



INSTITUTE OF  
LANGUAGES  
CULTURES AND  
SOCIETIES

SCHOOL OF  
ADVANCED STUDY  
UNIVERSITY  
OF LONDON

Abstracts for

**The 8<sup>th</sup> Middlesex Roundtable on  
Signs, Language and Communication:**

**The Concept of Language in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Middlesex University London  
Language and Communication Research Group

22<sup>nd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> April, 2026

**Pre-Roundtable Workshop:**  
**Posthumanist Linguistics: Challenges and Pitfalls**

**A Critical Integrationist Perspective on Posthumanist Linguistics**

Dorthe Duncker (University of Copenhagen)

The posthumanist turn in linguistics draws inspiration from integrationism. Harris's work is frequently cited by posthumanist scholars, who appear to regard integrationist thinking as compatible with their own ideas about language and communication, while at the same time finding it unproblematic to map them onto concepts like distributedness, agentivity, or assemblage. However, the way integrationism is presented in posthumanist writings suggests that core notions are either misconstrued or overlooked. In this talk, I identify points of agreement and disagreement between integrationist principles and posthumanist discourse, and discuss why integrationism cannot be taken to endorse the posthumanist understanding of the human condition.

**Conundrums of their own making**

Mark Stott (Sheffield Hallam University)

The posthumanist approach, as seen for example in the work of Alastair Pennycook, posits that the communicational environment is populated with various kinds of semantic resources. The resources available in any particular place are collectively known as the spatial repertoire (e.g. Pennycook and Otsuji 2014). This sets up a 'conundrum' for the posthumanist analyst that involves attempting to understand how "people, semiotic resources and objects meet at particular moments and places" in the form of semiotic assemblages (Pennycook 2017: 280).

However, this methodology, along with multimodal approaches more generally, fails to take into account the semiological activity of the analyst. In particular, it goes unacknowledged that the components of the 'semiotic assemblage' are created via the semiological activity of the analyst and, furthermore, are the consequence of the adoption of a particular (Eurocentric) perspective on, or framing of, language and communicative activity.

This creates an inevitable distortion of the activity being studied and ultimately results in an analysis that says more about the semiological activity of the analyst than it does that of the participants involved. This is precisely the kind of analytic blind spot warned against by Harris when he writes:

"The distortion the integrationist protests against is a distortion which arises not from observation, but, on the contrary, from one kind of interpretation, which involves treating an integrated whole as if it could be taken apart like a machine in order to isolate the ultimate constituents" (1998: 144).

## Zombie Reason

Mary Coghill (University of Exeter)

This presentation aims to combine three possibly disparate things: zombie knives, post-humanism and reason. As a mere human, the following reasoning holds misconceptions. Speaking as a human, the zombie knives provide edge but not acuity. Speaking as a human, post-humanism is obsolete – the knife has a sharper edge to it.

This is an exploration of ethics, zombie behaviour and the development of post-reason. “Posthuman ethics”, Professor Patricia MacCormack’s entry in “The Posthuman Glossary” Eds: Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, is a starting point for this discussion. Another starting point is “How We Became Posthuman” by Professor N Katherine Hayles.

A third starting point includes the origin of the word “zombie” and concluding derivation into the transferred epithet of “zombie knife”. Who is bringing whom to life and who is bringing an end to another one? Is this an ethical question or lines of writing/blood in the sand?

Humans question their superior position of control over other species and do not always feel threatened by machines. Ray Kurzweil of Google sees a technologically expansive future. Donna Haraway sees the human race as operating more ethically and successfully in tandem with other species. The conclusion of this presentation provides some questions about the existence of zombie-reason.

Channel 4 Documentary 24 Hours Zombie Knives

Haraway, Donna Jeanne. (2004). *The Haraway Reader*. London. Routledge

Hayles, N.Katherine (1999). *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press

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MacCormack, Patricia. (2020). *The Ahuman Manifesto*. London. Bloomsbury Academic

## The possibilities and limits of using the master’s tools to dismantle and rebuild the master’s house

Susanna Kass (Charles University, Prague)

Posthuman critique of language centres around identifying and challenging how biases towards nonhumans are produced and maintained through language use and discourse. The posthumanist interest in language is thus two-fold, as one set of tools that are aligned with mainstream linguistics are required to identify problems and a secondly a novel set of methods and practices are needed to create a new way of using language that is aligned with the inclusivity of posthumanist ethics. Although Donna Haraway does not call herself a posthumanist, her critical figurations, such as the cyborg, and sympoetic practices of making-with and storytelling have been highly influential within critical posthumanist language practices. Along with several other posthumanists, Haraway has both critiqued and made use of ‘clunky’ structuralist tools such as Greimas’ semiotic square. Recently, digital theorist Leif Weatherby (2025) proposes a (re)turn toward structuralism to help us understand the specific variety of language produced by large language models (LLMs). As algorithmically reproducible language, he considers LLMs not as a threat but as a valuable tool which may be able to provide insights on our relationship to language.

## Reconnecting Language and Makers: An integrational critique of Holborow's *Language and Neoliberalism*

Nick White (University of Portsmouth)

In January 2026, the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP) circulated draft copies of the association's forthcoming *Mission, Vision and Values* statements to its "key stakeholder communities" (personal communication). Whatever merits such a consultation process may be perceived as having, it can also be seen as both a paradigm case of the encroachment of market values into spheres of public life, or *commons* in Pennycook's 2018 *Posthumanist Applied Linguistics*, and also of the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideology in language, resulting in unwitting support for "ideological hegemony on behalf of powerful social interests" (Holborow, 2015, p. 21). However, while broadly sympathetic to the wider aims pursued here in Pennycook and Holborow, it is still possible to argue that the discussions in each remain ambiguous on the question of how language in the experience of an individual relates to that of the collective (and *vice versa*) and that, moreover, this ambiguity presents challenges and pitfalls for both projects.

Focusing on the treatment of language in Holborow's 2015 *Language and Neoliberalism*, this paper suggests that this ambiguity results from a commitment to theoretical foundations that pay insufficient attention to what are, following Harris (1996; 1998), circumstantial factors in the contextualization of communicational experience. It then goes on to suggest that the ambiguity might be resolvable through reconnecting such language as *mission, vision, and values* with its makers who, far from being unknown or unknowable, are traceable through historical investigation.

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- Pennycook, A. 2018. *Posthumanist Applied Linguistics*. London and New York: Routledge.

## Roundtable Day 1

### **The (Multi)modality Myth of Language, or Language in Linear Limbo**

Sinéad Kwok (Hong Kong University)

The language myth comes about coterminously as a modality myth – that is, the purported autonomy of language lies in its portrayal as a *sui generis* mode of communication, as enabled by a utilitarian, glottic kind of writing<sup>1</sup> that “made speech speech and language language”<sup>2</sup>, conjuring spoken language as ‘linear’ and primary, and written language as secondary and capturing the sequentiality of speech.

It would therefore be pertinent to review several directions taken up in a multimodal turn in response to the so-called linguistic paradigm: The ‘more-than-language’ approach<sup>3</sup>, for one, only perpetuates the confinement of language in a mythologized, modalized version of it, reducing the problem to one of exploring how speech and writing (as insufficient linguistic modes) interact with non-linguistic modes; while the post-Barthesian tendency to undermine the dominance of language in communication, culminated in Ledin and Machin (2019)<sup>4</sup>, still misses the point of attending to the misconceived nature of language in the first place; it is also unclear whether the social semiotic introduction of the concept of ‘semiotic resources’ to replace the concept of signs<sup>5</sup> simply regurgitates the segregational sign (a product of the language myth), the very idea of which necessitates its own, latent ‘meaning potential’ or ‘affordances’ to be actualized in communication<sup>6</sup>; even initiatives to deconstruct language as one unified mode by viewing speech and writing as distinct modes with “related yet importantly distinct affordances”<sup>7</sup> are conceived in the mould of linearity and sequentiality<sup>8</sup> in contrast to which non-verbal modes are perceived.

The question of language, then, has been recurrently dodged by multimodal quests. What are the implications of this in a new technological age, and what would an integrationist say about all this?

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Harris, *Signs of Writing* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995); *Rethinking Writing* (London & New York: Continuum, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Roy Harris, “Language and speech,” in *Approaches to Language*, ed. Roy Harris (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1983), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Carey Jewitt, “Introduction: Handbook rationale, scope and structure,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, ed. Carey Jewitt (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Per Ledin & David Machin, “Doing critical discourse studies with multimodality: from metafunctions to materiality,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 16, no.5 (2019): 497-513, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2018.1468789>.

<sup>5</sup> Theo van Leeuwen, *Introducing Social Semiotics* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Gunther Kress, “What is mode?,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, ed. Carey Jewitt (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2009), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Ron Scollon & Suzie Wong Scollon, “Multimodality and language: a retrospective and prospective view,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, ed. Carey Jewitt (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2009).

## **Multimodal language and new depths of semiotic freedom**

Susanne Kass (Charles University, Prague)

The audio-visual paradigm of the 21st century is a turn toward multimodal communication, and although the written word is not at all in decline, mediated language use has quickly become ever more reliant on audio-visual media including images, emojis, gestures and dance to frame and buttress verbal messages. If ‘language is a virus’, what are the conditions for virality to take hold in the 21st century, how might they be qualitative as well as quantitative? If the meaningful impact of information met online is generated by ‘a difference that makes a difference’ how might one identify new qualities of language that penetrate deeply rather than the more easily quantifiable virality of memes and trends? Jesper Hoffmeyer’s concept of semiotic freedom (Hoffmeyer, 2008, 185–88) suggests an ecological understanding of how selective processes increase qualitative depth of communicated meaning (Hoffmeyer, 1992). New modes or systems of communication are not contingent on increased complexity, rather new communicative modes emerge through increased flexibility in how signs are used, resulting in a ‘deepening’ of meaning.

## **Victim or Survivor? Identity Construction in Victim Narratives and the Concept of Language in the 21st Century**

Evangelia Mourtzanou (National and Kapodistrian University, Athens)

This paper examines the discourse of sexual harassment testimonies through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), situating its investigation within broader debates on the concept of language in the 21st century. In contemporary, mediatized contexts, language operates not merely as a system of representation but as a dynamic, multimodal, and socially embedded practice through which identities, agency, and experience are actively constructed and negotiated. Focusing on victim narratives, the study explores how language functions in highly charged environments to shape subjectivity and public understanding.

Drawing on Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) and Multimodal Analysis, the research investigates how events are represented in victim testimonies, the discursive strategies through which speakers construct identities as social actors, and the role of multimodal elements in meaning-making. Presenting findings from ongoing analysis, the paper initially focuses on the public testimony of Sofia Bekatorou, a central figure in Greece’s #MeToo movement. The analysis identifies patterns in relational and experiential processes, transitivity structures, and lexical cohesion strategies that contribute to the linguistic construction of victimhood and agency. These findings highlight how language choices actively position speakers along a victim–survivor spectrum, reflecting a contemporary understanding of language as performative and identity-forming.

Building on this case, the paper also examines the narrative of Zeta Douka, who publicly recounted experiences of verbal and psychological abuse. Here, relational and experiential processes, transitivity structures, semantic fields, and lexical cohesion strategies are employed to analyze the multiple identities enacted in discourse, including woman, mother, victim, and survivor. Furthermore, by applying Labov’s narrative framework, the study considers how narrative structure and delivery interact with broader socio-cultural expectations, reinforcing the view of language as a socially situated and interpretive practice.

By comparatively analyzing these case studies, the paper identifies points of convergence and divergence in how experiences are linguistically constructed and socially interpreted. Ultimately, it argues that in the 21st century, language must be understood as a multimodal, performative, and context-dependent resource that not only reflects but actively shapes social realities. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing theoretical discussions about the nature of language while offering critical insights into how victim narratives influence public discourse on sexual harassment.

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## A Choice with Ramifications

Mark Stott (Sheffield Hallam University)

Harris claims (1996: xi) that integrationism provides an alternative to the segregational perspective on language. We can understand this as a suggestion that we are free to make a choice between viewing language from either a segregational or integrational perspective. However, this choice is not a case of neutral, abstract relativism, one that absolves the 'chooser' of responsibility. It is a choice that has ramifications with logical, ethical and practical ramifications, many of which have been discussed in detail in the integrationist literature.

The heated and ongoing race to artificial general intelligence (AGI) provides an interesting case study of possible practical ramifications involved in 'choosing' which perspective we adopt. Currently there is debate over which of two possible approaches offers the best route to AGI: either the symbolic AI approach, or the connectivist-inspired artificial neural-network approach. Since the rise of LLMs the latter has been in the ascendancy, despite well-publicised problems such as the tendency to 'hallucinate'. Some have suggested that such issues will persist until the two approaches are used in conjunction. However, both approaches arise from segregational conceptions of language. This raises a number of interesting, and presently highly speculative, questions regarding whether segregational approaches to language could ever form the basis for artificial human-level, or even human-surpassing (whatever that may amount to), 'intelligence'. And what, if anything, would such success mean for integrational theory, and what can an integrational perspective on language offer on the issues to hand.

## LLMs and the symbolic function of language

Gianluca Michelli (LUMSA, Rome; ICP, Paris)

With the spread of AI systems based on Large Language Models (LLMs), a growing body of research has attempted to make sense of their unprecedented linguistic capacities. Philosophical debates have largely focused on whether LLMs can, in principle, understand language. Positions range from strong scepticism—Bender et al. (2021)’s “stochastic parrots” view—to recent enthusiasm, culminating in Cappelen and Dever (2025)’s “whole-hog” thesis. Given this stalemate, some authors have taken a middle way by decoupling linguistic competence from other cognitive faculties (Nefdt, 2026), portraying LLMs as purely linguistic—rather than genuinely cognitive—agents. This proposal, however, raises further questions, given the deeply integrative character of language (Harris, 1998).

In this talk, I draw attention to a dimension of human language that has been largely neglected in recent discussions. Mainstream approaches tend to construe language primarily as an instrument of communication, framing the challenge posed by LLMs in terms of their (alleged) ability to understand and convey communicative content. Yet human language is not merely a tool for coordination and joint action (Clark, 1996). Construed broadly as a symbolic institution, language is a fundamental medium through which individuals build and sustain personal as well as collective identities. Drawing on Ortigues (2007)’s account of the symbolic function, I argue that this identity-constituting role of language remains distinctively human. The impersonal character of present-day genAI systems (Annoni, Battisti, and Marchegiani, 2026) suggests a principled difference in their linguistic agency.

**Keywords**— LLMs, integrationism, symbolic function, Ortigues

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## I Would Have Took...

Mary Coghill (University of Exeter)

荃者所以在鱼，得鱼而忘荃

Nets are for fish;

Once you get the fish, you can forget the net.

言者所以在意，得意而忘言

Words are for meaning;

Once you get the meaning, you can forget the words

Roman Jakobson's core research into parallels and the combination of language – along metonymic or metaphoric lines - has provided the basis for fresh insight into how computers can correlate words and their meanings. The computer takes the individual words, uses their context and then derives more likely or less likely combinations to construct text. Inevitably the construction of the software to enable this is crucial. Using the research of the writers listed below. This presentation asks whether the computer has taken words and constructed something new or whether it is simply reiterative – I would have took....

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## Language, Linguaging, and Multilingualism in a Neoliberal Education

Cliff Ndlangamandla (University of South Africa, Pretoria)

There are mismatches between ontologies of language and languaging, on the one hand, and language policy or language teaching, on the other. South Africa has a proliferation of policies with limited implementation and desired outcome, in other words, a misalignment of policies with curriculum. In addition, institutions tend to follow a populist and simplistic misdiagnosis of problems and misconceptualisation of language, and multilingualism and therefore perpetuate the mismatches of policies and implementation. This is a context where ideologically, language policy is influenced by a love for both monolingualism and multilingualism by institutions and government. The paper is underpinned by three questions: “What is a language?” “What ontologies/theories and models of language, languaging, and multilingualism inform multilingual policies in education?” and “How can Southern ontologies of language, languaging, and

multilingualism promote equity, justice, change, and transformation?” In answering these questions, I draw on the coloniality and decoloniality of language and communication, and explore what it could mean to decolonise language and communication in a university context, despite the abiding and enduring existence of the project of capitalist neoliberal principles and policies governing higher education.

## Can Language Teaching Strike a New Chord in the 21st Century?

Nick White (University of Portsmouth)

As might be expected, it has never been possible to avoid the question, ‘What do you mean by language?’ in the practice of language teaching. Indeed, it is a foundational question that must be addressed before the language educator can make decisions on what constitutes a learnable unit of language (whether defined in the Council of Europe’s terms of *savoir* or *savoir-faire*) and what are considered ideal conditions for facilitating the learning (or acquisition) of such units (the *savoir-être* and *savoir apprendre* of the Council of Europe, 2020). However, to anyone familiar with the work of Roy Harris, it seems evident that foundations such as these are an open invitation to the language myth (see e.g. Harris, 1981); as a consequence it seems therefore unsurprising to find Long (2015) reporting between 40 and 60 theories of second language acquisition, which, even after alignment with eight broader research traditions, frequently turn out to be “clearly oppositional, not complementary” (Long, 2015, p. 32).

To consider what this means for language teaching in the second quarter of the 21st century, this contribution suggests that present issues are, in essence, fundamentally unchanged from those which confronted Wilhelm Viëtor (1850-1918) when he wrote his pamphlet, *Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren! ein Beitrag zur überbürdungsfragen* (1905 [1882]). In brief, these are the consequences for the intersubjective nature of language teaching in the face of increased demands for regulation and standardization concomitant with the expansion of education on an industrial, global scale.

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## The Extra-Linguistic Substance of Language-ing

Kieran McGillicuddy (Independent Scholar)

It is bizarre that so many linguists haven't worked out that language doesn't work. If you say

*The cat sat on the mat*

or

*This is my brother*

I have no idea what you are talking about, from the 'language' you seem to produce, since there is no 'this' or 'the cat', and, in any case, I can't distinguish 'this' from 'this', and I have related problems with 'he' 'should', 'can', and 'when', not to mention 'will'.

Language needs something, which is not a word or a sign, which allows me to distinguish this from this, and that something is not found in language, whereas 'languageing' may introduce entities into our interactant's consciousness, with those 'entities' different for each, and changing in the course of interaction, and what they are being identical to what we understand them to be.

There can be systematicity to language-ing, where we may reject systematicity for language.

Language doesn't engage with other modes, while language-ing is multimodal, formed around functions, amongst which deixis is crucial.

Language structure and syntax can be seen as unnecessary byproducts of analysis, and not languageing.

There can be systematicity to the language actions taking place, without determinacy of meaning, with 'meaning' then relegated to secondary importance.

## The Words Don't Work Anymore: Language in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

Chris Barnham (Independent Scholar)

In the pre-modern period, the world was construed as a text; the language of God was written on the earth and in the stars. It was assumed that the world contained certain forms and the purpose of language was to approximate to these forms.

In the 18C this model was overthrown by an account of word meaning based on usage. Although a faith in reference was largely retained at first, it was easy for a position to emerge that asserted that words, themselves, create meaning. In the early 20C, the signifier became separated from the signified.....

At the turn of the 21C the malignant fruits of this development are now becoming evident. When the meaning of words is detached from *both* reference and form, they adopt any chosen meaning. They lose their effectiveness as tools of communication, and this is becoming increasingly clear in marketing.

But there is now evidence of a new return to 'form'. 'Being' is becoming more important than 'saying'; signs are *identities that communicate*. Brands that are authentic (e.g. that act themselves) are trusted more. And in an age of identity politics, leaders that are 'just being themselves' can seemingly dispense with the rationalities of traditional policy making and debate.

Are we returning to a theory of meaning based on form, *but now without any regard for reference*? Is form now simply equated with 'performance'? In the visual world of mass/social media is semiotic 'being' the future of language?

## Re-linguaging communication as a three-body problem

Peter Kastberg (Aalborg University)

A spectre is haunting communication theory — the spectre of the message. Be the message that which is transmitted, that which is reacted to, or that which is being constituted. Alas, with the message as pivot, communicating becomes a matter of logistics, i.e., of procuring, distributing, and maintaining the message. Even if scholars of communication theory routinely distance themselves from the conduit metaphor of communication, they do not part ways with its Siamese twin, the message. With the message as pivot, the communication process becomes centripetal, positing that the *telos* of communication is shared meaning. Albeit laudable, this *telos* nevertheless rests on the aged assumptions that meaning is a discrete entity and that sharing it is akin to overlapping sets in a Venn Diagram. Furthermore, privileging the message leads to both ‘transfiguration’ and ‘transubstantiation’. ‘Transfiguration’ in the sense that documents can somehow ‘inform’ etc.; and ‘transubstantiation’ in the sense that documents can somehow ‘talk things into being’. Striving to avoid the many-headed Scylla of transsubstantiations/transfigurations, while at the same time steering clear of the centripetal pull of Charybdis’ vortex of shared meaning, I propose to re-linguage communication theory by building on its rudimentary constituents, i.e., on I, You, and It, and hence to view communication as a three-body problem. As such communicating inherently becomes a processual phenomenon, where time itself is the pivot around which communicative constituents evolve, positing that the *telos* of communication is not one of shared meaning but the very coextensiveness of communication and being.

## Roundtable Day 2

### **Are there limits to how we are prepared to apply the term ‘language’?**

Adrian Pablé (Scuola Universitaria Professionale della Svizzera Italiana, Ticino)

“...if you want to understand human nature, it is important to get your philosophy of language right” (Harris 2003: 83).

### **Cosmological Linguistics**

Johan Siebers (Middlesex University London)

“L’uni-vers, c’est une fleur de rhétorique.” (Lacan)

### **Language Questioning Language – or Why the Place of the Study of Language is in the Humanities**

Dorthe Duncker (University of Copenhagen)

The question, “What do you mean by *language*?”, can only be asked by a human, since humans, as far as we know, are the only species capable of asking questions, including questions about language itself. According to the integrationist, only a fool would ask what a question is, but in this case, it may simply *be* the question. Any question about language can only be asked and answered within the resources of language by those familiar with its reflexive dimension. Phenomenologically, it is impossible for a human to adopt a non-human perspective. We can imagine what it is like to be a bat or a lion, and we may feel that such imagination achieves experiential equivalence, but it remains just a feeling. When communicating with a non-human participant, my interpretation of the event is the methodological equivalent of that experience. I cannot *ask* my co-participant about it.

### **The current turn to historicising ‘Sound’ in the Humanities**

Artemis Ignatidou (University of Bayreuth)

Metaphors attributing linguistic properties to Western art-music have dominated scholarly and popular descriptions of its stylistic mannerisms, continuities, and discontinuities at least since the Baroque. Similarly, in the field of traditional and popular music genres, since the 19th century it has been customary to make reference to different musical ‘idioms’ and to compare the ‘syntax’ and the ‘grammar’ of one music to another in order to map out their lineage and their communicative effects or to analyse the impact of different modes of music education.

The currently unfolding turn towards contextualising music as one element of ‘sound’ among others that take place at any given place and time, presents us with the exciting methodological opportunity to use historical descriptions of speech, music, sound, noise, silence as well as their

historical construction, reception and conceptualisation, as equally impactful comparative units towards capturing culture in the process of its formation and before its rationalisation and politicisation. Unlike previous methodological turns this one does not promise to replace all others but rather to carry them forward towards a modal understanding of comparative cultural history: one that will not compare the music of two places in order to explain the transference but one that will capture how a whisper in Hungary was transmediated into a chair in England and a Revolution in Haiti [example fictional: do not quote].

For the purposes of this paper, I will present benefits and limitations in this turn towards a sound-based, trans-media comparative cultural history, I will share some of the obstacles I have faced in my attempts to recreate a 'historical soundscape' in my own research, and instigate discussion about the potential of this approach to liberate cultural history from one of its more detrimental attributes: its attachment to linear temporality.