

Call for Paper: International Conference “Thinking and Acting through Words. Ancient discourses, Historical Practices. Egypt, Greece, Mesopotamia, Rome” June 18-19 Paris-Cité University

Since the 1960s and the advent of the linguistic turn, language is no longer considered as merely a tool for expressing reality, but rather as a necessary condition for understanding it.¹ Words can no longer be regarded as simple descriptive tools: as the medium through which all thought, knowledge and experience are filtered, language actively shapes how we perceive, act, and think. This approach renews historical practice: texts are no longer treated as neutral reflections of a pre-existing reality or context but as situated discourses imbued with representations, value systems and intentions.² Consequently, the historian's approach must evolve and move beyond simple lexicographical inventory. Studying vocabulary amounts then to examining how ancient societies understood their environment and acted upon it. Words become a place where thoughts, practices and norms come together and therefore a privileged lens through which to question the emic dimensions of everyday activities, the ways ancient peoples understood and conceptualized the world they inhabited. However, this is only possible if one rejects any form of lexical hierarchy and avoids reducing words to static definitions or imposing rigid boundaries based on preconceived categories. The same term may be appropriate in different ways depending on the actors involved, thereby producing its own “context”. Hence the necessity to analyse political, social, or cultural practices from the standpoint of the terms that shaped them, without projecting overly contemporary interpretative frameworks onto them.

Thanks to the work of Alfred Ernout,³ Pierre Chantraine,⁴ and Émile Benveniste,⁵ the vocabulary of ancient societies has come to be regarded as a historical object in its own right. Studies on Greek vocabulary stand out due to their early diversity, with a focus on medical vocabulary,⁶ sacrificial vocabulary,⁷ and even the qualities like *mêtis*.⁸ On the Roman side,

¹ The phrase was coined by G. BERGMANN, *The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism*, New York, Longmans, 1967 [1954]. He used it to describe the orientation of the work of German philosopher L. Wittgenstein (p. 30-31). However, it was later popularised by R. ROTRY, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago-London, University of Chicago Press, 1967.

² In this regard, we agree with the conclusions of Cl. Moatti's work on the importance of not dissociating meaning from context and of moving beyond the conclusions of the Cambridge School – for instance: J. G. A. POCCOCK, *The Machiavellian Moment*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975 et Q. SKINNER, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

³ *Aspects du vocabulaire latin (Etudes et commentaires, XVIII)*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1954.

⁴ *Études sur le vocabulaire grec*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1956.

⁵ *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes. I : économie, parenté, société ; II : pouvoir, droit, religion*, Paris, Les éditions de Minuit, 1969.

⁶ N. VAN BROCK, *Recherches sur le vocabulaire médical du grec ancien : soins et guérison*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1961.

⁷ J. CASABONA, *Recherches sur le vocabulaire des sacrifices en grec : des origines à la fin de l'époque classique*, thèse de doctorat en lettres classiques, Université de Paris, 1964.

⁸ M. DETIENNE & J.-P. VERNANT, *Les ruses de l'intelligence. La mêtis des Grecs*, Paris, Flammarion, 1974.

Joseph Hellegouarc'h's seminal study⁹ paved the way for a certain focalization on the political world such as the various investigations into the concept of *res publica*¹⁰ and the vocabulary employed by political actors in both the republican and imperial periods.¹¹ For a number of years, the focus has thus been on political rhetoric and the relationships between actors. As recently as two years ago, a special issue of the journal *Mots* sought to examine institutional vocabulary through the analysis of the wording of votes and political candidacies in Rome.¹² Only a handful of isolated studies have examined semantic fields not directly tied to political activity, including vocabulary related to sexuality,¹³ environment¹⁴, family relationships,¹⁵ memory,¹⁶ urban life,¹⁷ and religion.¹⁸ For the Greek world, the archaic period has provided a rich field for analysis, particularly through the Homeric corpus. Scholars have studied architectural vocabulary,¹⁹ terms related to gifts,²⁰ wealth and poverty,²¹ as well as concepts of truth and falsehood.²² More recently, it is divine onomastics that has been analysed from this lexical perspective, most notably with the ERC MAP project coordinated by Corinne Bonnet or Michel Mathieu-Colas' book on Greek and Roman deities.²³ In the wake of these various works, the conference "Thinking and Acting through Words: Ancient Discourses, Historical Practices" aims to reaffirm the epistemological potential of ancient vocabulary studies through a meeting in which researchers – both young and more experienced – can showcase and discuss their analyses and methods. By putting words at the heart of historical inquiry, we aim to

⁹ *Le vocabulaire latin des relations et des partis politiques sous la République*, Paris, Belles Lettres, 1963.

¹⁰ Such as the works of E. LYASSE (« Les notions de *res publica* et de *ciuitas* dans la pensée romaine de la cité et de l'empire », *Latomus*, 66, 2007, p. 580-605 ; « L'utilisation des termes *res publica* dans le quotidien institutionnel des cités. Vocabulaire politique romain et réalités locales », in C. Berrendonner, M. Cébeillac-Gervasoni, L. Lamoine (dir.), *Le quotidien municipal dans l'Occident romain*, Clermont-Ferrand, Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2008, p. 187-202), de Th. LANFRANCHI (« La République romaine était-elle une république ? », *Anabases*, 25, 2017, p. 137-160) or even that of C. MOATTI (*Res Publica. Histoire romaine de la chose publique*, Paris, Fayard, 2018).

¹¹ According to different methods and perspectives: G. ACHARD, *Pratique rhétorique et idéologie politique dans les discours « optimates » de Cicéron*, Leyde, Brill, 1981 ; M. A. ROBB., *Beyond populares and optimates. Political Language in the Late Republic*, Stuttgart, F. Steiner, 2010 ; I. COGITORE, *Le doux nom de liberté : histoire d'une idée politique dans la Rome antique*, Bordeaux, Ausonius, 2011 ; V. ARENA, *Libertas and the Practice of Politics in the Late Roman Republic*, Cambridge, University Press, 2012.

¹² L. AUTIN, V. HOLLARD, R. MELTZ, V. BONNET (dir.), « Les mots du vote de la Rome antique à la Révolution française. Sens et significations, traductions, réappropriations », *Mots. Les langages du politique*, 132, 2023.

¹³ J. N. ADAMS, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, London, Duckworth, 1982.

¹⁴ M. CHASSIGNET, « Le vocabulaire des marais et marécages dans l'historiographie latine de la République romaine et du principat », *Riparia*, 5, 2019, p. 119-138.

¹⁵ P. ARNAUD, « Le vocabulaire romain de l'affection dans les sphères du public et du privé aux trois premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne », *Noesis*, 16, 2010, p. 27-38.

¹⁶ P. M. MARTIN, « Raconter le passé le plus lointain de Rome – le vocabulaire de la mémoire histoire chez Tite-Live », *Vita Latina*, 201, 2021, p. 95-119.

¹⁷ L. LOPEZ-RABATEL, V. MATHE, J. C. MORETTI (dir.), *Dire la ville en grec aux époques antique et byzantine. Actes du colloque de Créteil 10-11 juin 2016*, Lyon, MOM Éditions, 2020.

¹⁸ H. FUGIER, *Recherches sur l'expression du sacré dans la langue latine*, Paris, Belles Lettres, 1963 ; R. SCHILLING, « L'originalité du vocabulaire religieux latin », *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 49/1, 1971, p. 31-54 ; M. DE SOUZA, *La question de la tripartition des catégories du droit divin dans l'Antiquité romaine*, Saint-Etienne, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2004.

¹⁹ S. ROUGIER-BLANC, *Les maisons homériques : vocabulaire architectural et sémantique du bâti*, Paris, De Boccard, 2005.

²⁰ E. SCHEID-TISSINIER, *Les usages du don chez Homère : vocabulaire et pratiques*, Nancy, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1994.

²¹ S. COIN-LONGERAY, *Poésie de la richesse et de la pauvreté : étude du vocabulaire de la richesse et de la pauvreté dans la poésie grecque antique*, d'Homère à Aristophane, Saint-Etienne, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2014.

²² J.-P. LEVET, *Le vrai et le faux dans la pensée grecque archaïque*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1976.

²³ M. MATHIEU-COLAS, *Lexique des divinités grecques et romaines*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2024.

promote a history that fully acknowledges that the realities it examines are constructed, negotiated, and interpreted through language. We therefore invite researchers working on societies related to the ancient Mediterranean basin – beyond the Greek and Roman worlds alone – to present their work on the vocabularies specific to their areas of expertise. Still with regard to this historiography, another key objective of the conference is to highlight the less-studied aspects of ancient vocabularies. This involves moving beyond an atomistic approach to vocabulary analysis and avoiding an exclusive focus on the language of political institutions or translation issues. Since language functions as a system, the role of words in the everyday lives of these populations can only be understood through the connections they maintain with one another. This is why, beyond the meanings of words and their translations, our focus is on their use in practical contexts. The sources often provide examples of discourses built on semantic issues induced by variations in vocabulary. For instance, when Herodotus recounts Solon's journey to King Croesus, he attributes to the Greek lawgiver a speech in which variations in vocabulary relating to happiness (ὄλβιος, εὐτυχία, εὐδαιμονία) enable him to develop a discourse on what he considers to be true human happiness.²⁴

From these various perspectives, three research directions emerge to which the proposed papers and posters may contribute:

Line 1 – Vocabulary in Discourse. Following Herodotus' example, this line of research encompasses studies that examine the use of specific vocabulary within the context of a particular discourse, regardless of its nature or the sources in which it appears. The aim here is to address the question of choice that underlies every use of specific vocabulary, which is never a casual choice. Which words or lexical fields – whether previously overlooked or scarcely studied – should be brought to the attention of historians, and at what levels of analysis should they be examined (e.g., by work, author, or time period)? Are there words that an author consistently favours, and if so, why? Conversely, one can also investigate the absence of certain vocabulary in an author's work: why might a word that was known and in use at the time be deliberately avoided? Another area of interest concerns the reception of this vocabulary: is there a specific audience for certain lexical fields, and how receptive is this audience to the use of these words?

Line 2 – Lexical Field and Studies of Practices. This line of research encompasses papers that explore the relationship between a lexical field and the emic representations associated with a particular ancient practice. How is the lexical field organized, and what connections exist between its structure and the emic categories of action and thought? A related question is how the same term can become the focus of interpretative debates: which actors appropriate, transform, or misappropriate it? The aim is to examine semantic tensions as indicators of underlying issues and debates.

Line 3 – Vocabulary Through Time. This line of research encompasses papers that examine the reception of ancient vocabulary and its impact on historical studies. As recent research has shown,²⁵ the later reuse of an ancient word can shape historians' perceptions and analyses of a particular lexical field. Beyond the challenges of comparing emic and etic perspectives, these later usages also create lexical interference that must be taken into account. The distortions that arise when ancient vocabulary is used in more contemporary contexts will be examined, alongside the opportunities they present for historical analysis. Confronted with these challenges, historians must return to a direct study of ancient sources: which methods are

²⁴ *Histories*, 1.30-33.

²⁵ L. AUTIN, V. HOLLARD, R. MELTZ, V. BONNET (dir.), « Les mots du vote de la Rome antique à la Révolution française. Sens et significations, traductions, réappropriations », *Mots. Les langages du politique*, 132, 2023.

most appropriate? This line will focus on the practices and techniques historians employ in addressing specific cases, exploring the difficulties they encounter and the tools available to overcome them.

These research lines obviously do not exhaust all possible avenues of analysis and we therefore welcome proposals from researchers whose work does not fit neatly within them. We also encourage poster submissions from very early-career researchers (second-year Master's and first year PhD students).

Application Procedure

Proposals for papers and posters (**maximum 3,500 characters**) should be submitted by **15 February** to: **vocabulairesanciens@gmail.com**. Presentations may be given in **English, German, French, or Italian**. The conference will take place on **18–19 June 2026 in Paris (Paris-Cité University)**. Catering will be provided, and travel and accommodation expenses may be partially covered by the organizers.

Scientific Committee

Francesca Prescendi (EPHE), Antoine Jacquet (Collège de France), Louis Autin (Sorbonne Université), Brigitte Lion (Panthéon-Sorbonne).

Organization Committee

Marie Turpin (Université Paris-Cité – AnHiMA), Gregory Spadacini (Panthéon-Sorbonne Université – AnHiMA), Adrien Coignoux (AnHiMA)