

English-Centric Multilingualism for Humanitarian Work: Tensions between Roots and Routes in an International Organisation in Geneva

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This plenary lecture will examine the evolution of language requirements (1989-2020) for hiring expatriate representatives at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the oldest existing humanitarian organisation in Geneva. Adopting a multi-layered and discursive approach to language policy, I will analyse the ideological and practical tensions between English and French as well as the construction of strategic multilingualism for ICRC mobile humanitarian work. Language ideological debates engendered by “internationalisation” processes in this organisation have resulted in tensions between roots in Francophone Switzerland and routes linked with a global presence. Based on archival and ethnographic data, I will show how the longstanding discourse of “Anglosaxonisation” at headquarters coexists with the definition of English-centric multilingualism for a globalising workforce, characterised by the relaxation of French requirements and the increasing value of non-European *linguae francae* such as Dari or Pashto.