

## Language and Power

### Exploring New Global Histories of Language

Workshop to be held at the Käte Hamburger Research Centre “Dis:connectivity in Processes of Globalisation” (global dis:connect)

Munich, 10–11 July 2025

Convener: Valeska Huber (University of Vienna)

Deadline for Proposals: 28 February 2025

You are invited to submit proposals for a workshop on the role of language, broadly conceived, in globalising processes of the long twentieth century. Although they are often unacknowledged or even invisible, issues of language speak to central tensions in global history. They are tied to overarching power structures – colonial, national, or economic – and, at the same time, intensely personal in their relation to identity-building and individual expression. Since the late nineteenth century and, increasingly, during the 1920s and beyond, national languages were standardised, vernaculars came under threat, world languages were hotly debated, and experiments with artificial languages emerged in very diverse contexts. Studies that consider the varieties of human expression and the homogenising influences they face are well placed to advance a global history approach that takes global forces, social fabrics, and individual agency seriously.

What is more, language and its relation to the ‘global’ is also particularly topical at this present moment. Conceptions of language and globalisation are changing rapidly in the age of AI, and, for the first time, we can imagine a world without language barriers. Yet, while language barriers may seem finally surmountable, new rifts are emerging. At a time when English has achieved an unprecedented dominance in popular culture, trade, teaching, and publishing, questions of standardisation and linguistic diversity are increasingly being discussed. When it comes to the practice of global history, a passionate debate has erupted in relation to the dominance of English as a vehicle of (uneven) communication.

Research on global languages has consequently developed into a thriving but not yet consolidated subfield of global history. This workshop takes these recent individual explorations as its point of departure. Its goal is to move language history to the centre of global history research and to initiate a larger interdisciplinary conversation about language that speaks to the broad themes of standardisation and diversity, elitism and accessibility, simplification and complexity and to the tension between the social and the global at large.

For scholars seeking to address individual global histories of language in a common framework and in a more systematic and collaborative fashion, four overlapping areas of research are particularly relevant:

- (1) **Lingua Francas.** If, since the middle of the twentieth century, the predominance of English has been one of the striking features of globalisation, in different periods, language ecumenes and ‘world languages’ such as Mandarin, Persian, Arabic, Russian, Swahili or French have facilitated communication for the purposes of trade, politics, science, and religion across vast distances.
- (2) **Artificial Languages.** Moving beyond such existing ‘world languages’, experts of various kinds have been experimenting with invented or planned languages to reach across the boundaries of language communities – in relation to cultures and communities, but also in relation to generation and ability.
- (3) **Linguistic Engineering.** From China to Russia and Turkey, the long twentieth century saw the sometimes quite radical simplification and standardisation of languages and scripts. Debates about a clearly defined vocabulary or other forms of streamlining related to questions of a common language for all.
- (4) **Multilingualism.** The other side of language engineering and the standardisation of national languages was the persistence of vernaculars and language diversity which became a global debate within international institutions such as UNESCO and in local communities that feared language loss and language death.

Within these four broad areas of research, we welcome conference contributions on a wide range of regions, on any period of the long twentieth century, and from different subdisciplines of history (intellectual history, social history, history of science, material culture) and related disciplines such as anthropology, sociology or linguistics. They may cover a wide range of topics concerning different practices related to language such as writing, reading, speaking, teaching, listening, understanding and misunderstanding or translating.

The two-day workshop will take place on 10–11 July at the Käte Hamburger Research Centre in Munich. Meals and accommodation will be provided for the duration of the workshop, and we provide support in covering travel costs where required.

If you are interested in contributing a paper, please send your proposal (including your name, institutional affiliation or place of residence and title of the paper; abstract no longer than 500 words) and a short CV to the convener at the following address by 28 February 2025: [valeskahuber@univie.ac.at](mailto:valeskahuber@univie.ac.at).