

The dissertation considers the so-called crisis in language experienced by Germanspeaking intellectuals at the turn of the century. In particular, the dissertation thesis concentrates on Jewish writers and their attempt to understand the role translation plays in generating cultural meaning and racial identity.

Authors such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Fritz Mauthner, Franz Kafka, and Walter Benjamin, all grappled with what they perceived as language's inability to express anything but contingent representations of empirical and social reality. This failure of language meant that one's native language was always already a translation of an unknown text from an inscrutable foreign language. Seizing upon the problematic, powerful role language plays in culturally, hegemonic formations, these authors challenged German anti-Semitism from within the material-linguistic basis of German anti-Semitism itself.

At the same time, they constructed various conceptions of Jewish translations based on the impossibility of translations – a counter-hegemonic movement meant to decenter German as the lingua franca of culture. Concentrating on and complicating notions of the translatability of Yiddish into German and vice versa, German-speaking Jewish artists and intellectuals were able to put into question German's status as a singular, originary language, as they created powerful notions of German-Jewish identity based on contingency and hybridity.