

A Critique of Linguistic Capitalism

by Pip Thornton

1. OBJECTIVES

This poster details a development in my PhD research project *Language in the Age of Algorithmic Reproduction*, in which I aim to:

- make visible the processes and implications of Linguistic Capitalism as practiced by Google in its appropriation and monetisation of language for profit.
- assess how political and cultural events shape the exchange value of language.
- explore the linguistic and political implications of the subjection of discourse and knowledge production to market forces under the control of a private company.

2. METHODS

To represent the process of Linguistic Capitalism, I ran a poem through the **Google AdWords Keyword Planner**. This 'free' tool provides a suggested bid price for words and phrases so that advertisers can manage their budgets and decide how much to pay for the keywords which will propel their adverts to the top of the 'paid' search results. Each time an advert is clicked on, the advertiser pays the winning bid price to Google. This is Google's main source of revenue. I then created a receipt template on which to display the output, adding:

- a date/time stamp of when the bid prices were suggested, as they are constantly fluctuating.
- a checksum hash value of the original poetic text as the 'authorisation code'. When decoded, the poem is subjected to laws of the market.
- a tax 'not applicable' line to represent the Google tax situation.

Daffodils
by William Wordsworth

SALE

February 12th 2017 11:47PM
BATCH #: CRC32
AUTH #: 2902651734
AREA #: ALL

2	i	£1.02
1	wandered	£0.13
1	lonely	£1.18
1	as	£0.33
3	a	£0.87
1	cloud	£4.73
1	that	£0.40
1	floats	£0.84
1	on	£0.41
1	high	£0.41
1	oer	£0.40
1	vales	£0.24
1	and	£0.17
1	hills	£0.49
1	when	£0.66
1	all	£0.50
1	at	£1.84
1	once	£0.06
1	saw	£0.58
1	crowd	£1.08
1	host	£3.23
1	of	£0.63
1	golden	£0.68
1	daffodils	£0.64

SUBTOTAL: £21.52
TAX: N/A
TOTAL: £21.52

APPROVED

Thank you for shopping at Google

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{poem}.py

3. RESULTS

What this method shows is the distance between the original meaning of words and their economic value as decontextualised commodities. The word CLOUD is expensive not because of its poetic value as imagined by Wordsworth, but because of the market value of CLOUD technology.

4. OUTPUTS

a) a quantitative longitudinal study of political and cultural influences on the linguistic economy, recording the fluctuating prices of relevant poems and texts as various national and world events unfold. For example, how did the 'cost' of Alan Ginsberg's poem *America* vary in the run up and aftermath to the US Presidential election, or a war poem when the Chilcot report into the Iraq War was released.

b) an artistic intervention - making the politics of Linguistic Capitalism more visible by means of exhibiting 'receipts' for poems. Following Walter Benjamin (1936), the answer to an 'aestheticisation of politics' (i.e. the near ubiquitous control Google has over language and information) is to 'make art political'. Forming part of the final chapter of my thesis, this method is a way of taking back control of poetic language - the re-appropriation of language as art.

c) a project called {poem}.py - I have been working with ISG colleagues Ben Curtis and Giovanni Cherubin on some Python code with which to process and gather data and re-order text back into a narrative order with a view to fully automating the process of 'poem to receipt'.

CONTACT

pip.thornton.2013@live.rhul.ac.uk
CDT Geopolitics & Cybersecurity