

## SEM32. Addressing hate speech and promoting digital citizenship in English studies

11 September h. 16:00-18:30, room 1 Moro (first floor)

### Convenors

Margherita Rasulo (Università degli Studi della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli) [margherita.rasulo@unicampania.it](mailto:margherita.rasulo@unicampania.it)  
Maria Grazia Sindoni (Università degli Studi di Messina) [mariagrazia.sindoni@unime.it](mailto:mariagrazia.sindoni@unime.it)

### Abstract

In alignment with the objectives of the ECHOES (English Studies to Contrast Hate Online and Enhance Solidarity) PRIN project (project ref. number 2022KZFT24) led by the University of Naples L'Orientale in cooperation with the University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli, the University of Messina and the University of Naples Parthenope, this seminar seeks to advance research on responsible digital citizenship in and through discourse (Balirano & Hughes, 2020) as advocated by UNESCO's principles (2016). We aim to explore creative and critical engagement with today's multimodal digital products and environments in Virtual English as a Lingua Franca (i.e., VELF, Sindoni, 2023), that is conceptualized as the English language of international communication used within digital scenarios and beyond.

The seminar invites proposals that investigate research methodologies and pedagogical practices, including, but not limited to, studies on multimodal digital literacies (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2022), within educational settings and broader social contexts. These proposals should help develop knowledge dissemination and awareness regarding the identification of hate or harmful online speech and practices, particularly within English multimodal digital texts that threaten individuals, communities, and societal cohesion. To incorporate diverse perspectives and address a range of research questions, we invite submissions employing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches to the analysis of multimodal digital texts and practices in VELF. Our aim is to advance research on the mechanisms through which hate is triggered within and through digital discourse and to explore strategies for its mitigation in the context of peace education.

### References

- Balirano G. & Hughes, B. (Eds.). (2020). *Homing in on hate: Critical discourse studies of hate speech, discrimination and inequality in the digital age*. Loffredo.
- Lim, F. V. & Tan-Chia, L. (2022). *Designing learning for multimodal literacy: Teaching viewing and representing*. Routledge.
- Sindoni, M. G. (2023). A multimodal and translanguaging approach to video-mediated interaction in Virtual English as a lingua franca contexts. In: Pineda I. & Bosso, R. (Eds.), *Virtual English as a Lingua Franca* (pp. 63–82). Routledge.

## SEM32. Papers

11 September h. 16:00-18:30, room 1 Moro (first floor)

- *A multimodal tool for assessing learners' digital literacies in interpreting harmful contents in English* (Marta Arcovito, Università degli Studi di Messina)
- *Promoting digital citizenship: the ECHOES project first wave results* (Mariavita Cambria, Università degli Studi di Messina / Stefania Taviano, Università degli Studi di Messina)
- *"You're not depressed, you're just lazy. Stop whining and go outside like the rest of us". Hate speech and mental health on social media: Discursive constructions and pedagogical perspectives* (Maria De Santo, Università di Napoli L'Orientale)
- *Counter-hate speech education: Critical tools for school teachers and learners* (Alessandra Ferlito, Università degli Studi della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli)
- *Multimodal digital literacy and AI-generated memes: Exploring AI's role in education-based hate speech prevention* (Annalisa Raffone, Università Pegaso)

### **A multimodal tool for assessing learners' digital literacies in interpreting harmful contents in English**

Marta Arcovito (Università degli Studi di Messina) [marcovito@unime.it](mailto:marcovito@unime.it)

In the increasingly complex landscape of digital communication, the need to equip learners with robust multimodal digital literacies has become both a pedagogical imperative and a matter of social responsibility. A recent binational study found that 67% of adolescents in Germany and Switzerland witnessed hate speech at school, and 65% had encountered online hate speech at least once in the past 12 months (Wachs et al., 2023). In the Italian context, exposure to hate speech has been linked to reduced well-being and lower educational self-confidence among adolescents (Di Brango et al., 2024), underscoring the urgent requirement to develop users' critical awareness of linguistic and visual content.

We introduce a newly developed multimodal assessment tool, created within the framework of the ECHOES project (English Studies to Contrast Hate Online and Enhance Solidarity; PRIN ref. 2022KZFT24). The core premise of the project is that the active promotion of inclusion and equality should be pursued through the dissemination of knowledge and the raising of awareness about hate speech and harmful online practices in English multimodal digital texts—particularly those that may threaten or harm individuals, communities, or society.

Within this framework, the multimodal assessment tool has been developed with the aim of evaluating how Italian secondary school students interpret harmful and harmless digital texts in English. ECHOES is a joint research project carried out by the University of Naples L'Orientale in cooperation with the University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli, the University of Messina and the University of Naples Parthenope. The tool is specifically designed for students in the third year of middle school and the first three years of high school, aligning with A2–B1 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the Waystage level of the Common Framework of Reference for Intercultural Digital Literacies (Sindoni et al., 2019). It comprises two components: a sociodemographic questionnaire and a rating task involving 24 three-tier multimodal digital items categorised under six types of discrimination—Age (Ageism), Body (Body Shaming), Disability (Ableism), Ethnicity, Gender, and Religion. The tool is designed to measure students' awareness of offensive or respectful content in multimodal texts in the English language. Implemented through Google Forms with randomized element sequencing, the tool not only captures students' interpretive responses but also facilitates research into the perception of harmful content across multimodal formats.

### **References**

- Di Brango, N., Corbelli, G., Mariotto, M., Marras, A., Verbena, S., Gregori, F., Ioverno, S., Palladino, B. E., & Zuffianò, A. (2024, May). The consequences associated with exposure to online hate speech among adolescents: A systematic review. Paper presented at the World Anti-Bullying Forum 2025, Florence, Italy.
- Sindoni, M. G., Adami, E., Karatza, S., Marenzi, I., Moschini, I., Petroni, S. & Rocca, M. (2019). The common framework of reference for intercultural digital literacies. EU-MADE4LL, European Multimodal and Digital Education for Language Learning.
- Wachs, S., Wright, M. F. & Maier, C. (2023). Hate speech in adolescents: A binational study on prevalence and correlates. *Frontiers in Education*, 8, Article 1076249.



### **Promoting digital citizenship: the ECHOES project first wave results**

Mariavita Cambria (Università degli Studi di Messina) [mariavita.cambria@unime.it](mailto:mariavita.cambria@unime.it)

Stefania Taviano (Università degli Studi di Messina) [stefania.taviano@unime.it](mailto:stefania.taviano@unime.it)

This paper presents the initial findings of the ECHOES (English Studies to Contrast Hate Online and Enhance Solidarity) PRIN project led by the University of Naples L'Orientale in cooperation with the University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli, the University of Messina and the University of Naples Parthenope. In line with the seminar's focus on responsible digital citizenship (Balirano & Hughes, 2020), as advocated by UNESCO's principles (2016), these findings reveal how 720 teenagers, aged between 14 and 17, responded to the ECHOES digital questionnaire administered in two secondary schools in Sicily. The questionnaire invited them to reflect on the respectful and/or offensive language used in multimodal digital texts in English. Existing frameworks and taxonomies, i.e. The Digital Competence Framework (DigComp, 2016) and the Common Framework of Reference for Intercultural Digital literacies (CFRIDL, Sindoni et al., 2019) were used as a point of reference for the questionnaire.

The presentation of the findings corresponds to the two main sections of the questionnaire. The first section analyses demographic information regarding secondary school students, their perception of their language skills, and their (if any) multilingual repertoires (Sindoni, 2023). Students were also asked about their knowledge and use of English in educational contexts, as well as sociodemographic variables. The second section focuses on students' responses related to six distinct discrimination areas identified in the project as targets of hate speech: ethnicity, gender, age, disability, religion, and body shaming. Participants answered items in this section using a 5-point Likert scale. The items included in this section were either images, text or images accompanied by text, and participants were asked to assess if the items were respectful or offensive to them (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2022).

These initial findings, representing the first wave of results, aim to encourage reflection on strategies and pedagogical practices that may be effective in raising students' awareness in the collective fight against hate speech and in promoting counter-discourse strategies.

## References

- Balirano G. & B. Hughes (Eds.). (2020). *Homing in on hate: Critical discourse studies of hate speech, discrimination and inequality in the digital age*. Loffredo.
- DigComp (2016). *The digital competence framework for citizens*:  
<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC101254>
- Lim, F. V. & Tan-Chia, L. (2022). *Designing learning for multimodal literacy: Teaching viewing and representing*. Routledge.
- Sindoni, M. G. (2023). A multimodal and translanguaging approach to video-mediated interaction in Virtual English as a lingua franca contexts. In Pineda I. & Bosso, R. (Eds.), *Virtual English as a lingua franca* (pp. 63–82). Routledge.
- Sindoni, M.G. et al. (2019). *The common framework of reference for intercultural digital literacies*:  
<https://www.eumade4ll.eu/common-framework-of-reference-for-intercultural-digital-literacy/>



## **“You're not depressed, you're just lazy. Stop whining and go outside like the rest of us”. Hate speech and mental health on social media: Discursive constructions and pedagogical perspectives**

Maria De Santo (Università di Napoli L'Orientale) mdesanto@unior.it

In recent years, social media platforms have emerged as key arenas where mental health narratives are shaped, shared, and contested in ways that can both foster solidarity among users and perpetuate delegitimisation or marginalisation. Often framed as spaces of collective engagement - facilitating open discussion around mental health issues, information seeking, and peer support (Bucci et al., 2019; Naslund et al., 2020) – such multimodal and collaborative environments may also, at the same time, pave the way “for language aggression, violence and unrivalled displays of hatred” (Balirano & Hughes, 2022, p. V).

Against this backdrop, the present study examines how hate speech targets individuals who share personal experiences of mental health struggles, and how it is articulated through discursive patterns that are often covert, shaped by socially legitimised forms of speech, and reinforced by dominant ideologies that marginalise vulnerability and emotional suffering. Drawing on Critical Discourse Studies (Wodak & Meyer, 2016) and corpus-based approaches (Baker, 2023; Hunt & Brookes, 2020) the study explores a corpus of social media posts sourced from Reddit communities focused on mental health and TikTok profiles engaging with mental health discourses. The study also adopts a multimodal perspective of analysis (Sindoni, 2020) in order to explore the ramifications of hate expressions (Rasulo, 2023) in digital discourses.

Grounded in the findings of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of harmful online discourses surrounding mental health, the study seeks to offer pedagogical insights to mitigate the spread of hateful content and its broader societal impact. Specifically, it aims to develop pedagogical perspectives for English language and media education by providing learners with the skills and tools to decode hostile language, facilitate inclusive online interactions, and reframe discourse practices toward ethical and inclusive digital citizenship.

## References

- Balirano G. & Hughes, B. (Eds.). (2020). *Homing in on hate: Critical discourse studies of hate speech, discrimination and inequality in the digital age*. Loffredo.
- Baker, P. (2023). *Using corpora in discourse analysis*. (2nd ed.) Bloomsbury.
- Bucci, S., Schwannauer, M. & Berry, N. (2019). The digital revolution and its impact on mental health care. *Psychology*

- and *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 92(2), 277–297.
- Hunt, D. & Brookes, G. (2020). *Corpus, discourse and mental health*. Bloomsbury.
- Naslund, J. A., Bondre, A., Torous, J., & Aschbrenner, K. A. (2020). Social media and mental health: benefits, risks, and opportunities for research and practice. *Journal of Technology in Behavioral Science*, 5, 245–57.
- Rasulo, M. (2023). *Master narratives of hate speech. A multimodal analysis*. Loffredo.
- Sindoni, M. G. (2020). A multimodal critical discourse analysis of the Stop Funding Hate boycott campaign in the UK. In G. Balirano & Hughes, B. (Eds.), *Homing in on hate: Critical discourse studies of hate speech, discrimination and inequality in the digital age*. Loffredo.
- Wodak, R. & Meyer, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Methods of critical discourse studies*. Sage.



### Counter-hate speech education: Critical tools for school teachers and learners

Alessandra Ferlito (Università degli Studi della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli) [alessandra.ferlito@unicampania.it](mailto:alessandra.ferlito@unicampania.it)

In recent decades, the issue of countering hate speech has emerged as a pressing concern in both academic discourse and the political agendas of Western democracies. Although international and national institutions, as well as media companies, have introduced legal frameworks, regulatory measures, and sanctions, the phenomenon remains unresolved. What continues to be missing is a widespread dissemination of critical tools that empower individuals to recognise, analyse, and challenge hate speech and its damaging effects (Balirano and Hughes, 2020; Rasulo, 2023). This gap is particularly evident in educational settings, despite the growing acknowledgment of education's pivotal role in this endeavor (Kellner & Share 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

Drawing on these premises, and within the framework of the project *ECHOES. English Studies to Contrast Hate Online and Enhance Solidarity* (PRIN 2022), this contribution presents the principles and approaches behind a set of operational guidelines (*vademecum*) created to support schoolteachers and learners in countering online hate speech. Existing educational toolkits in Italy broadly follow international and European directives that promote digital competence and critical thinking among youth. While they recognise the role of hate speech in reinforcing *us-versus-them* dichotomies, they rarely interrogate the deeper structures of power that sustain such discourse. Crucially, they often overlook the historical roots that continue to nourish hate speech, especially in today's increasingly nationalist, conservative, and reactionary climate. Racist, xenophobic, sexist, or ableist discourses must be deconstructed not as spontaneous emotional reactions, but as embedded in systemic structures of power and privilege (Manzoor-Khan, 2022; Nisco 2020). These are the effects of Whiteness, acts of 'microfascism', and continuations of the 'colonial gaze' (Bratich 2022; Mirzoeff, 2023). At a time when acts of solidarity with oppressed groups are being criminalised, it becomes imperative to renegotiate our understanding of key concepts and categories.

From an interdisciplinary and intersectional perspective, this *vademecum* aims to provide educators with an informative, formative, and critical tool, offering both theoretical insights and practical pedagogical strategies to foster inclusive and emancipatory classroom practices.

### References

- Balirano G. & Hughes, B. (Eds.). (2020). *Homing in on hate: Critical discourse studies of hate speech, discrimination and inequality in the digital era*. Loffredo.
- Bratich, J. Z. (2022). *On microfascism: Gender, war, and death*. Common Notions.
- Kellner, D. & Share, J. (2019). *The critical media literacy guide: Engaging media and transforming education*. Brill Sense.
- Manzoor-Khan, S. (2022). *Tangled in terror: Uprooting islamophobia*. Pluto Press.
- Mirzoeff, N. (2023). *White sight: Visual politics and practices of whiteness*. The MIT Press.
- Nisco, M. C. (2020). Online abuse and disability hate speech: A discursive analysis of newspaper comment boards on Harvey's law. In Balirano, G. & Hughes, B. (Eds.), *Homing in on hate: Critical discourse studies of hate speech, discrimination and inequality in the digital age* (pp. 75–91). Loffredo.
- Rasulo, M. (2023). *Master narratives of hate speech. A multimodal analysis*. Loffredo.
- UNESCO (2023). *Addressing hate speech through education. A guide for policy-makers*. UNESCO and The United Nations.



# Multimodal digital literacy and AI-generated memes: Exploring AI's role in education-based hate speech prevention

Annalisa Raffone (Università Pegaso) [annalisa.raffone@unipegaso.it](mailto:annalisa.raffone@unipegaso.it)

The rise of generative AI, whose systems are trained on large datasets that may include biased information, has sparked concerns about the amplification of stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory attitudes manifesting through the phenomenon of hate speech online (HSO) (Liebowitz, 2025). At the same time, European regulations (Council of Europe, 2018; European Commission, 2021; Vuorikari et al., 2022) demand that teachers and educators equip students with fundamental competencies and skills, including critical digital literacy and active citizenship, to prepare future citizens of the world to live in and contribute to an increasingly sustainable society.

This study explores how AI and multimodal digital literacy intersect in the realm of hate speech awareness and prevention, especially in secondary and high school environments. This research, conducted under the PRIN Project ECHOES, directed at improving students' digital skills and critical understanding of HSO (Balirano & Hughes, 2020), focuses explicitly on designing multimodal educational tools to counteract dominant hateful narratives. Since memes have been recognised as an effective means of HSO dissemination (Polli & Sindoni, 2024), they have been selected as critical instruments to contrast harmful discourses and develop students' metacognitive skills and civic engagement (UN, 2015; Council of Europe, 2018).

Against this backdrop, this study, adopting multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2013), examines how AI tools respond when prompted to generate multimodal content to challenge hate speech targeting three commonly affected categories (i.e., body, disability, and age). The aim of this research is twofold: (a) to explore how AI constructs prompt-based meanings and whether the outputs meet real-life dimensions and non-discriminatory and instructional objectives, thus unveiling the affordances, constraints, and ethical implications of automatically crafting pedagogical memes; (b) to contribute to the growing body of literature on effective methods for incorporating AI technologies in education to promote EU values and recommended skills while tackling multifaceted societal issues such as HSO.

## References

- Balirano, G. & Hughes, B. (2020). *Homing in on hate: Critical discourse studies of hate speech, discrimination and inequality in the digital age*. Loffredo.
- Council of Europe. (2018). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C/189(1). [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01))
- European Commission. (2021). *Digital education action plan (2021-2027) | European education area*. Education.ec.europa.eu. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>.
- Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T. (2013). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Taylor & Francis.
- Liebowitz, J. (2025). *Regulating hate speech created by generative AI*. CRC Press.
- Polli, C. & Sindoni, M.G. (2024). Multimodal computation or interpretation? Automatic vs. critical understanding of text-image relations in racist memes in English. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 57(2024), 100755.
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>
- Vuorikari, R., Kluzer, S. & Punie, Y. (2022, March 17). *DigComp 2.2: The digital competence framework for citizens - with new examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes*. JRC Publications Repository; Publications Office of the European Union. <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128415>