
Languages and the First World War

The British Library & University of Antwerp

International Conference, 18-19-20 June 2014

Conference rationale

The centenary of the outbreak of the First World War coincides with the fading of direct memory of the period. Few can remember the linguistic experience of wartime in the speech of those directly or indirectly involved, but the linguistic traces of combat and civilian life, in and out of war zones, remain.

The term 'no man's land', for instance, came into general use in English during the First World War, referring to inhabitable areas that saw the fiercest of the fighting between the two sides of the conflict; the use of the term, many centuries earlier referring to an isolated patch of land outside the City of London, is indicative of a pattern of language-change produced by the war – by 1920 'Niemandland' was a widely used term in German. In the varied theatres of war, the home fronts, training camps, war offices, hospitals and supply trains, language shifts happened, in which the dialects and languages of the various parties involved influenced one another, and in which new language and new language use emerged through new technologies of destruction and communication.

The idea for a conference on the linguistic experience and legacy of the war arose from research into the sociolinguistics of the war (especially the Western Front) and the immediate post-war period in the UK, particularly with reference to how terms had crossed linguistic boundaries, including between hostile linguistic groups.

The conference aims to be truly international and interdisciplinary.

Sites and dates

The conference will take place on 18th, 19th & 20th June 2014.

The University of Antwerp will host the first day, and the British Library will host the third. The interim day will be for travel between the two sites, with a possible visit to In Flanders Fields Museum at Ypres arranged for the morning of 19th June. There will be a book launch and public lecture at the British Library on the evening of 19th June. Eurostar travel between the two Brussels and London only takes two hours.

Topics

The conference aims to explore the nature of language experiences and change brought about by the First World War, both within languages and between languages. The languages in question include, but are not limited to: Arabic, Hindi, Turkish, Dutch / Flemish, English, French, German, Russian, Yiddish.

Subject areas for the conference have been grouped into five broad sections. Topics of papers concern the following subjects, but are not limited to:

Movement between languages

- Specific multilingual settings
- Symbolic values of linguistic borrowing
- Identity construction by code switching
- Incorporation of specific words in multiple language sets
- Mutual influence between soldiers of different nations
- Specific bilingual language settings

Slang, dialect and cant

- The dissemination of slang beyond local use as a result of trench warfare
- The social movement of taboo terms and slang, at the front and at home
- Changes in attitudes towards taboo language before, during and after the First World War
- English pronunciation against the backdrop of the First World War & the Berliner *Lautarchiv*
- The influence of British Empire nations' languages/dialects; non-European French speakers; linguistic influences in the East African campaign and the Middle East
- The press and the ownership of soldiers' slang
- Intranational linguistic differences and the front
- Combat zones as areas of linguistic emancipation

Translation, mistranslation and interpretation

- The processes of folk-etymology, miss-hearing, etc
- The uses of languages previously learnt by combatants
- Interpreting and translating during the period
- Foreign language use by convalescent soldiers
- Communication between front-line soldiers and other-lingual support behind the lines
- Code switching between languages in exile press
- Translation theories, war realities and war scrap books
- Other-lingual language in soldiers' letters and diaries

Political management of language

- Military language and its dissemination between languages
- Officialese
- Political directions regarding the uses of specific languages
- Linguistic accommodation of war refugees
- Differentiation between real front language and popular culture representations
- Dealings with POWs

The legacy

- The persistence and disappearance of terms
- Language change and critical heritage of literature during the First World War
- Language and the ideology of First World War poetry (criticism)
- Trench language in British popular memory
- The romantic tradition, trench language and war poetry
- The First World War and the language of early twentieth-century literature
- The legacy of the First World War linguistic front lines to language usage today

Papers and presentations

As well as proposals for individual papers, proposals for poster papers, short papers and panel presentations are also welcomed, and postgraduate/early career participation is particularly encouraged.

Individual papers should aim for 20 minutes, short papers for 10 minutes.

Papers may be given in languages other than English, with synopses available in English.

Publication

We aim to publish papers on the EUROPEANA website, and will be submitting a proposal for a book of selected conference papers to Palgrave Macmillan, under the 'Languages at War' imprint.

Call for papers

Abstracts of 300 words need to be sent to languages.fww@outlook.com by 1 December 2013, 4pm.

Notification of acceptance will be sent on 20th January 2014.

Booking

Booking will be made available with the second call for papers, after summer. This will be through the British Library, liaising with Antwerp University.

Organising committee

Robert Davies, British Library

Matthew Shaw, British Library

Julian Walker, British Library

Christophe Declercq, Imperial College London and University of Antwerp

Marnix Beyen, University of Antwerp

Els Maldoy, University of Antwerp

Hilary Footitt, University of Reading

Scientific committee

A committee of academics from several countries will be involved in selecting the papers. The committee will be finalised by the end of summer.

Social media

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