

Sacred Languages and the Formation of Religious Terminology: Contact, Borrowing, and Transformation

Proposal for a workshop at the 59th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea (SLE 2026), to be held in Osnabrück, 26–29 August 2026

Convenors:

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Religious terminology provides a unique window into processes of language contact, borrowing, adaptation, and semantic change. Across time and space, languages regarded as *sacred* – such as Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Classical Arabic, or Hebrew – have exerted a profound and lasting influence on vernaculars, shaping not only the lexicon of theology and ritual but also broader conceptual and stylistic patterns.

This workshop aims to explore the formation, transmission, and transformation of religious terminology in contexts where sacred and vernacular languages interact. We invite contributions that address phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic adaptation of borrowed terms, as well as the sociolinguistic and cultural mechanisms that regulate such transfers.

A central question concerns the role of sacredness and religiosity as sources of linguistic prestige. Sacred languages often function simultaneously as vehicles of revelation, education, and authority, thereby establishing hierarchies of linguistic value that guide borrowing and imitation. The workshop will ask how *prestige rooted in sanctity* differs from other forms of prestige (political, economic, or cultural), and how it affects lexical choices, stylistic norms, and perceptions of linguistic purity.

Following Bennett's (2018: 6) distinction between *sacred language*, *liturgical language*, and *religious language*, we also aim to refine the analytical vocabulary used in contact studies. This differentiation allows us to trace how varying degrees of sanctity and institutionalisation shape the direction, intensity, and nature of linguistic influence.

Rather than focusing on a single linguistic tradition, the workshop seeks to bring together a wide range of case studies that illuminate comparable mechanisms of linguistic sanctification across different cultural settings. Examples may include the influence of Latin on Old Polish and other Slavic languages, but also the impact of Arabic on Berber, Sanskrit on Dravidian, or Greek on early Christian vernaculars. By integrating such perspectives, the workshop aims to connect detailed historical and philological analyses with broader theoretical approaches from historical sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. This comparative outlook will help identify recurring patterns in how sacred authority, textual canonicity, and ritual practice shape the dynamics of contact-induced change and the formation of religious terminology.

Topics may include

- Phonological and morphological adaptation of religious terms from sacred to vernacular languages
- Semantic shifts and reinterpretations of theological vocabulary
- Sacredness and prestige as factors shaping linguistic change
- Institutional and liturgical mechanisms of transmission
- Translation, calquing, and neologism formation in religious discourse
- Comparative studies (e.g. Latin–Slavic, Arabic–Berber, Sanskrit–Dravidian, etc.)
- Methodological implications of distinguishing sacred, liturgical, and religious languages

Please send abstracts of up to 300 words by **November 10th** to any of the two convenors. Include your affiliation and e-mail address and add four to five keywords.

NB: Notification of acceptance/rejection of workshop proposals by the SLE workshops committee will be by 15 December 2025. In the second step, abstracts for presentations – also those for workshops – should be submitted via EasyChair by 15 January 2026, for which acceptance/rejection will be announced by 31 March 2026.

Selected references

Bennett, B.P. (2018) *Sacred Languages of the World: An Introduction*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Drinka, B. (2011) ‘The sacral stamp of Greek: Periphrastic constructions in New Testament translations of Latin, Gothic, and Old Church Slavonic’, in Welo, E. (ed.) *Indo-European Syntax and Pragmatics: Contrastive Approaches*. *Oslo Studies in Language*, 3(3), pp. 41–73.

Khachaturyan, M. (2017) ‘Christianity, language contact and language change.’ *Texas Linguistic Forum*, 60, pp. 1–15.

Kossmann, M.G. (2013) *The Arabic Influence on Northern Berber*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Leonhardt, J. (2013) *Latin: Story of a World Language*. Translated by K. Kronenberg. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Pollock, S. (2006) *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Schieffelin, B.B. (2014) 'Christianizing language and the dis-placement of culture in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea.' *Current Anthropology*, 55(S10), pp. S226–S237.

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Timofeeva, O. (2018) 'Survival and loss of Old English religious vocabulary between 1150 and 1350.' *English Language & Linguistics*, 22(2), pp. 225–247.

Versteegh, K. (2014) *The Arabic Language*. 2nd edn. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.