



2nd jointly organised symposium with the Institute of Languages, Culture and Societies, London / Levantine Heritage Foundation, Woburn Suite, Senate House, Malet Street London WC1E 7HU

24 June 2026, 4 - 8 pm

Languages of the Levant



**INSTITUTE OF
LANGUAGES
AND
SOCIETIES**

**SCHOOL OF
ADVANCED STUDY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON**

Languages were at the heart of the Levant. In a multinational region, it was essential to know many different languages. Language could be an instrument of confrontation and manipulation, as well as a means of communication. Interpreters became crucial intermediaries for foreign embassies, the Ottoman government, businesses and travellers. Maureen Freely reveals the vital role language reform played in Kemal's nationalisation programme in Turkey. Miguel Selvelli shows the multiplicity of languages used in the polyglot port and press of Smyrna. George Vassiadis speaks on the different types of Greek used in Istanbul and Alexandria (at home, in church, in business, at school, in the press). The symposium will be chaired by Katia Pizzi, the authority on Trieste and Venice, and Philip Mansel, author of books on Constantinople and the Levant. It will conclude with a panel discussion on languages in the Levant, and a drinks reception.

Speakers:



CITIZENS SPEAK TURKISH: The Language Revolution in Transition and Translation

Ataturk's Language Revolution is most often understood as an ethnic cleansing of the Turkish language. Although it did result in excision of most words with Arabic or Farsi roots (as much as sixty percent of its vocabulary), it was but one strand of the Kemalist effort to forge a new national identity through linguistic policies. With the *Citizens Speak Turkish* campaign, the nation's founding fathers set out to remove Turkey's many minority languages from the public space, while with the Alphabet Revolution they made Turkey's Ottoman legacy illegible to most citizens in the space of a generation, with only those texts deemed suitable being translated into new Turkish.

None of these policies were universally welcomed. All were openly and privately resisted. Though the days of top-down linguistic policy are long over, questions around language and who controls it are far from settled. For to argue about language in Turkey is to argue about history and religion, national identity and cultural rights, authoritarian overreach and the right to free expression. For most of the past century, such disputes have been inward-looking and conducted by citizens speaking in Turkish. Freely will be discussing the latest twists in the plot, as Turkish literature gains global renown, mostly at the hands of non-citizens who do not have Turkish as their mother tongue.

Maureen Freely is a writer with eight novels to her name and many other strings to her bow. Well known as a translator of the Turkish Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk, she has also brought into English numerous twentieth century classics and works by Turkey's rising stars. For many years she worked as a journalist in London, writing about literature, social justice, and human rights. As chair of the Translators Association and more recently as President and Chair of English PEN, she has campaigned for writers and freedom of expression internationally. She teaches at the University of Warwick.



THE LOST PAGES OF SMYRNA: LA RÉFORME AND THE POLITICS OF MULTILINGUALISM IN THE LATE OTTOMAN PRESS

Thanks to the favourable conjuncture provided by Ottoman liberal reforms, and the strategic positioning of its harbour in the context of Mediterranean capitalistic networks, the city of Smyrna went through an exceptional development starting with the second half of 19th century.

Together with urban expansion, economic growth and social transformations, another crucial innovation that came to symbolize the golden age of the so-called "pearl of the Levant" was the apparition of an astonishing number of newspapers published in all the many languages spoken in the city: Ottoman Turkish, Greek, Armenian, French, Italian...

Aiming to provide a vivid representation of that cultural richness now lost in time, Miguel will focus on the story of one single newspaper called *La Réforme* and on the life of its last owner Nikolas Tsourouktsoglou. *La Réforme* was founded in Smyrna in 1867 by an Ottoman Armenian named Stepan Voskan, who directed the French language newspaper until his death around 1900. At this point *La Réforme* was taken over by the Ottoman Greek Nikolas Tsourouktsoglou, a lawyer and a notable of the Greek community belonging to a Cappadocian family.

What makes Tsourouktsoglou an extremely interesting figure is that he was not only a crucial member of the Greek-speaking community of Smyrna (he also founded the Greek newspaper named *Imerisia*) but also a balanced political figure who distanced himself from nationalist currents and during the 1919-1922 occupation he collaborated with a committee of Greek and Muslim journalists, in order to help reduce tensions between the communities.

As much as his life is a testament to those astonishing decades of multiculturalism and cohabitation, his death during the dramatic days of September 1922 came to symbolize the end of an era.

Luis Miguel Selvelli (LHF Trustee member) is a literary translator and an independent researcher dedicated to the intersection of humanities, history and political thought. Due to specific family circumstances, his studies focus primarily on the last century of the Ottoman Empire (1821-1922), with a focus on political and cultural relations between Italy, Greece and the wider Ottoman geography. He's the author of *Antenati a Costantinopoli. Esuli Italiani negli anni del riformismo ottomano 1828-1878* (Turkish edition to be published in late spring 2026), and *Smirne e l'Italia. Comunità, relazioni, istituzioni* (ETP Books, Athens 2022, co-edited with Francesco Pongiluppi). He is currently working on a new book exploring the lives of his Levantine ancestors amid the political upheavals of the early 20th century.



LANGUAGE, ETHNICITY AND CULTURE: Greek in Istanbul and Alexandria (1870-1970)

Although Greek has been spoken in the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean for millennia, political and economic developments since the early nineteenth century have had a particularly profound influence on its history. The establishment of the Greek Kingdom resulted in the widespread propagation of a new, purified form of the language. The expansion of Greek commercial endeavours and emigration well beyond the Aegean basin and the Black Sea resulted in the widest dispersion of the language since antiquity. The wars and population displacements of the twentieth century brought about further unexpected changes.

This presentation will explore the history of the Greek language in Istanbul and Alexandria during the crucial period between 1870 and 1970, when it was spoken by a significant percentage of the population of both cities. What types of Greek were used in the home, in church and in business? How was Greek taught in the renowned schools of Istanbul and Alexandria? What role did the local Greek press, learned societies, writers and poets play in its development? Which other communities made use of Greek and how did it come to be adopted as a Levantine lingua franca? The presentation will conclude with brief observations on the post-1970 fate of Greek in both cities.

George Vassiadis is a Research Associate of the Hellenic Institute at Royal Holloway, University of London, where he was the inaugural A. G. Leventis Foundation Lecturer in Modern Greek History. His main area of interest is the modern history of the Greek Community of Constantinople, with an emphasis on educational associations and family, business and cultural networks. His contribution to the collective volume *Occupied Istanbul: Urban Politics, Culture, and Society, 1918-1923*, entitled "The Greek Philological Syllogos of Constantinople during the Allied Occupation: the beginning of the end," will be published shortly by Berghahn.

Chairs:



Dr Philip Mansel's books include *Constantinople: City of the World's Desire* (John Murray 1995); *Paris between Empires* (2001); *Prince of Europe: the life of Charles Joseph Prince de Ligne* (2003); *Levant* (John Murray 2010) on Smyrna, Alexandria and Beirut; and *Aleppo; the Rise and Fall of Syria's Great Merchant City* (I B Tauris 2016), all of which have been translated into French or Italian. He is a founding committee member of the Levantine Heritage Foundation and the Society for Court Studies, and a Fellow of the Institute of Historical Research, the Royal Historical Society and the Royal Society of Literature. His most recent book is *King of the World: the life of Louis XIV* (Penguin 2019). He is currently finishing a history of the Courts of Europe 1814-1918.



Katia Pizzi published extensively in the fields of literature, culture, memory and history of European cities, especially Venice and Trieste (see *Venice Tales* (2025), *Trieste Una frontiera letteraria* (2019), *Cold War Cities: History, Culture and Memory* (2016), *The Literary Identities of European Cities* (2011) and *A City in Search of an Author* (2001)). Pizzi's research interests further include the international Avant-garde and industrial cultures in the 1920s and 1930s. Between 2020 and 2024, Pizzi was Director of the Italian Cultural Institute in London. She is currently Senior Lecturer in Italian Studies at the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies, School of Advanced Study, University of London.



Registration: <https://languages-of-the-levant.eventbrite.co.uk>

Please support these events by becoming a sponsor. We provide these talks for free to members as part of our mission to preserve and promote the research and public understanding of Levantine heritage. Sponsoring the talks helps cover the LHF's costs in arranging these talks in central London. For sponsorship packages, please contact chairman@levantineheritage.com. All sponsors will be recognised at events and on our website.