

Lost in Translation: Historical Perspectives on Language and Student Mobility from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century

Workshop – University of Geneva – June 16, 2026

Since the nineteenth century, international student mobility has witnessed an unprecedented increase. This was in large part due to increased global competition after the Second World War but was also the result of the commodification of academic mobility during this period. In more recent years, student mobility flows have gradually expanded to integrate parts of the world that were once far-removed from each other, and there is now a much wider range of host countries. According to UNESCO, 6.9 million students studied abroad in 2022, with young people from every corner of the world participating. In this context, the question of language acquisition is particularly relevant since it shapes how a student experiences mobility and how they access knowledge. What language(s) do students use to learn while they are abroad? How do they learn these languages? Who are their instructors? Aside from purely practical considerations, the question of language also touches on much larger issues outside of education—such as political, social, or diplomatic considerations— and involves a wide array of actors (instructors, university administrators, public authorities, private organizations, etc.)

This workshop therefore seeks to explore **the relationship between language and student mobility from the nineteenth century to the present**, a historical perspective that few scholars have adopted.

For the last several decades, historians have studied the concept of student mobility mainly through the lens of social history focusing specific migratory flows. This scholarship has included studies of different social groups and the conditions that shape their mobility, (Manitakis 2000, Karady 2002, Moulinier 2011), employing perspectives such as gendered analysis (Cattan 2004, Tikhonov-Sigrist, Durand 2020). Others highlight the lived experience of students in their host country and pose questions about integration and discrimination (Kévonian, Tronchet 2013 and 2022) or the social and professional opportunities that result from educational mobility. At the same time, this work draws attention to the political and diplomatic stakes associated with student mobility, using, for example, the lens of transnational or transimperial cooperation and competition (Katsakioris 2022, Matasci, Ruppen-Coutaz 2024), which can reveal key features of university and cultural diplomacy (Lerg, Adam, 2015, Tronchet 2016, Suzarte 2023). Student politics also figure into this framework, such as the mobility associated with transnational student organizing or activism (Laqua 2017, Löhr 2024, Gillabert, Lesnykh, Pesta 2025). In terms of geography, recent scholarship has shown a renewed interest in the Europeanization of universities (Ruppen-Coutaz, Paoli 2024, Haikola, Östling 2025); other studies about academic mobility offer a more inclusive perspective and focus on a wider range of home and host countries outside of the western world, including colonial and post-colonial spaces (Harrell, 1992, Mukerjee 2010, Fei 2017, Legrandjacques 2021). However, in contrast to fields

like linguistics (Messana 2024) and education (Ruet 2018, Molinier, Moore 2020), historians rarely broach the topic of language acquisition for mobile students as a subject worth studying in its own right.

To develop a historical analysis of **language and student mobility**, while also remaining open to interdisciplinary perspectives (education, sociology, political science, linguistics), we invite proposals related to the following methodological approaches:

-A language for learning: This first approach asks scholars to reflect on how mobile students are able to pursue their course of study from the perspective of language. This includes **the tools, means of support, and strategies** that students have access to before or during their time abroad and how they utilize, or reject, these resources. In addition to emphasizing the importance of student autonomy, this journée d'études seeks to shed light on **the pedagogical practices and innovations** used to facilitate the acquisition of the language in which mobile students learn. What languages are students speaking when they study abroad (language of the host country, English, other)? How does their ability to express themselves evolve over time? Are there any notable disciplinary innovations, particularly in linguistics, that help students learn? What impact does student mobility have on language instruction and academic curriculum in host countries?

-Actors and Sites of Learning: The issue of language learning for mobile students involves a variety of actors aside from the students themselves. If **members of the university** (administrators, instructors, etc.) are invested in promoting language training for foreign students, **outside actors** can also become involved, such as public authorities, student organizations and other groups, as well as private individuals. This approach may also consider the networks associated with the students—familial, migratory, or even alumni. Scholars may also explore the diverse nature of these individuals and groups to consider factors related to categories like **gender**. For instance, what was the role of women among teaching staff? Additionally, there is the question of where students learn. How do they fit into traditional spaces at a university like classrooms? Do they learn elsewhere? What do these sites for learning reveal about native social practices? What is the role of third spaces (residence halls, restaurants, cafés) or private spaces? An analysis of these varied elements allows scholars to better understand the **spaces that students occupy when they are abroad** and to craft a more complete social history that incorporates elements outside of the university structure.

-Language and Diplomacy: Language instruction and acquisition are also **political acts**. They are deeply intertwined with the practices and strategies related to linguistic, cultural, and university diplomacy. Since the end of the nineteenth century, issues surrounding the politicization of language have appeared in different contexts, from imperial expansion to the bifurcated divide of the Cold War. Considering the mobility of students who come from colonized territories, what does it mean for these students to learn and study in the language of the colonizer as opposed to that of a different host state? Moreover, this approach may also consider how language can function as a tool of **international relations**. For example, during the Cold War, competition between two

spheres of influence had a direct effect on academic mobility. How did the monopolization of student mobility fit into the geopolitical rivalry between the two blocs, especially with respect to the role of language? More recently, the end of this rivalry and the rise of Europeanization have created new concerns and new practices related to language acquisition that have yet to be studied.

Paper proposals should be in French or English and must relate to or expand upon one or more of these approaches. Please include a short bio, working title, and a brief summary of your topic, including your methodology and/or the sources used in your project (2,000 characters max).

Proposals are due January 20, 2026. Please address any questions and all submissions to langstudmob.2026@gmail.com.

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