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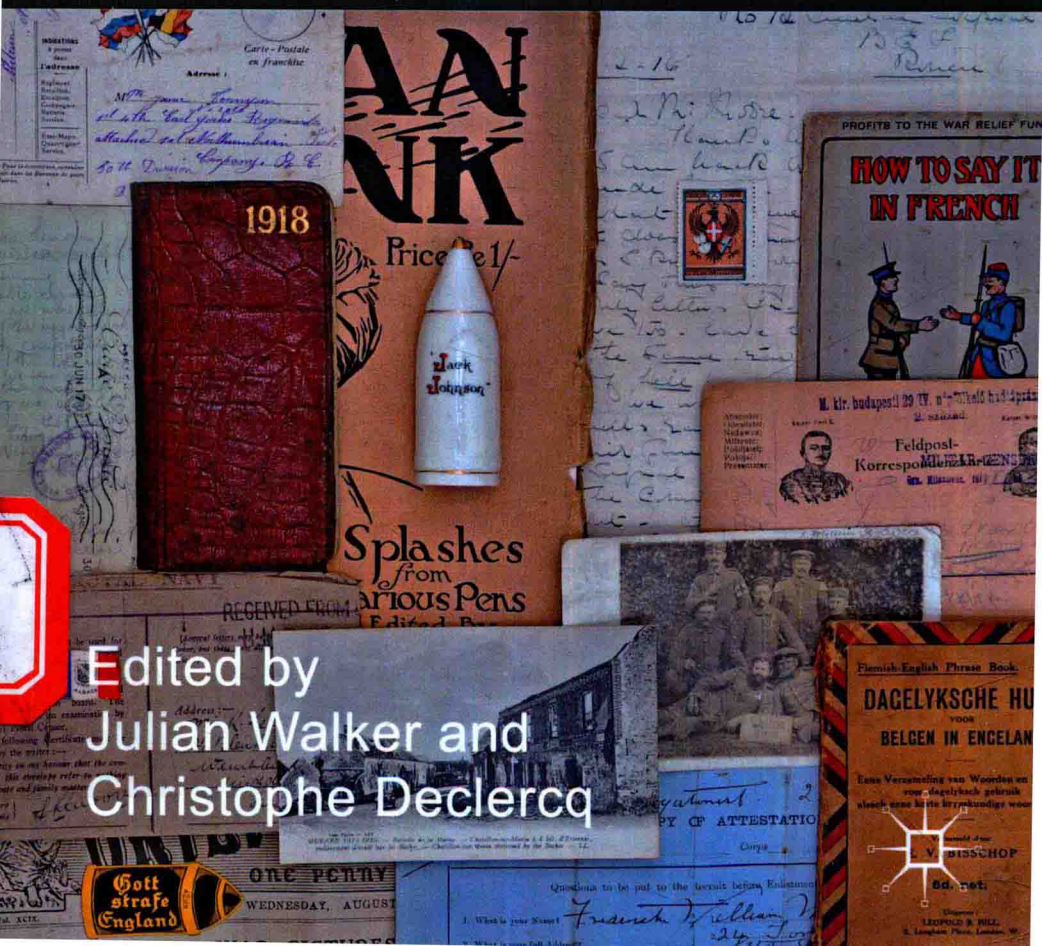
Languages and the First World War: Communicating in a Transnational War



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Palgrave Studies in Languages at War
ISBN 978-1-137-55029-3 ISBN 978-1-137-55030-9 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-55030-9

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature.
The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd. London

Languages and the First World War: Communicating in a Transnational War

Palgrave Studies in Languages at War

Series Editors: **Hilary Footitt**, University of Reading, UK and **Michael Kelly**, University of Southampton, UK.

Languages play a crucial role in war, conflict and peacemaking: in intelligence gathering and evaluation, pre-deployment preparations, operations on the ground, regime-change, and supporting refugees and displaced persons. In the politics of war, languages have a dual impact: a public policy dimension, setting frameworks and expectations; and the lived experience of those 'on the ground', working with and meeting speakers of other languages.

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Series Standing Order ISBN 978–0–230–35516–3 (hardback)
9780–230–35517–0 (paperback)
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Acknowledgements

The companion volumes *Languages and the First World War*, and indeed the conference they draw from, could not have happened without the support of people to whom sincere gratitude is owed. We thank, in particular, Marnix Beyen (University of Antwerp), Robert Davies (British Library) and Hilary Footitt (University of Reading).

Other people involved in organizing the conference were Ben Ali Abdelghani, Anke Baeck, Nele Crabbé, Bruno Fleurackers, Christine Goethals, Els Maldoy, Aline Remael, Pascal Sleeckx, Alex Vanneste and Alain Verschoren (University of Antwerp); Barbara De Schepper and Koen Kennis (City of Antwerp); Geert de Proost (Representation of the Flemish Government to the United Kingdom); Jorge Diaz-Cintas (University College London); Jamie Andrews, Kristian Jensen, Jonnie Robinson and Matthew Shaw (British Library); Sheena Calvert and the students of CSM Graphics (University of the Arts London, 2014–15 MA group).

Thanks to Peter Doyle for the idea of initiating the conference.

Our job as editors has been to move the essays around to provide the optimum range of connections. Groupings have emerged and competed with other groupings. We feel we have arrived at the most challenging arrangement, provoking further questioning. Our task was made easier through correspondence with Hilary Footitt and Mike Kelly, to whom many thanks.

Finally we – the editors and contributors – are grateful to Libby Forrest, Chloe Fitzsimmons and Fiona Little for their support for and work on this book.

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Sandrijn Van Den Noortgate graduated as an interpreter from the University of Antwerp with an MA dissertation describing the role and position of interpreters in the first half of the twentieth century and how a true profession emerged as a result of the practice of mediation in wartime. She is currently working as a freelance translator.

Julian Walker is a writer and research-based artist, and an educator at the British Library. He has written five books on the history of the English language, including *Trench Talk: Words of the First World War*, co-authored with Peter Doyle (2012), and books on social history. He co-organized the 'Languages and the First World War' conference, and has written widely online on language change during and after the First World War.

Contents

Introduction

Meetings between Languages

Christophe Declercq and Julian Walker

The collection of essays in this book developed from the conference 'Languages and the First World War', held at the University of Antwerp and the British Library in June 2014. That conference offered the opportunity to bring together several aspects of the wartime and post-war linguistic interpretations of the experience of the First World War: language collecting, change within languages, influences between languages, interpretation, status difference between languages, dialects and argots. The second volume deals with *Memory and Representation*; this first volume concerns *Communicating in a Transnational War*.

The essays in this volume look at how languages changed, connected and were observed during the period of the conflict. The problems and opportunities of dealing with foreign languages are explored in the first section, 'Languages at the Front', communication with home and the imagination and creation of a sense of 'home' in 'Writing Home', the second section, the management of language and languages away from the combat zones in the third section, 'The Home Front', and reactions to language change in the final section, 'Collecting Conflict Words'.

While many of the essays are based on the extraordinary phenomenon of the Western Front, there are intriguing facets of language change and manipulation elsewhere, some unconnected with events in France and Flanders, and focusing less on combatants than on civilians, administrators and politicians.

Languages at the Front

Krista Cowman's paper notes that, as regards their changing linguistic environment, the starting point for some soldiers was being exposed to the difference between French and English. The British Expeditionary

Force in France was ill equipped to manage this situation. Phrasebooks provided a language which was both selected and predictive, relating to the ultimate predictive language of the Field Service Postcard, which itself reflected the predictive parameters in soldiers' postcards home, set both by concerns over censorship and by the soldiers' own sensibilities and emotional protection of loved ones. Cowman points out that phrasebooks appeared partially within the paradigm of health and safety; sometimes this was explicit, as in the case of *Sprechen Sie Deutsch and Parley Voo!* (1917), which carried advertisements for soldiers' dental care products.[1] Despite the obvious and growing importance of phrasebooks for the British soldier operating abroad, there was little development from the 'traveller's guide' model. The *Automatic-Interpreter*, published in France in 1918 'for the ... British Soldier in France with the Allies, in Germany in Case of Captivity', offered a list of parts of the body as locations of wounds that matches the pattern of requests elsewhere to purchase a mirror, a rug or a pair of slippers. It is difficult not to read as poignant naivety the final exchange in the 1914 *How to Say it in French* phrasebook (see Figure 0.1).

In soldiers' slang glossaries unintentional humour was inevitable. Everyday war experiences were not that much of an ongoing divertissement – quite the contrary; but boredom, apparently futile routine and petty officialdom have long provided ground for humour in the military experience, as evidenced in countless trench journals. This is confirmed by Julie Coleman:

> Humour isn't just for light-hearted entertainment, though. It can be used to avoid confronting unpleasant realities, and many dictionaries of the slang of soldiers serving in the First World War favoured misdefinition as a way of making light of inhuman conditions and incompetent or incomprehensible bureaucracy. (Coleman 2008: 11)

Occasional glossaries in trench journals indicate the idea of the foreign language as inherently funny (e.g. the *Fifth Glo'ster Gazette*, July 1918, provides a joke glossary of Italian). The overarching question here is: how did the soldier deal with foreign languages? For British soldiers reactions were guided by experience, and by social class. How did the school teaching of French in Britain, for example, or the provider of phrasebooks, shape as much as reflect attitudes? Noticeable about the *Chinese Note Book for C.L.C. [Chinese Labour Corps] Officers*,[2] for example, is that it is designed for the corps' British and French officers to speak

French.	*English.*	*Pronunciation.*
Vous êtes de bonne heure	You are early	Voos ate deh bonn urr.
Il est étranger	He is a foreigner	Eel ate a-trong-jay.
Parlez-vous français ?	Do yŏu speak French ?	Parlay voo frongsay ?
Non, pas du tout	No, not at all	Nong pah du too.
Quel dommage	What a pity	Kell domahj.
Quel malheur	Bad luck	Kel mal-urr.
Quelle bonne chance	Good luck	Kel bonn shonse.
Je crois que oui	I think so	Jeh krwah keh we.
Je crois que non	I do not think so	Jeh krwah keh nong.
Savez-vous monter à bicyclette ?	Can you ride a bicycle ?	Savvay voo montay ah beeseeclett ?
Les journaux Anglais	English newspapers	Lay joor-no Onglay.
Comment allez-vous ?	How are you ?	Kommont allay voo ?
Quel est votre nom ?	What is your name ?	Kel a votr nom ?
Je m'appelle	I am called	Jeh map-pell.
Où sont les Anglais ?	Where are the English ?	Ooh song lays Onglay ?
Voilà	There	Voy lah.
Est-ce loin	Is it far	Ace lowahn.
Tout près	Quite near	Too pray.
Au plus tôt	As soon as possible	Oh plu toh.
Qu'est-ce que vous voulez ?	What do you want ?	Kess keh voo vooley ?
Espérons que la paix sera bientôt dèclarée	Let us hope peace will soon be declared	Espairong keh lah pay serrah beangtoh dayklarray.
Courage	Cheer up	Koorahj.

Notes on pronunciation.

Pronounce " j " like " s " in vision.
When " g " is at the end of a word pronounce it very slightly.
Pronounce " a " and " e " when alone like the English letters.
Pronounce " un " like " un " in hung without the " h " and " g."
Pronounce " une " like " une " in tune without the " t."

PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHERS

Figure 0.1 Page from *How to Say it in French* (Bristol, 1914)

to the Chinese labourers, but barely caters for any need to understand what was being said in the other direction (see Figure 0.2).

The need to manage foreign languages was a matter of both safety and political expediency. Within the Austro-Hungarian armies, as shown by Tamara Scheer's essay, tactical caution was needed in the management of language; particular languages among the more than a dozen in use could carry connotations of disloyalty or separatism, yet all carried official approval. The model of diglossia-convergence can be seen in two variations of English apparent at the time, military slang and standard English, brought together in the expectation of civilians to be conversant with soldiers' slang. Witness to that are the frequent jokes in *Punch* pointing out the mistakes of those who got slang wrong, usually elderly women. Lynda Mugglestone gives the example of Andrew Clark's awareness of 'war enthusiasm' expressed in, for example, the appropriation into female fashion of military 'accessories'. Parallel to this can be seen a divergence, most often seen in the growing distance between soldier and civilian, deriving largely from the wholly disparate experiences of life and death. Koenraad Du Pont's essay points out how this divergence was used in an Italian trench journal as a morale booster.

Amid the military chaos that was the First World War and among its linguistic representation stand the interpreter and the censor, whose jobs as much as anything were to read between the lines for indicators of morale. The need for interpreters was acknowledged and called for by Jeroom Leuridan (see Marnix Beyen's essay), within a diglossal single political unit, the Belgian army, where French was used by the officer class, and Flemish was largely used by rank-and-file soldiers from Flanders. Sandrijn Van Den Noortgate's essay shows how the role of the interpreter was key in the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. For those who took on the role of interpreting, there was a context which ranged from 'having a go', outrageous expectations, suspicion and resentment to appreciation, applause and a place in the vanguard of the professionalization of the role.

When it was decided that certain French and Japanese amendments to the Covenant of the League of Nations should be withdrawn, President Wilson of the United States addressed the League and congratulated it on its constitution. However, in the words of *The Times* of 29 April 1919, the senior Japanese delegate, Baron Makino, expressed his concern and regret in that Wilson's speech had not been translated, the first time any delegate at the conference had overlooked that formality. The *Dundee Courier* of the same day was slightly less reserved in its reporting on the matter and headlined that Japan warned the Allies of a danger of 'racial