

SEM29. A house is not a home? Discursive representations of contemporary households

29A 11 September h. 11:00-13:00, Auditorium

29B 12 September h. 14:00-16:00, Auditorium

Convenors

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Abstract

Diverse family formations and practices are at the forefront of contemporary societal debates (Balirano et al., 2024) as issues of representation, inclusivity and equity continue to shape the cultural, political and digital landscapes. In this seminar, we explore the discursive representation of different family forms, i.e. households which come together in ways that steer away from the traditional cisgender, heteronormative, binary, monoethnic matrix. From queer (Mackenzie, 2023) and multiethnic (Riboni, 2024) families to the evolving portrayal of diversified households, discourse plays a pivotal role in both perpetuating and challenging traditional norms (Fruttaldo, 2024; Zottola, 2024).

We invite scholars to submit research proposals that explore the heterogeneity of households in contemporary linguistic representations. In particular, we welcome contributions that investigate how discursive practices construct, contest, or redefine kinship identities in and across media, policy and specialized domains. Topics of interest include but are not limited to:

- Intersectionality in discourses of families and households: gender, sex, race, class, disability, age
- The role of language in perpetuating or dismantling discrimination and bias
- Discursive constructions of family and parenting in different cultural contexts
- Queer linguistics and the evolution of language surrounding different household formations
- The impact of digital and multimodal platforms on family and household representations
- Policy, education and institutional discourses shaping contemporary households
- Legal and medical discursive practices that frame contemporary families and households.

We encourage interdisciplinary approaches, drawing on critical discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, queer theory, corpus linguistics, pragmatics, and multimodal discourse analysis. Papers addressing current events, emerging societal issues, or intersectional (in)visibility are particularly welcome.

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SEM29. Papers

29A 11 September h. 11:00-13:00, Auditorium

- #TradWives: Multimodal discursive constructions of a backward trend in family roles (Catherine Del Buono, Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II / Sole Alba Zollo, Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)
- Representing single-mother families: A discourse analysis of Reddit threads and comments (Maria Cristina Nisco, Università degli Studi di Napoli Parthenope)
- Performing family on TikTok: Multimodal discourses of lesbian motherhood and IVF (Robin Donadio, Independent scholar)
- Reimagining kinship in Sense8: A multimodal stylistic analysis of posthuman household narratives (Roberto Esposito, Università di Napoli L'Orientale)

29B 12 September h. 14:00-16:00, Auditorium

- *Shifting family imaginaries in forced migration contexts: A corpus-assisted analysis of refugee discourses* (Dario Del Fante, Università degli Studi di Ferrara)
- *Sisterhood, solidarity and transfeminist alliances in digital environments: A multimodal critical discourse analysis of the FEMINIST ZINE* (Giuseppina Pirozzi, Università di Parma)
- *Human and AI ideologies: Pragmalinguistic and multimodal representations of contemporary family forms* (Raffaele Pizzo, Università di Napoli L'Orientale)
- *Not a mother: Surrogacy, agency and the reframing of family through the voices of surrogates* (Angela Zottola, Università di Torino)

SEM29. Abstracts

#TradWives: Multimodal discursive constructions of a backward trend in family roles

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One could say the late Phyllis Schlafly – a central figure in conservative family politics in the United States – was the original TradWife (traditional wife): a woman who believes in traditional gender roles in the home, with the household structured with the male as the head and the female as submissive. Like Schlafly, TradWives hold a belief that women are better off with a gender hierarchy than in more equal arrangements (Stewart, 2025). While Schlafly actively worked to successfully defeat the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment in the United States in the 1970s, these TradWives have shown up hawking goods on the ever-growing ‘momosphere’ – a collection of blogs and social media posts that revolve around parenting, cooking, and crafting (Zappavigna & Zhao, 2017; Mackenzie, 2019; Mackenzie & Zhao, 2021; Proctor, 2022). With social media platforms such as Instagram showing #tradwives as thin, beautiful, white young women in vintage dresses and using terms such as ‘true calling’ and ‘old-fashioned values’, it has become a glorified identity. This new-yet-old role of women represents a family dynamic that completely counters any feminist progress made in recent decades and sets up a toxic example for young women to emulate.

Our study aims to investigate a sample of multimodal texts extracted from the ‘ballerinafarm’ Instagram account of Hannah Neeleman, the most prominent of all TradWives who with her seemingly effortless beauty runs a dairy farm and raises eight children without the help of her husband. “Her bucolic, old-fashioned lifestyle is both a masterclass in aesthetics and branding and an illiberal vision of traditional culture and lifestyle” (Shrewsbury, 2025, p. 7). The fact that she has co-opted feminist rhetoric to defend herself by saying it is her choice (Bower, 2024) continues to obscure how problematic this lifestyle is for women’s equality and, in turn, begins to normalize these illiberal ideas.

A multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin, 2013; van Leeuwen, 2012; Ledin & Machin, 2018) approach will help to detect the most recurrent verbal and visual features in the data under investigation in order to verify to what extent discursive choices can reinforce anti-feminist attitudes and stereotypical gender roles.

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Shifting family imaginaries in forced migration contexts: A corpus-assisted analysis of refugee discourses

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Migration can be understood as a process in which an individual experiences a moment of crisis, partly due to separation from their homeland and the transition from a known familial, socio-cultural and linguistic environment to one that is unfamiliar and often disorienting. In this sense, the migratory experience profoundly shapes the self-perception of those who migrate (Omole, 2024). During this passage from the home community to a new one, the relationship between individual and group identity is placed under strain, as the individual may be required to modify or reconstruct their identity to adapt to the new context (De Fina, 2003). Therefore, the role of family is particularly significant for refugees and migrants, as it is the first place where identity is formed (Bateson, 1973), whether the family is physically present or not. The process of integration into a new society is influenced by the presence of family, and when it is absent, individuals may need to reconstruct it or maintain a special, often distant, connection with their original household. These dynamics are further complicated by legal, cultural and socio-economic barriers in host countries, where migrants and refugees often occupy marginalized positions, as well as by the specific conditions of their countries of origin, which they have left due to economic hardship and political instability, factors that profoundly impact how relationships are maintained, transformed, or imagined across distances.

Therefore, drawing on Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis methodologies (Baker, 2023), this study examines how the concept of ‘family’ is discursively constructed and represented in refugees’ words within a corpus of interviews collected from the 1000 Dreams project, a storytelling initiative that challenges mainstream narratives about refugees through a collection of stories by and about refugees from across Europe (<https://1000dreamsproject.com/>). The analysis focuses on strategies of representation (Heritage & Taylor, 2024), with particular attention to the discursive imagery through which interviewees articulate experiences, losses and reconfigurations of family ties. In this way, the study explores how the notion of ‘family’ is not only described but also actively reimagined in the context of forced migration. Indeed, preliminary results reveal a complex landscape of familial experiences that go beyond traditional or nuclear family models. The interviewees, coming from diverse cultural, religious and national backgrounds, offer insights into multiple and intersecting conceptions of family. A wide range of experiences emerges from the interviews, illustrating the plurality and fluidity of familial imaginaries among displaced populations.

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Performing family on TikTok: Multimodal discourses of lesbian motherhood and IVF

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This study analyses how lesbian couples on TikTok discursively construct their identities as families through narratives of their IVF journeys, a process frequently positioned on the platform as a central and emblematic pathway to queer family-making. Among lesbian creators, IVF-related content is particularly prominent, often serving as a highly visible and emotionally resonant mode of representing kinship, biological connection and shared maternal experience. Focusing on a small multimodal corpus of videos and user comments drawn from clearly identified two-mother families on TikTok, and selected through targeted hashtags such as #ivfjourney, #reciprocalivf, #twomomssquad, #wlw, #wlwcouple, #lesbiancouple, and #mumsoftiktok (among others), we explore how traditional membership categories associated with family are reshaped through the strategic deployment of predicates of love, biology, sacrifice and joy.

Drawing on Harvey Sacks’ theory of membership categorization and the role of predicates in social identity construction (Sacks, 1972), this investigation examines how users discursively claim legitimacy within the historically normative ‘happy family’ model, often idealized through heteronormative, nuclear-family tropes (Vanobbergen et al., 2006;

Petintseva, 2018). Using Membership Categorization Analysis (Stokoe, 2012; Fitzgerald & Housley, 2015), we explore how lesbian couples mobilize category-bound predicates to affirm their roles as mothers and partners. Particular attention is paid to how users manage tensions between biological and relational markers of kinship, often negotiating claims to legitimacy in the face of normative expectations. Sequential discourse analysis (Schegloff, 2007) is employed to examine how TikTok videos unfold narratively, from scientific accounts of IVF procedures to emotional affirmations of familial belonging.

Rather than rejecting traditional family ideals, these ‘performances’ are better understood through the lens of Butler’s (1990) concept of performativity, whereby identities are enacted and legitimized through the reiteration of normative discursive practices. In this sense, lesbian family roles and kinship ties are performed on TikTok through recognizable linguistic and visual patterns that both align with and expand the boundaries of heteronormative frameworks. The affiliative bonds produced in this context are not inherent to the hashtags themselves but emerge discursively through what Zappavigna (2012) terms ambient affiliation: the cumulative effect of repeated semiotic strategies such as shared stances, evaluative language and affective framing that align users around communal values. Hashtags like #ivfjourney and #twomomssquad thus function not merely as topical labels but as socially meaningful cues that help to co-construct emotionally resonant digital publics.

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Reimagining kinship in *Sense8*: A multimodal stylistic analysis of posthuman household narratives

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This study investigates the discursive construction of the alternative household representation within the Netflix series *Sense8* (2015–2018), a ‘proud and loud’ manifesto of diversity and equality (Shaw & Stone, 2021). The protagonists’ *cluster* – a group of eight individuals who share a profound mental and emotional bond – makes a case for the contemporary societal debates surrounding diverse family formations (Balirano et al., 2024). Moreover, series creators, the Wachowskis (directors of *The Matrix*, *V for Vendetta*, *Cloud Atlas*), have notably depicted imaginary, yet not-out-of-reach post-human societies, where individuals are called to inhabit reality beyond hegemonic paradigms, and to evolve *sympoietically* (Haraway, 2016), that is, humanely, emphatically and collaboratively. In *Sense8*, the (re)presented household moves beyond traditional cisgender, heteronormative, binary and monoethnic frameworks, a compelling and all-encompassing trope of intersectionality and inclusivity.

Drawing on the premise that discourse can both consolidate and unbuild power and societal family norms (Fruttaldo, 2024), this research employs a Multimodal Stylistic approach (Nørgaard, 2014) to explore how *Sense8* casts a brand-new sense of family, which in the series is both chosen and biological, to suggest that humans are born with humane capability. Kinship and emotional connection are construed through linguistic devices such as deixis and evaluative lexis, which are scrutinised with a stylistic lens to highlight the evolution of the cluster’s collective voice and negotiation of shared experiences. From a multimodal perspective, these categories are reflected in visual salience, which is cued in the series’ shared spaces and synchronised actions, and in function of eye contact and gaze. These elements, along with reflections on categories of being, doing and existing, increase the sense of belonging and solidarity within the cluster, encouraging the spectators to question and reimagine traditional households and what it means to be humane.

This study also helps to explore the intersectional dimensions of the cluster's experiences. Each member faces distinct forms of discrimination related to gender, sexuality, race, class and ability, mirroring the call for research on intersectionality in discourses of families and households. The analyses highlight both the individual struggles and the collective strength derived from the cluster's interconnectedness, showcasing how their 'sensate' experiences foster empathy and solidarity across diverse identities (Mincheva, 2018). In light of a reconceptualized posthuman subjectivity, grounded in relationality and transversal interconnections across classical axes of differentiation (Braidotti, 2013), it becomes necessary to consider how such a subject engages in the practice of making kin beyond normative familial models (Haraway, 2018). Through its discursive construction of the cluster, *Sense8* offers a compelling reimagining of kinship that challenges traditional models and contributes to broader conversations on inclusive, intersectional representations of family in contemporary media (Riboni, 2024).

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Representing single-mother families: A discourse analysis of Reddit threads and comments

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Family patterns have diversified considerably in the last sixty years, going beyond the married nuclear family (a married – heterosexual – couple with children) and single-parent families are now a widely recognised phenomenon and family assemblage (UN, 2017; Balirano et al., 2024). Yet, according to some narratives, the 'traditional', nuclear family remains a source of morality for nations, a beacon for social order and identity (Sullins, 2021). Indeed, this concept of family has proved to be a fertile instrument of political and public communication because of its resonance across the social spectrum and its ability to engage with social and cultural values (Galvin, 2006). However, amid the many public appeals to embrace the defense of traditional family values – such as love, respect, honesty, responsibility –, a more subtle view has increasingly emerged, capturing the paradox of such narratives. Traditional family values are used as a weapon to deny the rights of differing, non-traditional families (Zartler, 2014).

This study specifically aims to investigate how different concepts of family are discursively construed in social media discourse, focusing on the online interactions that could be retrieved from the platform Reddit concerning single-mother families. Reddit is a platform consisting of topic-based communities, often referred to as 'subreddits', which function as discussion forums where users can share content and comment on a wide range of issues. Its hybrid nature, combining features of traditional forums and social networking sites, has contributed to its growing popularity. A corpus of threads featuring the keywords 'single mom(s)/mum(s)/mother(s)' was collected, including all the replies and comments to the initial messages, as posted over the last 3 years on the platform.

Through a critical approach to discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2006; Jones et al., 2015; Bouvier & Machin, 2018), the construal of single-mother families emerging from Reddit posts and comments will be examined. The investigation will concentrate on conversations on topics relating to single moms, seeking advice/opinion, and so forth, as well as instances of hate speech perpetuating forms of discrimination and marginalization towards such families. By enacting social stigma and stereotyping, hateful narratives exacerbate emotional and social tensions, portraying single mothers as unworthy exceptions to the 'natural' and 'traditional' family.

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Sisterhood, solidarity and transfeminist alliances in digital environments: A multimodal critical discourse analysis of the FEMINIST ZINE

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The present study aims to investigate the multimodal construction of household and sisterhood within the digital community FEMINIST, a popular social-first digital platform that currently engages more than six million people worldwide (FEMINIST, n.d.). Indeed, contemporary fourth wave feminism differs from other phases of the movement mainly because of the new horizons of connections and spaces allowed by the Internet and social media (Peroni & Rodak, 2020). Feminist activists soon recognised the power of the web to build global networks with sisters all around the world and used it to take their battles for change to a new dimension, creating feminist digital communities that have had a significant impact on the development of the contemporary movement (Zottola, 2024). Drawing on the concepts of sisterhood and women's solidarity (hooks, 1984), the community FEMINIST configures itself as a feminist digital household where marginalised subjectivities experience different forms of community, challenging traditional family representations and kinship relations. The community-centred approach of the platform led to the collective creation of the FEMINIST ZINE, a publication of multimodal contributions on what it means to be an intersectional feminist today. The first issue of the FEMINIST ZINE, published digitally in 2022, is the selected corpus for this study. By exploring the discursive practices of the members of the community involved in the creation of the issue, this study intends to investigate the modalities through which the digital household FEMINIST and its bonds of sisterhood are discursively construed. At the same time, the core of the study is to highlight how marginalised subjectivities construct their own intersectional identities and their relationship to each other within the feminist digital environment. The methodology adopted for this study is Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (Kress, 2010), characterised by a specific transfeminist approach (Lazar, 2007). This analytical framework will allow for a critical exploration of the different semiotic resources employed in the construction of meanings and representations. Additionally, the transfeminist-situated approach will allow for a reading of the collected data in relation to the trends and contradictions of feminisms within contemporary neoliberal society (Peroni & Rodak, 2020). Ultimately, the investigation will suggest that the analysis of popular feminist digital households is fundamental to understanding how contemporary feminisms challenge traditional representations of family and kinship identities, promoting an anti-essentialist approach in contemporary family types (Balirano et al., 2024).

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Human and AI ideologies: Pragmalinguistic and multimodal representations of contemporary family forms

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Considering the dynamics of the Web 2.0 as a defining feature of contemporary societies (O'Reilly, 2005), wherein online communities of belonging emerge through users' subjectivity, agency and shared discursive practices (Zappavigna, 2014), this study aims to compare human linguistic conceptualisation of contemporary households with its corresponding representation in AI-driven multimodal design. In particular, this investigation is organised into two distinct phases. The first phase examines university students' discursive representations of family structures. Since "negative and discriminatory depictions [of family practice] have continued to limit the production of dialogic spaces in which non-normative families can exist and feel acknowledged" (Balirano et al., 2024, p. 4), a pragmalinguistic approach (Thomas, 1995) may help uncover both ideological and interpretative biases. Adopting the methodological framework developed within the PRIN ECHOES Project (English Studies to Contrast Hate Online and Enhance Solidarity), data collection involved the design and administration of a survey aimed at prompting students to engage with AI tools (primarily Copilot and ChatGPT) to generate visual representations of their most prototypical concept of family. The second phase of the study applies a multimodal semiotic approach (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) to analyse the AI-generated images, with the objective of investigating how the AI interpreted the linguistic input and visually constructed the concept of family. By juxtaposing the findings from both phases, the research aims to explore the illocutionary force in students' speech acts (Austin, 1975) and their multimodal interpretation by AI systems, drawing upon the theoretical principles of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 2014).

Through the active generation of AI-driven multimodal representations of family forms, this study aims to investigate the diverse articulations of subjectivity shaped by individual perceptions and student-machine interactions, thereby foregrounding potential biases of both computational and socio-cultural origin. By focusing on pragmatic aspects, the research seeks to examine possible communicative discrepancies between humans and machines through an analysis of their respective illocutionary acts, in both linguistic and multimodal modes. Given the increasingly pervasive role of AI technologies in contemporary society, such discrepancies may reveal how machines interpret, reprocess, and realise intended meanings in ways that diverge from human communicative intent, potentially undermining the user's agency, a defining feature of human discourse. Drawing on Foucault's (1972, p. 49) understanding of discourse as "practices which systematically form the [mental] objects of which they speak", this study aims to analyse possible hidden ideologies within contemporary (human and artificial) discursive practices on the concept of family.

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Not a mother: Surrogacy, agency and the reframing of family through the voices of surrogates

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This paper explores the discursive role of gestational carriers (more commonly referred to as surrogates) in reshaping dominant narratives of family, motherhood and reproduction in the context of surrogacy arrangements. For the purpose of

this study, I focus on women who have carried a pregnancy for couples of gay fathers. This focus reflects the trend of right-wing and religiously aligned media amplifying a reductive and moralizing narrative: that of the exploited, economically disadvantaged surrogate mother (Mongibello, 2024), forced to give up ‘her child’ to fulfill the selfish desires of wealthy gay couples. Central to this framing is the symbolic function of the term ‘mother’, which assigns a parental role that many surrogates explicitly reject.

As a counter-discourse, several reproductive surrogates (by choice) – particularly from North America – have publicly challenged these narratives, producing videos and social media contents that assert their agency and ethical motivations (Smietana et al., 2018). These women describe themselves not as mothers but as gestational partners or even surrogacy activists, emphasizing their role as vessels who enable the creation of a family without claiming parental identity. Their testimony reveals a desire to participate in something larger than themselves, often framing their actions as expressions of solidarity, care and intentional choice rather than victimhood or exploitation.

This investigation analyzes the discourse of one such figure: a self-described ‘retired surrogate’ who, after forming her own family, chose to carry children for others multiple times, The Lotus Woman. Through a critical multimodal discourse analysis (Lazar, 2000, 2005) of her Instagram videos, I examine how she constructs a counter-narrative that both resists maternal framing and makes visible alternative understandings of kinship.

In this perspective, surrogates are also openly acknowledged as part of the extended family network, not as a mother but as a significant figure in the process of family-making. This openness reflects a broader shift in how queer families face and sometimes dismantle heteronormative notions of kinship (Balirano et al., 2024). Ultimately, the study argues that surrogates play a crucial discursive role in challenging the foundational idea that family necessarily requires a mother, thus exposing the limits of normative reproductive imaginaries.

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