Multilingualism in Eurasian Premodern Societies – Introductory Remarks

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This introductory essay outlines the aims, scope, and initial results of the work package *Multilingualism in Eurasian Premodern Societies: Social Hierarchies and Spaces*, part of the Cluster of Excellence »Eurasian Transformations«. The work package investigates multilingualism as a pervasive feature of premodern Eurasian societies and explores how language use intersected with social diversity, identity formation, and spatial organisation. By combining social, spatial, and linguistic approaches, the initiative seeks to illuminate the functional and ideological dimensions of historical multilingualism and to situate it within broader patterns of communication, mobility, and power. Since the 1990s, scholarship has recognised multilingualism not as an exception but as a structural norm of premodern polities. Building on this foundation, the work package examines multilingual practices in key urban settings – administrative, religious, and commercial – where social hierarchies were negotiated and reproduced. A series of workshops and a major conference held in Vienna between 2025 and 2026 addressed administrative multilingualism, elite linguistic repertoires, religious language spaces, and the linguistic dynamics of trade. These events highlighted how languages served as instruments of governance, social distinction, and economic interaction, and how multilingual practices were embedded in the spatial logic of cities and empires. The contributions by Marijana Mišević and Lena Sadovski exemplify the project's approach. Mišević analyses Ottoman–Ragusan multilingual diplomatic communication and the shifting role of Slavic expertise in early Ottoman administration, while Sadovski investigates the pragmatic coexistence of Latin, Venetian, and Slavic in late medieval Spalato, emphasising the social distribution of language skills and the significance of vernacular communication. Together, these studies open up new comparative perspectives on multilingualism in premodern Eurasia and lay the groundwork for further interdisciplinary research within the Cluster of Excellence.

Keywords: Historical multilingualism, urban space, eliteness, identity

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The essays by Lena Sadovski and Marijana Mišević in the cluster *Multilingualism in Eurasian Premodern Societies: Social Hierarchies and Spaces* are the first in a series of contributions that emerged from discussions within the work package of the same name in the Cluster of Excellence »Eurasian Transformations« (WP2024-1-18, principal investigators: Bernhard Palme, Pavlína Rychterová, Katalin Szende). One of the central research topics of the Cluster of Excellence, which concerns social diversity as well as the formations and transformations of social identities, is examined in relation to the diversity of languages in the societies of the Eurasian region. By integrating social, spatial, and linguistic approaches, the work package *Multilingualism in Eurasian Premodern Societies* aims to enhance the coherence of the focus of the Cluster of Excellence on Communication and Mobility, with a spatial and social and language-centred setup. It was designed as a framework for a series of interconnected collaborative research events that focus on historical multilingualism in both its functional and ideological dimensions.

I

Linked to the experience of increasing linguistic diversity in contemporary society, multilingualism became the focus of historical disciplines around three decades ago. The search for answers to pressing questions, such as how a society should address multilingualism in its discourses of self-reflection and self-description, how multilingualism can be related to the problem of social cohesion, how its connection to concepts and experiences of individual and collective identity can be understood, how it should be handled in social practice, and much more, how it is reflected in historical research.

Since the 1990s, when the academic community's attention was drawn to multilingualism as a ubiquitous and important social phenomenon, awareness of the diversity and sheer volume of source material has continued to grow. A very solid research base, achieved over the last two decades, allows us to view multilingualism in premodern societies generally not as an exception but as an omnipresent normality, which is merely reflected differently in the sources, influenced by secular and religious (church) policies. The more analyses of multilingual sources are conducted, the clearer and more concrete their potential for researching different cultural dynamics in the societies under focus becomes.[1]

1 Numerous works have been published on multilingualism in premodern societies over the last three decades, and interest has grown exponentially in recent years. If we consider only collaborative volumes published in the academic lingua franca, English, we see that the diversity of examples makes even a simple description of the source basis of multilingualism an enormous challenge. See, for example: Braunmüller and Ferraresi (eds.), *Aspects of Multilingualism in European Language History*; Kleinhenz and Busby (eds.), *Medieval Multilingualism: The Francophone World and its Neighbours*; Classen (ed.), *Multilingualism in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age. Communication and Miscommunication in the Premodern World*; Mandalà and Pérez Martín (eds.), *Multilingual and Multigraphic Documents and Manuscripts of East and West*; Pezzella and Scappaticcio (eds.), *Latin and Coptic. Languages, Literatures, cultures in Contact*; Silleras Fernández (ed.), *Iberian Babel. Translation and Multilingualism in the Medieval and the Early Modern Mediterranean*; Sövegjártó and Vér (eds), *Exploring Multilingualism and Multiscriptism in written Artefacts*; Borrut, Ceballos and Vacca (eds.), *Navigating Language in the Early Islamic World: Multilingualism and language Change in the First Centuries of Islam*; Minets and Nowakowski (eds.), *Shaping Letters, Shaping Communities. Multilingualism and Linguistic Practice in the Late Antique Near East and Egypt*.

The research in the work package *Multilingualism in Eurasian Premodern Societies* basically runs along two parallel tracks. On the one hand, we are interested in the relationship between multilingualism and space, especially urban space. In the Eurasian past, political, religious, and economic centres were linked to urban communities that exerted a gravitational pull on their immediate and wider surroundings. Urban space was becoming increasingly dominant in the dynamically developing societies of medieval and early modern Eurasia. Multilingualism was closely linked to the constant negotiation of social identities, which often underwent accelerated transformations as urban centres grew. The majority of the multilingual sources that have been handed down to us are connected with them, and it is therefore important to increase sensitivity to the specifics of the urban setting.

Languages are instrumentalised by the ruling social groups and thus hierarchised. The multilingualism of individuals and groups represents social capital today, as it did in the past; as such, it can now, and could then, help individual and collective speakers gain various privileges or, conversely, lead to disadvantage and discrimination. The strategies that these individuals and groups used to either acquire privileges and/or avoid discrimination are examined within the work package, as are the various types of interaction that these individuals and groups engaged in, in which social hierarchies were constantly being negotiated. The relationship between language and power in relation to social space as well as social production and reproduction of elites and elite languages with regard to their various social functions is always considered in the background of the individual studies and the discussion in the work package. The structure of the work package allows the topic to be approached from different angles: the discussion was opened in January of this year with a workshop on multilingualism in administrative sources from urban societies in premodern Eurasia at the CEU in Vienna (»Administrative Spaces and Administrative Languages«). The conference on elite multilingualism in a given time and space was held in March 2025 at the AAS in Vienna (»Elite Multilingualism in Premodern Societies and the Production of Power«), followed by a workshop on multilingualism in urban religious spaces in June 2025 at the CEU in Vienna (»Urban Religious Spaces and Their Languages«). The first phase of the joint work was concluded with a workshop on multilingualism in pre-modern urban commercial spaces in November 2025 at the CEU in Vienna (»Urban Commercial Spaces and their Languages«).

The workshops built on the spatial turn in historiography and examined key situations in which language use in urban environments became a problem, a source of conflict, or an instrument of power. The workshop »Administrative Spaces and Administrative Languages« started the discussion on multilingualism from the point of view of the political organisation (see below, in the second part of this introduction), while »Urban Religious Spaces and Their Languages« discussed the religious dimension of urban multilingualism. Frequently, distinct spaces were inhabited by individual religious and language groups within religiously designated urban areas, which brought with it a specific kind of tension. The role of religion in shaping the spatial arrangements was explored, together with topographies and morphologies of cities and towns, focusing on questions such as how did religious interactions correlate with the use of multiple languages; how can we discern models of segregation or integration within urban centres; and, additionally, what tools are at our disposal for comprehending the spatial systems of multilingual and multicultural urban communities, utilising archaeological and topographical indicators?

The international conference »Elite Multilingualism in Premodern Societies and the Production of Power« dealt with the role of language as a means of social stratification, as a status symbol, and as an effective strategy of identification. It explored elite forms of

hierarchical multilingualism, their interplay with other aspects of social life, and their transformative dynamics. The goal was to comprehend the role of language in producing social difference, shaping social hierarchies, and establishing power relations. Hierarchical forms of multilingualism in the sources and the relationship between elite and non-elite languages and scripts were of particular interest. The discussion delved into fundamental terminology and methodologies, focusing on the means of communication that individuals used to distinguish themselves and the ways in which such distinctions manifest in written sources. The discussion encompassed methodological approaches for distinguishing spoken and written languages, as well as the production and perpetuation of linguistic hierarchies linked to specific media. Further, the production of discourses of linguistic eliteness as a strategy of identification, modes of access to elite languages and scripts, and their role in social stratification were discussed. The concept of eliteness as a collective identification strategy was explored, particularly concerning its relationship to other identification strategies, such as those rooted in ethnicity or religion, within respective societies. The mechanisms of the cultural economy of language acquisition in premodern societies were explored, with a focus on fostering broad intercultural comparisons.

The workshop »Urban Commercial Spaces and their Languages« shifted the focus to the languages of trade and commodity production, its exchange and consumption. The discussion explored various patterns of language use shaped by these economic activities, addressing questions such as: how did the spatial and social structures of cities and towns accommodate the economic functions of production, exchange, and consumption? In what ways did oral and written language use intersect in commercial life, and what other non-verbal forms of communication can be identified? Furthermore, the workshop examined how and why norms and practices of language use in these economic activities differed from those established in administration and religion. This latter question served to consolidate the findings of the workshop series and lay the groundwork for new inquiries in the subsequent years of the Cluster of Excellence.

The conference and the series of workshops thus created a conceptual and functional framework for further research and discussion within the Cluster of Excellence. The research and discussions are based on the broad geographical coverage of the cluster and examine methods that can be applied to written sources from regions such as Egypt before and after the Arab conquest, Central Asia within the Mongol Empire, and Eastern Central Europe in the contact zone between the Byzantine Empire and the Holy Roman Empire.

The visual »logo« for the three workshops and the conference was Pieter Brueghel's »The Tower of Babel«, which is exhibited in the city where these events took place. Apart from that, and apart from the general relevance of the biblical passage on which this masterpiece is based for the aetiological and cosmological interpretation of linguistic diversity, the painting symbolises several key points of the workshop series. It reminds the viewer that the confounded languages of humanity are more than just means of communication: they also promote cohesion and joint action, as depicted in so many lively scenes at the base of the tower. The basic story is a typically Eurasian one, set in Babel or Babylon, the cradle of many civilisations that became crucial to these interconnected continents. It is also presented as an urban story, and a story of urban resilience: even if the tower remains unfinished, the city below stretches far and wide and continues to function.

II

The workshop »Administrative Spaces and Administrative Languages« focused on languages within the spatial dimension of multilingual administrative centres in late antique and medieval Eurasia. The discussion covered the material basis, the current state of research, and possible avenues for future comparative studies. The central questions guiding the case studies revolved around how the multicultural framework and the use of multiple languages contributed to the operational aspects of cities as administrative centres, occasionally shaping them into centres of realms inhabited by a diverse, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious population. Approaches and methods defined by geospatial data visualisations were presented in dialogue with research inspired by the social sciences and linguistics.

The overarching questions included: to what extent does the use of multiple languages influence the functionality of administrative centres? Under what circumstances does a single language prevail, and when is there room for negotiation and compromise? What are the specific spaces, places, and occasions where the use of multiple languages becomes not only possible but also necessary?

The contributions dealing with multilingualism in Roman, Byzantine, and early Arab Egypt shed light on the dynamics between Greek and Egyptian in the area of tension between the central metropolis and the peripheral Chora, as well as the establishment of Arabic as the administrative language. Research into cities and communities in Eastern Central Europe and the Balkans has progressed recently; multiple speakers referred to valuable examples of the simultaneous use of different languages in their administration. Several speakers presented case studies or methodological considerations on how patterns of segregation or integration can be identified in urban centres. Such models deepened our understanding of the spatial logic of multilingual and multicultural urban communities. In addition, general issues relating to urban multiculturalism and manifestations of cultural diversity were discussed from the perspective of language use and space.

The twelve presentations and Keith Lilley's keynote speech on »Polyvocality and the Medieval City: Mapping Spaces and Places of Urban Multilingualism« focused on the question of what specific forms multilingualism can take in city administration, and how this is reflected in the sources. The study of cities as hotbeds of multilingualism in the premodern era is particularly rewarding, as numerous sources have been preserved which are still awaiting basic analysis.

The Cluster of Excellence »Eurasian Transformations« provides an inspiring framework for researching urban multilingualism. It enables comprehensive comparisons across space and time through collaboration between researchers. Such comparisons put into perspective assumptions that are often taken for granted and are based on individual case studies or smaller samples – for example regarding the primacy of Latin as an administrative language in medieval Europe. The pooling of contributions from scholars with knowledge of a wide variety of languages and dialects, from Czech to Uyghur and Venetian to Khotanese, has, during the workshop, enabled discussion at a meta-level, the discovery of patterns on a global scale, the identification of exceptions to many of the patterns found, and the testing of hypotheses using a much greater variety of examples than any single scholar could cover. For example, we were shown the importance of trained translators and interpreters at the interface between local, regional, and supra-regional administrations, who enable the individual administrative spheres to communicate with each other and thus have a positive effect on social stability. Similarly, we learned much about the manner in which power was transferred during a change of governance. This specifically affected the administration, which

depended on the cooperation of many individuals and groups, the multilingual administration often playing a mediating role between the individual ethnic and social strata.

When considering the administrative languages of cities, it is important to take into account the larger political framework in which the cities were embedded. This inevitably determined the offices and staff available and required for the tasks at hand, as well as the problems to be solved and the range of issues that could be dealt with orally, as opposed to those that had to be dealt with in writing. The types covered in one or more of the workshop contributions included city republics or city states such as Venice and Dubrovnik/Ragusa; cities and municipalities in kingdoms (royal seats, capitals, cathedral cities, trading cities, small towns); cities in commonwealths, in this case the Polish-Lithuanian and Venetian ones; and cities in empires (stable or temporary imperial capitals, local capitals of conquered states, trading settlements and other urban centres, cities in imperial border areas). The Eurasian agenda led to lively discussions that extended to most of the continent's major empires: the Hellenistic-Roman, Byzantine, Mongol and its successors, the Ilkhanate and the Golden Horde, the Ottoman Empire, and the Holy Roman Empire in Central Europe.

It is worth looking at the terms administration, space, and languages to unveil the complexity of the approach of the workshop. This brief overview may also serve as a reminder or call for action to explore more deeply each of them in the above-mentioned broad geographic framework; the papers to be published in the current and subsequent issues of *Medieval Worlds* will show the way for this. Administration, or more generally, governance, is a term with multiple meanings and manifestations. In the broadest sense, it refers to the governance of communities for which cities served as centres. This usually meant far-reaching regional influence and the presence of a kind of court and court officials, whose expertise and networks were often intertwined with those of city officials. Secondly, it refers to the governance of the city itself by appointed or elected leaders: varying degrees of self-government and autonomy. Even in areas where central power dominated and appointed those responsible for city administration, the management of local public affairs such as defence, public spaces, public ceremonies, and public expenditure gave local actors leeway to pursue independent agendas. Third, administrative languages were needed for the administration of smaller local communities (e.g., guilds, brotherhoods, neighbourhoods) by appointed or elected leaders.

The administration also included the administration of justice at various levels and through various courts and authorities, whereby oral and written proceedings were usually combined, often in different languages and with the assistance of professional mediators, translators, and scribes. Another typical branch of municipal administration was the registration of property ownership and changes thereto. It was in the interest of local leaders to track the movements of real estate, as these formed the basis for the payment of taxes. Such records also provide an excellent selection of spatial data: in the absence of modern cadastral registers, points of reference, neighbours, landmarks, and field names of vineyards had to be specified during purchase and sale, often retaining vernacular forms or variants of toponyms. Accordingly, discussions focused both on communication networks within the city and on exchanges between centres and their immediate or more distant hinterland.

Spatial approaches, a hitherto less obvious or less practised aspect of urban multilingualism, deserve due attention, as they make it possible to reconcile the diversity and complexity of the urban fabric with the complexity of language use. As already indicated above in relation to a basic typology of cities in different political systems, space is important in its manifold dimensions and forms of political organisation, in terms of the centrality and

centralisation of power, and in terms of the languages used to achieve these goals. In the context of administrative languages, certain spaces within the city played a central role in communicating rules and decisions, in law-making, in the administration of justice, and in the storage and retrieval of information. In medieval Europe, the most typical of these spaces were town halls, multifunctional buildings with courtrooms (sometimes semi-open or open), council chambers, chancelleries, and archives, but there were also several transitional or alternative forms of buildings and spaces that served the same purpose.

The final word in the workshop title, »languages«, is also a placeholder for a variety of concepts. In an administrative context, for example, one can think of imperial languages, languages of power, or mediatory languages (lingua franca). The distinction between local vernacular languages and the languages of immigrants may not be as obvious as it seems at first glance, as it has often been influenced by changes over time, demographic shifts, and reversals in the balance of power. This has affected language regulations and policies, language hierarchies, and oral and written language use, turning language skills and the ability to acquire languages into instruments of political control. It is also necessary to distinguish between forms of multilingualism, which range from the parallel use of languages to borrowing certain phrases or loan words in another tongue. The recently coined term »plurilingualism« is intended to distinguish between the incomplete forms of language use and the complete mastery of several languages implied by multilingualism.[2] Multiscripturality, i.e. the use of different scripts to reproduce the words and sounds of languages that were not traditionally written or not written in that form (e.g. the reproduction of Hebrew words in Arabic letters, German words in Hebrew script, or Croatian in Cyrillic script), adds another layer of cultural and linguistic exchange processes, decisions and identities.

There are a number of »how« and »why« questions that were partially answered during the workshop but which could prompt further reflection and research, drawing on more comprehensive sources and comparisons from the period before the emergence of the nation state and its standardising influence.

First, let us look at the roots: how did multilingualism come about in the administration? Why did it emerge? Was it the result of conquests, the takeover of existing bureaucracies and subject groups? How did it work in practice? Why did it work or fail? How and why did the relative importance of the languages used in the administration and the degree of professionalisation change?

Second, considering the human factor: who made it work, who was responsible for what kind of work and in which language? Who employed the administrative staff, including elected semi-professionals and paid experts (notaries and scribes), and how was the choice of languages determined? How did elites and subjects negotiate language use in urban social and physical space? How did the needs of the administration and the judiciary affect the manner and locations of language acquisition? Which languages were worth learning, and who could afford to do so?

2 Most, Schäfer and Söderblom Saarela (eds.), *Plurilingualism in Traditional Eurasian Scholarship: Thinking in Many Tongues*.

In terms of content, what were the typical genres of oral and written administrative communication? Were there any rules or restrictions regarding their language(s)? What were the physical formats of multilingual administrative communication (layout, design, conventions, and practical aspects of writing materials)?

There were often reciprocal processes that are worth considering dialectically: how did the use of different/multiple languages affect the administrative process, and how did administrative use affect the languages? Did special administrative registers for languages develop? How did city administration affect language use in rural areas, and how did language use in rural areas affect city administration? What role did political power play in the administration of multilingual societies and situations, and what role did multilingualism play in the administration of composite polities?

The concluding discussion of the first workshop confirmed that in all the societies and places studied, multilingualism was the norm rather than the exception in premodern times. Against this background, it is extremely worthwhile to pay more attention to the carriers and manifestations of this widespread practice.

III

Marijana Misevic's essay draws attention to a hitherto little-noticed but extraordinarily rich corpus of sources documenting multilingual communication between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) from the late 14th to the 17th century. It documents the use of various languages such as Latin/Italianate, Slavic, Turkish, Arabic, Persian and scripts (Latin, Cyrillic, Arabic). This complex variety originated in dynamic contact zones between the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East – areas that modern research often artificially separates.

Despite its importance for research into premodern multilingualism, the corpus has never been systematically studied. Since the 19th century, historiography has mainly used Ragusan sources to reconstruct political, economic, and diplomatic events. National historical perspectives make it difficult to understand the linguistic complexity of the corpus. Diplomatic texts were often classified according to supposed ethnic-linguistic categories, which projects modern language boundaries onto premodern groups of actors. As a result, there is still no diachronic or synchronic analysis of multilingualism in Dubrovnik – and, analogously, in the Ottoman world – even though it was historically highly multilingual.

Nevertheless, previous research provides a solid basis for investigating the dynamic multilingualism in the administration. Dubrovnik already had established archival practices and a pronounced pragmatic multilingualism in the 14th century, while the Ottoman central administration was still in its infancy. The essay examines the emergence, development, and eventual disappearance of the Ottoman Slavic/Cyrillic chancellery, as well as the role of Slavic scribes and *dragomans* in the early Ottoman state, using numerous sources. The central thesis is that this chancellery only functioned as long as the Ottoman Empire was dependent on already established Slavic administrative personnel and diplomatic traditions of the late medieval Balkan empires. As soon as the *translatio imperii* – the takeover of rule over the region – was complete and the descendants of the Slavic aristocracies were no longer needed as political mediators, this chancellery lost its importance. From that moment on, the Ragusans (Dubrovčani) in particular, traditionally important trading partners, had to learn Turkish, as they could no longer count on Slavic-speaking mediators within the Ottoman administration. Marijana Misevic's study makes a valuable contribution to the

history of imperial dynamics in South-Eastern Europe, and her findings can serve as a basis for far-reaching comparisons on several levels.

Lena Sadovski's contribution to the thematic block shows the dynamic coexistence and pragmatic use of Latin, Italian (Venetian) and Slavic languages in the Dalmatian city of Spalato (Split), archbishopric seat and trading centre, in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. The study uses the innovative concept of the social distribution of language skills and also integrates the spatial aspect, which was high on the workshop agenda. The combination of these two perspectives provides an excellent starting point for a reassessment of the traces and significance of the Slavic language in the administration of Spalato.

The article explains how the legal context increased the value of knowledge of the local vernacular in order to avoid misunderstandings regarding the validity of transactions. It also becomes clear that a complete understanding of administrative practices is only possible with the help of in-depth archival research, as normative regulations alone tell only part of the story. Similarly, looking beyond the city walls at communication practices in the hinterland provides a more nuanced picture, including the deliberate development by the Venetians of communication channels in the vernacular for the local population. Sadovski's work also refutes the still widespread belief that the proportion of ethnic groups within a population can be calculated on the basis of language use or onomastic analysis. Another important observation is the gender-specific linguistic divide, which makes it clear that women were more strongly tied to the use of their Slavic vernacular languages. Sadovski's erudite and methodologically balanced study serves as a model for similar investigations in other urban communities.

The articles presented here are the first of a series in which we are going to showcase this exciting panorama of multilingualism in premodern societies in *Medieval Worlds* over the next few years, and we look forward to the conversations and discussions it will engender.

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