

SEM17. Framing the feminine: Language, crime, and cultural narratives

11 September h. 16:00-18:30, S8 Moro

Convenors

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Abstract

This seminar explores how language and cultural narratives frame representations of women in crime, examining how linguistic choices and storytelling conventions shape perceptions of gender, agency, and justice. By analyzing the intersection of language, crime, and culture, we aim to uncover the discursive and narrative strategies that construct women's roles as victims, perpetrators, and consumers of crime across media, legal texts, and fiction. Drawing on methodologies from corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis, frame theory, and feminist literary criticism, the seminar will analyze how gendered stereotypes are perpetuated or challenged in crime narratives.

Crime narratives, whether factual or fictional, reflect and reinforce societal attitudes toward gender and justice. Women's roles in these narratives are often framed in ways that perpetuate patriarchal norms, with female criminals portrayed as emotional or deviant and female victims depicted as passive or vulnerable. These representations are not merely descriptive but performative, influencing how society perceives and responds to women involved in crime. The seminar will investigate how language and cultural narratives intersect to produce these gendered portrayals, as well as how audiences engage with and interpret them.

We invite papers that examine the representation of women in crime across a variety of contexts, including true crime media, courtroom discourse, crime fiction, and social media discussions. Potential topics include the lexical framing of female criminals, the narrative construction of women's agency or victimhood, and the cultural tropes that shape readers' perceptions of women in crime. By bridging the gap between linguistics, cultural studies, and literary analysis, this seminar aims to offer new insights into how language and cultural narratives perpetuate or challenge societal norms.

This seminar will provide a platform for interdisciplinary dialogue, bringing together researchers from linguistics, literary studies, media studies, and gender studies. By examining the intersection of language, crime, and cultural narratives, we hope to contribute to broader discussions about justice, representation, and equality. Join us in uncovering the linguistic and cultural mechanisms that frame the representation of women in crime narratives, and in exploring how these representations influence societal attitudes and behaviors.

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SEM17. Papers

11 September h 16:00-18:30, S8 Moro

- *Disposable femininity and linguistic deviance: The "Chavette" as cultural folk devil in British crime discourse* (Emilia Di Martino, Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa)
- *Old crimes, new words: the case of femi(ni)cide* (Elisa Bertoldi, Università degli Studi di Padova)
- *Unnamed crimes: Redefining gendered violence in Elena Ferrante's My Brilliant Friend* (Tehezzeb Moitra, Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa)
- *Getting away with murder: (In)famous Victorian trials from the court to the page* (Elisabetta Marino, Tor Vergata Università degli Studi di Roma)

- *Linguistic and narrative constructions of crime-related female agency in The Cleaning Lady: A critical discourse analysis* (Viviana Gaballo, Università degli Studi di Padova)

SEM17. Abstracts

Old crimes, new words: the case of femi(ni)cide

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Attested since 1831 (Oxford English Dictionary), the word “femi(ni)cide” has witnessed a sharp increase in use since the 2000s (Google Books N-gram Viewer), a trend not observed for near-synonyms like “murder of women”, “murder of wife” or “uxoricide”.

Feminicide and the discourse about it have been investigated in sociological and legal contexts (e.g. Bandelli, Porcelli, 2016; Dino, 2019). This paper examined the co-text of use of “femminicidio” and “femi(ni)cide” in 4 comparable and 4 parallel English and Italian corpora representative of legal-political and newspaper discourse, available through SketchEngine (Eur-Lex 2/2016 English and Eur-Lex 2/2016 Italian; EuroParl Spoken: English and EuroParl Spoken: Italian; British Parliamentary Debates and Italian Parliamentary Debates; English Broadsheet Newspapers and Italian Trends).

Concordances revealed three main findings:

I) the lemma “femminicidio” was fairly frequent only in two Italian corpora, while the lemmas “femicide/feminicide” were rare in all the English corpora;

II) in both Italian and English, the concept denoted by “femminicidio/femi(ni)cide” was represented as: the focus of law enforcement (“the first conviction for femicide”; “il disegno di legge sul femminicidio”); a topic of discussion (“a national conversation about femicide”; “stiamo parlando di femminicidio e di dignità della donna”); a social phenomenon, possibly associated with others (“forced disappearances and femicide”; “violenze precedenti al femminicidio”); a negative trend to contrast (“we will stop femicide”; “contrasto al femminicidio”); or a term to be introduced (“what he called femicide”; “la parola femminicidio è entrata nell’uso comune”);

III) language-specific semantic preferences were also observed: in the English data “femi(ni)cide” was mostly represented as a statistical pattern (“the scale of femicide”; “data on femicide”; “worst femicide rates”), while in the Italian data “femminicidio” was represented as the subject of a narrative/chronicle (e.g. “ogni giorno una donna muore per femminicidio”; “notizie in cui si parla di femminicidio”), and attention was drawn to the “stakeholders” involved (“gli autori di femminicidio”; “gli orfani di femminicidi”).

In both languages, that crime was recurrently defined as an extreme force of violence against women because they are women (“the killing of women because they are women”; “intendendo l'omicidio volontario di donna in quanto donna”). However, the episodes reported suggested an alternative account, namely that feminicide was the outcome of machism, hatred, and determination to control a woman’s behaviour, although this interpretation was rarely made explicit (e.g. “[...] that need to control and coerce. Sometimes it leads to rape [...] femicide or just controlling a women's choices so she can't go where she wants and see who she chooses”; “per questa idea del controllo della donna, l'avrebbe uccisa accoltellandola”).

The findings suggest that there is a need to raise awareness of the motive behind feminicide, which is a man’s punishment of or revenge against a woman who refuses to conform to his wishes in choosing to (not) associate herself with a given romantic partner.

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Disposable femininity and linguistic deviance: The “Chavette” as cultural folk devil in British crime discourse

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This paper explores the figure of the “Chavette”—a derogatory stereotype of white, working-class women in the UK—as a discursively constructed symbol of social deviance and moral panic. Drawing on methodologies from critical discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and feminist media criticism, the paper analyzes how language and cultural narratives intersect to frame the Chavette as both a product and perpetrator of crime, and as a cautionary tale of failed femininity. Through her hyper-visible appearance, stigmatized accent, and perceived moral laxity, the Chavette has become a cultural shorthand for dysfunction, irresponsibility, and criminality.

Focusing on the role of linguistic enregisterment, the paper investigates how features associated with Cockney and Multicultural London English are weaponized in media and popular discourse to mark the Chavette as linguistically deviant. These features—such as h-dropping, th-fronting, and glottal stops—are not neutral phonetic phenomena but are loaded with social meaning. They index class, race, and gender, and in the case of the Chavette, they are used to render her speech—and by extension, her identity—as unintelligible, excessive, or even threatening. The accent becomes a kind of linguistic “evidence” of her unsuitability, her failure to conform to middle-class ideals of femininity, restraint, and respectability.

The paper also traces how this figure is constructed across a range of cultural texts, including satirical characters like Vicky Pollard (Little Britain), reality television shows such as *The Only Way is Essex*, and tabloid media. These texts not only reflect but actively shape public perceptions, turning classed and gendered identities into objects of ridicule, fear, or fascination. The Chavette becomes both a consumer of “trash culture” and a symbol of its moral and social consequences, a representation that reinforces broader narratives about welfare dependency, teen motherhood, and anti-social behavior.

Yet the figure of the Chavette is not entirely passive. Through social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, women from working-class backgrounds have begun to reclaim elements of the stereotype—accent, fashion, even “chav” aesthetics—as forms of identity and resistance. This digital recontextualization raises important questions about whether such acts subvert or reproduce the underlying structures of classism and misogyny.

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Linguistic and narrative constructions of crime-related female agency in *The Cleaning Lady*: A critical Discourse analysis

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This paper bridges media linguistics, critical race theory, and feminist television studies, offering a systematic analysis of how language shapes gendered and racialized power dynamics in crime narratives. The study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the linguistic and narrative representation of women in the American crime drama *The Cleaning Lady* (Fox, 2022–present). Focusing on the protagonist Thony De La Rosa—a Cambodian-Filipino immigrant who becomes entangled in criminal underworlds while working as a cleaning lady—the study investigates how the series linguistically constructs female agency, victimhood, and resistance within intersecting frameworks of gender, race, and class.

Drawing on Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA model (2001) and feminist stylistics (Lazar, 2005), this study analyses the lexical and syntactic choices used to label Thony and other female characters (e.g., “cleaning lady”, “immigrant”, “mother”) versus male counterparts (e.g., “boss”, “doctor”, “agent”); the transitivity patterns that

grammatically frame women as passive subjects (“Thony was forced into ...”) or active agents (“Thony manipulated the situation”); the modality and speech acts that underscore how women’s dialogue is hedged, interrupted, or policed, particularly in interactions with law enforcement and criminal figures; and the narrative framing, to expose the series’ use of voiceovers, flashbacks, and focalization that align audience sympathy with Thony’s perspective or undermine her credibility.

Preliminary analysis reveals that *The Cleaning Lady* both challenges and reinforces gendered stereotypes through its linguistic and narrative strategies: Thony’s dual roles as caregiver and criminal are linguistically marked by tension between maternal lexical fields (“protect my son”) and underworld jargon (“I’ll make a deal”); racialized and classed descriptors (e.g., “illegal”, “maid”) frequently position her as subordinate, even though her actions drive the plot; interrogation scenes show marked differences in how male authorities address Thony (frequent interruptions, rhetorical questions) versus male suspects; supporting female characters (e.g., Fiona, Nadia) are often framed through emotional or sexualized language (Molina-Guzmán 2010), contrasting with Thony’s pragmatic speech.

Extending the analysis beyond the text, this study examines a corpus (Baker 2006) of online discourse (forum threads, social media debates, and media reviews) to assess how audiences interpret Thony’s agency. For example, fan discussions often emphasize her “sacrificial motherhood”, while critics debate whether the series exoticizes her immigrant identity (Jeffrey 2007).

While *The Cleaning Lady* ostensibly centers a resilient, complex female lead, its linguistic and narrative patterns often revert to familiar tropes of the “noble immigrant” or “desperate mother”. By applying CDA to the series, this paper highlights how crime dramas linguistically negotiate—and often constrain—female agency at the intersections of gender, race, and class. The study calls for more nuanced portrayals that resist reducing women to their marginalization.

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Getting away with murder: (In)famous Victorian trials from the court to the page

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The Victorian period was marked by (in)famous murder cases and trials, surprisingly involving women as offenders. In 1845, Martha Brixey slit the throat of one of the children who had been entrusted to her care. Despite the brutality of her act, she was soon released as menstrual irregularities had allegedly impaired her mental faculties. In 1857, Martha Bacon suffered from repeated fits of so-called “puerperal insanity”, after the birth of her second child; her condition ultimately resulted in the cold-blooded slaughter of her offspring, the poisoning of her mother-in-law, and the symbolic destruction of her family home by arson. Bacon was eventually acquitted, as she was not held entirely responsible for her actions (she had previously spent some time in a mental asylum). In the same year, a young Scottish woman, Madeleine Smith, laced chocolate intended for her lover with arsenic, so that she could free herself from him and marry a wealthier man. Needless to say, the verdict was “not proven”.

This paper sets out to elucidate how these cases impacted the imagination of women writers, such as Mona Caird, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Ellen Wood, as well as male writers, such as Wilkie Collins and Henry James. Although undoubtedly shocked by the crimes, these writers made female offenders the protagonists in their novels and narratives to explore and problematize gender roles, expectations, and prerogatives. Special emphasis will be placed on the language employed both in the official trial reports and by these writers to highlight the offenders’ transgressions and the puzzling and alarming clash between their physical appearance, proper manners, and their outrageous deeds. The depiction of female insanity (and its exploitation) will also be the object of investigation.

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Unnamed crimes: Redefining gendered violence in Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*

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Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* (L'amica geniale) offers a powerful critique as to how gendered violence is legitimized, obscured and reframed within cultural and linguistic parameters using what Heidensohn and Silvestri call 'selective deafness' (2012). This paper examines how Ferrante's narrative highlights the subtle, and oftentimes insidious, mechanisms through which violence against women is articulated and the systemic responses it evokes. Violence, whether physical or psychological, is rendered invisible, excused, or portrayed as part of the female experience— with abusive behaviors renamed as expressions of love, passion or discipline, rather than as criminal acts. By analyzing the tension between speech and silence, visibility and erasure, the paper explores how Ferrante reconsiders the boundaries of crime, justice and moral responsibility. In the novels, female victimization is often framed within the context of deeply ingrained societal norms and cultural expectations, positioning violence against women as a normalized part of the natural order. Through the characters of Lila and Elena, Ferrante examines how the language surrounding women's suffering perpetuates their victimization. Ferrante's linguistic choices, particularly her use of indirect speech or use of dialect, draw attention to the gap between public and private experiences, illustrating how women's voices are often marginalized, reinterpreted or smothered in both familial and societal contexts. By foregrounding the tension between what is seen and what is unseen, Ferrante calls for a critical examination of the ways in which cultural and linguistic frameworks narrate the woman's role in crime. The paper argues that Ferrante's interrogation of gendered violence is not only a reflection of the past but also a commentary on the ongoing denial of women's agency and victimhood within contemporary society. Ultimately, *My Brilliant Friend* (L'amica geniale) challenges readers to confront the hidden dynamics of gendered violence and to consider the broader societal complicity in its normalization and denial.

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