

2012 Global Humanities Lecture Series
Tatjana Soldat-Jaffe, Humanities Division

“Globalization and Language in Contact: Language as a Cultural Performance”

Abstract: The absolutism of a binary paradigm in which a language is either fully “alive” or completely “dead” creates difficulties in making sense of hybridity, sociolinguistic contact and cultural multilingualism. Once the loaded term “death” enters the picture, ideas about linguistic revival or resurgence - or, perhaps, more simply, change or futurity - become either fundamentally dubious or suspiciously inauthentic. Defining language and identity must then be prescriptively and narrowly restricted to fully competent language users as members of a community rather than understood in relation to semiotically complex systems of communication.

Using Yiddish as a case study (Yiddish learning as a second language and expressions of contemporary Yiddish secular culture), my paper questions to what extent the two leading sociolinguistic concepts of collective agency, language community and speech community, can fully explain languages that experience a revival but lack the competent speakers. A new model, I argue, would have to introduce a paradigmatic shift in language studies forcing us to reconceptualize the function of language – leaving a functionalist normative approach behind. A new type of collective agency --which I coin the *performance community* -- understands language not just as reflection of the speaker’s identity but the manifestation of the sum of cultural performances. Language ceases to be the means to an end but rather a cultural process.