

Österreichische-Linguistik-Tagung, Universität Innsbruck (ÖLT)
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Workshop: “Preserving Voices: Strategies for Endangered Languages” with a focus on Modern (especially Turoyo-Neo-Aramaic and Hebrew) and Ancient Near Eastern languages

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Language preservation is indispensable for safeguarding endangered or extinct languages, which are essential for maintaining diversity across various academic disciplines such as linguistics, anthropology, prehistory, and psychology. Just as historic preservation allows us to retain insights into the past, language preservation ensures that dying or dead languages remain accessible for future study. Examples of this preservation effort include ancient extinct languages, like those found on Cuneiform tablets from Mesopotamia or monumental inscriptions from Egypt to Mesopotamia, which are often housed in museums. In a similar way, documentary linguists play a part in preserving the current linguistic diversity for future typological research.

In that way preserving languages is not only crucial for understanding ancient and extinct cultures but also vital for safeguarding existing cultural heritage. The workshop aims to delve into both ancient and modern languages. While philologists continue deciphering ancient languages engraved on stone, wood, and various materials, linguists collaborate closely with native speakers to document and transcribe oral traditions, stories, and linguistic nuances.

When a language vanishes—such as ancient Egyptian or Sumerian—it takes with it a significant aspect of culture, complicating future generations' ability to comprehend it fully. The workshop seeks to present a range of modern and traditional approaches for deciphering ancient writing systems and safeguarding modern endangered languages. It explores potential solutions offered by both conventional and innovative investigative methods, including those employed by palaeographers, epigraphers, documentary and computational linguists on the one hand and by traditions of passing on linguistic knowledge by members of ethnolinguistic communities on the other hand. For example, Hebrew and Syriac, while not being the actual spoken languages of the Jewish and Aramean communities, have been preserved by traditional scholarship and learning over centuries in addition to the respective spoken community languages.

Moreover, the workshop addresses the contextual challenges scholars face when dealing with ancient codes, alongside the difficulties involved in safeguarding modern languages that have overwhelmingly been transmitted orally thus far, like several Neo-Aramaic varieties. In such cases, the points of interest between linguists and the communities of speakers sometimes diverge. Especially in contexts of migration, minority languages are prone to lose communicative functions and may be viewed by some members of the community as hindering integration and competitiveness in majority-language contexts. Furthermore, there has to be a negotiation about which variety to preserve. The resolutions of intra-communal negotiations may run counter to the linguists' expectation by choosing traditional literary or sacred languages like Syriac or Hebrew in lieu of the language actually spoken within the community. This last point represents a borderline case between the preservation of extinct or rather dormant languages and the preservation of endangered languages. By surveying various methodologies, the workshop aims to provide insights into preserving linguistic heritage while bridging the gap between ancient and modern language studies on the one hand and the respective language communities on the other hand, resulting in a polyphony of voices.