

Lost in translation: How differences in terminology shape our view of cultural evolution in the Paleolithic of Eurasia

Keywords: Paleolithic - Terminology - Eurasia -Transition - Middle/Upper Paleolithic

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Abstract:

The study of Paleolithic technologies is highly dependent on descriptions of artifact, cultural units and processes. There are, however, different ways to described archaeology. Regional research traditions, each of which coming with their own terminology, analytical conventions, and historical trajectories, have a significant impact on how we describe - hence reconstruct our past. In fact, technical nomenclatures are unavoidable at all level or analysis, from individual artifact analyses to the definition of broad temporal or geographic cultural units. In some cases, different definitions are often applied to identical descriptive terms (e.g. "blade", "burin-core", "microblade", "Levallois"), broader labels (e.g. "Mousterian", "Initial Upper Paleolithic"), and processes ("transition", "migration"). Other times, scholars use different terms to refer to similar objects. These challenges are well known since the dawn of archaeology as a field of research and over the years, information exchanges between specialists never stopped improving. A more unified language is still needed, however, to address the challenges posed by the exceptionally broad temporal and geographical scope of Paleolithic research. This session explores how to identify terminological mismatches, how to better understand why miscommunication sometimes arise, and how it can be an obstacle to meaningful comparison across regions. By bringing together researchers working in diverse geographic and academic contexts, the session aims to identify the most critical areas between regional frameworks where information is 'lost in translation'. Our hope is to disentangle issues of technical language from actual hominin behavior, and to foster clearer communication among specialists studying the Middle to Upper Paleolithic transition. Ultimately, we believe that these issues are relevant to the study of Paleolithic as a whole, and we invite all speakers that hope to contribute to a more coherent and integrative understanding of archaeological variability.