SEM53. Worlds beyond words: Lines of enquiry about language, metaphysics and spirituality.

53A   **11 September h. 11:00-13:00, Gorr 9**
53B   **12 September h. 14:00-16:00, PN 11**

Convenors
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Abstract
Technological advances and scientific progress have ensured a high quality of life and an unparalleled level of comfort, especially in the Western world (OECD, 2024) to the extent that our contemporary society seems obsessed with material possessions and physical well-being. However, in contrast to the spread of a consumerist ethos and utilitarian philosophy of mind, recent scholarly studies have shown that new forms of spirituality are taking over, and people's beliefs and sense of religious affiliation still bear considerable social significance (Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Pennarola, 2019 among others). Studies of spirituality are largely based on a Western-centred and Anglophone vantage point (Lomas, 2018), and consequently can benefit from a cross-cultural perspective widening the angle of analysis and showing the differences, commonalities and contaminations between traditions distant in time and space, made available by translations and informative materials (for example, see Marks et al. on the Buddhist origins and evolution of mindfulness in the Western world).

According to the Greek philosophers Heraclitus and Socrates, language (i.e., *logos*) belongs to the metaphysical as a trace and a reflection of the eternal principles shaping the world of all transient things and mortal beings (Colli, 1980). Human understanding, however, fails to grasp the essence of reality and the ideal world contemplated by philosophers, saints and ordinary people alike. In Plato's *Phaedo* the eternal *logos* prophesied remains obscure, while in the Prologue to John's Gospel, the Verb or word of God is embodied, rejected and apparently vilified (John 1:1-11). The tension between different versions of divine and human *logos* has fed a metaphysical discourse that lies deep in mystery, despite the widespread tendency to downplay the area of uncertainty and oversimplify (Ditifeci & Kantzas, 2021). Besides a philosophical approach to *logos*, words can also relieve the feelings of loneliness and nurture other human beings in need of a more rewarding humane identity, as shown by the pioneering experience of the London Alexandra pub (www.swlondoner.co.uk/news/15012018-popular-merton-pub-opens-its-doors-to-offer-companionship-for-the-lonely)

Taking the cue from David Crystal's advocacy of theolinguistics (2018), this seminar aims to shed light on the interrelationships between language, metaphysics and spirituality, and explore how language both reflects and shapes one's metaphysical, spiritual and/or religious identity in a never-ending quest for authenticity and meaningfulness. Lines of enquiry could include but are not limited to the following:
-    universal or culture-bound dimensions of spirituality
-    individual and collective religious identities
-    prayer encoding and the dialogue with the divine
-    the representation of the divine
-    Western vs Eastern forms of cognition and spirituality
-    ethnographic investigations of beliefs and believing communities
-    verbal and multimodal representation of mystical/transcendental experiences
-    allegiance with and subversion of religious doctrine(s)
-    the pragmatics of faith-based social networks
-    philosophical and theological approaches to spirituality

In line with the complexity and multifacetedness of this object of study, this seminar aims to encourage a wide variety of empirical and theoretical approaches.

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SEM53. Papers

53A   11 September h. 11:00-13:00, Gorr 9
- *Invisible worlds made visible by words: the evocative power of language in shaping the realms of spirituality in spiritually conscious films* (Silvia Monti, Università di Pavia)
- *Uncovering the devotional tradition of the Veronica in Lombardy and beyond: Popularization perspectives through translation* (Amanda C. Murphy, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore)
- *Words of Hope in Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love* (Pasquale Pagano, University degli Studi della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli)
- *'a voyce within a voyce': The prophetic discourse of Anna Trapnel* (Donatella Pallotti, Università degli Studi di Firenze)

53B   12 September h. 14:00-16:00, PN11
- *Spirituals beyond discourse: A timeless resonance* (Carmina Meola, Università degli Studi del Sannio)
- *The sound of the sacred: linguistic construction of spirituality in the discourse of jazz musicians* (Mikaela Cordisco, Università degli Studi di Salerno)

SEM53. Abstracts

The sound of the sacred: Linguistic construction of spirituality in the discourse of jazz musicians
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Jazz, as both a musical form and cultural practice, has long been linked to expressions of transcendence, resistance, and the sacred (De Stefano, 2014; Walser, 1999). While the spiritual dimension of jazz music itself has received considerable attention, less explored is the language through which jazz musicians express their spirituality. These musicians construct a worldview in which musical and spiritual identities are co-produced, and language becomes not merely a means of representation but a site of enactment—through which experiences of the divine, the mystical, and the ineffable are negotiated and shared. Beyond identity construction, their discourse also acts as a tool for metaphysical orientation, positioning spirituality as a lived, embodied linguistic practice that dissolves the boundaries between voice, sound, and soul. Adopting a Critical Discourse Analysis framework (Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 1998), this study applies a Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (Baker, 2006; Machin & Mayr, 2015) to a curated set of interviews, public talks, and autobiographical reflections by contemporary American jazz musicians. The analysis identifies recurring discursive patterns that not only describe spirituality but also construct the speaker as a vessel, seeker, or practitioner—aligning with posthumanist conceptions of subjectivity as porous, relational, and emergent (Braidotti, 2013).

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Spirituals beyond discourse: A timeless resonance

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This study examines the diachronic evolution of Afro-American spirituals by tracing their transformation from early oral traditions among enslaved Africans to their enduring presence in modern Black music. Originating as expressions of faith, coded resistance, and communal consciousness, spirituals blended African rhythmic structures with Christian hymns to create a uniquely hybrid musical form (Rakotsoane, 2010; Diallo, 2013). Enslaved communities, through clandestine gatherings, developed these songs as tools for both spiritual and cultural survival, integrating call-and-response techniques, layered harmonies, and symbolic narratives (American Black Journal, 2022). As Black music evolved, spirituals laid the foundation for gospel, blues, jazz, soul, and hip-hop, preserving themes of resilience, freedom, and transcendence (Seroff, 2016; Ramsey, 2008). This research is guided by two central questions: how Afro-American spirituals have progressed in time while preserving their core themes of faith, resistance, and communal identity, and in what ways these sacred songs continue to influence modern Black musical genres. To address these questions, the study employs historical analysis, thematic exploration, and structural investigation to examine the continuity and transformation of this tradition across musical forms. By analyzing both historical shifts and current interpretations, from the coded messages embedded in early spirituals to their echoes in contemporary gospel and protest music (Benson, 2015; Pitchfork, 2017), this paper underscores the timeless resonance of spirituals as both a form of cultural heritage and powerful vehicle for resistance, demonstrating their ability to transcend time, language, and musical form. Findings reveal that these faith-protest songs retain their emotional depth, communal significance, and layered symbolism through adaptation, remaining central to the aesthetics and ethos of Black musical traditions across time.

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Invisible worlds made visible by words: the evocative power of language in shaping the realms of spirituality in spiritually conscious films

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In the last decades, the notion of spirituality, whose scope extends beyond that of organized religions (cf. Ammerman 2013), has conquered an increasingly central position in society as well as in cultural and academic discourse, as a result of deep sociocultural transformations redefining the sacred in broader terms and reshaping spiritual identities. The cinematic industry has played a crucial role in this spiritual 'reawakening' with the release of spiritually conscious films where spirituality acts as a key narrative force and universal spiritual themes (e.g. transcendence, the nature and journey of the soul, death and the afterlife, reincarnation, connection to a higher power, interconnectedness of all beings), drawn from various traditions (e.g. Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, New Age philosophies), are presented

through specific linguistic devices distinct from those typifying traditional religious discourse (cf. Hammond 2015; Crystal 2018; Pennarola 2020).

Starting from these observations, this paper aims to illustrate the carefully crafted use of language as a powerful portal to the spiritual dimensions in a corpus of 20 successful spiritually themed American films, belonging to different genres (i.e. comedies, dramas, fantasy dramas, animated films) and released between 1989 and 2024. More specifically, the empirical, diachronic linguistic investigation, based on a wide selection of excerpts from the films' dialogues, aims to:
-    illustrate how specific lexical items (e.g. metaphysical, mystical, philosophical and religious terminology, spiritually resonant multilingual borrowings, evocative abstract terms), syntactic structures (e.g. short and simple declaratives in the present tense, rhetorical and introspective questions, mantra-like phrases, repetitions and parallelisms), and stylistic devices (e.g. metaphors, similes, personifications, euphemisms, aphorisms) are used to explore and define the realms of spirituality, thus grounding intangible dimensions into tangible language;
-    show possible analogies and/or differences in linguistic approach in conceptualizing and communicating spiritual truths according to either film genre or release year, thus also verifying whether the cinematic representations of spirituality have changed during a time span of more than 40 years.

Preliminary results highlight that in spiritually sensitive films the expression of spirituality is always deeply rooted in accurately constructed linguistic markers, functioning as key spiritual signifiers and conveying profound spiritual beliefs through accessible, though poetic, language, straightforward syntax and intensely symbolic storytelling, thus allowing viewers to delve into cross-cultural and cross-linguistic transcendent worlds (cf. Lomas 2018) where they can embark on their own journeys of spiritual growth and finally experience, through language itself, an overall sense of spiritual, cosmic connectedness.

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Uncovering the devotional tradition of the Veronica in Lombardy and beyond: Popularization perspectives through translation
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This paper considers how the tradition of devotion to the Veronica, which echoes throughout European literature (Bossi 2015) and is found in churches all around the world, can be decoded, investigated and translated so as to be comprehensible in the twenty-first century.

The tradition is complex: according to Windeatt (2017: 59) "[o]ne might say there are at least three Veronicas. First, there is Veronica's existence in narratives, her legend. Second, there is the material relic, in Rome. And thirdly, there is the tradition of replicating the relic." In religious tradition, "Veronica" is a proper name. Particularly since the fourteenth century (Zardoni and Murphy 2022), Veronica is identified as the woman who wiped Jesus' face on the way to Calvary and was rewarded with the imprint of his face on her cloth. In all the variants of the character, the woman's distinguishing element is the precious cloth/sudarium/handkerchief/veil she possesses with a miraculous image.

A veronica, or vernicle/vernacle (Maggioni 2021) is also the name of the cloth itself: when pilgrims went to Rome, their aim was to gain pardon for themselves by venerating the tombs of St Peter and Paul, and gazing on the "veronica" displayed in St Peter's. Forgiveness for sin could also be gained also by praying in front of a representation of the holy face, and veronicas thus spread around Europe, while always remaining a link to the relic in Rome.

Investigations through an online catalogue of veronicas linked to googlemaps (cf. www.veronicaroute.org) reveal an extraordinary concentration of veronicas in Lombardy. Given the tradition's connection with Rome and the holy year of 2025, a multi-site exhibition of veronicas was set up by a cultural association in Lombardy to draw attention to this tradition. To attract culturally interested travellers and ramblers, texts describing the veronicas were translated into

English for panels outside 21 churches, and audio descriptions were recorded for the same purpose. The translation into English of artistic and religious history poses issues of terminology and popularization (Levonian 2021): the linguistic and translational challenges of bringing this little-known devotional tradition to an international audience are the object of the paper.

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Words of hope in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*

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Amidst the social and political unrest of her times, marked by bloody wars, internal clashes, and plague, Julian of Norwich (1342– ca. 1416) stands out as a prophetic voice of faith and hope. Her exceptionality also resides in the fact that, in contrast to the rigid social and cultural positions of the Middle Ages, which assigned women marginalized roles to be played within the constraints of domestic or religious spaces, Julian of Norwich professed intellectual and spiritual freedom, which made her a forerunner of women's authorship and emancipation.

Most importantly, Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* represents a source of high mysticism and profound theological thought, whose distinctive trait is her resolute profession of hope and trust in God (Renolds, 1984; Ramelli, 2019). Although the exclamation "All shall be well" is famously recognised as the main formulation of her positions, the Anchoress of Norwich conveyed her hopefulness in a variety of expressions, metaphors, and symbols (Caspar, 1981; Yoshikawa, 2008): the analysis of such 'words of hope' will be the central aim of the present research.

Hope is also the major theme of Byung-Chul Han's latest contribution (*Der Geist der Hoffnung*, 2023), which not only outlines the characteristics of authentic hope but insists on the necessity to practice it in times of renovated anguish and anxiety. Hence, the South Korean philosopher's theory on the essence of hope seems to further illuminate Julian's 'shewings' and to nurture the appreciation of her words in the present age.

By reading Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* from the perspective of theolinguistics (Crystal 2018; Hobbs 2020) and through the lens of Han's reflections about hope, this paper intends to explore the fruitful connections among philosophical speculation, Christian mysticism and linguistic analysis.

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'a voyce within a voyce': The prophetic discourse of Anna Trapnel

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The paper explores the construction of prophetic authority in the writings of Anna Trapnel, a prominent seventeenth-century prophetess associated with the radical Fifth Monarchist movement. Framed within the broader context of mid-seventeenth-century England—a period characterized by the collapse of traditional political institutions, the weakening of ecclesiastical authority, and the rise of radical dissenting movements—the study examines how Trapnel's prophetic voice engages with the complex issues of legitimacy, gender, and dissent. By analyzing her language, use of biblical intertextuality, and charismatic expression, the paper investigates how divine speech was articulated and mediated during a time of intense spiritual turmoil and cultural instability. It also explores how marginalized figures, particularly women, participated in prophetic discourse to claim spiritual agency and political relevance in a volatile sociopolitical landscape, emphasizing how prophetic speech served as a site of resistance against institutional power. Trapnel's case illustrates prophetic speech as a culturally embedded form of discursive negotiation, wherein personal revelation and collective expectation converge in a dynamic interplay.

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