

Call for Papers

Language in Crisis, Crisis in Language, Language on Crisis: Interdisciplinary Perspectives From Antiquity to Modern Times

Date: November 20th-21st, 2025

Venue: online (University of Cologne)

Abstract: 500 words, in PDF, anonymous

Deadline: October 13th, 2025

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Topics and Aims of the Conference

The ancient Greek historian Thucydides was already aware of the intersection and mutual influence between historical moments of crisis and the usage of language, as in his description of the civil strife on the island of Kerkyra he notices:

τὴν εἰωθυῖαν ἀξίωσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐς τὰ ἔργα ἀντήλλαξαν τῇ δικαιώσει (3.82.4)

(the common meaning of words to describe events was changed at each party's discretion)

Conflicts within communities are particularly disturbing since they entail a rupture in social unity and, therefore, also a fracture in the cultural conventions that regulate it. Language, as the most direct and palpable expression of such cultural norms, plays a seminal role in times of crisis. On the one hand, internal conflict causes changes in the usage of language; on the other, language influences the development of contemporary events. In the historian's reflection, moreover, a meta-level is added when the mutual influence between crisis and language is itself analysed in a specialised language.

The online conference "Language in Crisis, Crisis in Language, Language on Crisis. Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Ancient to Modern Times" explores this mutual influence between historical moments of crisis and the usage of language across different ancient cultures and is particularly interested in how insights in the ancient thoughts about the intersection of crisis and language can help us to better understand the role of language in our own societies. Besides, we would like to inspire a discussion upon potential common traits across cultures in their reactions to internal strife by and through language that might reflect universal human experiences.

State of Research

Research on the intersection between times of internal struggle and the use of language has been conducted by BÖRM/GOTTER/HAVENER 2023 on political communication during the civil wars in the late Roman republic, NEBELIN/TIERSCH 2021 on the "semantical strife" in Rome between republic and principate, and KLOOSTER/KUIN 2021, proposing a "rhetoric of crisis" through which the "traumatic" experience of crisis is dealt with. Modern philology is more focused on how the crisis is represented as a narrative: DEGE/STRASSER

2024 explore how crisis is transformed into short stories, NÜNNING/NÜN-NING 2020 analyse the narrative structure of crisis, and FENSKE/HÜLK/SCHUHEN 2014 collect examples for the concept of crisis as a figure of thought.

Still, there are important aspects that have received little attention so far, such as the meta-level reflecting upon the intersection between internal struggle and language and establishing it as a linguistic factor of the crisis itself. Besides, the presentation of such a crisis of language in texts using this same language has not yet been investigated extensively. It is the aim of our conference to step into this gap as growing instability and unrest as well as radicalism of political views lead to and are fostered by a communicative style that relies heavily on slogans and catch words.

Outline of the Program

The conference will be held **online** on **November 20th/21st, 2025**. On the first evening, a keynote lecture given by a guest speaker will introduce the conference. On the second day, six contributions of 30 minutes each (25 minutes for the presentation and 5 minutes for discussion) will take place from 11 A.M. to 3 P.M. CET (including an hour-long lunch break), concluding in a panel discussion led by the organisers from 4 P.M. to 5 P.M. CET. The language of the conference will be **English**.

Abstracts

Proposals for contributions are welcomed from every scholarly level: submissions by early career scholars are particularly encouraged. A distinctive character of this conference is its comparative and intercultural approach. We are therefore looking for contributions covering a wide range of ancient cultures, among others, Egyptology, Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Classics, Mesoamerican Studies, Indoeuropean Linguistics and others. There are three main questions we would like to pose and reflect upon:

- ✓ What changes in the use of political, ethical and religious language are thematised in textual representations of internal strife?
- ✓ Through which linguistic means (vocabulary, style, textual genres...) do representations of crisis describe the crisis itself and the reciprocal effects between crisis and language?
- ✓ What role do these textual representations play within the crisis? How do they influence the crisis itself and its reception?

Proposals for contributions should not exceed **500 words** (excluding bibliography) and should be emailed as **anonymized PDF** to **Isabel Caspar (icaspar1@uni-koeln.de)** and **Margherita Coughlan (margheritacoughlan@gmail.com)** no later than **October 13th, 2025**. Applicants will be informed about the outcome of their submission ca. 15 days after the deadline.

For further inquiries, please contact Isabel Caspar (icaspar1@uni-koeln.de) or Margherita Coughlan (margheritacoughlan@gmail.com). We look forward to your submissions and to an engaging conference!

This event is made possible thanks to the support of the Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes.