account was particularly informative because of the multi-layered identity she possesses as a domestic worker, a researcher on female migrations, and a volunteer in migrant services.

dependent on having regular employment and accommodation, which makes migrant domestic workers deeply dependent on their employers. This aspect reinforces the representation of ‘employment as a favor which justifies the workers’ subordination.

Subaltern integration of migrant women in Italy

In order to make sense of the precariousness of migrant domestic workers in Italy, it is necessary to frame their living experiences in the context of transnational labor migration. Before dealing with the asymmetry of power in the workplace, we will first briefly discuss the racialization and commodification of domestic labor in relation to broader societal transformations in the receiving countries; secondly, we will focus on migrants’ motivations to engage with private domestic service.

The importation of migrant domestic labor has encountered the void left by Western women’s devaluation of domesticity and the weakness of public welfare services. While paid domestic service used to be a luxury that only best-off social classes could afford, the availability of cheap migrant labor has drastically reduced the costs of employing domestic personnel. One could argue that the emancipation of Western women from unpaid reproductive labor has been enabled by the segregation of migrant women in the very occupations that native women contempt (Parreñas 29). Gender inequality within the household has been replaced partly by the power inequality between the employer and the employee, usually both women (Anderson 116).

Domestic labor currently constitutes the main professional opportunity for both documented and undocumented migrant women, apart from sex work. This occupational concentration is due to various factors. The trip to destination countries can be extremely long and expensive, leading many households to invest a great amount of resources (often contracting debts) to enable a member to work abroad. Therefore, as soon as she reaches the receiving country, the worker is pressured to maximize any earning opportunities and remit most earnings to pay back the debts. Valeria⁹, who moved to Italy in 2001, explains that:

Io ho pagato duemila euro per venire in Italia, un tempo si pagava...Ho provato con diverse agenzie ma non aprivano il visto, per niente. L’unica cosa che mi hanno aperto è il visto turistico per l’Ungheria, dopo dovevo attraversare l’Austria e mi hanno fatto il permesso falso. Sono entrata con un permesso falso e appena sono arrivata in Italia me l’hanno strappato. Dalla Moldavia [costa] quattromila euro. Allora figurati, tu arrivi in Italia, già hai questo debito - qualcuna deve anche pagare interessi - i primi stipendi sono di settecento, ottocento, novecento euro. Devi mandare [rimesse] per i figli, devi mandare per questo debito, allora si risparmiava su tutto, su tutto.¹⁰

Unless a temporary accommodation in the receiving country is provided by the household’s transnational network, the migrant must find a place to stay with scarce monetary resources available. Co-resident employment can be perceived as a quick

⁹ See footnote 8.

¹⁰ I paid two thousand euros to come to Italy, it used to be like that... I tried with many agencies, but they did not give me the visa: the only thing that I got was the touristic visa to Hungary, then they provided me with a fake visa to cross over to Austria. I came here with a fake visa, but it was ripped up as soon as I arrived in Italy. [...] From Moldova, the price is four thousand euros. So, imagine that you arrive here with such a debt – some [agencies] even demand interests – and the first wages [that you earn] are seven hundred, eight hundred, nine hundred. You need to send money to your children, save money to pay the debt. So, you save on everything, on everything.

solution to the problem of accommodation, which also allows minimizing the risk of deportation. For employers, undocumented migrants in precarious conditions constitute a source of cheap labor, which is why co-resident domestic service tends to be the first employment for newly arrived migrants. When asked about her arrival to Italy, Luba¹¹ recalls that:

Volevo sottolineare anche questa cosa: che c'è anche il problema di posto letto, quando arriva una persona, diciamo, praticamente come siamo arrivate noi – senza soldi, senza niente, con un sacco di debiti – dice: “Io non posso stare a pagare il posto letto un mese, due mesi, tre mesi”, quindi ti butti nel primo lavoro che capita. Basta che tu intanto vai a lavorare, dici: “Imparo dopo com'è il lavoro... Buono o non buono, io non pago posto letto che già non ho soldi”.¹²

Migrants' agency can be especially constrained by a precarious migratory status, as Victoire's¹³ experience shows. A Cameroonian woman in her late twenties, who had moved abroad because of financial and relational issues and had lost her asylum seeker status. She soon realized that finding co-resident employment was an urgent need to protect not only her financial security but also her safety:

Ho visto l'inferno, eh? Quando mi hanno mandato via [dal centro per richiedenti asilo] ho cominciato a chiedere le persone dove dormire e, come lo puoi immaginare, sono una donna - se tu vedi un ragazzo alla strada che non conosci [e dici]: “Per favore, aiutami!”, lui ti dice: “Vuoi che ti aiuto? Devo avere... Se tu devi vivere a casa mia devo avere sesso con te”. È sicuro. [...] Grazie a Dio, lì dentro la casa di riposo mi hanno fatto fare un corso di assistenza familiare e quando mi hanno mandato via allora sono tornata all'agenzia e ho parlato con la signora lì – ricordo bene, piangevo [perché] non avevo dove dormire, vestiti e allora le ho detto: “Sto cercando un lavoro: un lavoro dove posso dormire lì, vivere lì, così”. E lei come sempre molto buona, molto gentile. E allora mi ha trovato un lavoro da una signora e da lì ho cominciato a lavorare, lavorare, fino [a] qui dove sono oggi.¹⁴

¹¹ This account is extracted from the focus group which took place on November 3, 2019. Luba is a fifty-eight-year-old Ukrainian woman who work as a live-in caretaker.

¹² Well, I just want to stress something: there is also the problem of accommodation: when a person arrives, let's say, basically as we arrived – with no money, with nothing, just plenty of debts – says, “I can't be paying the rent, for one month, two months, three months.” So, you just get the first job that you find. You just want to work, you say, “I will see how the job is later ... [No matter if the job is] good or not. At least I don't have to pay the rent, since I already have no money.”

¹³ The interview was conducted on June 28, 2019. Victoire is a twenty-eight-year-old Cameroonian woman who works as a live-in caretaker.

¹⁴ I have seen hell, you know. When they kicked me out [of the reception center for asylum seekers] I started to ask around where I could find accommodation and, as you can imagine, [because] I am a woman ... if you meet a stranger around the street and cry, “Please, help me!” of course he will say, “So you want me to help you? If you want me to host you, you need to have sex with me.” That's a sure thing. [...] Thank God, I had attended an internship on care work, so when they kicked me out, I went to an agency and there I spoke to the lady – I remember it very well. I was crying [because] I didn't have anywhere to sleep, any clothes, so I told her, “I'm looking for a job, a job where I can sleep and live. Something like that.” She was very sweet and kind as usual. So, she found me a job with a lady and then I began to work, work, work as I'm doing now.

As will be demonstrated further, the precarity of a migratory status is a direct restraint of migrants’ agency, since the possibility to remain in the country depend on having regular employment and accommodation. However, this does not imply that obtaining a residency permit guarantees integration in the job market. Gender-by-ethnic biases construct a representation of migrant women as embodying an old-fashioned femininity that justifies their segregation into under-waged, gender-segregated occupations that mirror wife-and-mother roles, such as housekeeping and eldercare. This aspect shows how migration standardizes human capital, by turning every individual into an indistinct subordinated workforce. As Marya’s¹⁵ experience exemplifies, the stereotypes attached to a migrant’s nationality and age may directly prevent their access to qualified occupation. Formerly a clerk in a business company, she decided to leave Ukraine because inflation has made her salary inadequate to maintain her household’s middleclass lifestyle. Once she obtained the residency permit in Italy, she attended professional courses to build a career in the service sector. However, it soon became clear that the only job opportunity available for a mature foreign woman was cleaning or elderly care. Her account poignantly shows how ethnic, gender, and age stereotypes can reinforce one another in constraining the professional potential of migrant workers, systematically relegating them to subordinate roles:

Quando mi sono messa in regola ero ancora più giovane, così cercavo una via di uscita per cambiare la [mia] vita, perché dico: “Se noi siamo ucraine...” a volte dicono: “Se sei ucraina, allora sei badante?” perché se sei ucraina ricevi un timbro: badante. Guarda, a me viene il nervoso, quando cominciano... Va bene, io non è che mi vergogno del mio lavoro, ma perché pensano che se sei ucraina devi fare per forza quello? Vabbè, comunque adesso siccome sono ancora giovane e ce l’ho un po’ di tempo potrei anche cambiare qualcosa. Va bene, allora ho avuto possibilità a fare due corsi – non uno, due corsi professionali – siccome, diciamo, io ero disoccupata, io potevo fare gratuitamente i corsi regionali: uno per addetta a punto vendita - fatto quasi un anno, con tirocinio e tutto quanto, proprio professionale, con certificato e tutto – allora appena finito con esami e tutto ho portato il mio curriculum dappertutto, in tutti i punti vendita e tutti i posti possibili e immaginabili e non mi ha chiamato nessuno, neanche... Neanche così, per scherzo. [...] Forse se io arrivavo un po’ giovane, cercavo ancora qualcosa; se, come se fosse adesso, tanto capisci anche con la tua testa che non c’è lavoro per gli italiani, figurati a te, se ti prende qualcuno...Se arrivi a cinquant’anni, per esempio, per te o pulizie o badante ed è già buona grazia! Nessuno ti aspetta in un ufficio, in un negozio.¹⁶

¹⁵ See footnote 7.

¹⁶ When I got the residence permit, I tried to find a way to change my life because I was still young. Because I say that if you are Ukrainian, people will say, “You are Ukrainian? So you are a caretaker?” If you are Ukrainian, it is as if you have a stamp on your head: caretaker. Look, I get so nervous when they begin [to do that] ... It’s fine. It is not like I am ashamed of my job. But why do they assume that this is inevitably what you do if you are Ukrainian? Anyway, I thought that because I was still young, I could have made a change. I had the chance to attend two professional courses – as I was unemployed at that time, I could do these courses for free. One as a shop assistant: I did it for one year, even with the internship, the professional certificate, and everything else. So, after I passed the final exams, I brought my CV everywhere, to all the shops, to every possible and imaginable place. But no one called me, not even as a joke. [...] Maybe, if I were younger, I would have kept looking. But nowadays you perfectly understand that if there are no jobs

When migrant workers are identified with subordinate professional roles and the educational and professional qualifications they obtained in their home countries are neglected, their access to professional mobility is restrained. Such professional segregation can furthermore affect self-perception, leading to a dissociation of the worker with her professional role. Yet, in order to avoid a victimizing representation of migrant laborers as passive subjects, inevitably subjugated and marginalized, it is worth stressing that many transnational workers are aware of this process of professional segregation and consciously choose to prioritize the economic goals at the root of their migration experience, as the participants' biographical trajectories show¹⁷:

Quindi, voglio dire, se tu arrivi a una certa età e lo sai che sei arrivata per avere un po' di soldi non è che vai, scegli... Prendi la prima cosa che trovi, basta che ti pagano; chiaro che se ti insultano, se ti picchiano, dici: "Vado a cercare qualcos'altro", però se sei più o meno a posto – diciamo, tutti noi non abbiamo pensato all'inizio: "Adesso io sto qua dieci anni, vent'anni".¹⁸

One could argue that the very occupations stigmatized by Western eyes as inherently subordinate may be appreciated by the workers involved as a means to achieve economic empowerment. The condition of migrant domestic worker may be conceived as a form of partial emancipation, for material gains are accumulated at the price of social marginalization. Yet, the subjects who took part in this research stressed that they were aware of this contradiction and made rational choices based on cost-benefit evaluations. In Darya's¹⁹ words:

Però è la nostra scelta: noi sappiamo già dopo tanti anni com'è questo lavoro, però se siamo ancora qua si vede che stiamo bene.²⁰

The professional concentration of people from certain nationalities is linked to presumed cultural characteristics. This process of essentialist stereotyping affects not only migrant women's segregation in the labor market, but also employment relationships in domestic work. In hiring a domestic or care worker, employers tend to focus on aspects that are not related to professional skills: it is the person's appearance as a whole that is under examination. Personality traits such as docility, compliance, and full availability are regarded by many potential employers as necessary qualities for working in their private environments. However, given the pervasiveness of racist stereotypes, the simple fact of belonging to an ethnic group that the collective imagination links to these personality traits may function as an assurance of reliability. The professional segregation of people from certain nationalities is linked to presumed cultural characteristics, ignoring the evidence that very few migrants were already engaged in those professions when they were in their country of origin (Ambrosini, *Sociologia* 79). Within the market of private domestic work, racist stereotypes lead to migrant workers being ascribed with a natural

for Italian, who would hire me ... If you move here at fifty years old, you can either do cleaning or caretaking and that's if you are lucky! Nobody wants you in their shops or offices.

¹⁷ See footnote 7.

¹⁸ So, I mean, if you move here at a certain age, you are aware that you came here in order to save up money. You don't go around and choose ... You'll just get the first job you can find, as long as you get paid. Of course, if they offend you or if they hit you, you'd say, "Ok, I'm going to look for something else." But if you are more or less all right, let's say, we didn't initially think, "I shall stay here ten, twenty years."

¹⁹ See footnote 6.

²⁰ This is our own choice: after so many years we know very well what this job is like, but if we are still here that means we are fine.

inclination for housework or caregiving. For instance, South American women tend to be considered particularly suited for babysitting because they are considered to have a loving, warm attitude. Likewise, Asian women are appreciated for housekeeping because of their assumed discretion and docility. Regarding East European women, the emphasis is on their self-abnegation and tirelessness, which would predispose them to elderly care (Triandafyllidou 9). According to this essentialist way of thinking, the reason workers accomplish their tasks in a certain way depends on proposed ethnic characteristics. This narrative produces an ethnic hierarchy according to which workers who belong to certain nationalities are regarded as more desirable than others and consequently tend to enjoy more favorable wages and working conditions (Anderson 124). At the bottom of this arbitrary hierarchy are people of color, with the exception of some nationalities, such as Somalian, Eritrean, and Peruvian women due to the lasting character of their immigration in Italy, which was facilitated by various Catholic philanthropic organizations. This racist stereotyping, however, not only influences the professional segregation of migrant women, but also function as justification for their mistreatment at the workplace.

Discrimination at work

Co-resident domestic work is a highly intensive job, both physically and emotionally, characterized by unfavorable working times, lack of privacy, and a surrogate family environment. Migrant domestics tend to work for long shifts and perform an indeterminate set of tasks, often in a context of social isolation. As the experiences of the research participants reveal, a fundamental power inequality, emotional ambiguity, and various forms of either direct or implicit exploitation shape the employer-employee-relationship.

The relational dimension of domestic labor makes the employer-employee-relationship inherently ambiguous (Anderson 114). The work is extensive and varies according to the preferences of each household; hence, the worker is expected to display a high degree of flexibility and adaptability (Akalin 222). It can be argued that employers conceive the worker not only as a service provider in charge of specific tasks, but as a kind of *factotum* ready to adapt to the circumstances. In this sense, the worker is not so much evaluated by employers in terms of expertise but rather permanent availability. Another feature of domestic labor is its inherent unpredictability. The worker may experience a relatively uneventful day or has to continue for extra hours to undertake unexpected chores. This tendency is particularly evident in full-time co-resident workers, who are expected to fully adapt to the (often capricious) needs of the employers in order to maintain good relationship with the household. The following extract from the focus group clearly shows the ambivalence at the root of this dynamic of exploitation:

Darya: sì, perché a volte ti dicono: “Ti pago lo stipendio, tu lavori qui... Ah, magari pulisci di là, pulisci di qua”, sai, a volte c’è anche quella cosa, che dicono: “Va bene, tu mi prendi come badante”, io parlo dei casi, diciamo, quelli seri che devi magari seguire il tuo genitore, non mi puoi dire: “Magari vai anche a casa mia a pulire qualcosa”.

Olena: oppure ti chiedono di stirare.

Darya: sì! Oppure dicono: “Tanto mia madre va a letto, se tu non sai cosa fare ti porto da stirare la roba mia”.

Olena: capita anche a me.

Darya: sì, capita eccome!

Olena: approfittano e allora cominciano a chiederti di più.

Interviewer: In quei casi si riesce magari a stabilire dei limiti?

Olena: sì, ma se vuoi stare, diciamo, tranquilla a lavorare... Puoi cominciare in contrasto e allora cominci a litigare con i figli; se non ti metti d'accordo poi hai dei problemi a lavorare. Meglio così, stai zitta e lavori, fai cosa puoi.

Darya: poi sai, noi siamo sempre abituate a lavorare, quindi se uno dice...

Olena: se si approfittano troppo, sì.

Darya: se uno dice: "Guarda, mi fai questo favore? Mi potresti fare questo favore?" "Va bene, non c'è problema", va bene, te lo faccio una volta però non è che tu devi prendere così come abitudine: "Ah, va bene, se hai fatto una volta allora seconda volta pure devi..." non lo so, ci sono, sai, momenti, però una magari sta zitta perché dice: "Ah, sto bene qui, non voglio perdere il lavoro", va bene se mi porta questa a stirare faccio lo stesso, va bene.

Maryna: no, va bene ma prima ti chiedono di stirare, poi ti dicono: "Vai a pulire in garage", poi dopo: "Vai a pulire in giardino", e sempre di più!

Darya: eh sì, dicono: "Ah, con mamma sto io, tu va a pulire di qua, vai a pulire di là..." Oh, scusa, io badante o tu badante? Io sono badante, devo stare qui. "Ah, ma tanto che cosa vuoi fare? Non fai niente, stai così...". Ma che tu mi devi sempre vedere sfinita, morta?

Darya: e poi succede che magari i figli, beati e tranquilli, vanno alla cena, vanno al ristorante, vanno a dormire, e quella che magari faceva il favore non dorme di notte perché chissà com'è, succede: a volte dormono, a volte non dormono, ti chiamano nel cuore della notte.²¹

²¹ Darya: Yes, sometimes they say, "I pay your wage, you work here ... Ah, perhaps you could clean here, you could clean there," you know, sometimes it also happens that, like ... all right, you hire me as a care worker – I mean when you work with severe cases, like looking after her parents – you can't ask, "Maybe you could also clean my house."

Olena: Sometimes they ask you to iron.

Darya: Yes! Or they say, "When my mother is going to sleep, if you don't know what to do, I can bring you some stuff to iron." [...] That does happen indeed!

Olena: They take advantage and start to ask you to do more.

Interviewer: In these situations, is it possible for you to set some limits?

Olena: Yes, but if you want to be, let's say, comfortable at work ... You can start to oppose them and then you fight with the sons [of the care recipient]; if you don't find an agreement with them, you'll have troubles at work. It's better this way, you keep quiet and work, you do what you can. But in case they take advantage of you too much, then yes, it is.

Darya: Besides, you know, we are used to work, so if somebody says, "Look, could you do me a favor?" That's fine, there is no problem. All right, I do you a favor once, but you shouldn't get used to it, like, "Fine, if you did it once then you have to do it next time too ..." I don't know, there are moments like that, but maybe you keep quiet cause you think, "Ah, I'm fine here, I don't want to lose my job." If she brought me stuff to iron that's fine, I'll do it anyway.

Maryna: No, that's fine but you know, firstly they ask you to iron, later on they say, "Go clean the garage." Eventually, "Go clean the garden." [They ask] more and more [of you]!

This asymmetry of power, which shapes employment relationships, shows that the working conditions are left to the employer’s discretion. In this, we can see a continuation of pre-industrial working relationships. Another central feature of paid domestic work is the coexistence of intimacy and social distance (Colombo and Decimo 254). Working within the private space of the employer enables the domestic to familiarize with very private aspects of the other’s life. Such physical proximity, however, can be deprived of emotional significance if the worker’s subjectivity is reduced to her subordinate role.

The domestic as a servant

In this section, we aim to investigate how social distance is performed in daily interactions and the role of everyday rituals in asserting power relationships. In some cases, the power asymmetry is evident as employers expect a servile behavior from the worker and exercise control in various ways. The domestic may suffer from acts of psychological violence, obsessive supervision, restrictions to food consumption, unsafe housing arrangements, or authoritative control over the worker’s private life. For instance, power can be exercised by manically supervising how the domestic chores are carried out, by limiting the amount of water or electricity available to perform the cleaning tasks, or distrustfully checking the bills when the worker oversees grocery shopping. Many participants stressed the frustration caused by employers’ behavior. Recalling her first professional experiences in Italy, Olena²² recalls that:

Quando ero senza documenti ancora, ho lavorato per tre mesi e mezzo da una signora, a Casalecchio²³, che dal mattino fino alla sera mi rompeva le scatole: “E non hai scaldato acqua così”, “Non hai fatto il tè così”, “Non hai preparato il caffè così”, “E non spazzi bene”. “Insomma, ascolti: ci ho due figli, sono sposata, ho vissuto in famiglia, so fare tutto già! I bambini sono cresciuti, [con] il marito a casa tutto bene, e non sarei capace a fare niente...”. Piangevo tutte le sere, in più sentivo che i nervi già mi scoppiano, allora [sono] andata via.²⁴

As this account shows, migrant workers often tend to be treated not as mature, relational actors, but as subjects that need to be educated in order to adapt to the employer’s lifestyle. The employer’s pervasive control is not limited to the management of professional tasks but also to the employee’s private life. For instance, the worker may

Darya: Oh yes, they say, “Ah, I can stay here with mom, so you can go clean here, go clean there ...” Oh, come on, who is the caretaker? You or me? I am the caretaker, so I shall stay here. [...] They think that we don’t have anything to do ... What is the point? Do you always want to see me exhausted, like dead? [...] And then it happens that the children go to have dinner or go to rest, peaceful and content, and maybe you don’t even sleep at night because, you know, that happens: sometimes [old people] sleep, sometimes they don’t sleep and call you in the middle of the night.

This dialogue is extracted from the transcription of a focus group that took place in Bologna on November 3, 2019.

²² The interview took place on November 3, 2019. Olena is a fifty-eight-year-old Ukrainian woman who currently works as a co-resident caretaker.

²³ Casalecchio di Reno is a small town near Bologna.

²⁴ When I was still undocumented, I worked three months for a lady in Casalecchio, who used to annoy me all day long, “You don’t warm up the water in the right way. You don’t brew tea properly. You don’t make a good coffee. You don’t sweep the floor well.” Look, listen to me: I have two children, I am married, I grew up in a decent family, I know how to do house chores! The children have grown up well, my husband is all right. And [according to her] I was incapable of doing anything right ... I used to cry every night; I felt my nerves breaking. So, I left.

be required to be permanently available to encounter the employer's need and, at the same time, be deprived of the most basic needs, such as a decent place to sleep. Ada²⁵, who currently works part-time and lives with her family in a private flat, sternly recalls the working conditions that she had previously experienced as a live-in maid:

A casa dell'anziana era stressante perché lei fumava a letto, suonava il campanellino, io mi svegliavo e dovevo andare da lei di fretta; poi tante volte tornavo a casa la domenica sera, andavo in cantina a dormire (perché in cantina c'era il mio [alloggio], ha messo un divano letto e questa è la mia stanza, no?) e io guardavo la tv e lei scendeva nella mia stanza e diceva: "Ma tu che ci fai qua? Quando sei arrivata?" un pochino perdeva la memoria, no? Le ho detto: "Mi hai aperto tu!" era un po' pauroso per me, poi io [ero] ragazza, era stressante, dormivo così come un coniglio, quando suonava il campanello subito scattavo, in cantina c'erano le pulci pure! Eh, perché era... Era una stanza, tipo cantina, e lei l'ha fatta per essere tipo una camera. C'era una stanza libera in casa, però quella era la camera degli ospiti.²⁶

These situations occur despite domestic labor regulations explicitly require that co-resident workers' accommodations should be appropriate to ensure the dignity and privacy of the individual. Similarly, the subjugation of the worker may also take place through strict control over food consumption in contrast with labor regulations:

Mangiava più che altro surgelati da Prisco, come si chiama? Veniva a citofonare e portava. Io avevo tanta fame, avevo diciannove anni e mi comprava una rosetta per tutta la giornata. Dicevo alle amiche: "Se vai a fare la spesa, compra qualcosa più di sostanza, perché ho fame!" non potevo mangiare, non potevo cucinare. Se io cucinavo qualcosa che era surgelato diceva: "Ma io ho comprato quella cosa, che fine ha fatto?" poi quando io facevo la pasta mi dicevano le amiche mie: "Mettili un po' più di pasta", ma lei veniva a controllare: "Quanta pasta hai messo?"²⁷

Remarkably, problems related to nutrition are not rare among domestic workers. Among the sixteen biographical narratives that inform this research, nutrition issues within the workplace emerged in five accounts. Some live-in caretakers link the scarcity of food to

²⁵ The interview took place on September 2, 2019. Ada is a forty-nine-year-old Romanian woman who currently work as a part-time domestic. She was previously employed as a full-time co-resident worker.

²⁶ [Being] in that lady's house was stressful because she used to smoke in bed. She rang the bell and I had to wake up and go to her room very quickly. When I came back home on Sunday night, I used to go to the basement to sleep (because my accommodation was the basement, she put a sofa there and that was my room, you know) and watch TV, and she came to my room and said, "What are you doing here? When did you come home?" She had problems with her memory, you know. I told her, "You opened the door!" That was a bit scary – I was just a girl. It was so stressful. I used to sleep like a rabbit: when she rang the bell, I snapped right away. That basement was also full of fleas! That is because that place was a basement and she made it like a room. [...] There was an empty room in the house, but that was the guest room.

²⁷ She mostly ate frozen food bought at Prisco (is that's the right name?) They did home deliveries. I was very hungry. I was nineteen years old, and she bought me just one slice of bread for the entire day. I used to tell my friends, "If you go shopping, please buy something extra for me because I am hungry! I cannot eat, I cannot cook." If I cooked some of those frozen meals, she came to ask me, "I bought that food, where has it gone?" My friends suggested to me to sneakily cook some extra pasta when I was preparing the lunch, but the lady always came to check, "How much pasta are you cooking?"

For the details of the interview, see footnote 25.

employers’ widespread assumption that the worker would easily adapt to the care recipient’s daily habits:

Sì, capisco che tu mi paghi i soldi, che è il mio lavoro, però [serve] anche un po’ di umanità, perché conta anche quello. [I datori di lavoro mi dicevano]: “Sì, tanto lei [la persona anziana assistita] mangia poco, ti bastano dieci euro per spesa”. Sì, lei forse mangia poco ma io non sono malata, sono viva e magari voglio mangiare qualcosa. Io lavoro e magari voglio anche qualcosa anche in più.²⁸

Other restrictions may relate to the consumption of electricity and water for personal use. One worker lamented that in order to carry out personal hygiene she had to warm up water using the kitchen stove because she was not allowed to use the boiler.²⁹ Power may be exercised by not only denying material but also the emotional needs of the worker. The demand for the employee’s permanent availability may lead to consider her family relations an inconvenient distraction from work that can be prevented by denying legitimate days off or forbidding contacts with family members. As Clara³⁰ recalls:

Io non vivevo, io non mangiavo, non dormivo se non sentivo i miei figli. Era tutto di nascosto perché certi datori di lavoro non ti permettono di chiamare la tua famiglia, no. Perché è così, è vietato. Devi lavora’, devi solo lavora’! Inumano, inumano. Però io ci riuscivo di nascosto; io dovevo parlare con i miei figli perché sennò mi affogavo.³¹

People who experience highly hierarchical working relationships often describe their condition with crude language, for example, by labelling themselves as slaves. This is because the employers’ degrading practices seem deliberate and not directed to any aim beyond asserting their complete authority over the worker. The asymmetry of power is presented as something inherently legitimate when the worker is in a precarious condition because of the lack of a residence permit or the urgency to save money. In these situations, employers may convince themselves that hiring the worker means doing her a favor and expect a deferential attitude as a demonstration of the worker’s gratitude. The more the worker is perceived as vulnerable, the harsher are the daily practices of asserting the asymmetry of power. The language used is essential in understanding the extent of social distance between the two actors. Authoritarian relationships are characterized by the unilateral use of formal expressions. The worker adopts courtesy forms to address the employer, who in contrast responds using informal language. In the Italian language, that would mean addressing the interlocutor with the third person ‘lei’ and adopting

²⁸ Yes, I know that you pay my wage, that I work for you, but a bit of humanity [is needed] too. [They would say,] “Yes, my mother doesn’t eat much, so ten euros for shopping is enough.” Yes, maybe she doesn’t eat much but I am not sick, I am alive. So, maybe I want to eat something. I work all day long, so perhaps I want something more. I clean, I iron, yes, I move around all day long [...] but sometimes they say, “Just get a pack of salad, a pack of pasta, and you both will be fine for many weeks.” That’s not possible!

For the interview details, see footnote 6.

²⁹ The interview took place on September 3, 2019. Sophia is a forty-year-old Eritrean woman, who currently works as a part-time caretaker. She previously worked as a co-resident maid.

³⁰ Clara is a sixty-four-year-old Ecuadorean woman, who works as a live-in caretaker.

³¹ I wouldn’t eat, I wouldn’t sleep if I didn’t talk to my children. That all happened in secret because some employers don’t let you call your family, no. This is how it is. It’s forbidden because you need to work, just work! It’s inhumane, inhumane! Anyway, I managed to do it secretly – I had to speak with my children because I would have drowned myself otherwise.

professional or aristocratic titles like ‘doctor,’³² ‘professor,’³³ ‘marquess,’³⁴ and so on. In this context, the unilateral use of formal language functions as a tool to reinforce the perception of social distance in the working relationship. There are also more subtle ways to assert the employer’s sense of superiority towards the worker. Sophia³⁵, who used to work as a live-in maid, recalls the experience with an old lady who, as an employer, used to spend a large amount of time with her. Nonetheless, she appeared ashamed to be seen with Sophia in public:

Quando stavamo sole e [la datrice di lavoro] deve camminare un po’, allora la tengo un po’ a braccetto mentre camminavamo lungo Via Risorgimento³⁶. Se vedeva qualcuno che conosceva mi diceva di allontanarmi: “Vai via!” e io dovevo camminare molto lontano da lei. La accompagnavo pure ai teatri e cose così, la sera, qualche volta: mi pagava il biglietto però dovevo stare seduta lontano!³⁷

In this situation, social distance is precisely expressed by physical distance, and subjugation takes place through the refusal of a worker’s social recognition.

The domestic as ‘one of the family’

In some other cases, the power inequality is somewhat hidden as the worker is expected to behave as a member of the family. This kind of working relationships is characterized by informal interactions that reflect the will to naturalize the worker’s presence within the household. Intimacy is expressed through the exchange of confidences, favors, and material goods. Interactions are characterized by the reciprocal use of informal language: the worker tends to address the employer by using her first name or by calling her grandma. Conversation between the employer and the worker transcend work-related matters as both actors become involved with the other’s private life. Employers may also directly intervene with the worker’s personal matters, for instance, financing the trip to visit their family or providing the required documentation to apply for family reunification. The result is that the working relationship implies emotional investments from both sides.

Yet, even if the employer and the employee share a genuinely affectionate relationship, their relationship is not necessarily alien from utilitarian considerations. The employer may be particularly keen to build a positive working relationship to make sure that the worker remains in their services long-term. The worker may take advantage of the employer’s protection to achieve specific goals such as renewing the residence permit, receiving paid holidays, and profiting from various other kinds of benefits. Similarly, employers who enhance workers’ regularization may expect greater availability in return (Marchetti 337). Moreover, the relationship may be somewhat ambiguous because the desire for the inclusion of the worker within the family may take the form of total

³² Dottore (male noun) or dottoressa (female noun).

³³ Professore (male noun) or professoressa (female noun).

³⁴ Marchese (male noun) or marchesa (female noun).

³⁵ The interview took place on September 3, 2019. Sophia is a forty-year-old Eritrean woman who currently works as part-time caretaker. She previously worked as co-resident maid.

³⁶ A street in the center of Rome.

³⁷ When we were alone and she [the employer] wished to walk for a while, I would hold her arm, while she walked around Via Risorgimento. If she saw someone she knew, she would tell me to leave, and I had to walk very far away from her. In the evenings, we used to go to the theater and stuff like that. She bought me tickets, but I had to sit far away from her!

assimilation. Intimacy does not necessarily result in equality. Even within this framework, it is common to see displays of obsequiousness on the employee’s part, reproducing the subtle ideal of employment as favor. The deferential way in which Clara³⁸, a co-resident caretaker, talks about the employer reveals that affection can be merged with paternalism and subordination:

Il dottore dopo un anno ha detto: “Mamma, chiedi a Clara se vuole un aumento” [ride], le dico: “Amore!” io stavo là che pulivo la casa e sistemavo lì, lei era nel letto, le dico: “Sì, mi dica”, “Robè chiede se vuole un aumento”, e lei si mette a ridere: “Eccola lì!” me fa così, le dico: “Non lo so, veda lei; se me lo merito me li dà”, “E quanto vorresti?”, pensi, quanto vorresti! Le dico: “Amore, non mi chieda quello! Io non lo so il grado”, “Mille va bene?”, le dico: “Va bene, grazie! La ringrazio tanto, lei è il mio angelo, già l’ho detto, e anche il figlio. Salutalo il dottore, salutamelo!”³⁹

In this dialogue between Clara and the old lady she takes care of, it can be observed how improving the employment conditions is intended as a kind concession from the employer. Another element of ambiguity is that treating the worker as if she was part of the family may lead to the expectation that she will be keen to do extra work anytime necessary. Moreover, the exchange of gifts may lead to equivocation if it is subtly intended as a substitute for regular payments. Working relationships based on intimacy and inclusion imply that negotiating employment agreements may lead to severe conflicts. In a relationship based on trust and intimacy, refusing to fulfill the employer’s requests can be seen as an offence, no matter what the employment agreements stipulate. Relying on formal agreements may appear as a break of mutual trust. This tendency is particularly evident in full-time co-resident workers, who are expected to guarantee full availability, not only in terms of working hours (which are virtually unlimited) but also in terms of emotional resources, as it is somewhat taken for granted that the worker will put in effort to make her presence pleasant to the household. As a result, the working environment is shaped by a complex emotional involvement. The concept of normalization of dependency, which refers to the assimilation of the worker within the household, functions to hide the asymmetry of power between employer and employee and to enhance the exploitation of the worker’s subjectivity (Sòrgoni 83).

The role of migratory regimes

The conditions of vulnerability and dependency of migrant domestic workers are the direct result of national immigration policies and the unregulated nature of the labor market. In Italy, domestic workers are precluded from labor protection policies, so they are more easily exposed to abuse and exploitation. As we have seen, undocumented workers are more inclined to accept unfavorable working conditions to minimize the risk of deportation. Migration laws reinforce the migrants’ constrained agency because the opportunity to obtain and renew the residency permit depend on having regular

³⁸ See footnote 30.

³⁹ After one year, the doctor said, “Mum, ask Clara if she wants a raise [laughing].” I said, “My love!” I was cleaning her room while she was lying in bed. I told her, “Yes, tell me.” “Robe’ asks if you want a raise,” and starts laughing. I say, “I don’t know, it is up to you; if I deserve it, you can give me [a raise].” “How much do you want?” Imagine, she even asked me how much I wanted! So, I said, “My love, don’t ask me, I don’t know.” “Are you okay with a thousand?” I say, “That would be great, thank you so much! Thank you so much, you are my angel and so is your son. Send my greetings to the doctor, please!”

employment and accommodation. In fact, employments affect the person's chances to legally remain in the country and apply for family reunification. This regulation makes migrant workers deeply dependent on their employers, who may take advantage of this dependency by expecting greater flexibility in terms of wages and working hours in exchange for their cooperation. This asymmetry of power is perceived as legitimate when the worker is in a precarious condition due to the lack of a residence permit or the urgency to save money. Employers may take advantage of this dependency by providing the documentation that is required to obtain a residence permit but, in turn, expect greater flexibility in terms of wages and working hours. This aspect reinforces the representation of 'employment as a favor that justifies the worker's subordination.

Conclusions

With an ethnographic investigation on the living experiences of migrant domestic workers, the paper has attempted to understand the role of essentialist representation in producing the occupational concentration of these subject in domestic work and the precarity and subjugation they often experience in the workplace. The discussion began by taking into consideration the structural changes in destination countries, which contributed, to the racialization and commodification of domestic services. Relying on ethnographic pieces of evidence, we tried to trace migrants' motivations to engage with this unfavorable professional sector, aiming to avoid a victimizing representation of these social actors as passively overwhelmed by external forces. We continued the discussion by stressing the way in which essentialist representation of these social actors may affect professional mobility and inform their employers' perceptions and expectations. The various forms of discrimination which may characterize the professional environment have been described according to the subjective narratives of the research participants. We investigated employment relationships where the worker's subjugation is explicit and examined various examples of how power can be performed in everyday interactions. We finally considered how employment configurations ideally characterized by mutual affection and trust may reveal ambivalences and subtly facilitate further exploitation. Lastly, we pointed out the role of migratory policies in producing the dependency of migrant workers, which allows for their exploitation.

To conclude, scholarship on migrant domestic work in Italy and elsewhere in Europe is extensive and heterogeneous, and it tends to take the point of view of migrant laborers as the main analytical perspective. Further studies would profit from extensive ethnographic investigation on the side of native employers. In addition, extending the dissemination of ethnographic research to a nonacademic audience would contribute to raise awareness on the specific struggles of a somewhat hidden migrant population, yet so embedded in the Italian labor market. Such knowledge dissemination would be undoubtedly beneficial to advocate for policy changes regarding greater regulation of this occupational sector and more inclusive migratory policies, which take into consideration the fundamental role of migrant workers for the societal reproduction and wellbeing.

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Part II:
Reaching One
Another
Language as Interface and
Performance

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Looking through the Lens of Language

How Early Muslim Intellectuals Tried to Reach Hidden Truths by Examining the Arabic Language

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Arabic is the Greek of the Semitic world, and it was a fortunate event for the march of science to have found expression in Arabic at that time

Alfred Guillaume, and Sir Thomas Arnold, *The Legacy of Islam*, vi.

Being a Semitic language, Arabic is more than a mere tool of communication. It has an algebraic quality that connects it with fields that generally lie outside the scope of language. Roger Arnaldez and Louis Massignon, for example, hold that Arabic as a Semitic language “resulted in inflecting the knowledge it expressed towards thinking which was an analytical, atomistic, occasionalist and apophthegmatic,” and a newer French study conducted by scholars of the semantic evolution of concepts explains how Semitic languages have a tendency towards abbreviated and abstract formulation—something they call “algebrisant,” algebraizing, in contrast to “Aryan geometrization” (qtd. in Rashed, *Development of Arabic Mathematics* 51). According to these scholars, the linguistic structure of Arabic is responsible for the development of “a science of algebraic constructions.”

This paper focuses on this aspect of flexibility of the Arabic language. It is a historical look into different approaches by which some leading Muslim intellectuals tried to reach the ultimate truth through letters. The idea is that it was the richness and flexibility of the Arabic language that ultimately facilitated the early development of significant scientific theories at the time. For this, we will look into: The Abjad Numerals with some examples on how they were theorized as a tool to find the hidden meaning in speech, specifically by Ibn Sīrīn (653-729) in his work *Tafsīr al-aḥlām* (*Interpretation of Dreams*); the possibility that the linguist al-Farāhīdī (718-786) might have used some algebraic formulas in creating his dictionary *Kitāb al-ʿayn* (*Book of the ʿAyn*), long before the emergence of algebra in the Islamic world; the alchemist Jābir ibn Hayyān (721-813) and his alphabetical/mathematical system, which he claimed would show in every name the essence of the thing it names; and the view of some mystics, including al-Muḥāsibī (781-857), that all Arabic letters originally had the shape of the first one: ʿalif (ا).

The Abjad Numerals (Ḥisāb al-Jummal)

We start our investigation with the earliest example to trace the roots of how the method of engaging with the alphabet as a way to uncover hidden meaning was developed: the Abjad Numerals. Abjad is the ancient retained order of the Arabic alphabet, which is similar to the Aramaic and Hebrew order of letters. This decimal system was widely used

for ordering the Arabic letters and it was always consulted for expressing numbers as letters. According to Abjad, the first letter, 'alif, represents 1, the second letter, bā', represents 2, up to 9. Letters then represent the first nine intervals of 10s and those of the 100s, ending with 1000.

400	ت	60	س	8	ح	1	ا
500	ث	70	ع	9	ظ	2	ب
600	خ	80	ف	10	ي	3	ج
700	ذ	90	ص	20	ك	4	د
800	ض	100	ق	30	ل	5	ه
900	ظ	200	ر	40	م	6	و
1000	غ	300	ش	50	ن	7	ز

Fig. 1: The Abjad Numerals (*Hisāb al-Jummal*).

In this form, they were practiced in Arabia since the pagan era. After the emergence of Islam, the alphabet was rearranged—'alif-bā'-tā'-thā instead of 'alif-bā'-jīm-dāl. This change was introduced in order to facilitate the learning of Arabic for non-Arabs. Nevertheless, the Abjad order continued to be used especially for interpretative purposes (Miqdadi 278). So, for finding the numerical value of letters, the Abjad order is always employed. Similar systems can also be found in other ancient languages like Hebrew, where it is known as "Gematria," and Greek, where it is known as "Isopsephy." Sezgin mentioned that it is still historically unclear whether Arabs have created numbers based on the Greek style by themselves or whether they have borrowed it from the Syriac and Hebrew languages that used similar systems (25). At any rate, it is important to note the correlation between the 28 letters and the numbers from 1 to 1000 (Fig. 1). For instance, when this system is used in languages which have less than 28 letters—like Greek—the alphabet needed to be extended by using obsolete letters like wau (digamma).

This unique attribute of the Arabic language is significant in terms of its impact on the history of science. According to this decimal alphabetic numeral system, every Arabic letter has a special numerical value. So, it was used for mathematical and arithmetical purposes before the adoption of the Hindu-Arabic numeral system. For instance, zn (ظن) was used to refer to number 950, because the numerical value of z (ظ) is 900 while the numerical value of n (ن) is 50—the letters are written right to left according to their numerical value.

Besides using those letters as equivalent to numbers, Arabs after the rise of Islam started to use this encoding system in their poetry to add hidden meaning to their texts. For example, when a poet wanted to refer to a specific date—generally an important occasion—he would insert a date by using a special literary expression, such as tārikh (date). This expression would be an indication that would allow the reader to recognize that there are numbers hidden within the next words. The reader could then decipher the number for an extra level of meaning in the text. For example, a poet writing a poem regarding the rules of the Arabic letters stated at the end of it:

تاريخها بشرى لمن يتقنها

("the date of this poem is a good tiding to the one who masters it"). So, when the reader turns every letter in the words following the term "date" into numbers and combine them they will get the year in which the poem was written. Thus, with the advent of Islam, this system began to be used as an interpretative tool to find hidden meaning in the Qur'ān, the words and actions of the prophet Muhammad as recorded in the Ḥadīth, dreams, as well as names, among other things.

An interesting example of applying this technique, attributed to Ibn ‘Arabī, can be seen in taking the numerical value of the name of Allāh (الله), which is 66, as well as the numerical values of the letters of the names of Adam (ادم) and Eve (حواء), which together equal 66 (Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross* 11-12). This approach was used to prove that the prophet’s following ḥadīth was arithmetically or mathematically correct in assuming that “خَلَقَ اللهُ آدَمَ عَلَى صُورَتِهِ,” “Allāh created Adam in His own image” (Al-Bukhārī, ḥadīth 6227).

الله	ادم حووا
1=ا	1=ا
30=ل	4=د
30=ل	40=م
5=ه	
66	8=ح
	6=و
	6=و
	1=ا
	66

Fig. 2: An illustration of the discussed example of using the Abjad Numerals. On the right side we have the three letters of Adam (ا د م), below them the four letters of Eve (ح و ا و ا), and on the left the four letters of Allāh (ل ل ه ا). The Arabic names for Adam and Eve together and the name of Allāh individually sum up to the numerical value 66.

The impact of this system on the Islamic civilization can also be seen in the two most important symbols to the Ottomans as well as to the modern Turkish people, which are the hilāl (هلال), the crescent moon, as well as the lāle (لاله), the tulip. They are anagrams of the word Allāh (الله) and therefore also have the numerical value 66 (Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions* 422). This gives insight into their importance for the Ottoman people and implies that when the Ottomans looked at the crescent moon or the tulips, they were contemplating the miraculous beauty of Allāh’s creation.

Ibn Sīrīn (653-729) and the Interpretation of Dreams in his *Tafsīr al-aḥlām*
Ibn Sīrīn was the first Muslim intellectual who tried to establish a coherent method to understand dreams and uncover their prophetic content. For that, Ibn Sīrīn interpreted dreams with reference to the cultural context of the dreamer. Hence, he emphasized the importance of knowing the dreamer’s language, culture, idioms, religion, and exposure to poetry, etc. (Al-Akili xxi-xxiii). So, when Ibn Sīrīn related his interpretation of the contents of a dream to the Qur’ān, he didn’t do so merely because the Qur’ān represents the ultimate truth, but because he was sure that the dreamer was exposed to the Qur’ān and consequently the symbols appearing in the dream would be affected by the Qur’ānic language.

Moreover, Ibn Sīrīn’s method of interpretation changed according to the dreamer’s gender, age, character, and many other variables. For instance, a pomegranate seen by a statesman could refer to the city that he ruled, whereas if a pomegranate was seen by a merchant, it would represent his household or his shop, and if it was seen by a scholar, it would represent his books, and so on (Ibn Sīrīn 16). He also often refrained from interpreting dreams. He would interpret only one out of every forty dreams narrated to him (Al-Akili xxiii).

Ibn Sīrīn's work is like a manual for dreamers on how to interpret dreams. It contains entries for the main motif of the dream, ordered alphabetically. Some of the topics also contain anecdotes from Ibn Sīrīn's life as a practical oneirocritic, which maybe have been added later to his book. Ibn Sīrīn occasionally employed the Abjad Numerals to unveil more specific secrets regarding the minuscule details of the dream.

On one occasion, a woman told Ibn Sīrīn that she had dreamed that a sinur (سنور), a cat, had introduced its head into her husband's stomach, had taken something out of it, and eaten it. Ibn Sīrīn's interpretation foretold that a thief would enter her husband's shop that evening and would steal 316 dirhams from his safe. When they later checked the safe, they discovered that what Ibn Sīrīn had mentioned had actually happened. There was a bath attendant in the neighborhood who was caught, confessed to his crime, and returned the money. When asked how he had known all of that, Ibn Sīrīn replied that the cat in the dream represented a thief, the husband's stomach represented his safe, and what was taken out represented the money. As for defining the exact amount of the stolen money, Ibn Sīrīn said that he took it from the name of sinur (سنور), which, according to the Abjad Numerals, equates to 316 (Ibn Sīrīn 307).

The example illustrates the techniques generally used by Ibn Sīrīn in his *Tafsīr al-ahlām*. Firstly, he completely changed the contents of a dream into symbols, which he interpreted allegorically to reach the prophetic meaning behind the dream. Secondly, when he came across something that had surplus of meaning, he analyzed it according to the Abjad Numerals to uncover additional details about the prophetic content of the dream. In the given example, the woman specifically mentioned sinur (سنور), which was used as equivalent to a typical cat name (قطعة، هرة). Yet, it is a near-homonym that also refers to other objects like a specific type of armor when it is read with different vowels, sanur (سنور) (Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo, "س-ن-ر"). This near-homonymity, is based on the رَسْم, rasm, the bare-shape. Rasm is a historical form of the Arabic language without the Arabic diacritics and introduces, due to its lower complexity, a higher number of heteronyms. So, Ibn Sīrīn first dealt with sinur as equivalent to cat name, which in his paradigm is generally a symbol of a thief. Then, in order to reach deeper truths about the dream's meaning, he once again analyzed the same word sanur by its other meaning, a kind of armor. Since this other reading (armor) would be irrelevant to the context of the other symbols, he changed it into numbers.

In a nutshell, numbers-within-letters is a dominant method in Ibn Sīrīn's paradigm. Since Ibn Sīrīn lived before the famous translation movement and the official writing of the oral literature took place in the late 8th century, his adaptation of the Abjad Numerals as a part of his interpretive apparatus is important in historicizing the development of this method in the written form in other mystical and religious fields.

Al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī (718-786) and his dictionary

Al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī is relevant in the context of this paper for many reasons, the most important being that he wrote the first dictionary of the Arabic language, the *Kitāb al-'Ayn*.¹ He asserted that the roots of all Arabic words can be subsumed under four categories (Al-Farāhīdī 35) and he was even able to give the exact number of possible

¹ "The Kitāb al-'Ayn will not only survive al-Khalīl, but also become a model for a very long tradition. In short, every Arabic lexicographer is in a sense a student of al-Khalīl's" (Rashed, Classical Mathematics 157).

words for each category (Al-Suyūfī, vol. 1, 74-75):² 756 two-letter words, 19,656 three-letter words, 491,400 four-letter words, and 11,793,600 five-letter words. Accordingly, the total number of all potential Arabic words is 12,305,412. The method al-Farāhīdī had used to arrive at this conclusion seems to have been *partial permutation* along the $n=28$ letters of the Arabic alphabet and the $2 \leq k \leq 5$ letters of the words in the four specific groups. It, furthermore, exploits an interesting feature of the Arabic language: there is no repetition in the roots of Arabic words. Therefore, a modern-day algebraic representation of one of the possible methods³ used by al-Farāhīdī might look like this:

$$P(n, k) = n \cdot (n - 1) \dots (n - k + 1) = \frac{n!}{(n - k)!}$$

This formula might appear easy and commonplace to us today, but at the time of al-Farāhīdī's *Kitāb al-'Ayn*—it would still take more than 100 years before al-Khwārizmī (780-850) would introduce algebra, the Indian numbers including the zero, and other complex algebraic apparatuses into the Islamic world—it was an outstanding feat of mathematics.

Most of these “words” that al-Farāhīdī's mathematic approach assumed obviously do not exist in Arabic. Nevertheless, by employing this method, he uncovered what might be considered the pattern of the “possible language.” Based on this possible language, he extracted—according to its preceding rules—all the words of the real language and put them in their logical order in his dictionary.

In this sense, it can be assumed that al-Farāhīdī, being a famous mathematician, was forced to discover this algebraic formula during his pursuit of unveiling the possible words of the Arabic language. But this remains a hypothesis since most of the mathematical books which emerged in the Islamic world before al-Khwārizmī's time were unfortunately lost. Yet, whether it was al-Farāhīdī who discovered that formula or whether he borrowed it from one of his contemporaries would not change the result; the Arabic root system facilitated and likewise made it possible for him to employ algebraic tools in the aforementioned interdisciplinary manner. If Arabic had been built differently, if Arabic roots had repeating letters or a variable lengths, this method of *partial permutation* would probably not have been discovered at this point in time, the whole development of algebra might have been stunted.

It is also important to note that this process went in both directions. Just as much as the form of Arabic facilitated algebra, the algebraic inquiry allowed al-Khalīl to ask additional questions about the Arabic language. As Rashed concluded regarding this issue, examining the Arabic from different phonological perspectives “allowed al-Khalīl [al-Farāhīdī] to discover a property of Arabic (and of Semitic languages more generally) that became essential to his lexicographic project. Indeed, he noticed a morphological characteristic of Arabic, that is, the importance of roots in the derivation of its vocabulary and the relatively small number of its roots” (*Classical Mathematics* 156-157).

² Al-Farāhīdī's exact numbers of the Arabic words are not found in his *Kitāb al-'Ayn* but a quotation survived in a book by a later linguist, Ḥamzah al-Aṣḥānī (893 -961). Rashed assumed that the quotation was written in one of al-Farāhīdī's lost mathematic books (*Classical Mathematics* 152).

³ According to Rashed—one of the foremost authorities on this topic—al-Farāhīdī must have used some algebraic formula in creating his dictionary, because it is almost impossible for anybody to arrive at these exact numbers by means of normal calculation. Rashed actually considers multiple possibilities that al-Farāhīdī might have employed to arrive at his numbers (*Classical Mathematics* 150-156).

Jābir ibn Hayyān (721-813) and Alchemy

The flexibility of Arabic letters was also employed in a totally different field, that of alchemy, most notably by Jābir ibn Hayyān. There is no doubt that Jābir had a distinctive approach to language. For him, the underlying alchemical truth could only be reached by means of Arabic. This truth was mystically expressed in the Qur'ān, especially in the *ḥurūf muqatta'āt*, the disconnected letters. It was Pythagoras, who asserted that everything is made of numbers, but according to our knowledge did not fully elaborate on that claim. Jābir, on the other hand, went a step further to argue that everything was made of numbers and that those numbers were hidden behind the names of the things and objects existing in the physical world.

Jābir created a new system by means of which he believed he could uncover every word's essence. That is to say, he believed he was able to discover the quality of the object whose name he was investigating. Jābir held the belief that 28, the number of letters in the Arabic alphabet, was perfect, and that this was no mere coincidence.⁴ He classified the Arabic letters into 4 groups which corresponded with the then prevalent theory of the four elements. This led to 4 groups (hot, cold, dry, wet), each containing 7 letters—two sacred numbers which are very important in the Qur'ān and which Jābir must have seen as another proof of the divine nature of the Arabic language.⁵

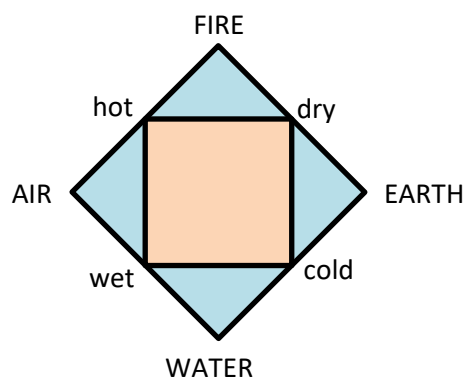


Fig. 3: The four Aristotelian Primary Qualities and the Four Elements.

To achieve this goal, Jābir adopted the Aristotelian theory on the composition of matter, where everything is constructed from the elements earth, water, air, and fire. In short, when the four elementary qualities dryness, coldness, humidity, and heat interact with a substance, they form the qualities dry, wet, cold, and hot. For example, fire is hot and dry, air is hot and wet, water is cold and wet, and earth is cold and dry (qtd. in Principe 37).

⁴ Ikhwān al-Safā' talked in considerable depth about the development of languages and letters and how Arabic arrived at the perfect completed form of evolution with its 28 letters, with this number being one of the perfect numbers (هذا العدد من الأعداد التامة). For look into their ideas about number 28 see: Ikhwān al-Safā', vol. 3, 143-144. Number 28 is also among the most important numbers for Jābir (Anawati 1106-1107).

⁵ Boyer asserts that the mysticism of numbers was not limited to Pythagoreans, for example, the number seven was sacred in many ancient cultures for its connection to the days of the week and the seven planets (47-48). In Mesopotamia, the number 7 was the number of Ishtar. Likewise, the numbers 7 and 4 are very sacred in the Islamic Sufism. We can find examples for that in Jābir in his interpretation of the Qur'ānic verse about Prophet Ibrahim and the four dead birds (Rasa'il 540) or his mentioning of the highly esteemed seven metals and seven planets (Rasa'il 581).

Jābir employed this theory in his study of letters. His *ilm al-mīzān*, science of balance, is based on the idea that the properties of things, including names, can be weighed, as they are made according to specific numerical ratios. His *mīzān al-huruf*, the balance of the letters, shows the mathematical dimension and arrangement as well as homogeneity of things. According to his adaptation, each of the Arabic letters is either hot, cold, dry, or wet. Likewise each letter has a specific weight based on its rank in the word. Even though Jābir used the same alphabetic order of the Abjad, he provided weights for each letter that differ from the Abjad Numerals. Jābir made a chart with the four qualities arranged at the top of four columns and the seven grades of intensity arranged in seven rows, giving a table with the twenty-eight letters. In this manner, he assigned a quality and a degree to each letter. He created three more tables like that with all the weights of letters increasing respectively along the ratio 1:3:5:8. When investigating a word, he used the first chart for the first letter of the word, the second chart for the second letter, and so on (Mahmud 120-135).

وهذا جدول الجوهر المكنون والسر الموزون الموصول في علم الوزن لجابر بن حيان رحمة الله عليه				
This is the table of the hidden essence and the balanced secret in the science of weighing made by Jābir ibn Hayyān, may God have mercy on him.				
رطوبة wet	يبوسة dry	برودة cold	حرارة heat	الطبائع Natures
د	ج	ب	أ	مرتبة Level
ح	ز	و	هـ	درجة Degree
ل	ك	ي	ط	دقيقة Minute
ع	س	ن	م	ثانية Second
ر	ق	ص	ف	ثالثة Third (Grade)
خ	ث	ت	ش	رابعة Fourth (Grade)
غ	ظ	ض	ذ	خامسة Fifth (Grade)

Fig. 4: Jābir's four categories of the Arabic Alphabet each having seven letters (hot, cold, dry, and wet), and their sequence, without their exact weights. Level, Degree, etcetera refer to units of weight, and it can be assumed that their conversion uses a base 60, i.e., 1 Level = 60 Degree. (Image taken from Jābir, *Rasa'il* 200; transl. E.A.K.)

Jābir asserted that everything is made of the four elements which have different qualities, thus, by what he called ميزان (balance) we can know the exact amount of each qualities. For example, if we want to examine the word أسرب (lead) which is written with four letters (أ، س، ر، ب), we put each letter in one of the four charts. The first letter أ is hot in the highest grade among the seven hot letters and its weight is 7 daniqs, that is, one dirham and one daniq. The second letter س which is in the second rank is dry and its weight is one dirham, that is, 6 daniqs. The third letter ر which is in the third rank is wet and its weight is one dirham and a quarter. The last letter ب which is in the fourth rank is cold

and its weight is 9 dirhams and a third. Thus, the total weight of the four letters of the word *أسرب* is 12 dirhams and three-quarters. Accordingly, if we take a mass of lead whose total weight is 12 dirhams and three-quarters it will have the 4 qualities of dryness, coldness, humidity, and heat. And this ratio would be found in every mass of lead (Jābir, *Mukhtarat* 185).⁶

The Qur’ān has openly stated the divine nature of language in the following verse, which has been discussed often by mystics and philologists:

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ قَالُوا سُبْحَانَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ قَالَ يَا آدَمُ أَنْبِئْهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ فَلَمَّا أَنْبَأَهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ لَكُمْ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ الْغَيْبِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَأَعْلَمُ مَا تُبْدُونَ وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْتُمُونَ (القرآن الكريم 2: 31-33).

And He taught Adam all the names (of everything), then He showed them to the angels and said, “Tell Me the names of these if you are truthful.” They [the angels] said: “Glorified are You, we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Verily, it is You, the All-Knower, the All-Wise.” He said: “O Adam! Inform them of their names,” and when he had informed them of their names, He said: “Did I not tell you that I know the *Ghaib* [Unseen] in the heavens and the earth, and I know what you reveal and what you have been concealing?” (*Qur’ān* 2:31-32)⁷

What this quote shows is the unique position that Arabic holds for Islam.⁸ Arabic was given to Adam by Allāh. Allāh’s position as an omniscient and almighty being implies that knowledge given by Allāh should be perfect. In other words, the relationship between the name and the object should not be merely arbitrary, but the name of each thing should instead tell us something about the very nature of the object it belongs to.⁹

According to Jābir, even though language was originally perfect, its words became corrupted (Jābir, *Mukhtarat* 133-145). For instance, some words started being spelled with extra letters. Because of that, Jābir formed a plan to fix some of the Arabic words. Therefore, when applying his system, it is sometimes necessary to only use some of the letters of a word. He believed that by exposing the Arabic words to his *ميزان*, we would be able to establish a direct relation once again between the word and the essence of the object it names (Mahmud 125-127).

In short, according to Jābir:

⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī also used this system, for example, when he analyzed the four letters of the word *يقين* (certainty). Three of these letters have cold qualities, while the one in the middle has a dry quality. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabī’s interpretation goes hand in hand with the prophet’s as well as the Qur’ānic narration about the nature of certainty being cold as well as earthbound in the heart (72-75).

⁷ This and all other translations of the Qur’ān follow the translation by Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilālī and Muhammad Muhsin Khān.

⁸ It makes sense to add that, while a similar episode also occurs in the Bible (Gen. 2.19-20), it is generally believed that the language spoken by Adam in paradise was no language that still exists, that, on the very opposite, this language, the Adamic language, was forever lost after eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the subsequent Fall (Gen. 3). Thus, Christianity does not possess a modern-day language generally considered by the Church to be the language of God or a language containing higher knowledge of God.

⁹ This view on language is contrary to Socrates’, who refused the divine nature of language (Plato, *Cratylus* 411b-c). Furthermore, Socrates asserted that anyone who investigates language will be fooled (436b). And that is strange since most of the ancient myths talked about language and writing as given to humanity by some divine power.

الكتابة دالة على ما في اللفظ المنطوق، واللفظ دال على ما في الفكر، وما في الفكر دال على ماهية الأشياء (محمود 125).

What is written refers to what is spoken, and what is spoken refers to what is in the mind, and similarly what is in the mind refers to what is in the real objects [transl. E.A.K].

المرتبة الأولى في الأربعة First Rank of the Four	مرتبة Level	الحرارة Heat	أ ā	1 dirham and daniq	البرودة Cold	ب b	1 dirham and daniq	الييبوسة Dry	ج z	1 dirham and daniq	الرطوبة Wet	د d	1 dirham and daniq
	درجة Degree (as a measure)		ه h	Half dirham		و w	Half dirham		ز z	Half dirham		ح h	Half dirham
	دقيقة Minute (as a measure)		ط ṭ	2 and half daniqs		ي y	2 and half daniqs		ك k	2 and half daniqs		ل l	2 and half daniqs
	ثانية Second (as a measure)		م m	2 daniqs		ن n	2 daniqs		س s	2 daniqs		ع ʿ	2 daniqs
	ثالثة Third (Grade)		ف f	1 daniq and half		ص ṣ	1 daniq and half		ق q	1 daniq and half		ر r	1 daniq and half
	رابعة Fourth (Grade)		ش sh	1 daniq (1/6 of dirham)		ت t	1 daniq (1/6 of dirham)		ث th	1 daniq (1/6 of dirham)		خ kh	1 daniq (1/6 of dirham)
خامسة Fifth (Grade)	ذ dh	1 carat (half daniq)	ض ḍ	1 carat (half daniq)	ظ ẓ	1 carat (half daniq)	غ gh	1 carat (half daniq)					

Fig. 5: The first of Jābir's four detailed charts for discovering the exact numerical qualities of letters. In this chart, the weight of each letter as well as its quality is provided. (Image taken from Jābir, *Rasa'il* 200; transl. E.A.K.)

Jābir was obsessed with numbers and balance. His obsession of putting each thing in its right place can be seen in the magic square. Here, the 9 base numbers are arranged in a way where each three numbers added up horizontally, vertically or diagonally produce the same value: 15. Jābir believed that numbers established within this square represented the foundation of all matter (Anawati 1107).

Additionally, the numbers 2, 4, 6, 7, and 9 could be added up to 28—the number of letters in the Arabic alphabet—leaving the numbers 1, 3, 5, and 8. These numbers were considered the seed of creation by Jābir and his followers. According to Jābir's method, the numbers were associated with the four elements: 1=fire, 3=earth, 5=water, and 8=air (or the natures of hot, cold, wet, and dry). Thus, the perfection seen in the Magic Square encouraged him to aim at completing his big project of finding that hidden order and balance whether in numbers, letters, chemical entities, bodies, etc.¹⁰ Succinctly, everything was originally created based on a divine precision and if everything were to be put back in its right place, the relation between the object and its essence would be manifested. This also reminds us of the Arabic understanding of wisdom, where the word

¹⁰ For instance, Jābir said if a woman, having problem in delivering her child, wrote these numbers in that order on two pieces of fabric and put it underneath her, she will easily give birth (*Rasa'il* 191). Jābir often talked about the idea of balance to arrive at the matter's divine and eternal state (*Rasa'il* 188-189).

حكيم, wiseman, refers to the person who put his every action, word, and behavior in its own strict right place and that is how his speech becomes divine.

4	9	2
3	5	7
8	1	6

Fig. 6: Magic Square. As can be seen, the sum of the numbers when combined from all directions produce the same value. The numbers marked in yellow add up to 28—the number of letters in the Arabic alphabet—leaving the numbers 1, 3, 5, and 8—the ratio of increase for the weight of the letters, according to Jābir’s theory.

An Overview of Number Mysticism among the Sufis

There is no doubt that Muslim mystics, from a relative early time on, tried to understand the hidden meaning of the Qur’ān, especially in the parts where Allāh, at the beginning of specific chapters swears by specific letters as miracles. For instance, we have the following verse at the very beginning of the second surah:

الم ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ (2: 1-2)

Alif-Lām-Mīm. This is the Book, whereof there is no doubt, a guidance to those who are *Al-Muttaqūn* [the pious believers] (2:1-2)

Interesting for us is that this chapter starts with the letters “Alif-Lām-Mīm.” This is an example of what is known as *ḥurūf muqatta‘āt* (حُرُوف مُقَطَّعَات), disconnected/mysterious/disjointed/isolated letters. They are combinations of one to five Arabic letters appearing at the beginnings of 29 out of the 114 chapters of the Qur’ān right after the Islamic phrase *Bismillāh*, in the name of Allāh. The letters are also known as *fawātiḥ* (فَوَاتِح), openers, as they form the opening verse of their chapters.

There are many speculations regarding the meaning behind these specific letters. Some are connected to the numerical value of those letters,¹¹ others to their shape, or to totally different aspects. But the most generally accepted opinion among Muslims is that only Allāh and the prophet know the real secret behind those letters.¹²

¹¹ According to one story, when some people came to the prophet to inquire about his prophecy, he recited “Alif(ا)- Lām(ل)- Mīm(م)” and, after their immediate calculation of the numbers behind these letters, they said that it is hard for them to embrace a religion that would last for 71 years, whereupon the Prophet smiled. This story along with many various interpretations of these mystical letters can be found in: Al-Baydawi 27.

¹² By removing the repeated letters (leaving only one of each of the 14 initials) and rearranging them, the following sentence can be created: نص حكيم قاطع له سر. It can be translated to: “A wise and conclusive text has a secret.” This would be consistent with the Qur’ān since the idea of keeping the divine a secret between the mystic and Allāh has a repeatedly emphasized importance among Muslim Sufis. Accordingly, the inner meanings of these letters could be secrets between Allāh and the prophet Mohammed.

On a related topic, Sufis' various approaches towards the Arabic letters are ingenious. Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (781-857) was a mystic, founder of the Baghdad School of Islamic philosophy, and the author of the first book about an imaginary visit to heaven and hell, *Kitāb al-tawahhum* (*Book of Imagination*). Al-Muḥāsibī introduced an interesting theory about the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, 'alif (ا). He said that:

When God created the letters he incited them to obey. All letters were in the shape [‘*alā ṣūrat*] of *alif*, but only the *alif* kept its form and image after which it has been created (qtd. in Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions* 417).

The roots of this notion can be traced to the Qur’ān, where it is said that:

تُسَبِّحُ لَهُ السَّمَاوَاتُ السَّبْعُ وَالْأَرْضُ وَمَنْ فِيهِنَّ وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ وَلَكِنْ لَا تَفْقَهُونَ تَسْبِيحَهُمْ
(44:17)

The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein, glorify Him and there is not a thing but glorifies His praise. But you understand not their glorification (17:44).

Thus, al-Muḥāsibī, being a Sufi, believed that everything in the universe was worshipping and praising Allāh, but most things, including the alphabet, did so in a language that we don't understand. And in order to understand this significant idea—which tells us a lot about the importance of the monotheistic aspect of God in Islam—we have to take a closer look at the Arabic letters.

According to al-Muḥāsibī's theory, the letter 'alif (ا) was the first Arabic letter to be created. 'Alif, being the nearest to Allāh—even being its initial—remained praying to Allāh standing. This phrasing already expresses how the Arabic alphabet is thought of as imitating the movement of the Islamic prayer. Hence, some letters are bowing, some are prostrating, others are sitting, etc.¹³ In this sense, all the Arabic letters originally had the shape of 'alif (ا) before they changed in prayer, that is to say, 'alif (ا) is the basic material of all Arabic letters.¹⁴

In essence, “*alif* was the divine letter” (Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions* 417). Later, the famous Persian Sufi and poet Farīd ud-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (1146-1221) mentioned that since the numerical value of 'alif is one, not only letters have their basic shape in the 'alif but also all numbers. That is how the different things came to existence from the divine unity (Schimmel, *Mystical Dimension* 417-418). Not to forget that those letters were used as equivalent to numbers before the Indian numbers were adopted. If we put these views in a bigger context, we can say that even the geometrical shapes have their source in the shape of 'alif, which is basically a line.

The view stands in an interesting relation to the Neo-Pythagorean group Ikhwān al-Safā', who also believed that the number one holds a monotheistic importance. In their opinion, if we removed the number one, all numbers would disappear, whereas, if we

¹³ Just because letters have prostrated and bowed, does not necessarily mean that they are fully obedient. For example, according to the 10th-century thinker Muhammad al-Niffārī, “all letters are sick except 'Alif, can't you see that all letters have inclined except the 'alif? To incline is to be sick, therefore never incline” (244). Whereas Rūmī used a more poetic description when he mentioned that 'Alif is like Allāh and like the mystic who had reached annihilation, it has no qualities (Schimmel, *Triumphal Sun* 163).

¹⁴ While 'alif (ا) has divine nature, bā' (ب) is considered the letter of creation, and that is why it is the first letter to prostrate to Allāh, as it is the letter with which the Qur’ān starts. Yet, based on Guénon's understanding of the Islamic science of letters, “Allāh created the world not by the alif, which is the first of the letters, but by the ba, which is the second” (Insights Into Islamic Esoterism 24). A similar idea is also expressed by al-Jīlī in his *Kitāb al-Kahf Wa-al-Raqīm*.

eliminate all the numbers the one would still remain (vol. 1, 57). So, the implication is that if we were to remove this divine shape (ل), the whole world of mathematical philosophy would collapse. That is to say, some steps in the process of reasoning will become incoherent.¹⁵ In this regard, the divine shape of 'alif, which is the source of all the shapes, is what upholds all of existence.

This unceasing act expresses an important concept in Islamic theology: continuous creation. The idea of continuous creation was developed to replace the Greek philosophical concept of the eternity of the world. The Greek concept was originally introduced to solve a contradiction in the idea that the world was created, which stemmed from the fact if God had always existed but only later decided to create the world, this would imply a change in the essence of God. However, as Socrates mentions in Plato's *Republic*, since God is the most perfect being, any change in him would make him less perfect, so, the creation of the world would have meant the destruction of God's perfection (bk II, section 381a-c). Therefore, they concluded that the world must be as eternal as God.

For Muslim philosophers, however, to say that the world is eternal contradicts the Qur'an, which clearly states that the world was created (10:3). Furthermore, this idea touches the important monotheistic aspect of Allāh. If the world had existed eternally, that would mean that Allāh would have shared His eternity with other beings. This idea is often challenged by Muslim philosophers and theologians, who built their philosophy based on the notion that Allāh had existed entirely alone. And that He is Ahad, the unique one, and consequently nothing can be put near to His glorious singular existence, whether it be time, space, hyle, humans, etc. (Al-Ghazali 53-79). Thus, not only did Allāh create the world, but He is creating as well as sustaining it constantly. As Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (874-936) explained, the world is sustained through Allāh's direct intervention, "[i]n each and every instant, God has to choose to create every single attribute 'from scratch.' Things possess no stability or continuity in themselves" (qtd. in Adamson, vol. 2, 108). Thus, for Muslims, the world is in a constant state of (re)creation by Allāh.

Unlike Aristotle's Unmoved Mover being "separate from sensible things," and who, after creating the world, went to contemplate the knowledge of himself and left the world to its own dynamic (bk XII, part 7), in Islamic theology, Allāh is within the world, and He is everywhere all the time. With this philosophical background, it can be said that 'alif is the proof of Allāh's intervention in the physical world, because it is the basic unit on which the actions of Allāh are based:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُمَسِّكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ أَنْ تَزُولَا وَلَئِنْ زَالَتَا إِنْ أَمْسَكَهُمَا مِنْ أَحَدٍ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ (القرآن الكريم 41:35).

Verily, *Allāh grasps the heavens and the earth*, lest they should move away from their places and if they were to move away from their places, there is no one that could grasp them after Him (*Qur'an* 35:41).

Without this continuous creation, everything would metaphorically collapse, the way the alphabetical, numerical, and other worlds would collapse if we took away the shape of 'alif (ل).

¹⁵ There are various intellectuals hold the mathematical-philosophical view that mathematics is the basic fundamental explanatory feature of the world. Among those intellectuals are Pythagoras, Plato, Jābir, and Ikhwān al-Safā'.

Arabic Letters after their creation (as imagined by Al-Muḥāsibī)	Arabic Letters before their dots were added in the Islamic Age	Arabic Letters after their dots were added in the Islamic Age
ا ا ا ا	ب ب ب ا	ث ت ب ا
ا ا ا ا	د ح ح ح	د خ ح ج
ا ا ا ا	س ر ر د	س ز ر ذ
ا ا ا ا	ط ص ص س	ط ض ص ش
ا ا ا ا	ق ع ع ط	ف غ ع ظ
ا ا ا ا	م ل ك و	م ل ك ق
ا ا ا ا	ی و ه ب	ي و ه ن

Fig. 7: These three charts help us comprehend Al-Muḥāsibī's notion about 'alif as the source of the alphabet. If we look at the second chart, which demonstrates the shape of letters before the dots were added, it becomes clearer that the basic shape of each letter is an 'alif bowing down or bending over in various ways. This was even clearer with the original shape of these letters, which was more rudimentary and likewise closer to the shape of 'alif.

Conclusion

The examples engaged with in this paper illustrate the wide arrange of approaches with which foundational Islamic intellectuals have approached the Arabic language as well as the Qur'ān across disciplines but with the shared goal of uncovering a hidden truth behind the letters. The Abjad Numerals and the algebraic flexibility as well as seemingly mathematical rigor they introduced into Arabic played an axiomatic role to these approaches. This deep-rooted, exegetic interest in language led to a multitude of approaches from Ibn Sīrīn and his interpretation of dreams, over Al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī and his algebraically motivated dictionary *Kitab al-'Ayn* all the way to Jābir ibn Hayyān and his alchemical interpretation of the letters and the essence of what they name as well as Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī and his metaphysical interpretation of the origin of the letter 'alif. This has facilitated the creation of different theories which likewise shifted the attention from a simple approach to letters to a more scientific one. It can be concluded that the structure as well as the cultural and religious importance of the Arabic language played a significant role in the development of these various branches of knowledge at that time in the Arabic world.

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Should You Let Your Computer Do The Reading?

A Discussion on the Benefits of Distant Reading for Literary Studies, with a Quantitative Study on the Development of Stage Directions in European Drama¹

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La pendule ne sonne aucune fois.
Eugène Ionesco, *La Cantatrice chauve*

The question “should you let your computer do the reading?” is—not just in Literary Studies—sure to raise a few eyebrows and spark some lively, but not always productive debate. Between the two problematic extremes in this debate that either sacralize literature or fetishize technology, I would like to show, as somberly as possible, what a computerized approach in the form of Distant Reading might offer for Literary Studies. Instead of approaching this problem theoretically and only discussing the ifs and coulds of the different approaches hypothetically—as seems to be done in this discourse a lot—I would like to build my case and my discussion around my own quantitative study² on the development of stage directions in European—really only a fraction of Dutch, English, French, and German—drama.³ For this, I want to start out by extensively acknowledging the Close Reading research on this topic, show its findings, illustrate its shortcomings, and introduce my own Distant Reading study against this backdrop. The problems and shortcomings of the computerized researched will also be discussed in

¹ My thanks go to a few people who helped immensely with this research. There are the amazing folks at *EMED* and the *Folger Shakespeare Library* who were a great help with establishing some of my database. I am further indebted to the people from the *WWP* for access to their databases, a genuine interest in my work, and the resulting encouragement. Thanks go to Els Pelekman and Rico de Bruin for helping me with my, at that time, almost nonexistent Flemish and Dutch and thereby allowing me to work with the *Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse Letteren*. And most of all, my thanks go to Vittorio Codogno, who, from my very first programming attempts, was there to support me, guide me, and never let me give up. I owe a lot to him and his expertise in programming.

² At the time of the conference, this was my first venture into the Digital Humanities and programming. The study itself was devised and conducted within my first 6 months of learning how to program. That means that obvious shortcomings are to be expected. However, it also helps to illustrate at what an early stage of programming computerized methods can already be fruitfully applied to aid Literary Studies.

³ There is another more detailed study with a smaller corpus and a somewhat different focus that was conducted by Peer Trilecke, Christopher Kittel, Nils Reiter, Daria Maximova, and Frank Fischer under the name “Opening the Stage—A Quantitative Look at Stage Directions in German Drama.” Since it uses token analysis and tries to analyze more aspects of the text and the stage directions, it can function as a helpful look into what else is possible with a computerized approach. Another shorter study by Dasha Maximova, Frank Fischer, and Daniil Skorinkin on “A Quantitative Study of Stage Directions in Russian Drama” also exists with a smaller corpus and a more detailed approach.

detail. Ultimately, I will try to show that Close and Distant Reading—both with their strengths and weaknesses—should be reconciled in a mixed method approach.

What is Close and what is Distant about Reading?

There is a train of thought introduced in 1958 by the still very early scholar of Comparative Literature René Wellek, that Comparative Literature—and to some extent Literary Studies as a whole—has always been in a crisis. The exact extent of this crisis has changed, but it has never actually been resolved. The history of Literary Studies, in fact, is generally (re-)constructed as the history of different crises surpassed by an ever-new method and supposed paradigm shift.⁴ This is not the place to attempt an overview of these approaches, but I think it is important to understand that the methodological push of Distant Reading, in essence, isn't something external to the discipline, but fits in line with the attempts of Literary Studies to find its object, method, and, above all, purpose.

Distant Reading—as the name clearly indicates—was designed and coined in opposition to the already established method of Close Reading. In its strictest sense, Close Reading as a conscious method arose in the West in the 1920s and, institutionalized through the school of New Criticism, became the dominant method in Literary Studies. In a broader sense, however, the basic principles of Close Reading have always been the core of virtually all concepts of Literary Studies, easily dating back as far as their conception in the earliest forms of hermeneutics and exegesis in Classical Antiquity.⁵ They still remain that way even today in the new poststructuralist approaches that were responsible for New Criticism's downfall in the first place. The basic idea is to focus on certain texts that are assumed to be important and thus deserve an extra level of attention and a thorough interpretation that assumes that virtually all parts of the text contain meaning. The text becomes a complex network of references both to itself and intertextually to other—ideally canonical—texts. The act of Close Reading is then to discover this network of interrelations, to uncover its hidden truth, or to offer an especially original reading of the interpretative possibilities the text offers. Or as Rita Felski put it in her discussion of Critique in Anglo-American Literary Studies:

Matters of import are shrouded, obscured, and inaccessible to the casual observer; they can only be mined via an exacting technique of close reading. What a text seems to be saying is either distracting or deceptive; its subterfuges must be resisted, its superficiality proclaimed. The task of interpretation is to burrow beneath these layers of concealment to arrive at a

⁴ As this paper will surely show, I have my own list of issues with Literary Studies and would like to push the discipline past its problems which, in my opinion, largely spring from virtually none of the paradigm shifts of the 20th century addressing the historical-theoretical misconceptions of the discipline—if anything, they have been augmenting them. I have grown to call this problem the *Fetish of Exegesis*. The basic idea of the Fetish of Exegesis—and I can really only give a rough sketch here—is that Literary Studies, instead of overcoming the Romanticist and pre-Romanticist notions of the genius author and the sacred text, have adopted these concepts in their approach to theory. There is an obsession with obscure, obtuse, and non-self-explanatory theoretical writing that is itself in need of a thorough interpretation, of a discourse that discusses the right exegesis of these authors more than it tries to critically reflect and apply their theories—if they even produce a clear theoretical structure rigorous enough to be applied. This ultimately sacrifices progress for the tacit assumption that those authors and their texts, like the geniuses and sacred texts of earlier times, possess some access to higher knowledge that merits an extensive practice of exegesis.

⁵ Herrnstein Smith phrases it like this: “The practice [of Close Readings] has multiple ancestors, including classical rhetorical analysis, biblical exegesis, and legal interpretation, and it also has some cousins, such as iconology and psychoanalysis” (58).

more fundamental grasp of how things are. Real meaning is at odds with apparent meaning and must be painstakingly exhumed by the critic (56).

Distant Reading sets out to do the very opposite. Franco Moretti established the term in his 2000 article “Conjectures on World Literature.” What Moretti criticizes is that Close Reading is stuck with the detailed analysis of singular texts while being unable to generate the basis of knowledge required to make broader statements about bigger developments in literature and the history of literature. As Moretti puts it:

Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more. If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something. We always pay a price for theoretical knowledge: reality is infinitely rich; concepts are abstract, are poor. But it’s precisely this ‘poverty’ that makes it possible to handle them, and therefore to know. This is why less is actually more (“Conjectures” 48-49).

If we want to talk about the development of the postcolonial novel, of feminist literature, sonnets, magical realism, or free verses, reading only a handful of—most likely canonical—texts won’t cut it. We need bigger corpora, need to consider more and more varied texts. According to Moretti’s earliest idea, literary history performed through Distant Reading “[...] will become ‘second hand’: a patchwork of other people’s research, *without a single direct textual reading*” (“Conjectures” 48). This idea didn’t stick around for too long and instead merged partially with the budding Digital Humanities. Distant Reading wasn’t performed anymore by reading secondary texts—texts about other texts—but by writing programs that would allow a computer to analyze larger datasets, corpora that greatly exceeded the tens of, maybe hundreds of texts that could otherwise be analyzed in a study employing Close Reading. By going beyond the canon that Close Reading necessarily presupposes⁶ Distant Reading is trying to tap into the easily 99.5% of literature that hasn’t been canonized, what Margaret Cohen so strikingly calls *the Big Unread*:⁷

But as soon as scholars start to work on the archive of forgotten literature, techniques of close reading come up short. Problems range from the simple lack of time critics have to read closely all the texts that make up the great unread to the failure of some of these texts to signify in fashions that are meaningful using the criteria of close, formal analysis (*Sentimental Education* 59).

⁶ Matthew Wilkens explains Close Reading’s need for a canon—or at least multiple canons—as follows: “The answer to the question ‘Why do we still have canons?’ is as simple to articulate as it is apparently difficult to solve. We don’t read any faster than we ever did, even as the quantity of text produced grows larger by the year. If we need to read books in order to extract information from them and if we need to have read things in common in order to talk about them, we’re going to spend most of our time dealing with a relatively small set of texts. The composition of that set will change over time, but it will never get any bigger. This is a canon” (249-250). It is, as the classic criticism of Distant Reading goes, a matter of scope capped by a time-intensive method.

⁷ To be frank, Cohen, in fact, does not think that Distant Reading can address this problem fully. We are going to address her criticism towards the end of this paper.

The Close Reading View on Stage Directions

Generally, and up until recently when stage directions were once again—for the first time—(re-)discovered by Literary Studies,⁸ they have been brutally marginalized in the broader field of drama studies. As Eric Rasmussen puts it so ironically, “Stage directions, quite literally, don’t count” (226)—addressing both the fact that stage directions don’t possess line numbers in a play and that they, aside from very scant studies, have mostly been overlooked by drama and theater research alike.⁹ In German, they are part of an aptly named distinction that was introduced by the Polish phenomenologist and literary scholar Roman Ingarden in his 1931 work *Das literarische Kunstwerk*. Stage directions are part of the *Nebentext*, the *side text* or *secondary text*, that, like a catch-all of disparate categories, contains every textual occurrence that isn’t part of the *Haupttext*, the *main text*, the text actually spoken by the characters (Ingarden 220-222). It is thus put aside literally and figuratively together with paratextual information like titles and prefaces, metatextual information like commentary, and purely structural information like act and scene divisions. The added irony to Rasmussen’s statement isn’t just that stage directions obviously do count, that they obviously perform an important function in the communication both between drama and performance and between drama and reader, but that they are countable, not just a qualitative category, but also a quantitative one. To understand this, we will quickly examine the kinds of statements generally made about stage directions.

Before I start with my proper quantitative study, I want to compile the already ample quantitative claims made within the study of stage directions in the established Close Reading part of Literary Studies. I have tried my best to compile all the quantitative research I could find on this matter. Since the number of monographs published on stage directions isn’t overly extensive and only a fraction of them is chiefly concerned with their historical dimension—most of my findings come from encyclopedia articles, small chapters in bigger publications, or tiny asides and footnotes. Assembling this overview was tedious and I am sure that I have missed a large portion of remarks made on stage directions hidden in larger—at times barely related—publications and overlooked other publications entirely.

Not only my research was tedious but so is the resulting chapter. It is, however, important in the larger scale of this paper as it serves a double purpose: on the one hand, it will extensively illustrate that quantitative questions are already established in Literary Studies¹⁰—even when chiefly qualitative approaches and methods are employed—and

⁸ This is excluding the constant interest of researchers in the stage directions of Elizabethan theater, especially of Shakespeare. Also noteworthy is the 2018 claim by Tonger-Erk and Werber that Anke Detken’s study *Im Nebenraum des Textes* (2009) is the only monograph about *Nebentext*—and I am sure this also includes stage directions proper—that has been published in German studies in the last 50 years (Tonger-Erk and Werber 418).

⁹ For an overview regarding this last point see: Detken 1-4. Also interesting is Lily Tonger-Erk and Niels Werber’s diagnosis: “Eine mögliche Nebentext-Forschung steht insofern zwischen den Stühlen: einer Literaturwissenschaft, welche die doppelte Medialität der Gattung Drama als Text und als Aufführung nicht selten zum Anlass nimmt, einen der Pole zu übersehen, und einer Theaterwissenschaft, die in der Bemühung um institutionelle Eigenständigkeit die Loslösung des Theaters vom dramatischen Text betreibt.” (413; “A possible institutionalized study of the side text [*Nebentext*] thus falls between two cracks: of Literary Studies, who usually takes the double mediality of the genre of drama—as text and as performance—as a reason to ignore one of the two poles, and of Theater Studies, who, in an effort to establish institutional autonomy, pursues the uncoupling of theater from the dramatic text. [transl. J.J.]”)

¹⁰ This goes especially for the research on stage directions where grand quantitative-historical claims are almost commonplace. Erika Sterz already noted this in 1963, and immediately added that she finds these

on the other hand, it will allow us to compare our own findings with the already established research and thus judge both the validity and the contribution of my research while pointing out shortcomings of previous attempts.

The general consensus on Classical Antiquity is that stage directions did not really exist yet. Since the stage was considered the space for rhetoric and spoken words, everything had to be coded in dialogue and therefore all actions and descriptions appeared only (Asmuth 51; Grillo Torres 57; Schonlau 79) or almost exclusively (Cuomo 828-829; Pfister 37; Platz-Waury 694) in the form of implicit stage directions. Marx and Pavis claim something similar for the Greek drama when they say that stage directions just did not exist (Marx 145; Pavis 172). Instead, the choir performed the classic functions of the stage direction—like informing about time, place, and occurrences (Thillmann 17). Cuomo, at least, mentions specific reoccurring concepts like *παρεπιγραφαί*—literally, “that which is written next to/to the side of it”—and the phrasing *χοροῦ (μέλος)*—“song of the choir”—that appear in multiple manuscripts (828-829).

Since most of the dramatic texts of the Early Middle Ages haven’t been archived and haven’t survived, there doesn’t seem to be any research—or even speculation—on the stage directions in plays of this time.

Plays of the High and Late Middle Ages had an abundance of stage directions. This goes especially for religious theater and morality plays—Marx specifically mentions “frühe geistliche Spiele des Mittelalters” [“early religious medieval drama”]—where the amount of stage directions oftentimes exceeded the amount of primary text (145) or, at least, took up a notable amount of space (Westphal 14). This is due to different aspects, partly the detailed descriptions of the stage (Mauermann 10-12), the captions that summarize the content of the following speech (16), their origin in the performance heavy liturgy (Marx 145), and their formatting that resembled a prose text (Weimar 252)—which, in part, shows the epic influence of the Bible (Mauermann 16, 24-25) and the lack of a typographic dispositive for drama at this time. Mauermann goes as far as to call many of them “überflüssig oder doch entbehrlich” [“redundant or at least expandable”] (27). The situation seems to be different for English morality plays and interludes. Lauf mentions that information about stage, costumes, and gestures in stage directions are scarce—with the latter only changing in early Elizabethan drama—(3, 43, 58). Other dramatic forms of that time—the profane plays—however, barely have any stage directions (Mauermann 34-38; Thillmann 20-22; seems to be implied by Stuart 3)¹¹ and Nöcker claims this explicitly for the *Fastnachtsspiele* [Shrovetide Plays] (469-470), while

kinds of questions regarding the “development”—she demonstratively puts it in quotation—meaningless, since she claims “[e]s gibt *keine* Entwicklung der szenischen Bemerkungen als solche, für sich!” (49; “There is *no* development of the stage direction as such, by itself! [transl. J.J.]”). Her criticism mostly aims at people who assume that there is a quasi-evolutionary development of stage directions towards better if not an ideal concept of the stage direction—and I share her criticism of that. However, she argues this, among other things, by saying: “Die gleiche Vielfältigkeit in der Anwendung der szenischen Bemerkungen hat es immer schon gegeben, und sie ist geblieben” (55; “The same richness in the use of stage directions has always existed, and still does so today [transl. J.J.]”). I not only think that the same richness in stage directions has not always existed—and I am sure the qualitative research more than adequately proves that—but even if that were the case, the specific uses of stage directions aren’t the only important aspect to their development. There is obviously also a more strictly quantitative dimension to that development that can show their relevance within the overall structure of the dramatic text.

¹¹ In a text-critical analysis employing quantitative linguistics, Gerd Simon additionally shows that many of the stage directions of that time—and most likely to be attributed to the same author—have such a high level of inconsistency that they probably did not originate from the author and in that time but were added by different scribes later (27-35). More on this topic later.

also acknowledging that the “späte Nürnberger Spieltradition des 15. Jahrhunderts” [“late Nuremberg tradition of the 15th century”] contained precise information regarding pantomime, movement, voice, costume, and props (470; Mauermann 53).

Renaissance drama obviously picks up central ideas from Classic Antiquity. There is another clear lack of stage directions (Mauermann 71, 90) since the stage again is considered a space for rhetoric and the spoken word and thus for implicit stage directions (Asmuth 51; Thillmann 23-27). Mauermann contrasts this to the contemporary 16th century German movement of the *Volkstheater*, which developed out of the *Fastnachtsspiele*, and contains a larger—and larger than the *Fastnachtsspiele*—amount of stage directions, which he sees as a growing appreciation for the theatrical (53). This especially includes descriptions of gestures and movements (64). He also acknowledges divergent authors who, despite the prevalence of a humanist drama tradition, use a greater amount of stage directions—most notably Albrecht von Eyb (Mauermann 98-101).

In Elizabethan and Jacobean Theater—generally considered part of the Renaissance—there is an absolute minimum of stage directions (Cuddon 680). The *Nebentext* at best contains references to prior performances. Both of those aspects result from the fact that drama wasn’t considered an important and autonomous textual form that deserved the same editorial efforts and attention as other literary forms (Fielitz 40; Pfister 35). Lauf, however, mentions an increase in stage directions in morality plays and interludes in early Elizabethan drama compared to earlier times (3). At the same, there is a budding understanding of drama as its own literary genre that isn’t just aimed at a stage but also at readers—e.g., Ben Jonson’s *Works* (Marx 145; Pfister 35-36).

Baroque, due to its closeness to Renaissance and, in turn, to Classical Antiquity, again possesses a fairly low stage direction count (Asmuth 51) and instead primarily employs implicit stage directions (51; Platz-Waury 694). According to Asmuth it, at most, contains descriptions of the stage (51), according to Jeßing, at most little footnotes with descriptions of actions like kneeling down or standing up (31). Grillo Torres attests the same lack of stage directions for the Spanish Baroque drama (58). The situation seems different for the German Baroque. Baum directly contests Asmuth’s claim and refers to the notable stage direction usage of different important authors of that time—among them Jakob Ayryer, Johann Christian Hallmann, and Andreas Gryphius (Baum 447-449). Westphal also mentions Gryphius specifically and additionally points to the Jesuit drama of the second half of the 17th century, which valued an optical and acoustic spectacle over the dominance of the spoken text and thus used a higher amount of stage directions (14-15). Marx seems to imply a medium amount of stage directions, which, together with long and commentated titles, play into the textual emblematic of the drama (145). Mauermann¹² also mentions ample usage to the point where he seems able to conclude that they become scarcer when the situation is serious (210).

French Classicism has a high infrequency in stage directions with them generally being shunned as external to the text—partially since they were absent in Classical Antiquity—but with some central authors—most notably Corneille—defending their use to keep the spoken text clean (Pavis 172). Kolesch also seems to hint at a lower amount of stage directions when she says that

Auch die Dramen der französischen Klassik lassen die sinnlich-dynamische Aktion häufig nur als rhetorisch verarbeitete und distanzierte Erzählung zu,

¹² Mauermann confusingly calls this *Renaissancedrama* (209-228).

indem die Protagonisten in langen Monologen eine N[arration] vergangener Geschehnisse bieten (228).

The plays of French Classicism also oftentimes only allow the sensual-dynamic actions to appear in rhetorized and distant accounts in which the protagonists use long monologues to give a narrative of past occurrences. [transl. J.J.].

Researchers who hold that stage directions have been scarce to non-existent prior usually attest a significant shift around this time or shortly after. Platz-Waury claims an increase in stage directions in the 17th century (694), which Aston and Savona see explained in an aesthetic development towards an illusionistic theater, which started with the late Renaissance (93). Pavis holds that stage directions did not really appear until the beginning of the 18th century (172), Grillo Torres remarks that they become more abundant at that time (58), and Detken points to the 18th century for a development from implicit to more explicit stage directions (11, 290). Asmuth and Fielitz claim that stage directions in mundane or profane drama were sparse prior to 1750 (Asmuth 51; Fielitz 40). Westphal, finally, points towards the *Sturm und Drang*—roughly the 1770s and 1780s—as the time when stage directions were seized properly for the first time and acknowledged as literary devices in German drama (15).

The general consensus on the Enlightenment—especially the second half of the 18th century—seems to be that stage directions are firmly established by now. Asmuth argues that the reason for this is an overcoming of the panlogism of earlier ages—most notably Classical Antiquity, Renaissance, and Baroque—in a new understanding of sentimentalism and human emotion as something beyond the realm of rhetoric and language (52). Thillmann mentions a shift towards realism, a growing acknowledgment of movements, expressions, and actions as an alternative to mere dialogues, and an understanding of theater as a multifaceted construct with verbal and non-verbal semiotic components (28). At the same time, there is a growing understanding of drama as an autonomous literary form that isn't tied to a performance. This is due to and encouraged by a development of imaginary theater—the act of reading becomes an imaginative act of staging—(Marx 145) as well as a growing literacy in the population that creates a wider potential audience for printed plays (Detken 392-393).

In Romanticism—especially around 1800—imaginary theater becomes even more established as a practice within the social practice of literature (Marx 145). Stage directions grow to become an autonomous commentary, which, in its literariness, at times almost replaces the actual scene (145). According to Andrea Heinz, this can be seen as a general development that starts with the 18th century and culminates in Naturalism (108).

In Naturalism, there is a growing amount of stage directions, especially descriptions, that often times aim at sketching a specific social milieu and can turn into small or longer prose passages (Asmuth 53; Grillo Torres 59; Marx 145; Pavis 172; Thillmann 35-36; Weimar 252), which aren't necessarily stageable (Westphal 15-16). This is coupled with elaborate directions and instructions that fill even greater gaps between the play and the staging in an (imaginary) theater (Cuddon 680; Platz-Waury 694).

The 20th century sees two opposite developments. On the one hand, stage directions keep growing, sometimes even surpassing the amount of main text in a drama—as is the

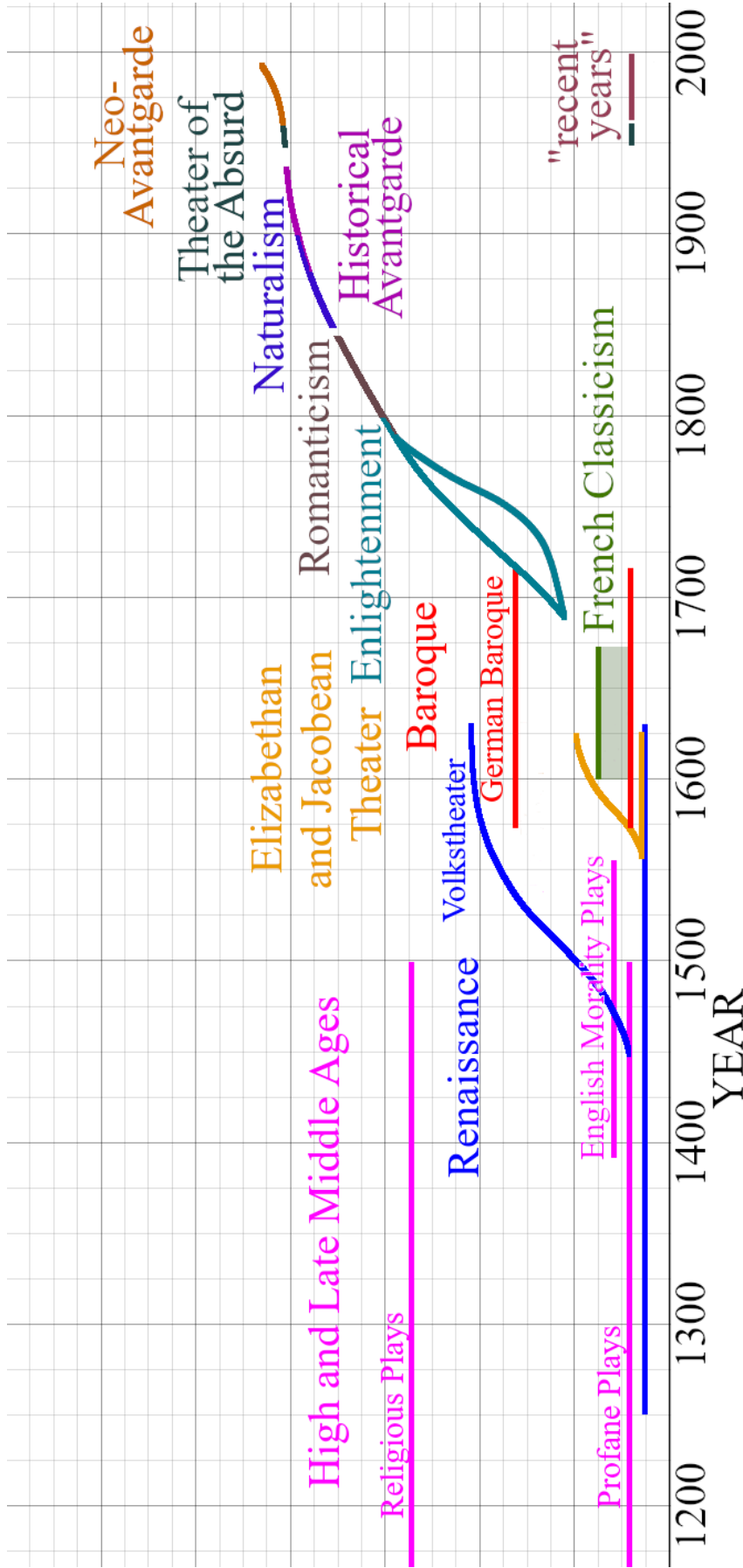


Figure 1: Graphical approximation of the qualitative research. Lines indicate average ratio of stage directions to text length and correspond to the labels of their color. Anything prior to 1100 has been omitted since the Classical Antiquity had no stage directions, we have no predictions about the Early Middle Ages, and no changes were predicted for the Late Middle Ages. The ambiguity of French Classicism is indicated by an opaque area. The possible developments of stage directions during the Enlightenment are indicated by their two most extreme predictions.

case with some plays by, e.g., Shaw, Handke, and Beckett (Asmuth 53; Pavis 172). Grillo Torres speaks of a very liberal use of stage directions, among that one of total excess—as he demonstrates with Beckett’s *Happy Days* (60-61). Stage directions often time intentionally exceed the means of performance (Baumbach and Nünning 51-52). On the other hand, researchers like Cuddon and Fielitz point at specific developments that lean towards a reduction of stage directions (Cuddon 680; Fielitz 40).

Looking at the 20th century in more detail, we see that the Historical Avantgarde employs a de-literalization and re-theatralization of theater, which led to a re-evaluation of the role of the text in theater. Drama—especially spoken text—isn’t the center of a theater production anymore, which led to stage directions growing to account for the growing performativity of theater (Marx 145; Thillmann 42; Westphal 16-17). For the Theater of the Absurd, Fielitz claims that barely any stage directions exist (40). Thillmann, however, holds the opposite belief and considers stage directions—not just because of their quantity—an important characteristic of the Theater of the Absurd (4).¹³ The Neo-Avantgarde—especially since 1960—builds on developments fostered by the Historical Avantgarde. There is a strong development towards post-dramatic theater, the distinction between primary and secondary text becomes muddled, and stage directions don’t dictate a production anymore but become textual code that a production has to interpret (Marx 146). Cuddon claims that “in recent years”—recent from the perspective of 1991¹⁴—“[s]ome dramatists have gone to the other extreme and pared directions to an austere simplicity” (680).

I have tried my best to sketch these statements as a “graph” in Figure 1. There are two central problems in translating the fuzzier qualitative research into graphs, whose level of precision comes down to literally having to draw a line somewhere. Firstly, dating the periods is complicated since most authors don’t generally add specific start and end dates to their claims about periods and, even in the best of cases, those start and end points can vary widely between countries, languages, disciplines, and specific researchers—for a detailed summary of how I approximated my dates, please see Appendix II. Secondly, since many authors give their assessment of a time without directly contrasting it with a prior or later time, many of those differences in the frequency of stage directions are extrapolations and interpretation. Do Renaissance plays have less stage directions than the profane plays of the High and Late Middle Ages? How about the works of Ben Jonson and likeminded playwrights compared to the German Baroque? Is the increase from the Enlightenment over Romanticism, Naturalism, up to the Avant-garde and Neo-Avantgarde linear or logarithmic? How great is its rate of change? Does it happen homogenously, or does it plateau out within or between periods? The cited research does not answer these questions. So, take this graph as a rough estimate, just one possible visual interpretation capable of capturing the essential information in broad strokes while taking a more creative stance on the details—due to a lack of those details in the research.

Based on the research and further exemplified by Figure 1, the following predictions can be made, and the following points of interest open up. We will expect a noticeable increase sometime around 1700 to 1750—when “exactly” is the question—that will continue at least until the mid-20th century—though the shape of this curve is

¹³ Thillmann’s claim is further backed up by her writing an almost 500-page book of analyzing the stage directions of the Theater of the Absurd.

¹⁴ Seeing how the entry in the third edition from 1991 is identical to the one in the fourth edition from 1999 and the fifth edition from 2013—I couldn’t get access to the first two editions—and that the example used in all of them is Harold Pinter, “recent years” might be relative to the first edition from 1977.

yet unknown. In the 20th century, we should encounter a wider spread between plays with a high amount of stage directions and those who barely contain any. Lastly, the high complexity of the time between the 15th century and the early 18th century will be especially interesting. How did the change from religious plays with a high amount of stage directions to the barren plays of the Renaissance occur? How do developments like the growing autonomy of drama as an autonomous literary form in Elizabethan and Jacobean Theater as well as the *Volkstheater* and the German Baroque play into this time? It is this patchwork character of the qualitative research and Figure 1 that lends its potential to a proper quantitative study.

The Problems of the Close Reading Research

There are some problems with this research. Stage directions do count, but Close Reading doesn't. No approach within Close Reading accounts for counting. So, the question—and the problem I want to address primarily here—really is: Where are those claims coming from? What are those quantitative claims based on? Obviously, nobody here sat down and counted the stage directions. This general question breaks down into smaller ones: Do those claims hold generally or just for a certain corpus of canonical works? Does it hold for all dramatic forms or just specific ones, like three or five act plays, for example? Or, to ask this differently: What here is the underlying assumption of what a drama is—what about pantomimes, opera, puppet theater? Finally, for what countries and languages does this hold? And are there different developments in different languages?

The research as is does not address any of those problems, or, at best, addresses them superficially. It is an absolute black box of claims that are made without any proper or sufficient citation and without explaining how their conclusions were ever reached in the first place. It is a testimony to the literally quantitative—and therefore qualitative—limits of Close Reading.

Regarding the question of what Close Reading bases those claims on, I would like to point out two quotes by previously cited researchers. Firstly, Siegfried Mauermann gives an interesting insight in his 1911 study about the German stage direction that—regardless its age—still seems to express the general idea behind Close Reading research. Commenting on two monographs on Goethe's and Schiller's use of stage directions, he says: “Erst wenn über alle bedeutenden und einflußreichen deutschen Dramatiker derartige Monographien geschrieben sind, wird es möglich sein, eine vollständige Geschichte der deutschen Bühnenanweisung zu geben.” (246; “Only when monographs like these have been written on every important and influential German playwright will we be able to write a complete history of the German stage direction [transl. J.J.]”). The assumption here being that an understanding of the canonical works is necessary and sufficient to sketch out literary history. This might be either because the bulk of non-canonical works will ultimately follow the example of some of the canonical ones or—even worse—since only the canonical works are important to us in our skewed concept of literary history as the history of revolutionary geniuses.

Secondly, I find a phrasing by Constanze Baum telling—the one person who regarding the Baroque opposes Asmuth's statement, using central texts of the time to point out that a large amount of stage directions exists during the Baroque period:

Dieser in sich schlüssigen Argumentation stehen jedoch zahlreiche Textbefunde [...] entgegen, die sehr wohl zeigen, dass Nebentexte im Sinne der von Asmuth gemeinten Bühnenanweisungen in der Frühen Neuzeit in allen Dramenformen zum Einsatz kommen [...] (447).

Contrary to this in-itself coherent line of reasoning [...] there exist numerous texts, which actually show that side text in the sense of Asmuth's stage directions were used in the early modern period throughout all dramatic forms [...] [transl. J.J.].

That means—and is essential to how any deductive reasoning works—that the explanation has primacy over the empirical reality of a circumstance. In this case, the line of reasoning—based both in the history of literature and the history of ideas—is coherent, Asmuth's train of thought immediately appears valid and sound, its truth is backed by the coherence to a larger body of knowledge. At this point, the actual historical reality of the stage directions as we can research them in the actual preserved texts of that time becomes an afterthought. What matters is that the reasoning is coherent, not that it actually applies to reality. As an additional problem, the lack of any real corpus those statements are supposed to be based on makes refuting them even harder. While it should be easy to find more counterexamples along the line of Baum's, their use in arguing against the status quo is questionable. They can be dismissed easily as isolated cases, individual occurrences that ultimately only play a minor role in the grand narrative literary history.

Large parts of literary history seem to come down to this paradoxical interplay. On the one hand, a certain number of texts is considered exemplary for a time and is analyzed and treated with the highest level of respect and care. On the other hand, those insights are used together with historical research and—more often than not—the authors' self-descriptions to make general statements about most if not all of the literature of a period or movement, while engaging with even a fraction of the texts, at best—a “reading” that is even more distant than Distant Reading.

Some Preliminary Considerations on the Quantitative Study

Before we finally tackle my own research, I want to introduce three additional issues.

There is a general problem when approaching stage directions. Their fairly low status in the structure of the play—remember Ingarden's *Nebentext*—has sometimes led to them being considered a merely functional text that could be omitted, changed or expanded on as a specific editor or scribe saw fit. A notable example of this practice can be found in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hardin L. Aasand impressively showed how the two expressions “Pah” and “Puh” that can be found during the famous skull scene in the second quarto edition from 1604 and the first folio edition from 1623 respectively¹⁵ have been interpreted as implicit stage directions and were at different times complemented by an explicit stage direction by different editors: “Following from the direction-less quarto ‘Pah’ and folio ‘Puh,’ we have three distinct kinetic supplements for Hamlet's ‘Pah/Puh’: *smelling to the skull; throwing down the skull; puts down the skull*” (220).

Cases of such editorial liberties with stage directions exist and can obviously skew a historical study like ours. There is no way to deny this as a general margin of error within our study. The question, however, is how numerous those examples are and if they could introduce a significant uncertainty into this study. This is ultimately hard to tell, but at least according to Alan C. Dessen, a scholar who has been engaged with the study of stage directions since the 1980s, at least for early modern English drama—a period that would be especially prone to this kind of scrutiny—this seems like a negligible factor. He claims “[r]ecent scholarship [...] has demonstrated that a high percentage of stage

¹⁵ “3388 *Ham.* And smelt thus? (Q1) /And smelt so pah.(Q2) /And smelt so? Puh.(F1)” (qtd. in Aasand 219).

directions are authorial in origin” (514). We will thus proceed with the study as planned, while keeping in mind that the editions we use can have an influence—even if most likely negligible—on our results and that a general margin of error has to be assumed.

The next problem is somewhat related to the first and concerns dating the plays. In analyzing the dramas historically, we will have to assign each of them a specific year. This can be a very hard task. Some plays are performed long before they are ever properly published in print. They might have been written even earlier, or went through vastly different editions. With others, all these dates might be uncertain. How are we to proceed with that? Most of the databases already provide appropriate dates—as far as I can judge this, those usually refer to the publication date. When no such date was provided, I opted for the earliest year given—be this the year it was written, performed, or published. For Shakespeare’s plays, I chose the dates suggested by the second edition of *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. For a handful of even older works, I had to use an approximated date—as is the case with the anonymously published play *La farce nouvelle fort joyeuse du Pont aux asgnes*. This obviously is another level of uncertainty. Again, I believe that this affects so few plays and to such a marginal degree—probably not more than 5-10 years on average—that this can also be neglected in the grand scheme of this study. At the same time, keeping this in mind as a general margin of error that comes with any largescale historical study is important.

The last issue is a purely technical and definitory one. There have been different attempts to classify stage directions further. Generally, this has been done by referring to their function. Elaine Aston and George Savona, for example, distinguish between 57 different functions in six broad categories (82-90). Even if such an in-depth taxonomy is useful—which it will be only very rarely—trying to recreate something like that with the means of Distant Reading would be complicated, if at all possible. Important to me in this context—and way more useful—is the more general distinction—understood and used as such by Anke Detken—between stage directions that are aimed at an actor and those that aren’t (20-21).¹⁶ The downside of this distinction and its underlying naming scheme, however, is that it ties drama to an im- or explicit practice of performance or staging instead of regarding it primarily as an autonomous literary text.¹⁷ Because of that, I want to introduce my own distinction based on Detken’s and want to—purely formalistically—distinguish between stage directions that are tied to a speaker and those that aren’t. For the purpose of this paper, I will call the first ones *actions* and the second ones *descriptions*¹⁸ since those are the functions they generally perform—denote a speaker’s

¹⁶ Detken uses the terms “schauspielerbezogene und nicht-schauspielerbezogene Regiebemerkungen” (20).

¹⁷ It is odd to me that Detken introduces those terms since she strongly argues to have drama be seen, read, and analyzed as an autonomous textual form and not just as something dependent on theater or staging.

¹⁸ Baumbach and Nünning’s terminology contains a form of stage direction called “expository stage directions” which is more or less identical to what I want to call *descriptions* (52).

Erfter Akt.

(Kleiner, blaugetünchter, flacher Küchenraum mit niedriger Decke; ein Fenster links; eine rohgezimmerte Thür in's Freie führend rechts; eine Thür mit ausgehobenem Flügel mitten in der Hinterwand. —

```
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<div n="1">
- <head>
  <hi rendition="#b">Erfter Akt.</hi>
</head>
<lb/>
- <stage>
  (Kleiner, blaugetünchter, flacher Küchenraum mit niedriger Decke; ein
  <lb/>
  Fenster links; eine rohgezimmerte Thür in's Freie führend rechts;
  <lb/>
  eine Thür mit ausgehobenem Flügel mitten in der Hinterwand. —
- <sp who="#WOLFF">
  - <speaker>
    <hi rendition="#g">Frau Wolff</hi>
  </speaker>
  <stage>(unfichtbar, von außen).</stage>
- <p>
  Adelheid!
  <lb/>
  Adelheid!
  </p>
- <stage>
  (Stille; dann wird von der andern Seite an's Fenster
  <lb/>
  gepocht).
  </stage>
  <p>Wirfchte gleich uffmachen!</p>
</sp>
```

Frau Wolff (*unfichtbar, von außen*). Adelheid!
Adelheid! (*Stille; dann wird von der andern Seite an's Fenster gepocht*). Wirfchte gleich uffmachen!

Figure 2: Hauptmann's *Biberpelz* as Text and XML (Hauptmann, Gerhart: *Der Biberpelz*. Berlin, 1893. In: *Deutsches Textarchiv*, <https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/hauptmann_biberpelz_1893>, page 6. Accessed Jan 6, 2022.) Purple highlighting was added to indicate a "description," yellow to indicate an "action."

action or describe a scene or an occurrence happening on stage that is not explicitly tied to a speaker. Obviously, it is no coincidence that this distinction aligns with the TEI¹⁹ markup of the plays. As you can see in Figure 2, the beginning of Gerhard Hauptmann's *Der Biberpelz*, actions are stage direction nodes <stage> that are child nodes of speech nodes <sp> (marked by me in yellow), while descriptions are all other stage direction nodes (marked by me in purple).

As the example also intentionally illustrates, this purely formalistic distinction in actions and descriptions does not always meet their interpretative function. "Actions" do not always containing information about a speaker's actions, and "description" are sometimes tied directly to specific speaker. The line "(Stille; dann wird von der andern Seite an's Fenster gepocht)" ["(Silence; then there is a knock coming from the other side of the window)"], for example, is not one of Frau Wolff's actions but a description of something happening on stage that does not originate from her. The distinction overall should still have a fairly high accuracy and is important for a more nuanced look at stage directions. After all, it makes a difference if the stage directions are largely used to set a stage—appearing as descriptions mostly at the start of a scene and rarely throughout it—or if they affect the characters during the scene, dictating their movements, pauses, manner of speech, and thus aim at more dynamic and performative scenes.

The Development of Stage Directions in European Drama

The corpus I used was assembled using seven different databases. Alphabetically, those are: the Deutsches Textarchiv (DTA), the Digital Anthology of Early Modern English Drama (EMED), the Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse Letteren (DBNL), Folger

¹⁹ The Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) is a consortium that was founded in 1987 with the goal of establishing certain standards and guidelines in the encoding of machine-readable texts, specifically in the humanities, social sciences, and in linguistics. Since the labels used for node names in XML are technically arbitrary, following the TEI guidelines guarantees that TEI XML are machine-readable ideally regardless of the encoder. The fact that <stage> denominates a stage direction, for example, is not an XML inherent feature but a convention introduced by the TEI.

Shakespeare, the German part of TextGrid Repository, Théâtre Classique, and the Women Writers Project (WWP). It contains 2844 dramas in four languages, coming down to 228 Dutch, 430 English, 1519 French, and 667 German plays.²⁰ They roughly span a period of 800 years, but since there are only seven works prior to 1500 and only one after 1939, it is effectively only 440 years (see Figure 3).

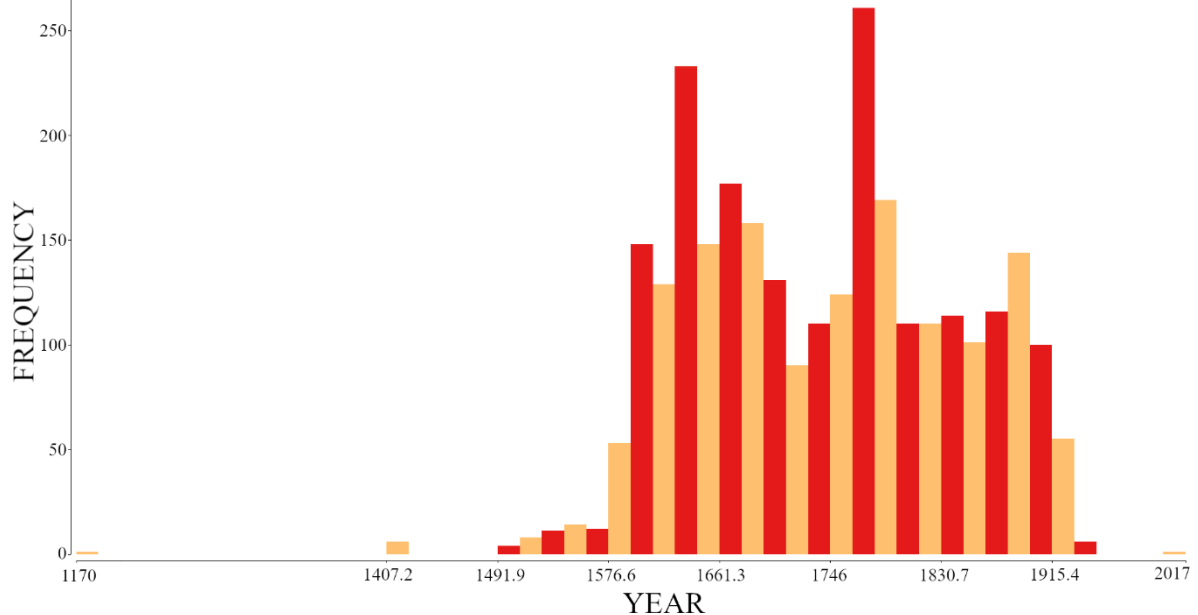


Figure 3 Historical distribution of all plays by year.

The corpus is distributed differently through the separate languages. English is confined mostly between 1580 and 1650, with an almost negligible number of plays trickling in until the 1820s. Dutch is also reasonably old, properly starting around 1600, but reaches up until 1847, while, however, on average providing less than one play per year and therefore, on its own, not being able to provide any proper information. French only really picks up around 1630, but then has a fairly homogenous distribution with more than 1149 plays until 1800 alone and another 331 until 1930. German has 111 plays between 1510 and 1740 and its actual bulk with 556 plays between 1740 and the end of the corpus in 1931. Because of that significantly inconsistent historical distribution of plays in the different languages, comparisons between languages won't be possible or at least won't yield any reliable results. Because of that I will primarily focus on looking at my corpus as a whole to approximate something like "European" drama, a construction that I—due to the relative closeness of the development of Dutch, English, French, and German literature—feel confident in applying as an auxiliary solution at this point in time.²¹ However, I want to make clear that this is at best a temporary solution to investigate a very general trend in European drama. A more detailed study with a better corpus and more sophisticated methods will be necessary to investigate the rich and complex history of stage directions for different literatures comparatively.

²⁰ There is a not insignificant overlap between the corpus of Deutsches Textarchiv and the one of TextGrid Repository. Because of the higher quality of the Deutsches Textarchiv XML, I have opted to employ those whenever a play was in both databases.

²¹ My thanks go to Lily Carr, who, in the discussion following my presentation, pointed out that this somewhat unorthodox approach should be clearly marked and discussed as such.

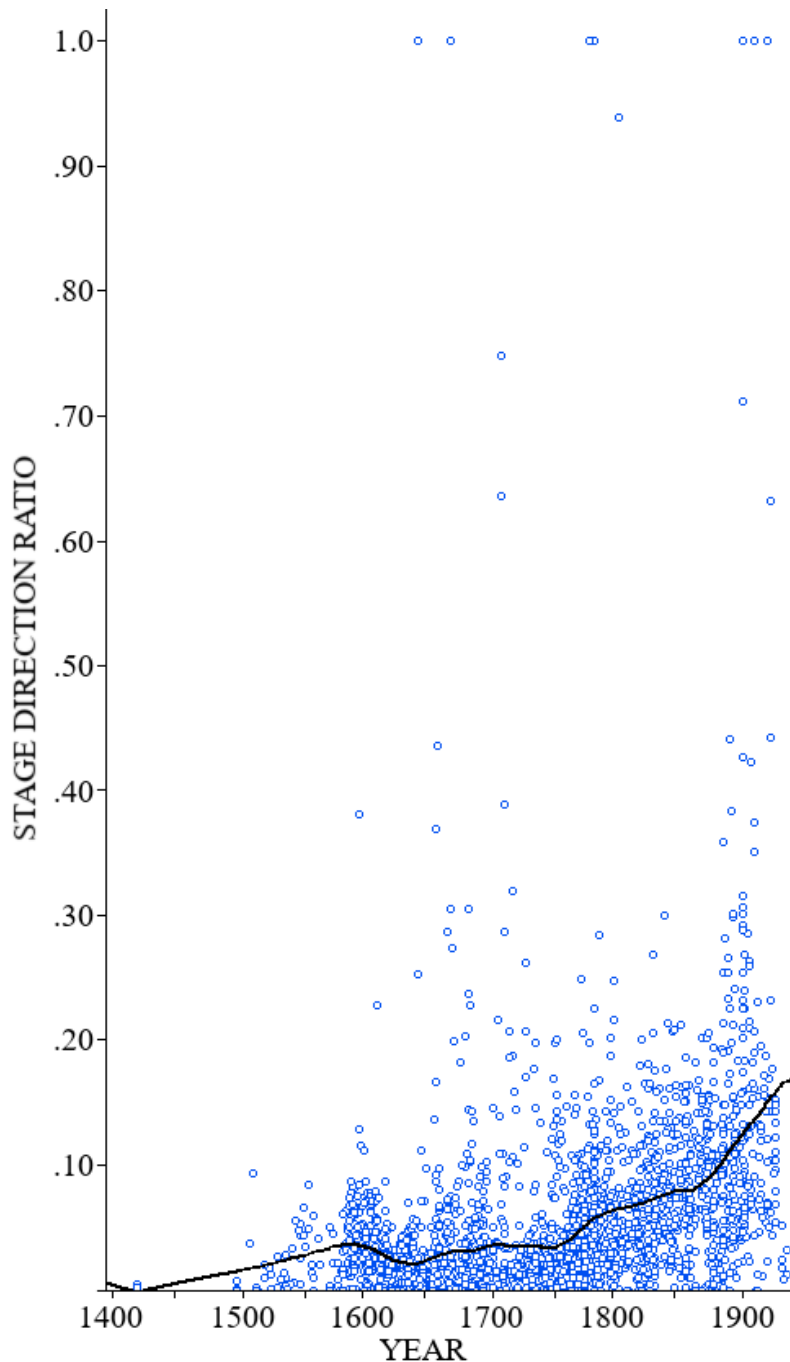


Figure 4: Ratio of stage directions to text length by year with a LOWESS regression.

Figure 4 shows a scatterplot of the ratio of stage directions to the text length plotted by year. Additionally, it has a LOWESS function fitted to it that should give us a fairly confident estimate of the medium development of the stage direction ratio between 1580 and 1930. Going through the LOWESS graph chronologically, there are some interesting findings worth pointing out.²²

The fairly high amount of stage directions around 1580-1600 that then decreases to the lowest level in the whole scope of this study in around 1640 is surprising. The corpus at this point is almost exclusively English and nothing in the research would suggest that this was the case in the English literature at that time. In fact, the consensus is the very opposite. Scholarly research on Elizabethan and

Jacobean Theater seems to indicate that stage directions only really developed in that time. Our research, however, seems to indicate that they already existed prior and, for some reason, started to decline at this time.

The renewed increase in stage directions starting around 1640 is interesting. According to the qualitative research, one would assume that this has its origin in the German part of the corpus, since *Volkstheater* and German Baroque were identified as containing a higher amount of stage directions. Despite the assumption that, aside from

²² Appendix I contains the same graph broken up by languages.

some authors, French Classicism is mostly devoid of stage directions, it is the prevalence of the French part of the corpus here that is responsible for this increase. It seems to plateau at around 1700 and even decrease a little before it finally picks up again around 1750.

The stark increase around 1750 was fairly confidently—although with predictions reaching from 1700 to 1770—predicted by the qualitative research. It exists almost identically for German and French (see Appendix I)—the only two languages we have reliable data for in this time. There seems to be a common consent that this development keeps going through Romanticism, Naturalism, and into the Avantgarde and Neo-Avantgarde. We can now see that this did not take place linearly but in multiple steps. Those periods roughly seem to be 1750-1800, 1800-1860—with a slight plateauing in 1850-1860—and, finally, 1860, around the time of Naturalism, until the end of our reliable corpus. French and German seem to develop differently here. German seems to increase until 1780 and then plateaus or slightly decreases until around 1810 when it again increases until around 1840 and then plateaus again until 1860 when it has the same increase as the whole corpus. French also increases around 1750 with the slope again increasing around 1775 until it peaks around 1800. At this point, the amount of stage directions actually decreases until it slowly picks up again around 1850 and properly around 1870. Therefore, vastly different developments might have taken place here.

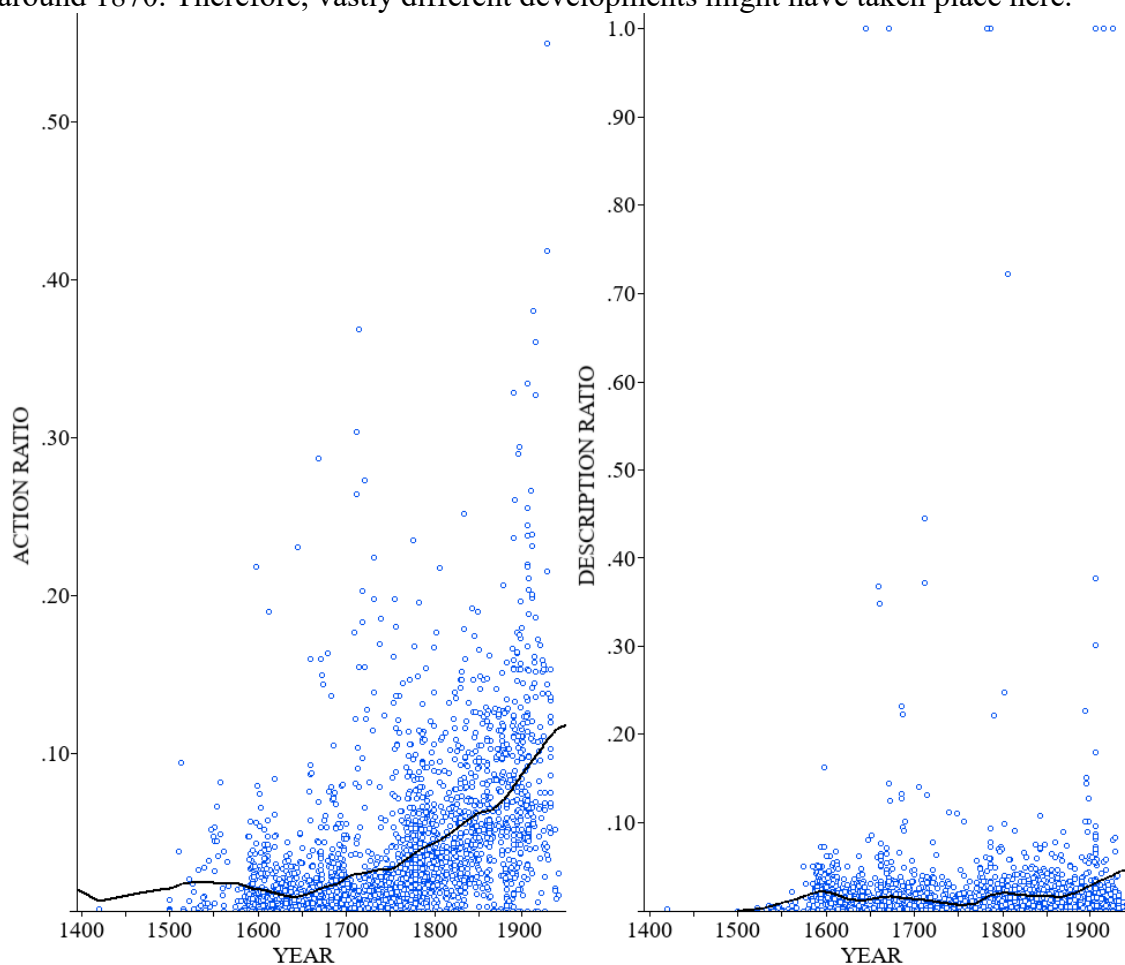


Figure 5: The ratio of actions and descriptions respectively to the total text length by year with a LOWESS regression.

Stage directions seem to fan out more with the 20th century, meaning that there seems less unity between plays in this category. At the same time, it seems as if plays with a low

ratio of stage directions have steadily decreased since 1800 with the majority of plays in our corpus in the 20th century containing more stage directions than plays prior to 1750 had on average.

Comparing what I call actions and descriptions yields some other important insights (Figure 5). Descriptions seem to play a smaller role in plays and do not change much throughout the years. They instead average somewhere at around 1-2.5% of the plays' total length. Although, there is a reasonable number of plays with more than 5% descriptions. Actions, on the other hand, make up the bulk of stage directions. While their lower average is also around 1%, their later averages range between 10 and 12% and for a reasonable number of plays easily over 15% of their total length. Actions, however, have a stricter fall-off. There are plays that are 100% descriptions—specifically pantomimes—while the same is not true for actions. Even having a play that is 50% actions is already an insane rarity.

Conclusion: So, what can your computer do?

I hope the above example has shown that compared to the problems in Close Reading that I have pointed out before, my study—and with it Distant Reading as a whole—presents an alternative that addresses most of these problems sufficiently. Instead of a research black box, we have a transparent corpus of texts that functions as data for my empirical claims. There is no question on what my claims are based because everyone can access the data. Any form of criticism becomes easier too since it can be addressed to my corpus or method. Further, there are mathematical models that can be employed to criticize a study like mine on a statistical and stochastic level. Finally, since the data is available to everyone, everyone is at least theoretically capable of duplicating my study and determining if my conclusions hold.

The most important point, however, is that Distant Reading allows us to bridge the inductive chasm. Realistically, the researchers making those broad quantitative claims before might have read a few hundred plays in total,²³ obviously not engaging thoroughly with the stage directions of all of them—maybe with half of them—and clearly not to the point of counting them—thoroughly or not. I, on the other hand, have the detailed quantitative information of 2844 plays and I am therefore better equipped to make these kinds of broad quantitative claims with less time needed and a higher overall accuracy.

Truth be told, however, there is one central problem that I am also unable to escape and that is the problem of the canon. Encoding a text in a markup language like XML—although the process has been simplified with different programs—takes time and effort. Therefore, the texts currently encoded are virtually exclusively texts that are canonized—or otherwise highly regarded—at least by some groups within Literary Studies. A flaw that hopefully will resolve itself as more and more texts are digitalized.

This admission of the limits of this method is only one of many. There are, of course, real concerns when it comes to Distant Reading, and I would like to address two of them—one of the less obvious ones and the most glaring one—to finish up this paper. For starters, Moretti rightfully claims that “[q]uantitative research provides a type of data

²³ This is obviously a rough estimate. It is rare to find any more or less definitive answer regarding the corpus used in any larger scale study—including the ones, I have quoted earlier. A general idea, however, is given by Erika Sterz, who based her study *Der Theaterwert der szenischen Bemerkungen im deutschen Drama von Kleist bis zur Gegenwart*—spanning roughly 160 years between Kleist's earliest dramas around 1800 to the publication of her study in 1962—on 2060 selected stage directions from 160 plays by 60 different authors (15).

which is ideally independent of interpretations [...] and that is of course also its limit: it provides *data*, not interpretation” (*Graphs* 9). However, as Margaret Cohen (“Narratology” 59) and Maurizio Ascari (5) point out, this shift from interpretation to data in Distant Reading is often only superficial. Distant Reading still uses the approaches, categories, and assumptions introduced by Close Reading both in generating these data and in interpreting them. It isn’t so much asking new questions as it is providing new tools to answer the already proposed ones. I think this very valid criticism can be addressed in different ways. Firstly, if Distant Reading does so and thereby allows additional insight into classical problems of Close Reading, there seems to be little harm in employing this method. However, Distant Reading originally set out to do more than just fill some holes in the corpus of knowledge of Close Reading. It wanted to go beyond it and address the great unread. If Cohen and Ascari’s criticism holds, Distant Reading falls more than short of that original promise. This, however, is not an internal flaw of Distant Reading. The categories used to generate and interpret data obviously can be replaced. Margaret Cohen introduces her own methods of reading²⁴ to move beyond Close Reading and I don’t see why the thereby generated findings couldn’t be used as the boundary conditions for new computerized studies. Not to mention Distant Reading’s own ability to generate and distinguish meaningful categories and patterns, something that researchers can theorize and employ in future studies. Nevertheless, this criticism—and Moretti’s own research—should function as a cautionary tale. There is a real danger in Distant Reading of leaving central questions of theory up to other parts of the discipline and only blindly employing already established categories and terms. A warning that does not only apply to Distant Reading, however.

The central objection from established Literary Studies to Distant Reading, however, comes from the assumption that they are both mutually exclusive methods, undeniably antithetical in their features²⁵, and that one will ultimately replace the other. This problem goes back to a formulation of Moretti, who, in coining the term Distant Reading, calls it “[...] a patchwork of other people’s research, *without a single direct textual reading*” (“Conjectures” 48). Personally, I think this was just rhetorical. The problem with Moretti’s first concept of Distant Reading—reading texts about literature—was that it is already how research always worked. All the authors I have quoted before on the development of stage directions drew their conclusions from other people’s readings more than from their own. They are engaged already with a form of this earliest concept of Distant Reading.²⁶ The only difference is that they are also still reading some of the texts and drawing conclusions from them. Therefore, the extra clause of prohibiting any and all reading of literary texts was—in my opinion—nothing but a trick to escape a certain criticism that his method was nothing but reframing an already institutionalized practice as something original. And as things usually go, it is the most controversial ideas that get remembered. But this rivalry is based on nothing. Close and Distant Reading—and all the other kinds of reading like Surface Reading or Cohen’s many approaches—

²⁴ For Cohen those are: reading for patterns, just reading, just enough reading, the representative example, scaling to the case, different modes of forgetting, the forgotten canon (“Narratology” 59-62)

²⁵ See van de Ven (3, 7), for a brief but telling comparison.

²⁶ I think, however, there is a real danger in this, and ironically, it is fairly similar to Distant Reading’s problem of blindly employing theoretical terms. The obscurity of qualitative Close Reading research in combination with the constant repetition of certain claims whose origin is unclear can easily lead to certain assumptions being considered commonplace while being both false and insanely hard to disprove with the means of Close Reading. Research—to some extent—is replaced by quoting some canonical theorists without properly engaging with the validity of their claims.

are rivals as much as a hammer and a screwdriver are. They are different tools in the toolbox of Literary Studies, different approaches to roughly the same subject, but they come with their own strengths and weaknesses, their own problems. Denying that—on either side of the argument—is stripping Literary Studies of a whole array of powerful tools.²⁷

Luckily, in recent years there has been a growing number of attempts to reconcile Close and Distant Reading. I want to add this paper to the list. My research undeniably started off from Close Reading. It was my involvements with Close Reading that made me aware of this topic in the first place, I have repeatedly compared my own findings with the predictions made by Close Reading—thereby employing an early form of Distant Reading—and the next step of this study will involve me returning to a form of Close Reading. I don't expect that a program can be written that can create something akin to Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson's *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama 1580-1642*²⁸ or really any study that tries to explain the use, function, form, or development of stage directions. The interpretative power required to make sense of my findings cannot come from a computer. It will mean closely analyzing outliers or texts in certain central positions, engaging with classic historical research—history proper, literary history, and theater history—and trying to find explanations that will, hopefully, shed light on some less explored areas of literary history and correct some of the more blanket assumptions on stage directions currently held by Literary Studies. It is an interlocking of Close and Distant Reading. No single method could achieve that. And keeping up the current rivalry would mean missing out on research such as mine,²⁹ on entirely new avenues of inquiry.

I would like to employ Matthew Lee Jockers' phrasing in this context:

Like it or not, today's literary-historical scholar can no longer risk being just a close reader: the sheer quantity of available data makes the traditional practice of close reading untenable as an exhaustive or definitive method of evidence gathering. Something important will inevitably be missed. The same argument, however, may be leveled against the macroscale; from thirty thousand feet, something important will inevitably be missed. The two scales of analysis, therefore, should and need to coexist. [...] Today's student of literature must be adept at reading and gathering evidence from individual texts and equally adept at accessing and mining digital-text repositories (9).

There is no *one* method to approach the vastness of Literary Studies. What we need instead are mixed methods, approaches employing both qualitative and quantitative methods to connect the microlevel of concrete textual phenomena with the macrolevel of historical developments and intertextuality.³⁰ Finally, to answer the question posed in the

²⁷ This argument obviously goes beyond a mere opposition of Close and Distant Reading and instead considers all kinds of "reading" practiced or developed in Literary Studies. I am indebted to Ismail Frouini, who pointed out to me that my original argument—mainly focusing on the dichotomy of Close and Distant Reading—only cemented Close Reading's central position within Literary Studies and, thus, ultimately hindered my aspiration of properly moving with Distant Reading beyond Close Reading.

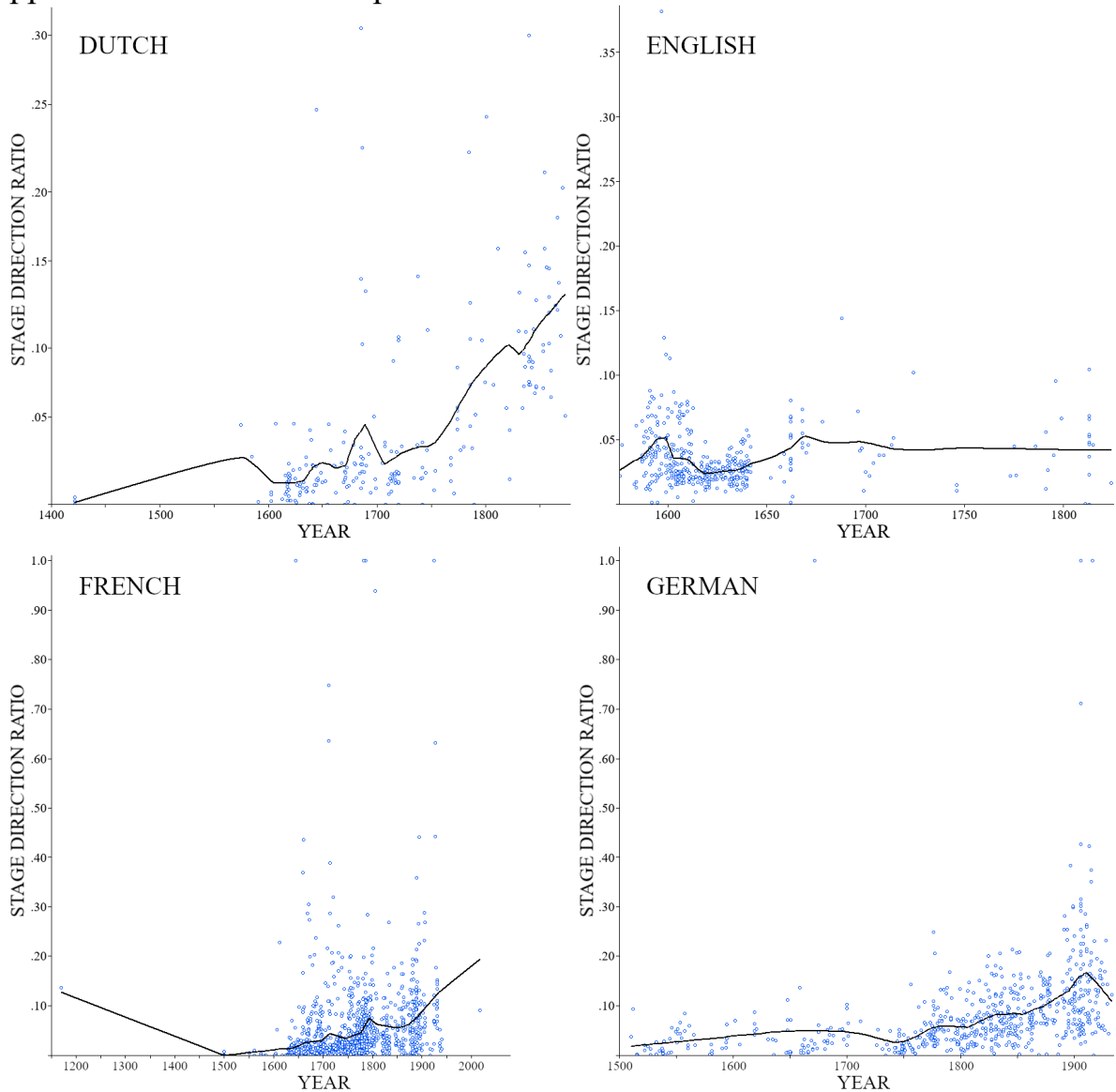
²⁸ I do not bring up this groundbreaking work just randomly. In fact, Dessen and Thompson's work was aided by a database and computational methods.

²⁹ See, for example, Oleg Sobchuk's interesting study "The Evolution of Dialogues: A Quantitative Study of Russian Novels (1830–1900)."

³⁰ For an interesting example, see Johannes Molz' *A Close and Distant Reading of Shakespearean Intertextuality: Towards a Mixed Methods Approach for Literary Studies*.

title of this paper: yes, you should let the computer do the reading; and that means specifically: some of it, for specific purposes, and it does not relieve you from the burden of engaging with some of the texts and areas of the more established research as well as engaging with fundamental questions of theory and the limits of the terms employed.

Appendix I: Additional Graphs



Appendix II: Literary-historical dating

Exact or even semi-exact dating of literary periods is tedious and might even be considered all together pointless. Periods are functional categories used to capture certain historical developments in broad strokes, while staying very fuzzy about their historical extension, and covering up phenomena and movements that aren't dominant or are unable to signify meaningfully in broader historical narratives. Moving away from periodization—or decreasing the influence of periodization—and instead appreciating a more directly year-based historical model might therefore be preferable. Nevertheless, in translating the qualitative research into something more strictly numerical or quantitative,

the question of dating has to be posed. What follows is the still very superficial research on which I based my approximations of the historical extension of the periods in Figure 1.

Classical Antiquity: Usually starts around 800 BC and generally ends with the death of Justinian I in 565 (Meier 187) or—according to the Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire (PLRE)—with the death of Heraclius in 641 (191 FN 22).

Early Middle Ages: According to historiographic convention, the starting point of the Early Middle Ages is usually set around 500—see, for example, the title of Paul Fouracre’s *The New Cambridge Medieval History Volume 1: c.500–c.700*.

High and Late Middle Ages: The transition from Early to High Middle Ages usually occurs around 1000—see, for example, the titles of Hermann Jakobs’ *Kirchenreform und Hochmittelalter 1046–1215*, and David Luscombe and Jonathan Riley-Smith’s *The New Cambridge Medieval History Volume 4: c.1024–c.1198 Part 1 and 2*. It ends around 1500—see, for example, Christopher Allmand’s *The New Cambridge Medieval History Volume 7: c.1415–c.1500*, the last volume of this series.

Renaissance: Dating the Renaissance is rather complicated since it developed in different times in Europe. Beutin sees its starting in 1250 Italy—according to him the older research situated it in 1450—and in Germany around 1400-1450 (59-60). Barbara Mahlmann-Bauer claims it started in 1300 Italy and was continued by intellectuals north of the Alps until roughly 1630 (262). Heyl says it started in 14th century Italy and was established in the British Isles in the 15th and 16th century (49). Bernhard Huß’ assessment for France is that it lasted from roughly 1490 until 1600 or 1610 (115).

Elizabethan and Jacobean Theater: generally is dated starting with the reign of Queen Elisabeth I in 1558 and ending with the reign of King James I in 1625.

Baroque: According to Herbert Jaumann, German Baroque starts in the last third of the 16th century and ends at the end of the 17th century (199). For Jörg Welsch, German Baroque lasted from ca. 1620 until 1720 (69). Jeremy Robbins defines the Baroque—in this context the Spanish Baroque—as “[...] the period when the optimism and idealism of the Renaissance gave way to intellectual and existential pessimism” (143) and sees this as a slow decline that starts around 1600 and “whose outcome was not settled until the mid-century” (144), and ends in 1700 (137).

French Classicism: According to Grimm, French Classicism can refer to three periods: the period 1660-1680, in which many now canonized works were created, 1643-1715, the period of the reign of King Louis XIV, or—the option he opts for—1598-1715, which would line it up more or less with the Baroque (150).

Enlightenment: Schlüter sees its starting point in the *Glorious Revolution* in England in 1688/1689 and its end in the French Revolution in 1789 (196). Heyl also sees the starting point in the *Glorious Revolution* (119). Jutta Heinz follows a—in Germany fairly common—systematic and distinguishes three sub-periods of the Enlightenment, *Frühaufklärung* (1690–1740), *Hochaufklärung* (1740–70), and *Spätaufklärung* (1770–1800) (53).

Romanticism: German Romanticism is dated either 1790-1840 (Matuschek 664) or 1795 until mid-19th century (Kremer 326), and French Romanticism from 1792/1793 until 1830 (Föcking 244). For English Romanticism, Joel Faflak and Julia M. Wright state: “1789 (French Revolution) and 1798 (Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*) were traditionally used starting dates, and the most common end-dates are still 1837 (Queen Victoria’s ascension to the throne) and 1850 (the death of Wordsworth). In recent years, the starting date has been pushed back to 1785, to approach the publication dates of early

volumes by William Blake, Robert Burns, and Charlotte Smith, and even back to 1750 [...]” (3).

Naturalism: The problem with dating Naturalism is its low internal consistency. Dirk Kemper goes as far as denying Naturalism its standing as an epoch due to its lack of programmatic closeness and of a self-referential discourse capable of establishing a naturalistic identity (534). He only sees German Naturalism as a heuristic category pertaining to the years 1882/83-1892/93. Föcking starts it as early as Honoré de Balzac’s *Comédie humaine* (1842-1850) (246), Christine Kanz, like many others, points towards Émile Zola’s *Le roman expérimental* (1879) (347), and Marx situates it in the last third of the 19th century (145). Consensus seems to exist that Naturalism proper ended around 1900.

Historical Avantgarde: One classic way of situating the Historical Avantgarde is between Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s *Manifesto del Futurismo* in 1909 and the establishment of fascistic regimes in many parts of Europe by 1938 (Kraß 63). Other approaches start it off earlier and consider a strict naturalism—especially since 1880—as part of the Avantgarde (Jäger 185) and opt to let it end in 1930 (Daus 4-27). Hubert van den Berg and Walter Fähnders, on the other hand, directly exclude Naturalism and other “-isms” prior to 1910 from the Avantgarde (2).

Theater of the Absurd: Ute Frackowiak defines it as an avant-gardist theater form from 1950s France (6), Karin Becker as developing in France after 1945 (767), and Ronald Daus sees its starting point in 1950 and its end in 1960 (37, 115).

Neo-Avantgarde: According to Hubert van den Berg and Walter Fähnders, a classic way to date the Neo-Avantgarde is 1945-1980 (10)—even though they hold that no real distinction between Avantgarde and Neo-Avantgarde exists. Since the claim about the Neo-Avantgarde is made only by Marx, who mentions its starting point as the 1960s, I have used Marx’s starting point (146) and van den Berg’s and Fähnders’ end point.

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Communication and Oppression

Fake News as an Instrument of Propaganda

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The phenomenon of propaganda is not only a controversial subject but has also been widely discussed by experts in various fields. Generally, it is associated with authoritarian regimes, since they possess structures that allow for open recourse to it, e.g., ministries of propaganda. What people are less aware of, however, is that propaganda is a problem typical of democratic societies as well, and that it should be considered even more dangerous in such a context. As the philosopher Jason Stanley highlights, “the distinctive danger propaganda poses in liberal democracies is that it is not recognized as propaganda” (*Propaganda*, 47). In this perspective, one communicative phenomenon immediately emerges as a political threat to democracy, which, as such, is intuitively linked to propaganda: *fake news*. Starting in 2016, there has been an increase in the recourse to the expression “fake news” and in the use of fake news itself in the political arena. Nonetheless, scholars’ attempts to highlight possible connections between the two phenomena from a rigorous and academic point of view are few and far between. Studies on propaganda and fake news have mostly been conducted in parallel to one another, and there are very few examples of possible explanations of their hypothetical intersection in the literature.¹

Given that, the aim of the present work is to study whether it is possible to connect fake news and propaganda in a single theoretical framework that is valid for both: in particular, it attempts to verify what is assumed by common sense: that fake news can be considered an instrument of propaganda. To do so, firstly, a definition of fake news will be given. Then Stanley’s account of propaganda will be discussed briefly. Finally, it will be demonstrated that both phenomena have enough in common to be considered related, up to the point where fake news should be seen as a form of propaganda.

Fake News: A Definition

As already anticipated, the first thing to be done to reach the goal of this paper is to discuss a possible definition of fake news. There are plenty of possibilities to take into account: though the literature on the topic is very recent, it is at the same time vast and the contributions to it are diverse. To deal with this situation and come up with an acceptable definition, the already available proposals have been compared through the use of four

¹ One interesting paper in which both topics are presented as interrelated is Habgood-Coote’s “Stop Talking about Fake News.” However, it has a divergent goal from the present one and is stricter in scope. Habgood-Coote, in fact, aims at convincing the reader of the necessity to stop talking about fake news, and his reference to propaganda is limited to the claim that the recourse to the expression “fake news” is an example of what Stanley calls “undermining propaganda” (1053). Another interesting reading on the topic is Andrejevic’s paper “The Political Function of Fake News: Disorganized Propaganda in the Era of Automated Media,” in which he proposes to consider fake news as a form of propaganda, starting from economic and technological considerations about the distribution of information online.

main properties that, according to Piazza and Croce, are essential in analyzing fake news and distinguishing it from other speech acts, i.e., their sociological, epistemic, intentional and format property. By applying this subdivision to other proposed definitions of fake news, it has been possible to study them in comparison to each other. As a result of this comparative work, Piazza and Croce's definition, in its most recent version, has emerged, in my opinion, as the most reflective and satisfying one. Said definition is as follows:

The assertion/implication that P by a subject S is the assertion/implication of a piece of fake news if and only if (i) the assertion/implication is meant to address a large enough audience and (ii) to convince its audience that it comes from an authoritative source, by means of the form in which it is presented; (iii) S thinks that P is unfounded in light of the evidence possessed; (iv) the assertion/implication is made either with the intention to deceive one's audience or with no concern with P's truth (*Fake News* 35-36).²

I will now analyze the definition property by property in order to explain it, show its merits, and clarify the four characteristics.

The "sociological property" identifies the impact that the assertion of a proposition has. In this respect, most definitions require that fake news needs to reach a wide audience (cf. Gelfert; Pepp et al.). However, if it is correct to consider fake news effective only if it reaches a wide audience, it is also right to follow Pritchard in that "ineffective fake news is still fake news" (2). Hence, it is not necessary that a proposition actually reaches a wide audience in order to be fake news, but it is enough to demand that this is at least the goal of its creator(s).

The "format property" stands for formal features, with which said proposition is presented. There are two elements that must be highlighted here. Firstly, as the definition makes explicit, the propositional content of fake news can be asserted or implicated. Though this strictly linguistic consideration may seem obvious, it is important to point out, since there is no consensus on the matter.³ Moreover, stressing this point will be particularly important in relation to the epistemic condition. Secondly, and most importantly, when discussing this property most everyone agrees that a piece of fake news should resemble a piece of real news, with there being some differences in the way this clause is interpreted.⁴ In my opinion, such specification is not needed. Requiring that fake

² My translation.

³ Mukerij, for example, maintains that whenever a literally true assertion implicates bullshit, this is a case of "bullshit journalism." Fake news, in his opinion, is something different and is characterized by what he calls the "assertion condition," i.e., that the bullshit must be asserted in order to be considered fake news (936). What Mukerij means with "bullshit" is exactly the original Frankfurtian sense, i.e., a proposition in which truth or falsity its author is completely disinterested (cf. Frankfurt 1986).

⁴ For example, Gelfert (108) and Pritchard (47) write that a piece of fake news is "presented as news," Mukerji that it must have "the form of a news publication" (923), and Piazza and Croce that it is an "assertion/implication [...] in the guise of a news" (*Misinformation*, 55). Other authors concentrate on more specific elements, such as the contents or the processes that characterize reliable journalism: Levy, for instance, maintains that fake news "resembles the format and content of legitimate media organisations" (20); Pepp et al. and Rini are even more detailed and write about the necessity to imitate "standard journalistic practices" (69) and "conventions of traditional media reportage" (E45), respectively; Lazer et al. combine these two elements, defining fake news as "information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent" and focus specifically on its lack of "editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information" (1094). Aikin and Talisse shift the attention to the institutions that create and spread fake news: they claim that the property of posing "as journalistic" should be assigned to such institutions, rather than to the proposition. Lastly, some defend

news somehow resembles real news implies the necessity to define how a piece of real news looks like, and this is far from an easy task to accomplish. Especially in the last years, due to the rise of new media outlets and of social networks in particular, news has shown that it can take a variety of historically changing shapes: from articles on blogs and newspaper websites, which are closer to the traditional idea of news, to Facebook posts, Instagram stories, WhatsApp messages, Tweets, TikTok videos, to name just a few.

In light of this, it is particularly challenging to find a definition of news that is generic enough to capture this diversity, and, consequently, it is equally difficult to define a format property for fake news. Thus, it seems unnecessary to require a specific declination of this property in the definition of fake news. Its real meaning, as I interpret it, is the need to establish a connection between fake and real news, which justifies the fact that fake news receives some credibility. Given that fake news is characterized by not being based on evidence, it must rely on something besides its formation to gain the public's trust. This is precisely the connection with real, trustworthy news. In this sense, such a link can take many different forms. For example, it can be built through the recourse to a similar external shape—as in blogs—, through the reference to a pseudo-institutional source, or by pretending that the piece of (fake) news is the product of a fair process that resembles genuine journalism. The exact way in which this connection is established does not matter: what matters is that its existence is exploited by fake news as a way to acquire a certain authority and trustworthiness among its audience.

Concerning the “epistemic property,” it is not easy to find a condition that would be generally valid for every possible case of fake news. It is, therefore, not surprising that the proposals on the epistemic state of a piece of fake news are varied: some authors suggest that it must be false (e.g., Klein and Wueller; Levy; Rini; Talwar et al.), others that it can be partially true and partially false (Dentith), or even literally true but misleading (e.g., Allcott and Gentzkow; Gelfert; Pritchard).⁵ Piazza and Croce, instead, introduce a different perspective on the epistemic property, which I will adopt: instead of focusing on the truth-value of the proposition, they concentrate on its justification. Independently of its epistemic status, a proposition conveys fake news if its authors are convinced to not have any evidence for its truth, i.e., if it is invented out of thin air with no proof to support it. This bypasses the problem of accidental or partial truths by shifting from a mere consideration of truth to a consideration of knowledge, classically defined as justified true belief. The originator of an instance of fake news does not know what they are saying because they are missing the justification to claim that knowledge nor do they believe they possess this knowledge. From this point onward, it does not matter if what they are saying is actually true, since it already violates basic principles of fidelity,

more constrained views, such as fake news being a phenomenon limited to the online world (e.g., Klein and Wueller, 6; Talwar et al., 73).

⁵ To better understand this last case, consider the following example described by Jaster and Lanius:

Suppose a report states the following: «After the refugees arrived, 47 burglaries occurred in the village». Suppose the report does not contain any further relevant information. The statement that is made is simply that 47 burglaries occurred in the village after the refugees' arrival. The statement is literally true if the statement expresses a fact—if it is true that this is the number of burglaries that occurred after the refugees arrived. The statement is misleading, however, if it nevertheless conveys something false. This is the case, for instance, if the number of burglaries was just as high before the refugees' arrival. Or, if the number of crimes did go up after the refugees arrived, but there is evidence that the crimes were committed by others than the refugees. In such cases, the report conveys something false: it conveys that the number of crimes went up and that the best explanation for the increase in crimes is that the refugees committed them. (209-210)

good faith, cooperation, and communication.⁶ This also captures those propositions that happen to be true and not misleading but are still problematic, since they were *prima facie* fabricated by their authors with no possibility of knowing that they would have been true.⁷

Lastly, the “intentional property” regards the intention of the author of fake news, especially with reference to the deception of the public. Most scholars are of the opinion that, when creating a piece of fake news, someone has the intention to deceive its audience with regard to the content of such fake news (Dentit; Gelfert; Pritchard; Rini). Piazza and Croce partially follow this line but propose to distinguish between a “strong” interpretation of the verb “to deceive,” i.e., making someone believe something false, and a “weak sense” of it, which is broader and encompasses, for instance, also the attitude of “bullshitting.”⁸ Hence, they maintain that fake news must always be deceitful in this weaker sense, i.e., that it either aims at convincing its audience of something false, or it is created with no concern for its truth or falsehood (e.g., by presenting it as minimally plausible or pretending to be talking seriously).

Stanley’s Account of Propaganda

The second element that must be defined in this work is propaganda. As mentioned before, studies on this phenomenon have been conducted for ages and from many different perspectives. What this chapter sets out to do is to consider only a specific proposal on how to interpret propaganda, namely Stanley’s. The main reason behind this choice is the peculiarity of his approach. Propaganda is an eminently interdisciplinary phenomenon, whose nature is particularly complex as demonstrated by the numerous and diverse approaches that have been adopted for the research in the field: not only the classics of media and communication studies (Smith, Lasswell, and Casey; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts; Woolley and Howard), but also historical (Welch), psychological (Silverstein), and sociological works (Eldersveld).

In such a miscellaneous landscape, Stanley’s *How Propaganda Works* distinguishes itself because of the specifically philosophical perspective that it adopts. Of course, it is not the only philosophical work on propaganda, but it is certainly particularly original for many reasons, among which I identify three: its interest in a specific phenomenon he calls “undermining propaganda,” its exploitation of tools that are typical of the tradition of analytic philosophy, and its scope. The first is certainly the element of greatest novelty in Stanley’s proposal. Far from considering propaganda only as a tool of dictatorships, undermining propaganda sheds light on propagandistic practices that occur more subtly under the guise of socially acceptable discourse even in liberal democracies. However,

⁶ I am referring here specifically to Grice’s Maxim of Quality:

Under the category of QUALITY falls a supermaxim—‘Try to make your contribution one that is true’—and two more specific maxims:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. (46)

⁷ As an example, consider another case proposed by Jaster and Lanus:

Suppose *Russia Today* fabricates a news story about Hillary Clinton: according to the story, Clinton committed tax fraud. The authors of the report take it to be false and propagate the story with the intention to deceive and spread disinformation. As it happens, however, Clinton has in fact committed tax fraud. (217)

Intuitively this would still be considered a piece of fake news, even though the proposition itself has been revealed to be true and not misleading.

⁸ For a more detailed discussion on the nature of deception, see, among others, Mahon and Noggle.

the impact of this new concept can be understood only in relation to the other two elements.

With regards to the sole aim of studying propaganda in a democratic environment, it is possible to find other works with a similar goal, for example, Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* and Ellul's *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. Nevertheless, even though they represent milestones in the development of propaganda studies, in their analyses they remain on too general a level. Herman and Chomsky, for instance, propose a "propaganda model," which is an interpretation of the principles of propaganda with a focus on the socio-economic factors that are responsible for the "filters" which, in their view, constitute propaganda. They include economic interests of media owners or poll results guiding editors' choices, among others. Similarly, Ellul depicts, in a very detailed way, the landscape of various kinds of propaganda, considered mainly from the point of view of their function on a social level. Certainly, the intrinsic inequalities of our modern societies play a crucial role in explaining the conditions of possibility of propagandistic speech as well as the importance of mass media in its diffusion, but an analysis that is limited to this level of discourse is undeniably partial.

One of Stanley's main virtues, in this sense, is to give a central role to these social factors, while moving beyond them with a deeper analysis of the linguistic and epistemic mechanism that makes propagandistic messages effective. Precisely here lies another element of novelty: his analysis is not (only) a psychological study of the cognitive dimension of propaganda but makes recourse to proper philosophical tools, specifically tools belonging to the tradition of analytic philosophy. This allows him to clarify the linguistic and epistemic dynamics involved.

In summary, the choice of referring to Stanley's account of propaganda is due to his focus on the concept of undermining propaganda together with the explanatory power that is given to it by the typically philosophical nature of its approach, which makes it particularly effective in clarifying what propaganda is, how it works, and why.

In view of this, let us now analyze Stanley's work more closely. To do this, it is necessary to begin by distancing ourselves from the classical account of propaganda as something false and insincere. Regarding the former, it should be obvious that propagandistic messages can be true or lacking a truth-value all together. They can, for example, be spread by means of literally true propositions with false implications or have the aim of provoking emotions rather than factual discourse, setting them outside of basic concepts of truth or falsehood. As for the insincerity, one must take into consideration that being aware that a certain message could have political repercussions does not necessarily imply insincerity. This fact, in particular, is one of the most threatening features of propaganda in a democratic state, as it entails that in democracies "propaganda standardly occurs masked" (*Propaganda*, 49). Thus, Stanley provides a double definition of propaganda:

Supporting Propaganda: A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to increase the realization of those very ideals by either emotional or other nonrational means.

Undermining Propaganda: A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals. (*Propaganda*, 53)

As can be seen, Stanley interprets propaganda as a discourse that exploits certain ideals either to support or to erode them.⁹ This is possible by virtue of the linguistic mechanism behind it. He maintains that a parallel can be drawn between propagandistic and pornographic speech as instances of the language of subordination. Following many authors in the field of the feminist philosophy of language like Langton and Butler, pornography is a practice that has the illocutionary effect of subordinating and silencing women. Stanley maintains that the same is true for propaganda.¹⁰

The way in which this happens is twofold. The approach relies on Stalnaker's theory of the dynamics of conversation as the updating of a common ground, i.e., the set of propositions that constitute the beliefs that the interlocutors share. Stanley points out that such an update can follow along two criteria: epistemic probability, as proposed by Veltman in his analysis of generics, or desirability, as in the case of imperatives according to Starr.

With specific concern for undermining propaganda, one may ask how it is possible to exploit the language proper of certain ideals in order to erode those very ideals. Stanley's explanation of this is based on the distinction between "at-issue" and "not-at-issue" content of a proposition as proposed by Potts and Murray. The idea is that we contribute to a conversation in two ways. On one level, we explicitly propose to add to the common ground a certain at-issue content that is in line with the conversation and, thus, receives the attention of the other participants, who evaluate it before accepting it. On another level, however, we also implicitly convey some supporting information (the not-at-issue content) with the function of channeling the conversation in a certain direction and of clarifying the relevance of the at-issue content. This latter element is directly added to the common ground, bypassing other participants' rational deliberation. This mechanism allows propaganda to spread messages incompatible with certain ideals through the not-at-issue content that avoids the filter of rationality by masking it under the veil of an at-issue content conveyed with the language of those very ideals.

To better understand this linguistic mechanism, consider, as an example, the declaration of Italian politician Giorgia Meloni: "We will give women the right not to have an abortion."¹¹ This is an evident instance of undermining propaganda. In this declaration, Meloni makes recourse to the language of rights and freedom that is at the basis of modern liberal democracies, while clearly trying to erode it. She is communicating an at-issue content that apparently speaks of giving more rights and more freedom of choice to women but hides behind it the not-at-issue content that abortion is something inherently wrong that should be prohibited as much as possible, if not eliminated at all, thereby limiting women's freedom of choice.

The second important part to Stanley's theory is explaining the effects and means of propaganda. To do this, Stanley makes use of his epistemological background. The central element for this part of his reflection, and one of the fundamental pillars of his theory of propaganda in general, is the concept of "flawed ideological beliefs." Flawed ideological beliefs are convictions of the agents that are particularly difficult, if not

⁹ Notice that such ideals are not necessarily directly political, but can just as well be economic, aesthetic, medical, etc. Political propaganda, in other words, is just a particular case of a more general phenomenon, though probably the most important one. Another widespread example of propaganda, according to Stanley, is advertising.

¹⁰ Obviously, in the case of propaganda, the targeted group is not only women. It is, more generally, and here Stanley follows Weber, the "negatively privileged" (*Propaganda*, 225 and 233; Weber 336).

¹¹ "Meloni: 'Daremo alle donne il diritto di non abortire.'"

impossible, to revise even in light of counterevidence (ideological), and that are false, unjustified, and impede the acquisition of knowledge (flawed). One of the most prominent examples of flawed ideological belief, according to Stanley, is the idea that certain social classes are superior to others. This case is particularly important because it shows that the characteristic of unrevisability is strictly linked to the fact that such beliefs generally concern our social identity, and thus the difficulty of abandoning or changing them is due to the fact that this would imply renouncing one's social status, with all the habits, practices and privileges that this brings with it (*Propaganda*, 179). In other words, flawed ideological beliefs perform the function of legitimating the social status quo by epistemically obscuring the elements that otherwise would undermine it.

Their connection to propaganda is twofold: on the one hand, they constitute the necessary precondition of propaganda, especially in its undermining form; on the other hand, they are the main consequence of propagandistic messages, since they instill unreflected and unjustified convictions in their audience. It is with the creation of this vicious circle that propaganda unfolds its detrimental effects on the knowledge of its public by limiting the awareness of their social conditions and consequently the ability to change said conditions.

The reason for this lies in Stanley's definition of knowledge. He supports a thesis known as "pragmatic encroachment" or "interest-related invariantism." According to this, knowledge is context-sensitive in the sense that the circumstances can change the epistemic standards required for us to consider something known. For example, if Sarah took the bus to the city on two occasions, once for a job interview and once to drink a coffee, then the higher stakes in the first occurrence would mean that she might double-check the bus schedule before she *knows* when the buses leave, while the lower stakes in the second example mean that a vague memory of the schedule might be enough for her to ascribe that knowledge to herself. In other words, knowledge attribution directly depends on the practical interests of the subject. That means that the requirement for a person to consider something known correlates with the personal stakes they have in the truth or falsehood of that proposition. Consequently, pragmatic encroachers have a very strong position on the problem of knowledge-action relation, i.e., that "one should act only on what one knows" (Stanley, *Knowledge* 9).

In light of his endorsement of pragmatic encroachment, it is possible to explain the above-mentioned detrimental effects of propaganda. By feeding the growth and strengthening of flawed ideological beliefs in the public, propaganda hinders the process of knowledge acquisition of said public about their condition, e.g., of the "negatively privileged classes" about their subordination. Since the stakes are evidently high for the members of a group when it comes to their social status and their efforts to change it, their being impeded in the formation of an awareness about their situation means that they cannot say to *know* their own condition, at least from a pragmatic encroacher's point of view. Hence, from the very same standpoint, they are not justified to change their situation, because they would not act on the basis of sufficient knowledge.

In summary, the ultimate effect of propaganda is double: on the one hand, the epistemic deprivation and oppression of its audience;¹² on the other hand, the practical

¹² For the concept of "epistemic oppression," Stanley's main reference is Kristie Dotson's definition of this phenomenon as "a persistent and unwarranted infringement on the ability to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources that hinder one's contributions to knowledge production" (2). In a broader sense, Stanley builds on the whole tradition of feminist philosophers in social epistemology and their debate on the theme of "epistemic injustice" (Fricker).

incapacitation of said audience to change the situation, because their actions are delegitimized as not knowledge-based.

Fake News as an Instrument of Propaganda

Given these fundamental elements, it can now be illustrated to what extent fake news can be considered a form of propaganda, according to Stanley's definition.

Fake news as a communicative practice can be considered propagandistic in virtue of the format property discussed above. The idea is that through this connection with real news, fake news can acquire a certain authority that is necessary for it to be effective, i.e., to be read and shared. My proposal is that to reach this goal fake news works as undermining propaganda. What it does is create the illusion of being real news and thus of being the embodiment of certain ideals, like objectivity, neutrality, frankness, truthfulness, and many other characteristics that constitute good information. At the same time, though, fake news creators do not share said ideals; on the contrary, they are interested in undermining them, since this leads to the erosion of people's trust in these ideals, which creates more space for fake news in our information environment.

From a linguistic point of view, this is made possible by fake news exploiting the same duality between at-issue and not-at-issue content that is inherent to propaganda, according to Stanley. In particular, fake news adds to the common ground the problematic not-at-issue content that it is real news, making it possible for its informative content to be introduced in the conversation as acceptable at-issue content. In other words, fake news exhibits the same behavior as Murray's "evidentials," i.e., expressions that are directly added to the common ground as not-at-issue content and that play the double role of altering and justifying the assertion of the at-issue ones.¹³

Likewise, by conveying the not-at-issue content of being real news, fake news justifies the introduction of its information content in the discussion and alters its utterance by conferring to it authority and trustworthiness. In particular, the addition to the common ground of the not-at-issue content, that it is real news, seems to follow Veltman's criterion of epistemic probability in updating the common ground. When the information that a certain assertion is a piece of real news, and therefore should be trusted, is added to the common ground, an ordering of the possible worlds is introduced, such that those in which the purported news is accurate and truthful are more probable than those in which it is not. Consequently, the uncritical acceptance that the at-issue content is a piece of real news makes the participants in a conversation more prone to accept it, even if it, in fact, is fake news.

The result of this dynamics is obviously epistemically problematic, and it is so for the whole public: fake news directly hinders its consumers in their process of knowledge

¹³ Consider the following example discussed by Murray (3-5): "Floyd won the race, I hear". When uttering such a sentence, according to Murray, the speaker is conveying two propositions: the "proposition in the evidential's scope" that Floyd won the race, and the "evidential proposition" that the speaker hears that Floyd won the race. In cases like this, it is evident that the evidential proposition is not-at-issue, while the proposition in the evidential's scope is at-issue. What is generally questioned is not the speaker's purported evidence, but the information that has been given, as one can easily understand by analyzing the possible answers to such a statement. We could certainly reply, "No, *he* didn't (win the race)," whereas it would sound strange to reply, "No, *you* didn't (hear that Floyd won the race)." Thus, the role of the not-at-issue evidential expression is twofold: on the one hand, it justifies the speaker in uttering the proposition in its scope, directly adding to the common ground that they have evidence for what they are saying; on the other hand, it alters the content of what the speaker is proposing to add to the common ground, that is that "it is possible that Floyd won the race" and not that "Floyd won the race."

acquisition. Indeed, even if it is debated what the epistemic status of beliefs formed based on fake news is, what is certain is that, in any case, it cannot be knowledge.¹⁴ Since, as required by the epistemic property, the author of fake news cannot be justified in uttering it, every belief derived from it, though eventually true (and possibly justified), would be too fortuitous to be knowledge.

In addition, there is also an “environmental” problem to be considered. The proliferation of fake news in our “infosphere” (Floridi) represents a danger to the development of the public debate and the acquisition of knowledge of those who take part in it, even without being a direct consumer of fake news. If we agree with Rose that it is very challenging to distinguish real from fake news, it is plausible to claim that the beliefs that we form based on news of every sort have a negative epistemic status, as we cannot be certain that what we have in front of us is, in fact, news.¹⁵ Thus, as a consequence of the diffusion of fake news, our information and epistemic environment is polluted, which results in a general distrust towards our sources of information and in the subsequent delegitimization of the public debate that is rooted in this environment. Hence, it is evident that the victims of fake news are not only its direct consumers, but all the participants in the public discourse that is negatively affected by it. In other words, fake news—as well as propaganda, for that matter—leads to the epistemic oppression of its audience. It does so on two levels: firstly, it does not convey knowledge about the specific topic of its information content; secondly, it hinders the formation of knowledge in general. Moreover, this has a social facet: not only the ability of single individuals to gain knowledge is hindered, but the entire public discourse is disrupted.

To conclude, an example will be analyzed to help illustrate the present proposal. Consider the following title of an article taken from the Fox News website: “Physicist to Tucker Carlson: Climate change is ‘fiction of the media’” (Stabile).¹⁶ It is relatively easy to recognize this as a piece of fake news. Concerning the *sociological* and the *format property*, the article reports an interview from the highly popular program “Tucker Carlson Today” available on the streaming service Fox Nation, the online companion to Fox News. Thus, it is designed to spread widely and inscribe itself into the journalistic discourse. Concerning the *intentional property*, the deceitful purposes of the author are evident: the aim of the article is to deceive its audience by instilling doubt about climate science as well as its generally affirmative coverage by the media. Lastly, with regard to the *epistemic property*, it is obvious that such a claim was made with the awareness of not having any evidence in favor of its truth. Scientists today almost unanimously recognize the existence of an anthropogenic climate change, and everyone can easily find reliable information about this. There can be no excuse for completely ignoring the available and peer-reviewed evidence, especially when we consider that the originator of the claim is a physicist. Furthermore, both the author of the interview and that of the

¹⁴ Specifically, said debate concerns the legitimacy of beliefs formed starting from fake news. Intuitively, one would easily conclude that, seeing how fake news is unjustified in itself, the beliefs one derives from it are unjustified, as well. However, it is not that easy. Rose, for instance, argues the opposite case. In particular, she maintains that certain pieces of fake news are so well-constructed that it would be too difficult for the audience to distinguish them from real news. Hence, we become justified in believing them. As one can see, the epistemology of testimony is a particularly difficult subject to deal with. For an overview of the many problems and questions that it involves, see Leonard.

¹⁵ The idea is that the proliferation of fake news shapes our infosphere in a similar way to the famous situation of Goldman’s Barn County case.

¹⁶ To keep the paper from getting bloated, I have refrained from a thorough analysis of the article. However, I want to point out that it is an exemplary case of fake news that is evidently propagandistic.

article are well-known journalists, hence people whose work involves distinguishing reliable from unreliable sources.

On the other hand, this article is also a clear case of propaganda. As a piece of fake news, as previously analyzed, it is propagandistic in nature and has the effect of eroding the authority of accurate and trustworthy information outlets, attacking their credibility. In addition, as a carrier of informational content, it is an instance of undermining propaganda, where the targeted ideals are that of science, e.g., objectivity, neutrality, fidelity, etc. Here, indeed, the author seems to defend good science from the interference of media and politics, whereas the real aim is to erode people's trust in science, so that doubt about climate change can circulate.

I am aware that the sketch given in this paper is bound to be incomplete. The high complexity and changing nature of contemporary phenomena like propaganda and fake news means that there is still a great amount of work ahead of us. For example, a phenomenon like "gossip," which often exploits fake news but does not immediately "embody certain ideals," as Stanley requires it for propaganda, creates some problems and deserves its own detailed discussion. It might lead us to distinguish fake news that is propagandistic only in virtue of its communicative practice from fake news that is "doubly propagandistic," i.e., that also conveys a propagandistic content. Exactly these applications, I hope, will show the power and flexibility of the philosophical framework I have introduced here.

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Part III: Appendix

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The Authors

Ebrahim Al-Khaffaf

Ebrahim Al-Khaffaf is a PhD student in History of Science at the Prof. Dr. Fuat Sezgin Institute of the History of Islamic Science at Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakıf University Istanbul, Turkey. He earned his B.A. in English and Arabic Translation with a translation of parts of a book concerning the writings of Virginia Woolf. He received an M.A. in English Literature and Culture Studies with a thesis on Renaissance individualism in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* as well as an M.A. in the History of Science with a thesis on Arabic manuscripts connected to divination, meteorology, and astrology. His current PhD thesis focuses on changes that took place in the translation of Greek writing into Arabic in the ninth and tenth century.

Margherita Di Cicco

Margherita Di Cicco is a second-year PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Milan and the University of Turin. With a background in anthropology and migration studies, she is currently working at the intersection of digital ethnography, sociology of labor, and media studies. Her main research interest focuses on gendered forms of emotional labor. This is how her studies have moved from domestic and care work to another kind of reproductive labor: sex work performed through digital platforms. Using a combination of in-depth interviews and qualitative digital methods, her PhD thesis aims to explore the experiences of adult content creators as a part of a broader analysis of digital commercial sex.

Jan Jokisch

Jan Jokisch is working as a doctoral student at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics on the project *Forager Folklore Database*, is a PhD student at Potsdam University, and a lecturer at University Mainz. They hold a B.A. and M.A. in Comparative Literature from the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. They received two scholarships from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD): In 2019-20, they spent an academic year as a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst; and in 2021-22, they spent an academic year in Argentina teaching at the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba and the Universidad Tecnológica Nacional. Additionally, they worked as a translator, most notably for the DEFA Film Library.

Their research focuses on the intersection of literature and philosophy, methodology, drama history, and, as of late, distant reading and digital methods in the humanities. They try to push beyond the limitations of research in the humanities via the analysis of a problem they call the “fetish of exegesis.”

Davide Versari

Davide Versari is a PhD candidate in Philosophy at the University of Eastern Piedmont, which is part of the FINO, the Consorzio di Filosofia del Nord Ovest (Northwestern Italian Philosophy Consortium). He graduated in Philosophy at the University of Pavia with a thesis on fake news and their connection to propaganda, approached from the viewpoint of epistemology and philosophy of language. He received a second-level master's degree in Humanities from the University School for Advanced Studies IUSS Pavia, and has been a fellow at the Collegio Ghislieri, a historical college in Pavia.

His research interests focus on the field of political epistemology. Further, he is interested in general themes of epistemology, political philosophy, and philosophy of science. His current research focuses on the role of experts in democratic societies.

Remarks on the ICON project

As the academic coach and companion of the ICON students team, I would like to briefly state what I see as the main success and as important opportunities of this project.

From the winter semester 2017/18 onwards, a total of 54 students worked in Team ICON. Of these, 26 were international students, representing a share of just under 50%, which is probably way above the average share of internationals in any regular courses. Average duration of collaboration lasts 2.3 semesters, nearly ten students worked on the team between 4 and 8 semesters. Several students did internships, received credits, and I have been more than happy to write letters of recommendation and work certificates for former team members.

Yet, these figures alone cannot tell what is special about this project and what makes this type of project valuable for students' education.

There is clear evidence about what makes studying successful: learning actively and cooperatively, thinking critically, and developing one's creativity in the process, which is exactly what students who work on Team ICON engage in. They research and develop interdisciplinary conference topics, write calls for papers and conduct double blind reviews, communicate with international speakers and make arrangements with local administration, cope with countless technical problems (when the pandemic hit our university unprepared and made us all learn instantly about online teaching and conferencing), plan, organize and hold the conferences, and several of them have not shunned the effort of publishing revised conference papers in an elaborate process of editing. One such result is the present volume. Students practice how to solve *real* complex problems, with deadlines to meet, and results that matter. They take responsibility over all their actions, and work in a diverse team. All this prepares them for the working world and any situation in which new learning is required.

From coaching the team, I gain invaluable insights that keep shaping all of my teaching. I like to think of myself as a learner with, well, a little more local knowledge, but as exploring new landscapes collaboratively with students. As soon as students notice that they are given room to make decisions themselves, they are highly motivated and do take responsibility, they research and learn the contents and skills to carry out the assumed tasks, to deal with the challenges. And they do it all the better when they realize that their teachers and their peers care about them, about what they do, and support how they do it. Above all, they develop themselves: they expand empathy, refine their communication, experience self-efficacy, foster self-confidence. The ICON project contributes to this in an essential way.

I feel privileged and am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this project, to collaborate with students, learn from them, support them and accompany them in their personal development.

In particular, I would like to express my gratitude to Jan Jokisch, without whose enthusiasm and tireless efforts the present volume would not have been created and completed.

Daniel Schmicking
Mainz, Germany, April 2023

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A different language is
 a different vision of life.

Federico
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