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How to Avoid Making False Friends: Taking the Multilingual Turn in Periodical Studies

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The multilingual turn in periodical studies comes with challenges that sometimes manifest themselves in the most unexpected, basic ways. In January 2022, I gave an online talk at the Séminaire PéLiAS, a French seminar series on periodicals as cultural mediators, about my experiences directing [WeChangEd](#) (2015–21), an ERC Starting Grant project in transnational periodical studies that brought together a multilingual team of six researchers around a common goal: examining how women editors and their periodicals acted as agents of change in Europe from the early eighteenth to early twentieth centuries, when women’s formal agency and access to power were limited.

The seminar itself was also a multilingual event. My talk was in English, another speaker presented in French, and the Q&A was a mixture of both languages. When one of the participants asked me in French if I was familiar with the [DEF19](#) database, I replied in English that I was not but looked forward to hearing more about it. As the participant expressed her surprise at my response and explained that DEF19 was short for ‘Dictionnaire des éditeurs français du XIXe siècle’, I started racking my brain. Why had I not heard about this project? Why had we not joined forces, or at least compared datasets? And then it dawned on me: ‘editors’ and ‘éditeurs’ are false friends. While WeChangEd gathered data about female *editors*, DEF19 compiled a database of nineteenth-century French *publishers*. DEF19 and WeChangEd never crossed paths for the simple reason that we were focusing on two different things.

Even if this misunderstanding was easily cleared up, it triggers important questions about periodical scholarship across languages on at least two levels: the level of the research object and the level of the researchers involved. At the level of the research object, the anecdote illustrates the need for a cross-language discussion of the basic vocabulary of periodical studies. When we talk about ‘periodicals’ in our native languages, are we talking about the same thing? Was my nineteenth-century editor in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium doing the same job as your editor in France, Britain, Hungary, Italy, or Spain? To what extent do different vocabularies and etymologies reflect not only different realities — differences in roles, responsibilities, hierarchies, social status, agency, or cultural prestige — but also different conceptual understandings? Do native speakers of German, Dutch, Swedish, and other Germanic languages have a different mental image of the research object than English or French speakers because their word for ‘periodical’ — ‘Zeitschrift’, ‘tijdschrift’, ‘tidskrift’ (literally ‘time writing’) — invokes a relationship to time on a more abstract level? So far, theories and typologies for periodical studies have been drawn primarily from particular national and linguistic contexts. Are they applicable across languages? How do we account

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for the specificities of national, cultural, and linguistic contexts while still enabling a bird's-eye-view across those contexts?

Such a comprehensive view is crucial for addressing the challenges at the second level, that of the researchers involved. Multilingual periodical research often requires collaboration and exchange among scholars with different language skills. How do we facilitate this? How do we make sure that we truly *understand* each other, from the basic comprehension that is needed to operate as a team on a daily basis to a more in-depth level of understanding of cultural contexts that are not our own? Members of the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals and the European Society for Periodical Research (ESPRit) usually adopt English as a shared language at conferences and in their contributions to the societies' flagship journals, *Victorian Periodicals Review* and the *Journal of European Periodical Studies (JEPS)*. There have been a number of multilingual initiatives in recent years, such as live translation at the 2018 Paris and 2019 Athens ESPRit conferences and a *bilingual issue* of *JEPS* with articles in English or French and abstracts in the two languages, but these are exceptions.

Establishing multilingual research infrastructures for periodical studies is a time- and labour-intensive undertaking, and Humanities budgets are already stretched thin. Still, as periodical scholars, we should never take language for granted when it comes to how we share and discuss our research. Critical thinking, nuance, and complexity of thought are at the heart of what we do. Yet when a group of scholars from different linguistic backgrounds uses a single common language to talk about periodicals *across* languages, part of that group will inevitably struggle to access and express the full depth and breadth of their intellectual resources. How do we deal with the power imbalance this entails? How do we foster both equity and diversity in a multilingual context? For periodical studies to truly take a multilingual turn, we need to find ways to create a more level playing field among periodical scholars where, at the very least, we do not reproduce the same inequalities over and over again every time we come together to talk about our work.

Marianne Van Remoortel is Associate Professor of English Literature at Ghent University, Belgium. She is the author of *Lives of the Sonnet, 1787–1895: Genre, Gender and Criticism* (Ashgate, 2011) and *Women, Work and the Victorian Periodical: Living by the Press* (Palgrave, 2015) and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of European Periodical Studies*. In 2015–21, she directed the ERC Starting Grant project 'Agents of Change: Women Editors and Socio-Cultural Transformation in Europe, 1710–1920'.