



International Conference on
“Asymmetric Communication in Ancient Societies”
Call for Papers

Date: October 16-17, 2025

Location: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Submission Deadline: April 30, 2025

Conference Theme

The study of communication in ancient societies provides valuable insights into the sociocultural dynamics, hierarchies, and interactional practices of the past. This conference aims to explore the concept of *asymmetric communication*, focusing on contexts where power imbalances, status differences, and socio-cultural hierarchies influenced modes of interaction. The term asymmetric communication describes situational conditions in which the interaction between interlocutors is not at eye level, i.e., it is unbalanced or uneven in respect to socio-cultural factors. In that respect, one may investigate aspects such as identity and number of participants/interlocutors as well as their characteristics, social roles, and statuses.

We invite studies based on ancient/historical texts, images, and image-text compositions from diverse cultural settings. As for written sources, these may concern the formulation of requests, commands or prohibitions, and the systematic choice of vocatives, epithets or idiomatic expressions, among other devices. Pictorial sources on the other hand may raise questions regarding size, orientation, and grouping of represented individuals as well as their attributes and insignia, actions and gestures. Communicative constellations can be analyzed in two dimensions: the production and reception of a text by historical persons (*text-external* dimension) and the communication between protagonists represented within the story world (*text-internal* dimension).

Departing from the field of ancient studies and building on advances in sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, and multimodal analysis, we invite contributions that examine the linguistic, visual, and contextual aspects of asymmetric communication across ancient societies. The goal is to better understand how power, agency, and status were negotiated, maintained, or challenged through communicative acts. How interlocutors navigate in such communicative settings and what strategies, e.g., politeness vs. impoliteness, they employ, is of primary interest here.

Topics of Interest

We welcome submissions addressing, but not limited to, the following topics:

- Theoretical frameworks for analyzing asymmetric communication in historical contexts across cultures and languages
- Case studies on hierarchical communication in ancient written or visual corpora
- The role of status, power, and authority in shaping communicative practices
- The occurrence and underlying motivations of biases in the representation of social constellations
- Language and register variation in its connection to asymmetric communication
- Multimodal perspectives: interaction of text and imagery in conveying power dynamics
- Diachronic perspectives on the evolution of communicative asymmetries in ancient societies



Research Questions

The following research questions may be considered:

- Which recurring asymmetric social constellations can be identified in ancient texts and artifacts across cultures and languages?
- To what extent are these representations realistic or on the contrary stylistically exaggerated or even reversed (e.g. by use of polemics, satire, parody, etc.)?
- What phenomena (linguistic, visual, etc.) are characteristic of asymmetric communication in different sociocultural contexts?
- How can balanced or peer-group communicative situations in ancient societies be identified and distinguished from asymmetric ones?
- In what ways do the materiality and visual design of artifacts contribute to asymmetric communication?
- What are the implications of asymmetric communication for understanding broader social structures and hierarchies in ancient cultures and societies?

We invite scholars from diverse disciplines (e.g., Egyptology, Assyriology, Oriental Studies, Classics, Historical Linguistics, Archaeology, and Art History) and contributors of all experience levels studying historical and ancient languages and texts, images and iconography, material culture and contexts to join us in discussing any of these main topics or to propose other research questions based on their work.

Abstract submission

Abstracts of approximately 300 words (excluding references), outlining the research objectives, methodology, and main findings should be submitted in English or German to the following email address by **April 30, 2025**: asymcom-conference@hu-berlin.de. Notification of acceptance will be sent by **May 30, 2025**. For inquiries, please feel free to contact the above-mentioned email address.

Format

The sessions will be held in person. Speakers are expected to give an oral presentation of 20-25 minutes.

Silvia Kutscher – Dina Serova – Svenja K. Damm – Tobias B. Paul – Amnah El-Shiaty