

## SEM30. De-/re-humanizing the language of global fears: Crises, extremisms, terrorisms

**30A 11 September h. 11:00-13:00, room 2 Moro (second floor)**

**30B 12 September h. 14:00-16:00, PN 14**

### Convenors

Ilaria Moschini (Università degli Studi di Firenze) [ilaria.moschini@unifi.it](mailto:ilaria.moschini@unifi.it)

Denise Filmer (Università di Pisa) [denise.filmer@unipi.it](mailto:denise.filmer@unipi.it)

Kim Grego (Università degli Studi di Milano) [kim.grego@unimi.it](mailto:kim.grego@unimi.it)

### Abstract

The new millennium has brought forth an escalating series of global challenges including mass migration, climate change, pandemics, AI development, acts of terrorism and wars or conflicts (e.g., Russia-Ukraine) – which have contributed to a heightened sense of global fear. These crises are not only material, but also profoundly discursive, as they are framed and reframed in public discourse. At the heart of these representations lies the strategic construction of humanity and its boundaries, which shapes how crises, extremisms, and terrorisms are mediated, understood, and responded to (Cap, 2017; Demata, 2018; Wodak, 2020 [2015]).

The seminar critically examines how language both dehumanizes and rehumanizes in times of crisis. While dehumanizing strategies strip individuals or groups of their agency and moral worth – reinforcing fear and legitimizing exclusion – rehumanizing discourses work to restore dignity, agency, and empathy, often serving as counter-narratives to dominant fear-based frames (Entman, 1993). We invite contributions that explore these discursive processes across political speeches, media discourse, and other public texts, analyzing both the linguistic mechanisms that construct fear-driven Othering and those that attempt to reclaim shared humanity.

While embracing diverse linguistic approaches outlined in the AIA call for seminars, the proposal prioritizes critical perspectives that analyze how language shapes meaning, constructs identities, and influences worldviews (possibly also considering the interaction with semiotic resources, e.g. Machin, 2013; van Leeuwen, 2014). By examining the processes of de-humanization and rehumanization in political and media discourse, the seminar seeks to uncover pathways for fostering more ethical, inclusive, and empathetic narratives in an increasingly polarized world.

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## SEM30. Papers

**30A 11 September h. 11:00-13:00, room 2 Moro (second floor)**

- “One – and only one – official language”: *Weaponizing English in the US* (Maria Grazia Sindoni, Università degli Studi di Messina)
- *Representations of opioid addiction and homelessness in an American city: A multimodal analysis of news discourse* (Chisom Nlebedum, University of Massachusetts Boston / Jennifer Sclafani, University of Massachusetts Boston)
- *Dehumanising and deagentifying migrants through externalisation policies: The cases of Italian and British offshoring/outsourcing to Rwanda and Albania* (Franco Zappettini, Sapienza Università di Roma)

### 30B 12 September h. 14:00-16:00, PN 14

- *Rehumanizing and dehumanizing news narratives through translation: Ideological translational decisions in the BBC documentary, Gaza: How to survive a warzone* (Denise Filmer, Università di Pisa)
- *Milan's 'lead years'. The human face of political violence in Anglophone media discourse* (Kim Grego, Università degli Studi di Milano)
- *From tools to faith: A paradigm shift in techno-discourse from Brand's human-centered vision to Andreessen's techno-determinism* (Ilaria Moschini, Università degli Studi di Firenze)
- *The discourse of fear and attempts at rehumanization in Waldman's The submission* (Mais Qutami, Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan)

### SEM30. Abstracts

#### Rehumanizing and dehumanizing news narratives through translation: Ideological translational decisions in the BBC documentary, *Gaza: How to survive a warzone*

Denise Filmer (Università di Pisa) [denise.filmer@unipi.it](mailto:denise.filmer@unipi.it)

The BBC's editorial guidelines clearly state its commitment to "achieving due impartiality in all its output"<sup>1</sup>. The BBC is the most visited English language news website in the world<sup>2</sup> and "the most trusted international news broadcaster"<sup>3</sup> across the globe. Recently, however, it has come under attack for alleged bias in reporting on the Israel-Gaza conflict. Controversies surrounding the documentary *Gaza: How to Survive a Warzone* (Roberts and Hammash 2025) prompted its removal from BBC iPlayer: the revelation that the father of the film's teenage narrator had worked as a deputy minister for the Hamas-run government in Gaza provoked a chorus of criticism from the right-wing press. Further accusations ensued: the *Daily Telegraph* reported that the BBC had 'whitewashed' the views of Gazan interviewees by "repeatedly mistranslating references to 'the Jews' and omitting the praise of 'jahid'" (Johnston 2025 my emphasis). Journalists are rarely trained in translation (Filmer 2014); therefore, when ideologically loaded lexis becomes a critical point in translational decision making (Munday 2021, p. 3), a closer scrutiny is called for. This paper examines the BBC's translational decisions and investigates the *Telegraph's* allegations of mistranslation from a journalistic translation perspective (Valdeón 2020) in the context of the emotional turn in journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen & Pantti 2021). Drawing on Baker's (2006) elaboration of narrative theory, framing in the news (Entman 1993), and Munday's (2012) *Critical Points in Translational Decision-Making*, the paper argues that the BBC's translational approach in the context of the Gaza-Israel war was more appropriate than a so-called literal translation, thus illustrating how translational decisions can restore or deny agency, empathy, and moral complexity in international news reporting.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines/impartiality/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://pressgazette.co.uk/media-audience-and-business-data/media\\_metrics/most-popular-websites-news-world-monthly-2/](https://pressgazette.co.uk/media-audience-and-business-data/media_metrics/most-popular-websites-news-world-monthly-2/)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/whatwedo/worldservice>

## Milan's 'lead years'. The human face of political violence in Anglophone media discourse

Kim Grego (Università degli Studi di Milano) kim.grego@unimi.it

Background. Over 50 years – more than half a century – has passed since the 1969 Piazza Fontana attack in Milan, which was among the incidents marking the beginning, both locally and nationally, of the so called 'lead years' (*anni di piombo*) in Italy. This was a period of political unrest that saw numerous violent acts, with many victims, mar the Italian scene, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, but which some scholars see extending into the 2000s. Material. The violent events that took place in those years were chronicled in many news outlets throughout the world. This study focuses on attacks that occurred in Milan, as reported by English-speaking sources. Aim. The purpose is to capture the affective dimension of the protagonists (perpetrators and victims alike) in the way they were depicted in contemporary reports, possibly extending the observation to more recent times, contingent on material availability. Method. The study adopts methods in applied linguistics, drawing on sentiment and discourse analysis in particular. The analysis is predominantly qualitative in nature, backed up where possible by quantitative inputs. Relevance. This paper contributes to studies exploring crises, extremisms and terrorisms, to offer a linguistic exploration of the human construction of those involved and – possibly – to contribute to the overall reflection on societal discourse across cultures.

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## From tools to faith: A paradigm shift in techno-discourse from Brand's human-centered vision to Andreessen's techno-determinism

Ilaria Moschini (Università degli Studi di Firenze) ilaria.moschini@unifi.it

The paper examines the discursive construction of the human-technology relationship in two influential texts that articulate contrasting visions of technological progress: Stewart Brand's preamble to the Whole Earth Catalog (1968) and Marc Andreessen's Techno-Optimism Manifesto (2023). Although both position technology as central to human flourishing, they substantially diverge in the ways in which they humanize – or dehumanize – the technological subject.

For several decades, Brand's ecological and countercultural vision shaped dominant US-based discourse of innovation. Inspired by R. Buckminster Fuller's (e.g. 1969) belief that access to the right tools could empower individuals to reshape society, Stewart Brand framed technology as a democratizing force (Turner 2006). In the Whole Earth Catalog, tools were considered as empowering conceptual devices for systemic transformation. Such a "tool-for-use" paradigm emphasizes agency and positions the human as a creative actor embedded in ecological and communal systems.

By contrast, Andreessen's Techno-Optimism Manifesto represents a paradigmatic shift in techno-discourse. Framed through conceptual metaphors of inevitability, and salvation (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), it portrays technology as the autonomous force that drives civilization forward. Human agency is contingent on alignment with innovation's teleology and dissent is considered as a regression. Such a discourse dehumanizes human subjects by collapsing moral complexity into binary logic and forcing subjectivity to a deterministic vision of progress (Cap, 2017).

Using tools from Critical Discourse Analysis and conceptual metaphor theory, the paper explores how language participates in the de-/re-humanization of the subject in digital techno-discourse. The contrast between these two texts reveals a shift in the rhetorical positioning of technology over time: from Brand's "tool-for-use" paradigm rooted in countercultural pragmatism to Andreessen's "technology-as-faith" narrative grounded in market determinism and futurist ideology. While both endorse a pro-technology stance, their different rhetorical strategies highlight competing visions of what technology is for, who it serves, and how it should be integrated into the fabric of human life.

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## **Representations of opioid addiction and homelessness in an American city: A multimodal analysis of news discourse**

Chisom Nlebedum (University of Massachusetts Boston) Chisom.Nlebedum001@umb.edu

Jennifer Sclafani (University of Massachusetts Boston) Jennifer.Sclafani@umb.edu

The opioid crisis is an ongoing national public health emergency in the United States that affects urban, suburban, and rural communities alike. Dating back to the 1990s with the pharmaceutical industry's aggressive marketing of prescription painkillers, opioid overdoses have increased exponentially over the past couple of decades. Public health policy debates on this issue are currently being debated at the national, state, and municipal levels. While research has documented an evolution in media portrayals of opioid-related policies, with more positive attitudes toward harm reduction policies in recent years, news coverage continues to use stigmatizing language to present those suffering from opioid use disorder (Carlson et al, 2025).

The present study examines the portrayal of individuals affected by addiction and homelessness in news coverage on "Mass and Cass" (MAC), a tent city and gathering place in downtown Boston that has become the epicenter of the region's intersecting opioid, mental health, and homelessness crises. Based on a corpus of 150 videos of local broadcast coverage (~10 hours) on the events, issues, and policy discourse surrounding MAC over the past decade, we perform a critical multimodal discourse analysis (Eriksson, 2022; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021; Machin & Mayr, 2023) of news coverage of the situation, focusing on how social actors, actions, and policy solutions MAC are represented and/or silenced in the media.

Findings show that political executives' voices outweigh those of public health and housing experts, and that the concerns of nearby residents and business owners are valued over the homeless individuals residing at MAC. We identify several dehumanizing strategies employed by news networks in representing individuals suffering from opioid use disorder, including:

- (a) subject selection: e.g., interviews with self-proclaimed "community activists" decrying the safety and aesthetic implications of the residents and activities at MAC
- (b) metonymic language: e.g., references to "drugs", "needles" and "tents" in place of people
- (c) framing devices: e.g., interplay between camera angle, distance, and sound effects that highlight transgressive group behavior rather than individual human suffering.

Additionally, by comparing the journalistic practices of various news networks and highlighting the strategies of one news station that bucks these trends, we draw attention to some re-humanizing strategies that may influence public perceptions of addiction and homelessness and better communicate the complexity of their underlying causes and potential solutions.

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## **The discourse of fear and attempts at rehumanization in Waldman's *The submission***

Mais Qutami (Al- Zaytoonah University of Jordan) maisqutami@gmail.com

This paper examines the way the discourse of fear is utilized and language is misused to be consumed by the American public to reinforce “the other’s” dehumanization in Amy Waldman’s *The Submission*. It is a counter- narrative through which the threat of selective democracy helps to contextualize the dehumanization of Muslims while their rehumanization proves to be achievable through language, dialogue, and unbiased representation. The paper reveals that dehumanization is perpetuated through the construction of a collective enemy and manufactured fear as depicted in the novel. It highlights the way American values of democracy, equality, and tolerance are even denounced as they are held responsible for providing “the other” with opportunities to rewrite their own story, become visible, and be heard.

The dehumanization of Middle Easterners and Muslims is so normalized that the majority do not question their own perceptions of the region or the constructed reality they have been fed. While the protagonist’s work is admired, it is disregarded due to his cultural and religious background in spite of his lack of faith. Waldman demonstrates that attempts to rehumanize “the other” succeed through his relocation to another country where his Arab name is not a liability. Once another culture embraced him and acknowledged his achievements, he regained his dignity, respect, and objective representation. The paper also delves into the issue of control over meanings and values that shape our lives and how this control determines what constitutes terrorism or extremism. In the novel, it is these labels that legitimize the exclusion and dehumanization of Muslim individuals and generate the inability to recognize their potential or humanity within the mainstream.

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### **“One – and only one – official language”: Weaponizing English in the US**

Maria Grazia Sindoni (Università degli Studi di Messina) mariagrazia.sindoni@unime.it

On March 1, 2025, President Donald Trump signed an executive order declaring English as the official language of the United States (Presidential Actions, 2025), thereby rescinding Executive Order 13166, which mandated federal agencies to provide language assistance to individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP). This policy shift carries significant implications for LEP individuals, particularly in their access to essential services such as healthcare, legal aid, and education. By removing federal requirements for multilingual services, the order effectively marginalizes non-English speakers, exacerbating existing inequalities and hindering civic participation.

This study adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis framework (Fairclough, 1989), informed by systemic-functional approaches to semiosis (Halliday, & Matthiessen, 2014), to analyze the transitivity structures and modality choices within the executive order, revealing how agency is attributed and obligations are framed (O’Grady, 2019). The discussion incorporates insights from translanguaging as a decolonizing project (Li Wei & García 2022) and illustrates how English is positioned as the “common” or “unifying” language, thereby naturalizing its dominance and relegating other languages to a peripheral or divisive status (Ho, Li & Sindoni, in press).

It is argued that the executive order operates as an instrument of linguistic nationalism, weaponizing English to enforce a monolingual identity that undermines the multicultural fabric of American society. The presentation also considers the socio-political motivations behind the order, its impact on marginalized communities, and broader implications for linguistic human rights. Ultimately, it explores how language policies can be used to dehumanize and exclude, transforming English from a global lingua franca into a tool of fear and control.

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## Dehumanising and deagentifying migrants through externalisation policies: the cases of Italian and British offshoring/outsourcing to Rwanda and Albania

Franco Zappettini (Sapienza Università di Roma) franco.zappettini@uniroma1.it

Over the last three decades, the externalisation of borders has been a systematic institutional response to the migration 'crisis' (Fitzgerald, 2020). Several nations states, as well as the EU, have been promoting policies aimed at offshoring and outsourcing borders management in an attempt to exercise 'sovereignty by proxy' and quell public fear of the 'strangers at our door' (Baumann, 2016). This study focuses on two recent cases of such policies, namely the bilateral agreements between the British and Rwandan governments and between the Italian and Albanian governments whereby migrants would be processed in/by another country's jurisdiction. More specifically, the study traces the discursive strategies (Wodak and Meyer, 2016) of British and Italian PMs to identify how their governments legitimise the aforementioned policies in the public sphere.

Findings suggest that key discursive strategies adopted by political actors are driven by previous electoral platforms committed to 'stop the boats' and are predicated on perceptions of migrants as an external 'threat' to domestic security. From these premises I will argue that the externalisation of borders deagentifies and dehumanizes migrants in significant ways while buying states an easy way out of their international obligations. As they shift the 'burden' of unwanted immigration beyond the imaginary boundaries of nationhood, offshoring and outsourcing migration management restricts migrants' mobility and, crucially, their "access to territorialised human and civil rights" (Fitzgerlad, 2020). Significantly, these policies also conveniently help to conceal migrants' suffering from the public view or, at least, to project human tragedies to the country's even more distantly imagined territorial 'periphery' as immigrants kept at a distance are perceived as less relatable, or at best, seen as 'proximal sufferers' (Ong 2015).

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