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Economies and *favours*: What's in a word?

Nicolette Makovicky and David Henig

Introduction

People do things with words. Metaphors, jokes, utterances, idioms and vernaculars are basic elements of how people communicate, create their communities and organisations, and act on and make sense of the world they inhabit (Austin 1962; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Consider, for example, these ways of talking about drinking and eating: in Kenya, someone might ask you to buy them a cup of tea; in Morocco they might ask for a coffee; and in Lebanon you might be surprised to be asked to bring sweets when dealing with an official. In Turkey, you might be asked for 'cash for soup', a dish traditionally eaten at the end of a night of heavy drinking. These requests and invitations, when uttered in the context of commensality, can create a sense of friendship, care or family belonging. When uttered in other contexts, however, such idioms can act as 'codes' referring to a range of informal economic activities – in this case, petty bribery and corruption.

Recent scholarship from the economic and social sciences has provided ample evidence that informal economic activities come in many, diverse guises, reflecting local histories, moral economies and socio-economic contexts (Agbiboa 2022; Tidey 2022; Zinn 2019). While documenting such diversity, however, few scholars have given any consideration to their discursive and linguistic aspects. Rather, references to vernacular expressions for unofficial (and/or illegal) economic activity have been used to add ethnographic 'flavour' to academic writing on the subject, or as a key to cataloguing, describing and comparing informal economic practices from across the globe (Ledeneva et al. 2018). Yet, there is plenty of evidence that words, embodied expressions and ways of speaking are pivotal to making illegal and informal transactions, institutions and networks function. Indeed, vernaculars of informality themselves often refer to the language of criminals or subalterns (such as the French *verlan* and Russian *padonki*)[1], or acknowledge the importance of 'talking well' for the making of informal deals (a common expression in Kenya, Uganda and Somalia).

In this article we advocate taking local vernaculars of informality seriously, arguing that language is a constitutive part of all economic practices, including informal ones, and the models of corruption and informality through which scholars have studied them. Approaching such vernaculars as conceptually powerful and analytically generative, we propose that focusing on communicative practices – as well as on functional or systemic factors – can provide a new conceptual approach to studying economic informality. It opens up the possibility of gaining insights into local, context-situated conceptions of enumeration, value and morality, as well as meaning-making practices, enriching our understanding of the ways in which these activities reflect local histories, moral economies and socio-economic contexts. It also allows us to probe how concepts and models of economic agency are embedded in everyday speech and actions, and how they co-exist and intersect with other conceptions of agency and social action that conventionally fall outside the category of economic action – including welfare, charity, community and kinship relations, and ritual exchange.

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We build our approach through the examination of vernacular expressions for economic informality drawn from our project *Languages of Informality*,[2] the *Global Encyclopaedia of Informality* project led by Professor Alena Ledeneva,[3] as well as our previous work on post-socialist economies of favour (Henig and Makovicky 2013, 2017; Makovicky and Henig 2018a, 2018b). Surveying these collections of vernaculars, we observe two things. First, terms for commonplace informal economic practices refer to 'everyday' situations and categories, generally falling within three globally occurring categories: references to food and drink, metaphors of concealment and movement, and references to human relationships. Secondly, we ob-

serve that vernaculars of informality operate as a language of affect in both senses of the word: they are both *connotative* and *performative* in that they do not simply refer to everyday practices and social ties, but move people in indeterminate ways to act by appealing to feelings of duty, care and empathy, as well as the desire for wealth and power.

We concluded with a provocation: if we accept that vernaculars are productive of economic thought and practices, must we then not also consider whether language itself creates informality through its performative effects?

From economies to favours (and back)

Recently, anthropologists and sociologists have turned their attention towards studying how language shapes the way people make economic judgements, viewing the economy as a product not only of practice, but also of words, rhetoric and persuasion (Keane 2019). Ethnographers studying everything from financial markets to popular culture have produced ample evidence of how economic transactions are animated through language: money 'talks', dollars are 'happy' or 'sad' (Oliven 2009), markets are the artefacts of words (Holmes 2013), capital is 'manic' and markets 'depressive' (Martin 2000); furthermore, language falls short in the world of derivative finance (Appadurai 2015). They share their interest in how economic decisions and markets are shaped by circulating economic theories, business strategies and speculations about the future with a growing number of economic sociologists (Mitchell 2005; Beckert 2016; Beckert and Bronk 2018). Furthermore, scholars interested in discourse – such as the geographer Doreen Massey (2013) – have argued that contemporary neoliberal capitalism is markedly discursive in character (also Fairclough 2006; Holborow 2015). They argue that language itself constructs the hegemonic order of global capitalism, extending the concepts and terminology of the market into ever new domains.

Studying formal economic institutions and ideas, these works are united by a common focus on the ways in which economic intentions and actions are expressed, as well as their functions and outcomes. They view the economy and the economic as operating through persuasive language. In contrast, scholars of informal economic practices have tended to approach verbal and nonverbal communication primarily as ways of facilitating unofficial exchanges, or ways of concealing their exact nature and diverting attention from its possible negative outcomes. Noting that acts of bribery in India cannot be separated from the popular narratives of corruption which give them meaning, for example, Akhil Gupta (2005) has already demonstrated that language plays a key role in the performance of illicit behaviour. Similarly, Alena Ledeneva (2011) has argued that informal transactions which circumvent the law, as well as test the boundaries of moral behaviour, are made possible by coded speech and subtle gestures. Both thus approach popular euphemisms and idioms for unofficial (or illegal) exchanges as part of a social 'misrecognition game' (Ledeneva 1998) or an act of 'wilful blindness' (Bovensiepen and Pelkmans 2020) designed to mitigate the social and moral ambiguities of informal economic activities in everyday life.

Scholars of informality, in other words, have tended to treat language and gesture as a mediating force, rather than in its full potentiality as a constitutive part of the creation and regulation of informal economic practices. One reason for this has been a general adoption of the transactional and interest-laden language of exchange, investment, and return for their analysis. Take the expression 'economies of favour', coined by Alena Ledeneva (ibid.) to describe Soviet and post-Soviet-era citizens' use of personal relations to get hold of scarce goods and services in times of shortage (*blat*). Alluding to both calculation and affect, the phrase deftly encompasses the way informal practices mix instrumental and affective relations, goal-oriented and gift exchanges, and 'formal' and 'informal' institutional ties. Assumed to be driven primarily by economic needs or opportunism, they are a type of exchange that flourished in situations in which personal and institutional roles and responsibilities are ambiguous, and contradictory – perhaps incompatible – social, moral and economic demands are made of individuals (Brković 2017). Indeed, Ledeneva notes, such economic 'favours' are themselves ambiguous, sharing 'features of the free gift and self-serving exchange, of network-driven endowment and self-generated investment' (2016: 26).

While acknowledging that economic informality involves both material exchange and social recognition, such formulations ultimately bestow greater explanatory importance on the former. Curiously, scholars have been less willing to adopt transactional language in their analysis of the Chinese practice of *guanxi*. Like scholars of economic informality in other parts of the world, they show how the common habit of using social contacts to exchange goods, labour, money, or mutual help involve both affect and instrumentalism, sentiments and material debt (Kipnis 1997; Yang 1994; Yunxiang 1996). *Guanxi*, they note, occupies the same social space as friendship; creating not only tensions between self-interest and other feel-

ings, but a situation in which looking out for the welfare of others is a constituent part of the relationship (Strickland 2010). Focusing on matters of sociality over matters of economy, such readings of *guanxi* place greater analytical emphasis on the importance of cultural and historical context. Furthermore, they suggest that activities which might at first glance be regarded as 'economic' intersect with and are informed by other fields of social life – such as kinship relations and religious practices.

These differential readings of *blat* and *guanxi* illustrate the importance of language in the construction of the models we employ to study economic informality – in particular, the degree to which tropes of interest and affect are allowed analytical purchase. In Caroline Humphrey's (2017) examination of illicit payments in Mongolian and Russian higher education, a focus on affect leads to a re-description of the concept of 'economies of favour' itself. Despite the nature of her subject, Humphrey refuses to use 'favour' as a euphemism for bribery or nepotism. Favours, she proposes, are not ill-disguised transactions, but rather a sui generis way of acting that deserves theorization on its own terms. They differ from other actions by their affects and ethics, rather than their morphology: while an action may take the form of barter, a gift, or even a commercial transaction, performing it as a favour 'adds a "gratuitous" extra to any practical function it may have, and turns the act into something incalculable' (2017: 51). Favours are thus involved in the production of social esteem and personal reputation; they are a 'a moral aesthetic of action that endows actors with standing and a sense of self-worth' (ibid.).

Humphrey's argument serves to highlight the fact that the giving and receiving of favours is above all an ongoing, reflexive exercise in moral reasoning and action. This is the major insight of our book *Economies of Favour after Socialism* (Henig and Makovicky 2017). Seeking to critically re-interrogate the conceptual relations between the categories of 'favour' and 'economics', we argued that favours are a distinct mode of action which have economic consequences, without unfolding in a regime of direct equivalence or being fully explicable in terms of transactional cost–benefit analysis (ibid.: 4). Favours are not simply altruistic, instrumental or reciprocal in nature. Rather, they are indeterminate because they have the potential to be one or all of these things. This makes them ethnographically and theoretically slippery; they resist fixed interpretation both in real life and in our theoretical attempts to square them with purely transactional frameworks of exchange. But rather than conceiving of this ambivalence or ambiguity as a conceptual problem to be resolved, we suggested that it is a productive outcome of everyday social interaction. As socially and morally ambiguous gestures and idioms, favours help to mediate between the values, expectations and moral frames that underpin social interaction (Henig and Makovicky *forthcoming*).

Informal economic practices, which involve both calculation and the pursuit of social recognition, rarely fit into pre-conceived categories of human action and intention. As such, they demand theoretical labour on the part of social scientists seeking to (re)construct an emic account of their meanings and effects. At the same time, this intellectual labour has also worked to construct economic informality as the object of our enquiry by formulating the linguistic and methodological tools for documenting, defining and studying such practices. This is especially visible in the particular ways scholars have attempted to concretize and locate such practices within, outside or alongside formal bureaucracies, institutions and markets. Colin Williams and John Round (2007) have shown that informal economic practices tend to be represented in the scholarship in one of four ways: as residual or historical economic practices ripe for formalization; as a by-product of contemporary capitalist economies; as complementary to and interdependent with formal structures; and finally as posing a positive alternative to the formal economic sector. They show how each of these discursive representations offer a partial reading of informality, importing tropes of development and modernization, normative hierarchies and ideas about economic and social embeddedness into descriptive models.

In the same way that definitions of 'economies of favour' (or 'favours') direct our analytical gaze, such models of economic informality create the reality they purport to describe, especially when they are translated into policymaking (Chen 2012; Deléchat and Medina 2021). But while we have come some way in acknowledging the performativity of our own theoretical language (Callon 1998), scholars of informality have yet to extend the same curtesy to the language of the people who actually undertake such economic activities. In the following, we survey a small collection of vernacular terms for informal economic practices, seeking to highlight the ways in which economic action is mobilized through the words, actions and gestures of those involved. We suggest that examining vernaculars can shed light on the concepts and models of economic agency that influence decision-making and processes of value-creation, and also how these intersect the desires, obligations and opportunities of individuals. Rather than making assumptions about their discursive function, then, we ask: 'What are people talking about when they use vernaculars of informality?' 'What is persuasive and efficacious about their language?' And finally, 'how does the language create informality?'

Vernaculars of informality

Vernaculars of informality from across the world are characterized by a surprising consistency of genres and tropes. Many vernaculars of informality make metaphorical reference to concealment and movement. To take the example of 'bribery', the Japanese use a particularly poetic term *sode-no-shita* ('under the sleeve'), conjuring up images of bundles of bills discreetly hidden or slipped between people. People make allusions to unmarked envelopes all over the world. In Latvia, the term *aplokšņu alga* ('envelope wage') derives from the practice of giving employees part of their wages in cash, allowing employers to evade paying a proportion of labour and social security taxes. In China, *hongbao* (red envelopes containing money) are often given to doctors in an attempt to secure medical attention and special treatment, while lobbyists in both Finland and Ireland hand over *brown envelopes* to secure access to politicians. Other expressions emphasize movement. In Germany, 'money that greases' ('*Schmiergeld*') is paid to officials to oil the wheels of bureaucracy, while Russians know it is sometime necessary to put something on the palm of an official's hand ('*polozhit na ladon*' or '*dat' na lapu*') in order to move things along. Some expressions even combine metaphors of concealment and movement, such as in the well-known English phrase describing money being passed 'under the table'. This expression also exists in French ('*dessous de table*'), Farsi ('*zir-e mize*'), and Swedish ('*pengar under bordet*').

Local traditions of cuisine provide another common set of metaphors for informal economic practices, especially petty bribery and corruption. From requests for 'coffee money' in Malaysia (*kopi duit*) to 'tea and water' (*chaa-pani*) in Pakistan, requests for drinks appear to be a near-universal way for policemen and local officials to request payment for their services. Sometimes the quasi-voluntary nature of these payments is reflected in the expression itself, such as in Côte D'Ivoire where the police sometimes asks for a *pourboire*, comparing the size of the bribe to that of a small tip. Food also features in references to large-scale corruption. Take the protest slogan 'There isn't enough bread for so much chorizo' (*No hay bastante pan para tanto chorizo*) which emerged in the wake of the corruption scandal that engulfed the Spanish government in 2013. Apart from being the name of a spicy sausage, chorizo is also slang for a swindler or thief – the implication of the slogan being that politicians were enriching themselves at the expense of the public. Indeed, in Turkey it is said that the 'a fish starts to stink at the head' (*balık baştan kokar*), reminding us that petty bribes at street-level are often matched by greater corruption at the top of organizations and institutions.

Such references to fish and sausages, or tea and coffee, communicate in an immediate way the public's perception of corruption as a problem of redistributive justice. They also indicate the degree to which these practices are connected to both a pragmatic need for survival, and/or an obligation to share or distribute a windfall with friends and relatives. Indeed, references to human relationships form another common trope of vernaculars of informality. Across much of Latin America, friends and relatives will exchange favours in the form of circumventing complicated or lengthy bureaucratic processes or giving each other preferential treatment. The desired outcome of this practice is often legal, but the means of getting there may not be. This system is called *compadrazgo* – the same word which is used for the local Catholic institution of godparenthood. Indeed, families may seek to engage those with economic resources and political capital as godparents in an effort to secure their help in the future. A similar term – *kumstvo* – is found across much of the Balkans. Deriving from the Serbo-Croat word for godparenthood (*kum* for godfather, *kuma* for godmother), it is used to talk about informal networks based on notions of fictive kinship: just like blood relatives, *kumovi* are supposed to help each other out in life, even if this means breaking rules and going against good practice.

This linguistic overlap between godparenthood as a religious institution, and as a term for patron–client relations, shows how informal practices may be (actually or metaphorically) entangled with the creation of ritual relations, kinship structures and community relations. Indeed, as in the case of the Chinese term '*guanxi* ('connection' or 'relationship'), vernacular references often refer somewhat tautologically to social ties themselves. In Poland, personal networks are called *znajomości* (literally, 'acquaintances'), while across South-eastern Europe such relationships called 'connections': *vrski* in Macedonia, *vruzki* in Bulgaria, and *veze* or *šťela* in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As Henig (2020) shows in his recent ethnography of Muslim life in contemporary rural Bosnia, *veze* are a natural part of life in communities where every day needs and problems are solved by turning to friends, relatives and/or acquaintances for help. They are used to navigate various spheres of everyday life, such as the job market, education, and social and medical care. As relationships which blend mutuality, obligation and self-interest, however, their use often poses moral questions about how access and resources should be shared and who is entitled to help. As such, *veze* cannot be reduced to a purely instrumental logic of economic informality; they also entail responsibility and

intimacy, moral conduct and ethical subjectivity, and social protection and care (see also Brković 2017).

Studying the survival and adaptation of historical modes of livelihood in a village in the Polish Carpathians, Makovicky (2018) also highlights the ubiquity of economic informality in village life. Informality, she notes, is a common subject of conversation and villagers speak quite openly about their engagement in material and economic practices that abuse or circumvent official avenues to income, employment and welfare. They identify everything from the construction of homemade tractors to new business projects which relied on the creative interpretation of laws and regulations, as *kombinowanie* ('to combine') – a common Polish expression for informal practices that bend the rules in order to access resources, money or opportunities. Such 'informality talk' serves to highlight the fact that such practices evade or resist the control and surveillance of state institutions, generally perceived as a distant and oppressive (but ineffective) source of power. As such, it connects informal economic practices with local notions of identity and subjectivity which celebrate the cultural and economic independence of Highland (Górale) villagers (ibid.). Indeed, references to *kombinowanie* appear to be particularly associated with the performance of local notions of masculine agency, men linking their informal activities to the lifeways of a cast of semi-mythological Highland ancestors (the outlaw, the migrating shepherd, and the outsider peasant).

Beyond referring to informal economic practices, then, *kombinowanie* acts as a trope for local ideas of agency and identity. 'Informality talk' is also a crucial part of making a livelihood for many villagers. This is particularly true for artisans and traders working in the local cottage industry making 'folksy' crochet lace (Makovicky 2017). The industry operates beyond the spaces and rules of the regulated market: in order to earn their share of the small profit margins, artisans and traders often misrepresent their earnings, income and labour to the fiscal authorities. Such informalization makes small-time enterprise viable by extending market practice into community and kin relations. However, it also leaves relations between artisans and traders open-ended: they are enforced neither by contracts of employment nor by the traditional parameters of mutual help. Artisans and traders deal with this ambiguity by using familiar idioms for economic and social action – such as *pobaba* (traditional labour exchange), *znajomości* ('connections'), or *greczność* (a favour) – when brokering offers of work or negotiating rates of commission. Mobilizing these terms in conversation allows them to work out the meaning and value of their labour. Rather than simply reflecting existing (or ideal) relations between members of the craft community, vernaculars of informality thus play an active role in their constitution and (re)negotiation in everyday life (ibid.: 222–3).

Conclusions

In this article, we have suggested that if we take vernacular vocabularies seriously, it can open up novel theoretical and methodological avenues for studying informal economic practices and informality more widely. Anthropologists have long treated language as efficacious, arguing that language and the material world are co-constitutive of each other (see Keane 1998; Malinowski 1935; Tambiah 1968; Weiner 1983). More recently, scholars studying the formal aspects of the economy – such as financial markets, fiscal policy and the financialization of everyday life – have shown that they operate through and are shaped by persuasive language (Appadurai 2015; Holmes 2013). We have suggested that taking the same approach to vernaculars of informality opens up new avenues for the study of informal economic practices. We suggest that much meaning is lost in the current gap between the interest-based language of academic enquiry and policymaking, and the everyday language of affect through which practices are actually communicated. Viewing this language as performative – that is, as a constitutive part of informal economic practices – we challenge the notion that vernaculars of informality are merely euphemisms that facilitate the 'misrecognition' of informal relations and transactions as affective relations in everyday life. Rather than seeing language as simply descriptive of economic informality (as an a priori category), or as concealing it through the introduction of ambiguity into speech and action, we suggest that informality is performatively produced through the words, actions and gestures of those involved. As such, studying vernaculars of informality (and 'informality talk' in general) should give us a new understanding of how informal economic concepts and practices shape models of subjectivity and agency, as well as how they are embedded in multiple dimensions of everyday life: from market transactions to religious and spiritual life, creative and imaginative practices, and local moral economies.

Endnotes

1 *Verlan* is a type of French slang featuring inversion of syllables in a word. *Padonki, Padonkaffsky jargon* or *Olbanian* is cryptic slang originally developed by the Russian online community in the late 1990s.

2 http://www.rees.ox.ac.uk/languages-informality

3 http://in-formality.com/

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