Who's Afraid of Cultural Studies?
Linguistics with a Twist

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ABSTRACT: This contribution examines the conceptualisation of language as a signifying practice by tracing the ways in which Cultural Studies have been productively mobilised within the domain of English linguistics. Focusing on the development of a distinctive Neapolitan tradition, the article reconstructs how Cultural Studies provided theoretical and methodological resources for challenging formalist and structuralist approaches to language, enabling a reconceptualisation of linguistics as a discipline deeply embedded in social, cultural, and political processes.

Situating its discussion within the broader emergence of Cultural Studies in Italy from the mid-1980s onwards, the article highlights how scholars working at the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples drew on Stuart Hall's theory of representation, Foucauldian discourse theory, and the postcolonial and feminist interventions of

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[1] The title is an explicit reference to Perniola. Although the article was conceived as a collaborative effort, Sections "Languaging English through the Neapolitan Tradition of Cultural Studies" and "Language as a Disturbing Practice" were written by Giuseppe Balirano, Section "Language as Power" by Maria Cristina Nisco, and Section "Language as a Site of Belonging" by Michaela Quadraro.

scholars such as Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti to reframe language as a site of meaning-making, power negotiation, and identity construction. In this perspective, linguistic analysis is no longer confined to describing abstract systems, but becomes an interpretive practice attentive to discourse, ideology, and historical situatedness.

By foregrounding marginality, transnationalism, and cultural hybridity as epistemological resources rather than limitations, the contribution illustrates how Cultural Studies enabled a form of interdisciplinary linguistics capable of engaging with questions of representation, subjectivity, and social transformation. It argues for a 'linguistics with a twist': an approach that integrates cultural theory into linguistic inquiry and reaffirms the relevance of Cultural Studies for understanding language as a socially embedded and politically consequential practice.

KEY WORDS: Language as signifying practice; English linguistics; Discourse and representation; Cultural Studies; Neapolitan school; Power and ideology

LANGUAGING ENGLISH THROUGH THE NEAPOLITAN TRADITION OF CULTURAL STUDIES

The affirmation of Cultural Studies within the Italian academy, emerging in the mid-1980s, unfolded against the backdrop of a society grappling with the aftermath of political unrest, the erosion of grand ideological narratives, and the rise of neoliberal reforms. During this phase of cultural realignment and institutional uncertainty, the city of Naples, long positioned at the symbolic and socio-economic margins of the Italian nation-state, offered fertile ground for alternative epistemologies. It was at the Istituto Universitario Orientale that such epistemological shifts found early expression, particularly within the faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures. In a climate where postmodernism dominated much of the critical debate, L'Orientale stood out for its transnational orientation, its openness to non-canonical texts, and its engagement with emerging discussions on subjectivity, identity, and representation. While postcolonial theory would only gain traction in Italy in the following decades, especially through the work of scholars like Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, the seeds of Cultural Studies had already been sown in the critical pedagogy and research carried out in the field of English studies. Here, the evolving dialogue between Anglo-American theory and the specificities of the Neapolitan context, marked by its linguistic, cultural, and social heterogeneity, gave rise to a practice of knowledge production that was both resistant and 'situated'. Thus, the journey of Cultural Studies at L'Orientale stretched across epistemological hurdles and institutional ambivalences, a shifting cartography of knowledge in which language, culture, and power were reimagined in conversation with global debates and local specificities.

Initially rooted in literary studies, this critical shift at L'Orientale was later consolidated and expanded through a more overtly sociological perspective, especially in the context of Naples, where questions of urban marginality, migration, and media representation demanded new modes of cultural analysis. It was precisely in this hybrid terrain, between the literary and the sociological, the global and the local, that the foundations were laid for a Neapolitan articulation of Cultural Studies deeply indebted to the Birmingham School. The legacy of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and Richard Hoggart was not simply imported but critically reworked to speak to the contradictions of the Italian South: a space marked by internal hierarchies, structural inequalities, and pulsating forms of cultural production. In Naples, Cultural Studies became not just a theoretical framework but a way of reading the city itself, a method attuned to the everyday, to popular cultures, to the textures of lived experience. This convergence of literary analysis and sociological insight gave rise to a distinctive Southern practice of Cultural Studies, one that foregrounded language as a site of ideological struggle and meaning-making, while drawing on interdisciplinary methods to engage with contemporary culture in all its complexity.

The authors of this paper, albeit from different generations, inscribe themselves within this critical horizon, shaped by the theoretical and methodological matrix outlined by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti at the former Istituto Universitario Orientale, now the University of Naples L'Orientale. The echo of their intellectual legacy reverberates through the authors' approaches to English language teaching and researching, which they reconfigure not as a mere object of structural analysis, but as *a signifying practice*, a semantic and political weaving in which language becomes both battleground and medium of cultural negotiation. As Hall (*Representation* 2) reminds us, "representation is the production of meaning through language"; hence, conceiving of language as a signifying practice foregrounds its constitutive role in culture. This occurs perhaps despite the authors', or perhaps precisely without the authors' knowing, through that inevitable shift that every theory undergoes when it truly comes alive, or maybe simply through that unwritten law whereby every great teacher ends up being misunderstood by their students.

And yet, it is from this very theoretical root that our work in research and lecturing proceeds, grounded in the awareness that language is far from a neutral entity; rather, it is a living fabric where power, ideology, and identity are inscribed and contested. As Hall ("When was 'the Post-colonial'") further observes, language is not a mere reflection of the world, but a site where meaning is produced and contested in a constant play of articulation. In this light, our critical proposal seeks to dismantle the rigid divide between linguistic and cultural studies, integrating methodologies that restore language to its dynamic and performative dimension. Our commitment translates into the adoption of analytical tools capable of exposing the rhetoric of hegemony, the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and the ways in which discourse becomes a site of resistance and re-signification. Read through Italian feminist thought, Curti's work helps frame representation as a contested practice and stresses mediation, the figure of exchange at the heart of the symbolic pact, as crucial to feminist re-articulations of Cultural Studies in Italy. This perspective foregrounds dissent, marginality and the crisis

of fixed subject positions, bringing feminism and postmodernism into productive tension.

In this perspective, teaching becomes a critical laboratory for experimenting with methodologies such as Critical Discourse Studies applied to contemporary social media, the deconstruction of academic and media texts, and the production of written work that dialogues with theory and practice, where language is not only the object of study, but also a means for knowledge production and a vector of agency. Homi Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*) conceives of language as a liminal terrain, an interstitial space in which cultural translation takes form and hybrid identities and new subjectivities are negotiated. Through pedagogical practices ranging from the critical analysis of texts to the exploration of multimodal materials, from the investigation of identity construction in the media to the deconstruction of hegemonic narratives, we encourage students to become critical interpreters of language as a technology of power and subjectivation. Participatory methodologies, dialogic seminars, discourse analysis workshops, and critical writing practices allow us to translate theory into lived experience, fostering a mode of learning that is both reflective and transformative in its praxis.

In this context, we claim our place within English linguistics, acknowledging how the field has undergone a process of significant redefinition as a result of the influence of Cultural Studies. From Hall's (*Representation*) discourse analysis to the linguistic hybridity emphasised by Ashcroft ("On the Hyphen in Post-colonial") and Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (*The Empire Writes Back*), English linguistics has been compelled to engage with postcolonial concerns, with the power dynamics inherent in language, and with its cultural implications. This dialogue has enabled a rethinking of language not merely as a formal structure, but as a site of cultural and political negotiation, a space where the dialogue with Cultural Studies is not only desirable but necessary for addressing contemporary epistemological and social transformations. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (*The Empire Writes Back*) have pointed out in their postcolonial studies, language is a field of tension between appropriation and abrogation, between resistance and reinvention. The analysis of language as a signifying practice is thus not an abstract exercise, but a political and pedagogical act, a continuous rewriting of knowledge that interrogates, deconstructs, and reconstructs the boundaries of the discipline and its practices within the Italian academy.

Such an approach finds significant resonance also in the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha, who deconstructs dominant narrative codes to reveal the layers of power and the logics of exclusion embedded in cinematic discourse. Her view of film language as a performative and never neutral practice aligns directly with our conception of language as a space of intersection between identity, alterity, and representation. In her films and writings, Trinh T. Minh-ha dismantles and reassembles the structures of discourse, showing that language, whether verbal or visual, is never a transparent medium, but rather a technology of power that can be subverted through strategies of *détournement* and re-signification. Similarly, in our teaching of English linguistics, we adopt an analytical approach that regards visual language not as mere support to the verbal, but as a semiotic device that articulates meanings, negotiates positions, and generates new interpretive possibilities. Through the study of multimodality within a Critical Discourse

Studies (CDS) framework, focusing on the intersections between text and image, we aim to show how Cultural Studies provide valuable tools for critically reading language in its multiple layers of signification.

LANGUAGE AS POWER

In a seminal work on cultural representations as signifying practices, Stuart Hall tackles the question of representation, defining it as "one of the central practices which produce culture and a key 'moment' in what has been called 'the circuit of culture'" (*Representation* 1). He then clarifies the more or less covert connection between representation and culture, and the role that language plays in this context: "culture is about 'shared meanings'. […] [L]anguage is the privileged medium in which we 'make sense' of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged. Meanings can only be shared through our common access to language" (Hall, *Representation* 1). In his view, language is central to meaning and culture, and it can be regarded as a repository of cultural values. It can construct meanings, building up a culture of shared understandings between the members of a society, because it operates as a representational system: language employs signs and symbols to represent thoughts, ideas and feelings. Therefore, representation through language is a pivotal process by which meaning and culture are produced. Since language works as a representational system using words, images, sounds, and so forth, it can be defined as a signifying practice (Hall, *Representation* 5): far from being a neutral tool to describe reality, it is a dynamic system through which meaning is actively created, negotiated, and exchanged, according to dominant ideologies and power relations.

Back in the second half of the 20th century, the above-mentioned tenets were developed and elaborated by the Centre for Cultural Studies (CCCS), founded in Birmingham in 1964 by Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart, which played a pivotal role in shaping Cultural Studies as a discipline with an interdisciplinary perspective blending semiotics, philosophy, sociology, history, literary theory, while pioneering a series of critical approaches over several decades. By the 1980s and 1990s, a theoretical and methodological evolution occurred, which led Cultural Studies to change in several ways: the concern with meaning merged into an interest in the broader role of *discourse* in culture. In Hall's words,

> [d]iscourses are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society. (*Representation* 6)

Influenced by Michel Foucault's theory (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*), discourse is viewed as a vehicle of knowledge, which produces meaning through the combined action of language, practices, and power relations. Indeed, one of Foucault's central ideas is that power and knowledge are intertwined, they directly imply one another

(Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*): power is not only repressive, it is also productive, in the sense that it creates categories, norms, truths and subjects.[2] Discourse is, thus, the means through which power circulates, by establishing what is true, normal, acceptable or deviant. It is through discourse that people become subjects, both as self-aware agents and as subjected to power (by law, discipline, surveillance, etc.); in fact, discourse positions people in specific ways, as citizens, criminals, patients, consumers, and so forth.

Foucault's work inspired a central shift in Cultural Studies, moving from language as representation to language as practice, which was a major element in the construal of reality. While the initial (semiotic) approach was concerned with the *how* of representation, namely how language produces meaning ("poetics"), the discursive approach is concerned with the effects and consequences of representation ("politics") (Hall, *Representation* 6). This view examines not merely how language and representation produce meaning, but also how the knowledge produced by a particular discourse connects with power, regulates people's conduct, and constructs people's identities and subjectivities. Emphasis is on the historical specificity of a particular regime of representation, on how certain representational practices operate in actual contexts. This discursive turn in social and cultural studies can be deemed as one of the most significant developments in how society is framed and viewed, especially because it allowed some counterstrategies to emerge in the politics of representation, in the way meaning is struggled over, and certain regimes of representation are challenged and contested.

The conceptual issues theorised by the British tradition of Cultural Studies merged into the Neapolitan tradition of Cultural Studies that, as said, was carried on by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, in their critical contribution to Cultural and Postcolonial Studies in the context of Italian academia, based as they were at L'Orientale in Naples. In their attempt to explore differing critical and analytical perspectives and examine the manifold cultural practices (textual or otherwise) of modernity, they mount a challenge against established and institutional knowledge. Accordingly, they argue that critical knowledge is vital, grounded as it is in forms of conflicts within culture itself, in a practice which questions and disturbs the intellectual script and all pre-conceived assumptions, to reshuffle the idea of culture and to find its own space within the interstices of different disciplines (Chambers and Curti, "Disciplinary crimes"). Their contribution managed to strike many chords, resonating in the work of several scholars researching in a variety of disciplines; it managed to sound out a vibrant critical legacy which welcomed and was then further expanded by the scholars of English linguistics authoring this essay, who happen to come from the same geographical and theoretical/conceptual background. Their work and research allowed Chambers and Curti's project to continue in different guises and in various disciplinary domains.

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[2] To exemplify this concept, Foucault investigates, for instance, how medical discourse defined what counted as 'madness' or 'illness', in the 19th century, and who had the authority to speak on it (see *Madness*).

Within the field of linguistics, language is thus investigated through the lens of power relations, ideology, inequality, in several communicative contexts (especially media discourse) and in relation to a number of issues (such as identity, ethnicity, gender, disability, class, and so forth). Indeed, linguistic patterns are framed in a web of beliefs, opinions and interests which tend to privilege certain ideological positions while downplaying others: "when language becomes embodied as discourse, it often throws into relief the totality of other possible ways of representing. Ideological standpoint in language can therefore be productively explored through comparisons between different texts, especially when the texts cover the same topic" (Simpson and Mayr 5). This approach, which is mainly associated with what is known as CDS, is described as 'critical' in that it focuses on "the social and ideological functions of language in producing, reproducing or changing social structures, relations and identities" (Simpson and Mayr 50).

CDS and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are probably the most comprehensive attempts to develop a theory where discourse, power, ideology and social structure intersect. They are mainly linked to the influential figures of Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and Teun van Dijk, although there are several scholars and analysts contributing to various versions of CDA. Common to all versions is the position according to which language, as a means of social construction, both shapes and is shaped by society. Fairclough, among others, stresses the importance of a critical awareness of language and specifically details the idea of 'critical' language study:

> Critical is used in the special sense of aiming to show connections which may be hidden from people—such as the connections between language, power and ideology […] Critical language study analyses social interactions in a way which focuses upon their linguistic elements, and which sets out to show up their generally hidden determinants in the system of social relationships, as well as hidden effects they may have upon the system" (Fairclough, *Language and Power* 5)

What he thus claims is that the ability to understand how language functions is crucial to understanding society. This is also the central tenet of the linguists authoring this essay, who approach language and discourse bearing in mind the 'critical' body of work of the Neapolitan tradition of Cultural Studies and, more specifically in this paragraph, Chambers' research on modernity, the Mediterranean and the perilous journeys of migration (Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings*).

What follows is an instance of how power and ideology work within texts and how linguistic and discursive analysis can be carried out, looking at certain language structures deployed across different texts. In particular, the paragraph will briefly go through a case-study on how migration in the Mediterranean Sea is discursively construed by the British press (Nisco), by exploring the language used to describe and construe migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, and how this shapes public perception and policy according to different ideological stances.

The case-study moves from the cultural, sociological, and political debates on the thousands of deaths at sea and the existence of a major migration route in the Mediterranean from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to Europe, the latter being

the largest single destination at the time. Moving from the assumption that the media play a pivotal role in conveying ideological positions to wider audiences, the case-study takes into account 826 British newspaper articles (published between 2011 and 2014 by the most widely circulated national daily newspapers in the UK among both tabloids and broadsheets)[3] adopting a combined quantitative-qualitative approach for investigation. The articles—constituting the so-called *MedMig* Corpus—were retrieved by employing the web-archive LexisNexis, searching for the seed words 'migrant*', 'refugee*', 'seeker*' (when occurring in the headline and lead paragraph), with a further refinement of results depending on whether articles exclusively concerned Mediterranean migration. Drawing on statistical data made available by using the software Wordsmith Tools (Scott), quantitative analysis of texts included in the *MedMig* Corpus (543,422 tokens) showed that some linguistic patterns were particularly frequent (see Nisco—for further details on frequency values); in fact, the terms 'migrant(s)', 'refugee(s)', and 'seeker(s)' often occur with:

- toponyms: locations and borders referring to the countries where migration flows originate, on the one hand, and to the EU and the UK, on the other; the presence of such linguistic items seems to suggest a spatial polarisation opposing the EU and the UK to the rest of the Mediterranean basin;
- terms referring to regulations and restrictions: items like 'undocumented', 'illegal', 'curb', 'intercepted', 'bogus', 'rejected', 'ban' were extremely recurrent in relation to migrants/refugees/asylum seekers and signal a specific stress on—and possibly concern for—the need to intervene on the current state of affairs with policies that are meant to deter migration flows;
- linguistic items describing migration in terms of a massive—and therefore frightening—movement of people: items like 'influx', 'hundreds', 'thousands', 'flow', 'millions', 'wave', evoke the idea of people pouring out of their countries and flooding into the EU and the UK, almost invading them.

Further qualitative reading uncovered the fact that there was a common association of migrants with the *topoi* of security and danger and confirmed a repeated use of numbers to dramatise the phenomenon, causing feelings of threat and panic in the host society. Stemming from this trait, some additional recurrent topics could be identified in the news reports published by the British newspapers under investigation:

- the urge for rules and restrictions to stop migration;
- the negative impact of migration on British social welfare;
- the high number of migrants reaching northern Europe.

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[3] The British national daily newspapers selected for investigation are: *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *The Sun* (and their Sunday editions). They are both quality and popular, left/right-leaning newspapers, because they are meant to give a representative sample of what was published on the topic by the British press as a whole.

Generally speaking, considerable prominence was given to the urgent need to establish tougher rules to regulate the status and acceptance of migrants and refugees in Great Britain, usually in opposition to the EU. The press often stresses a conflicting relationship between the UK and the EU over the management of migrants arriving from the Mediterranean Sea. The negative effects of migration on the British social welfare are alarmingly highlighted, especially in terms of financial burden for NHS and the British taxpayers. Migrants are, thus, framed as a threat, rather than as individuals in need.

Interestingly, indeed, migration is hardly ever portrayed as a humanitarian crisis: indeed, there are very few remarks concerning the desperate conditions from which migrants flee, the dangerous and hazardous journeys they embark on, not to mention the tragic experiences they are disgracefully left to endure when their boats sink and people are left dying at sea. Accordingly, quantitative analysis shows that linguistic items such as 'tragedy', 'died', 'deaths', 'desperate', 'dead', 'drowning', 'disaster', 'help', invariably feature considerably low frequency values, implying that they are rarely employed in the news reports.

The study reveals that the British press contributed to a politics of fear around Mediterranean migration, foregrounding issues relating to security and restriction over humanitarian concern. While migrants' stories are often excluded from reporting, great emphasis is given to the fact that they approach the UK; in fact, migration is treated as an urgent issue only when it reaches UK proximity (e.g., Calais). Considering how pivotal the issues relating to Mediterranean migration are in the political agenda of all European countries today, a linguistic investigation aiming at analysing the power relations embedded in media discourse can certainly shed light on a series of questions concerning representation, that probably deserve more careful thought. To such extent, qualitative and quantitative linguistic investigations can jointly provide a key to disclose underlying ideological patterns and access the way reality is construed through language.

This case-study is meant to exemplify how the work of linguists and discourse analysts can effectively and fruitfully combine with the theoretical background provided by Cultural Studies in both research and teaching activities. Linguistic and discursive analysis offers an opportunity to practice with how language produces meanings in our daily life, reflecting on the forms of signification that are employed. In this respect, the core feature that crosses, as a *fil rouge*, Cultural Studies and CDA is the emphasis on critical perspectives, which allow analysts not merely to describe discourse but, above all, to challenge it. Indeed, by capturing the profound political sense of Cultural Studies (which is present both in the British and Neapolitan traditions), new itineraries can be undertaken as a part of a fertile research practice in which several intellectual influences surface. Such influences find their expression in the critical attention to the manifold phenomena of the modern world, and flow into an intellectual militancy that animates scholars from different fields and disciplines who explore differing paths to understand society. This is possibly the major strength—and legacy— of Cultural Studies: it is a field of inquiry rather than a conventional academic discipline (see Connell and Hilton), implying politicised research practices which are nothing but

attempts to navigate the world of academia and the humanities among the many constraints that hinder intellectual dialogue. This approach, therefore, continues to thrive in a variety of disciplines across the arts and social sciences, emerging in a range of versions of Cultural Studies which can be found in some scholars' research and active involvement in the students' learning process, favouring interactive and reflective forms of education. By engaging with dominant discourses and frameworks, students learn that knowledge can be constructed and deconstructed, in an academic space where critical thinking can flourish.

The rich theoretical contents stemming from Cultural Studies (both from the Birmingham and the Neapolitan Schools) at the intersection with CDS/CDA frameworks, can be a starting point for the development of pedagogical material designed for university-level (MA) students on the general topic of "Language, Power and Identity in Media Discourse". This lesson plan combines insights from Cultural Studies to promote advanced language awareness, critical reading, and discursive competence in academic and media contexts. Students will learn to analyse English texts linguistically and critically, identifying how language encodes ideologies, frames identities, and performs power relations. Among the main learning objectives to be achieved:

- Identify and describe key linguistic features that construct social identities and power relations in English discourse;
- Analyse authentic texts using lexico-grammatical, pragmatic, and multimodal tools drawn from CDA/CDS and Systemic Functional Linguistics;
- Apply corpus-assisted techniques to detect patterns of evaluation, stance, and representation in English media discourse;
- Critically reflect on how language, ideology, and culture intersect in contemporary communication in English;
- Produce academic writing and oral presentations that integrate linguistic analysis with critical reflection.

Such learning objectives are to be reached by working on some thematic modules (four modules, 12 hours) whose content can be defined as follows:

Module	Theme	Key Concepts
1	Introduction to Cultural Studies and English Linguistics	- Key terms and disciplinary vocabulary; - Semantic prosody, collocation, and meaning construction; - Situated knowledge, discourse as social practice.
2	Language and Power	- Analysis of transitivity, modality, evaluative lexis, and metaphors; - Discourse, representation, and ideology (Hall, Foucault, Fairclough).

| 3 | Media and Migration | - Corpus-based keyword analysis, semantic preference, stance and appraisal;
- Ideological framing, media bias |
| 4 | Critical Pedagogy and Language Awareness | - Reflective language use, metalinguistic commentary, academic register;
- Resistance, identity, signifying practice. |

Source: Thematic Modules and Key Concepts

Accordingly, each of the above-mentioned thematic modules could feature a series of activities designed to engage students while using active learning strategies, thus integrating theory and pedagogical practice. What follows is a list of potential activities and project-related tasks designed to cover the main concepts in each module and to develop students' knowledge and critical thinking drawing on a series of tools and methods for shared learning, such as lectures and seminars (where excerpts from the main cited authors could be selected for close reading with students), workshops, individual and group work, reflective writing, tasks, projects and oral presentations.

Module	*Theme*	*Activities*
1	Introduction to Cultural Studies and English Linguistics	Create a bilingual glossary of key theoretical terms (e.g., 'representation', 'discourse', 'signifying practice') and identify their collocational patterns in the British National Corpus (BNC). Compare how these terms are used in academic vs. media English.
2	Language and Power	Using Hall and Foucault's frameworks with CDS/CDA tools, annotate a short media text for: transitivity (who acts upon whom), modality (certainty, obligation), and metaphorical framing (e.g. waves of migrants). Then rewrite the text altering modality and metaphors to shift the ideological stance.
3	Media and Migration	Build a small corpus of recent news reports on Mediterranean migration. Run a keyword analysis (using Sketch Engine or AntConc). Identify lexical patterns (e.g., 'illegal', 'crisis', 'flood') and discuss their semantic prosody. Compare findings to Nisco.
4	Critical Pedagogy and Language Awareness	Design a micro-project connecting language, identity, and representation. Students write a short CDA-informed report (800-1.000 words) with linguistic evidence (quotes, lexical tables, concordance lines) and an oral presentation explaining their analytical choices.

Source: Thematic Modules and Activites

Now, consider further how museums shape cultural and political meanings through carefully chosen language. Marwan Rechmaoui's *Monument for the Living* is a concrete sculpture modeled on Beirut's unfinished Burj El Murr tower, exhibited at the Tate Britain. The Tate describes it as "a monument to a city fractured by conflict and migration". What kind of migration flow is being imagined: forced, voluntary, internal, or global? And how does the museum's phrasing position us: as observers, witnesses, or participants?
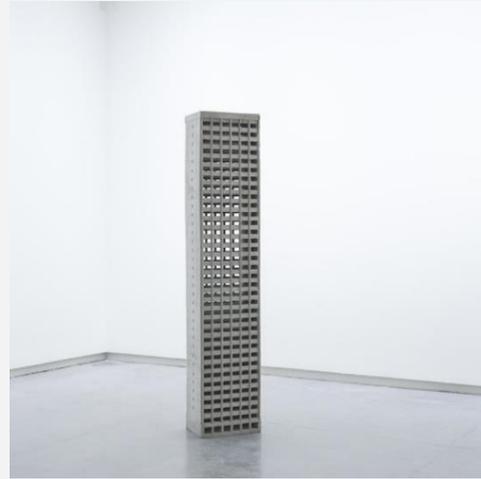
Fig. A. Marwan Rechmaoui, *Monument for the living*, www.tate.org.uk Last accessed: 30 dec. 2025

LANGUAGE AS A SITE OF BELONGING

The affirmation of the Cultural Studies tradition within Italian academia was marked by the concrete experience of the PhD Programme in "Cultural and Postcolonial Studies of the Anglophone World" (2000-2015) at the University "L'Orientale". Profoundly informed by the activities of the Centre for Postcolonial Studies and the Centre for Gender Studies, which were subsequently merged into a single research centre, the PhD programme involved professors, students and researchers dedicated to fostering the emphasis on subaltern subjectivities and decentred narratives, which have extensively characterised cultural and postcolonial studies. As a transnational and transcultural global process, the investigation of the consequences of colonisation was crucial for further developing the unstable cartography of knowledge that had already emerged in Italy, especially through the work of Curti and Chambers (*La questione postcoloniale*). Encompassing postmodernism, postcolonialism, feminism, communication and media studies, as well as Mediterranean and migration studies, the PhD programme developed a textual hybridisation which combined writing with music, visual art, cinema, theatre, communication, and technology (Curti, "Percorsi femministi"). The PhD programme certainly represented a larger project, a work of critical interruption both in the field of teaching and research, carried out over many decades to disseminate the vast array of interdisciplinary and transcultural perspectives of Cultural Studies within Italian academia.

Altre Modernità / Otras Modernidades / Autres Modernités / Other Modernities

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As often happens, the boundaries between disciplines remain formally unchanged, while the PhD programme suffered cuts due to the rationalisation of public education. The decision to conclude the PhD programme after fifteen years was pointedly marked by a conference entitled *Ritorni Critici* ("Critical Returns"), held at the University "L'Orientale" in November 2016, and followed by the publication of a homonymous volume in 2018. Nevertheless, even if not officially recognised, the critical perspectives of Cultural Studies have raised questions that have helped challenge the foundations of critical work in many areas. In particular, the following aspects have been crucial for developing a more experimental critical grammar in southern Italy: the analysis of literary and filmic texts, visual art and music, as well as urban cultures; questions of belonging and identity, gender and difference; the investigation of museum practices and the impact of digital technology. Within an intersection of critical perspectives, generations of junior researchers have endeavoured to engage Antonio Gramsci's call to think globally and envisioned a horizon aimed at resisting and enduring (Chambers, "L'(im)possibilità degli studi culturali").

The Naples-based group of scholars welcomed Hall's lesson to recognise the crucial role of the production and fruition of art in engaging with artistic productions. To mention one instance, several scholars and researchers, guided by Chambers, were involved in a four-year collaborative EU-financed research project involving many European partners, which investigated the transformation of the museum in response to the impact of contemporary migratory flows and art practices that challenge national identity claims.[4] In close dialogue with Hall and other cultural studies scholars worldwide, the Neapolitan tradition has consistently sought to analyse new conjunctures through multiple perspectives, constantly returning to the critical interruptions that had inspired the foundation of the CCCS. Language-based representation played a crucial role in our method of linguistic analysis, driven by a strong interest in the performative dimension of language and the revelation of what knowledge is considered hegemonic, which identities are constructed, and how discourses can become sites of resignification. In this context, museum practices and exhibition strategies can be regarded as representational systems, as they operate like languages to convey meaning and involve signifying practices through the adoption of specific choices and display strategies.

As Hooper-Greenhill suggests, museums are deeply related to questions of representation and power, especially "the power to name, to represent common sense, to create official versions, to represent the social world, and to represent the past" (19). Furthermore, the integration with the theoretical tools of visual culture can reveal the frictions and tensions that undermine conservative paradigms, soliciting the question 'Whose heritage?' (Hall, "Whose Heritage?"). This interrogation contributes to the reconceptualisation of institutionalised notions of memory and archiving, thus challenging inherited pretensions of legitimate ownership. Within this perspective, the Neapolitan tradition of Cultural Studies worked extensively on the formation of the museum, as it is inevitably implicated in relations of power, where vision has a central

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[4] See the website of the Research Project MeLa "European Museums in an age of migrations"

role in the discursive construction of subjectivities (Chambers, "Memorie, musei e potere"; Curti, "Oltre le quattro mura bianche"; Chambers *et al.*, *The Postcolonial Museum*). From a cultural studies perspective, visuality enables both the investigation of power relations on a global scale and the resistance practices that challenge the logic of belonging. As a field of study, visual culture is concerned with the cultural practices of looking and seeing, considering the image as a sign or text that produces meaning and requires the subjective capacities of the viewer to make the image signify (Hall and Evans). According to Nicholas Mirzoeff, the visual is an interdisciplinary and "challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gender, sexual and racialised identities" (4). Therefore, the interpretive frame of visual culture enables us to investigate vision in its social and cultural dimensions, devoting particular attention to the construction of meanings and values.

Working on the ways language can be used to produce social practices, we are profoundly indebted to the multimodal perspective, which directly stems from Michael Halliday's theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Extended by several linguists involved in analysing museum texts, SFL enables us to address language at various levels, not just the level of words, and to explore the main communicative dimensions or "metafunctions": the "ideational", the "interpersonal", and the "textual". All types of communication simultaneously generate meanings about the content being conveyed, the communicator, and the manner of communication. Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal perspective (Kress and van Leeuwen) adopted Halliday's metafunctional system to explore the meaning potential of semiotic resources and demonstrate how these choices can be utilised for effective communication. By expanding Halliday's metafunctions beyond the linguistic mode, Kress and van Leeuwen explicitly claim that both the visual mode and the linguistic one express the same semantic system. Thus, the museum can be considered a "multimodal constellation", where different resources cooperate to produce meaning (Kress, "Gains and Losses" 6; Ravelli 259).

The theoretical perspectives stemming from Cultural Studies and Multimodality can serve as a starting point for a module on "Language as a Site of Belonging", designed for MA-level university students. The following lesson plan is an example of how these frameworks can facilitate the understanding of communication in the context of a museum, viewed as a signifying practice. Students will analyse authentic texts to identify how a museum can discursively construe migrant identities. In particular, during three lessons (a total of 9 hours), students will deepen their understanding of language as a site of identity and belonging through the following key areas:

- The framework of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA);
- The representation of migration;
- Language as a tool of critical reflection and interpretation.

Lessons	Area	Key Concepts
1	Introduction to Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA)	- Halliday's "metafunctions" in the multimodal perspective.
2	The Representation of Migration	- Migration discourse in the museum context.
3	Language as a Tool of Critical Reflection and Interpretation	- Metalinguistic awareness and use of language in the academic context.

Source: Lesson plan of the Module "Language as a Site of Belonging"

The lesson plan will be based on the specific case study of the Virtual Museum of Caribbean Migration and Memory, which has been chosen because it allows the investigation of migration discourse within the museum context. The design of this museum contributes to the cultural debate on virtual museums and their conceptualisation, in the fullest sense, as online exhibitions designed to produce knowledge and potentially reach broader audiences through multimodal content and immersive experiences (Quadraro 42). The Virtual Museum of Caribbean Migration and Memory was conceived in 2017 as part of the EU-LAC MUSEUMS project, with support from the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Coordinated by the University of St Andrews and carried out by a team of academics, museum professionals, and policymakers, the project has created a virtual museum as a key research output, enabling viewers to explore materials from several community museums in Latin American and Caribbean countries. The museum was conceived to mark the 70th anniversary of the HMT Empire Windrush's arrival in the UK, the vessel that transported one of the largest groups of Caribbean migrants and became a symbol of post-war migration that reshaped British society.

The lesson plan focuses on the digital exhibition "Enigma of Arrival", which presents content from a physical exhibition that travelled along Caribbean migration routes and to arrival destinations, displaying undocumented stories of the migration experience. Each of the above-mentioned key areas could be explored through several activities designed to stimulate students' reflection on how language can be used to represent individual migration experiences, construct identities, and shape the audience's perceptions. Below is a list of potential activities designed to practically explore the key concepts in the proposed module "Language as a Site of Belonging".

Lessons	Area	Activities
1	Introduction to Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA)	- Close reading of the main cited authors.
2	The Representation of Migration	- Qualitative analysis of the basic lexical and visual elements of the panels "Caribbean

		conditions of pre-migration" and "Arrival" according to the categories of 'departure' and 'arrival'.
3	Language as a Tool of Critical Reflection and Interpretation	- Identification of the main social actors and their roles (students annotate verbs and strategies of representation). - Final task: Multimodal Analysis Writing Lab. Students write a short critical essay (800-1.000 words) on how language can be used to shape identity and belonging in the museum context.

Source: Activities of the Module "Language as a Site of Belonging"

Qualitative analysis reveals a dominance of words related to "family", "education", and "work". The verbal texts depict a world where "family", "communities", "familial ties", and "parents" are highly valued. This vocabulary fosters a discourse centred on community and social bonds, highlighting the role of families in promoting education and improving living conditions. The image of a barefoot, working-class man operating a factory machine further reinforces a discourse of poverty. The specific setting and the man's posture contribute significantly to the conveyed meaning. In this context, both image and text evoke shared feelings of deprivation and social inequality related to working conditions. Certain lexical choices stand out, particularly words associated with "encouragement", "improved wages and conditions", "opportunities", "hope", "higher wages", "potential", "greater" opportunities, and "great" incentives. These selections seem to exaggerate notions of hope and a promising future in the UK. From a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) perspective, the abundance of repetitive terms within the discourse creates an impression of over-persuasion.

While the first panel, "Caribbean conditions of pre-migration", depicts a narrative contrasting discussions of poverty in the Caribbean with visions of hope and improved living standards in the UK, the second panel, "Arrival", concentrates on the 'arrival' and features four texts on this theme. The first one illustrates images of people disembarking from a ship, travelling with a British/colonial passport issued in their home country. The second features a black-and-white photograph of a disembarked crowd surrounded by luggage, accompanied by a green-tinted image of a young boy descending the steps of a ship with his suitcase. The primary lexical choices aim to evoke emotional intensity with words like "anticipation", "optimism", and "hope". However, these positive sentiments are challenged by the experiences of "ignorance", "hostility", and "threat" faced by migrants upon arriving in the UK. Overall, the narrative emphasises a world marked by deception and difficulties encountered by migrants. The initially positive impressions of the UK are disrupted by "a rude awakening", "shock", "disappointment", "challenges", and "racism". Consequently, the idealised vision of British life, or "the world where everything was possible", stands in contrast to the words chosen by the text producer for this "Arrival" panel. The analysis suggests that the museum has

intentionally chosen imagery and language to depict the harsh realities faced by migrants arriving in the UK during the Windrush era.

The proposed lesson plan, based on this case study, could reveal that the interaction between words and images is crucial for the meaning-making process related to migration. Furthermore, a detailed examination of the multimodal texts from the museum website allows the identification of the main social actors and their roles. The analysis indicates that 'migrants' are mainly linked with activity verbs that describe actions performed by the agent. Nevertheless, the frequent use of mental verbs provides insights into the feelings of migrants and helps establish a closer connection between the depicted participants and the viewer. Migrants are often categorised by their professions to reinforce their sense of belonging to the local community. It is also remarkable that migrants are usually individualised and personalised to highlight their emotional dimension, whereas those encountered at the arrival location are described collectively and anonymised. Additionally, a significant lexical feature in the texts is the frequent use of personal pronouns like "you" and "we", which are employed to create "personalisation". This interpersonal communication between the viewer and the subjects fosters solidarity and elicits an emotional response.

Through the case study of the Virtual Museum of Caribbean Migration and Memory, students can foster their linguistic competence and translate the critical dimension into practical activities, such as rewriting and commentary on authentic texts. The proposed lesson plan could enhance the integration of Cultural Studies and English linguistics, thereby promoting an approach grounded in language as a signifying practice and a tool of analysis and critical reflection. Since the media play a vital role in conveying knowledge to wider audiences, students are encouraged to explore alternative discursive strategies on migration (Curti, "Migrant Identities") and to extend the museum horizons beyond the "white walls" (Curti, "Oltre le quattro mura bianche" 199).

LANGUAGE AS A DISTURBING PRACTICE

The notion of language as a *signifying practice*, central to this discussion, invites us to consider it not as a fixed system of reference, but as a material and affective force shaped by ideology, history, and power. From Hall's encoding/decoding model to Foucault's genealogies of discourse, and from Curti's feminist textuality to contemporary queer analyses of voice and performance, our trajectory has foregrounded the constitutive role of language in shaping social meaning. What these approaches share is a commitment to the materiality of discourse, its rhythms, silences, and reiterations, and to the linguistic processes through which identities are voiced, contested, and reimagined. The teaching activities thus operationalise Hall's notion of language as a *signifying practice,* showing how linguistic analysis, through semantic prosody and stance, enables students to unpack the ideological work of texts.

To speak of language in these terms is to recognise its generative contradictions and its capacity to produce as well as regulate reality. Far from being a neutral conduit,

language operates as a site where power is exercised and resisted, often simultaneously. Through repetition, it can naturalise hierarchies and stabilise subject positions, yet it also harbours the potential for deviation, irony, and subversion. This tension between regulation and rupture, normativity and difference, is where the political life of language discloses.

Rooted in feminist and poststructuralist traditions, this understanding of language reframes it not as a mirror of the world but as a terrain of struggle and transformation. It is within this unstable field that meaning is negotiated, identities are reshaped, and the very terms of representation are made contestable. What is added here, however, is the contribution of cultural studies—a perspective often overlooked in both feminist linguistics and poststructuralist theory—which foregrounds the material and symbolic power of discourse as it circulates across media, institutions, and everyday life. As Curti ("What is Real and What is Not") argues, cultural studies invite us to read across genres, disciplines, and subjectivities, illuminating how language becomes a site of ideological friction and aesthetic disobedience.

Against this backdrop, Curti's imperative to "disturb the text" (*Female Stories, Female Bodies* 14) is not only a theoretical gesture; it becomes the ethos that grounds our everyday engagement with language. We do not simply echo her insights: we practise them. Her feminist vision, in which "representation is a place of risk" (*Female Stories, Female Bodies* 20), shapes the very way we read, analyse, and teach. Therefore, for us, language is never stable or innocent, but always implicated in structures of power, identity, and exclusion. By applying a cultural studies framework to linguistics, thus, we enter into language as a space where "contradiction becomes a productive mode" (*Female Stories, Female Bodies* 9), where discourses fracture and recombine, and where meaning is constantly reworked from the margins. This is not just a theoretical position, it is our critical credo, the agenda through which we look at language as cultural and political material, and the way we teach our students to see, read, and listen differently.

This tenet is central to recent work on masculinity and media discourse, where queer linguistics, rearticulated through Curti's feminist critique, becomes a vital tool for exposing the discursive and visual regimes through which hegemonic masculinities are constructed and sustained. In *Masculinity and Representation*, for instance, this approach combines critical discourse analysis with multimodal and quantitative methods, demonstrating how hegemonic masculinity is performed in lifestyle magazines through "lexical, prosodic, and spatial cues that align with ideologies of control, endurance, and stoicism" (Balirano, *Masculinity and Representation* 36). Drawing on corpus-assisted techniques, the study quantifies the recurrence of semantic fields and prosodic patterns, showing how language contributes systematically to the normalisation of gendered power. Further reflections appear in *Queering Masculinities in Language and Culture*, where the editors argue that "masculinity is queered not merely through inversion but through ironic stylisation and linguistic friction, where affect and embodiment undo normative coherence" (Baker and Balirano 10). These tensions are traced across contributions that examine drag performance, trans representation, and queer subversion in media texts, illustrating how language and performance work in

tandem to destabilise gendered norms. Across these examples, discourses of masculinit(ies) emerge not as fixed identities, but as "a construct constantly being negotiated and challenged" (Baker and Balirano 3).

A case in point is the analysis of Conchita Wurst's televised performances ("Who's Afraid of Conchita Wurst?"), where the singer's bearded drag persona disrupts conventional binaries of gender while destabilising normative visual codes through what has been termed *multimodal prosody*—the alignment of visual, verbal and acoustic cues that generate affective dissonance and challenge heteronormative semiotic regimes. Through a corpus of televised appearances and audience surveys, the study reveals how Conchita's image functions as a non-ironic yet powerfully subversive icon of gender hybridity, priming more inclusive attitudes towards non-binary identities among European viewers. This reading resonates with Curti's insistence on traversing fixed categories of identity and representation, and her call for a critical engagement with symbolic systems that appear naturalised. Rather than merely inverting dominant norms, Conchita's embodied performance enacts a form of strategic subversion that, as Curti ("What is Real and What is Not") suggests, exposes the constructedness of gender and opens up spaces for alternative forms of subjectivity.

These dynamics extend also into spiritual discourse, as explored in *Queering God*, where representations of the divine are reframed through humour, iconicity, and queer aesthetics. In this framework, God is no longer a stable masculine signifier, but a performative and affective presence—immanent, parodic, and plural. Drawing on examples such as Saint Sebastian, Cher-as-God in *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006; 2017-2020), and drag rituals in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the study articulates a queer theology in which camp, laughter, and stylised excess become strategies of ideological disruption and spiritual reimagination. This approach exemplifies the critical potential of a dialogue between cultural studies and linguistics, particularly when informed by Curti's invitation ("What is Real and What is Not") to traverse symbolic systems and interrogate the normative foundations of representation. Her work challenges disciplinary boundaries and encourages forms of reading that foreground affect, hybridity, and the political charge of aesthetic disobedience. Rather than negating the sacred, these queer representations inhabit and re-signify it, enacting cross-disciplinary gestures that destabilise fixed meanings and open space for alternative imaginaries of belief, embodiment, and resistance.

Such a methodological framework, which combines gender studies, multimodality, and corpus linguistics builds on the dialogue between Cultural Studies and linguistic analysis. It draws on Hall's understanding of language as a terrain where meaning and power are constantly negotiated, and on Curti's feminist critique, which challenges fixed systems of representation by foregrounding the intersections of gender, voice, and symbolic disruption. At the same time, it is firmly grounded in Halliday's *Systemic Functional Linguistics*, particularly in the interpersonal metafunction, which highlights how language structures social relationships and positions speakers within networks of authority.

Importantly, this integration does not replace nor discredit the contributions of descriptive and structural linguistics. On the contrary, it builds upon them. A deep

knowledge of Halliday's model is essential in order to engage critically with the cultural work of language. What is resisted here is not linguistic precision, but a purist stance that isolates language from its ideological and social dimensions. Purism, in any field, tends to close off intellectual inquiry rather than foster it, and in linguistics, it risks reducing analysis to a neutral, ahistorical exercise.

By contrast, this critical perspective insists that language must be examined both for its internal organisation and for its role in producing, sustaining, or challenging dominant discourses. In the analysis of masculinity, for example, attention to lexical, prosodic, and visual cues is enriched—not weakened—by an awareness of how these semiotic choices circulate within wider cultural imaginaries. Rather than dilute linguistic expertise, this approach sharpens it, enabling a more expansive and politically aware account of how meaning operates.

The alliance between Cultural Studies and linguistics is, therefore, not incidental, but constitutive of this tradition. It is precisely in the Neapolitan context of L'Orientale that this convergence has found its most enduring expression, a place where the study of the English language has always been inseparable from the analysis of ideology, representation, and power. Yet, its resonance has not remained confined within institutional walls: the legacy of this alliance lives on in the work of scholars and practitioners who, trained within this tradition, have carried its critical, feminist, and postcolonial philosophy into new academic, linguistic, and cultural settings. From classrooms to conferences, from editorial series to research projects, the disruptive grammar of Cultural Studies continues to shape language-based inquiry across disciplines and borders. In this institutional and intellectual landscape, feminist theory has never remained peripheral: it has shaped both method and critique. Within the linguistic laboratories of L'Orientale, the legacy of Curti endures not as commemoration, but as praxis. The *Laboratorio Lidia Curti* continues to thrive as a space of textual, political, and affective inquiry, a space where language is always disturbing, and disturbed.

This epistemological stance finds theoretical consonance and resonance in Judith Butler's account of performativity, where "gender proves to be performative […] instituted through a stylised repetition of acts" (*Gender Trouble* 25). In our view, language is not a passive vehicle of description, but a formative site where identities are enacted, relations negotiated, and norms reiterated or undone. We understand language not simply as a tool for meaning, but as a performative force, one that both reproduces and disrupts social reality. As Butler observes, "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual" (*Excitable Speech* 15), and within that ritual lies the potential for failure, slippage, and resignification. To disturb language, in our practice, is to enter that space of tension, to locate the cracks in normativity and to speak from within them.

This is the legacy of Cultural Studies, one that continues to shape our linguistic research, pedagogical engagement, and critical inquiry.

The comparative analysis of Gillette advertisements from the 1980s and 1990s versus the 2019 ones offers an interesting perspective on the narrative of masculinity, which you have just read about.

Fig. B. Slogan Gillette 1992. www.youtube.com/@mikekling Last Accessed 24 nov. 2025

Fig. C. Slogan Gillette 2019. www.youtube.com/@guardiannews Last Accessed 24 nov. 2025

Try to reflect on what kind of man is being imagined in each of these moments, and on how these representations speak to broader cultural aspirations: the famous 1980s television campaign celebrated athleticism and success, identifying masculinity with performance in the well-known slogan "Gillette: The best men can get". However, the 2019 "The best men can be" short film ad critically engages with toxic masculinity, advocating for accountability and self-awareness. How do you feel the ad's dialogic structure featuring, for example, boys fighting, men intervening, and voiceover narration — invites male viewers to reflect on their own resistance? These representations are not neutral and they reveal two different gazes on masculinity: how do you think the respective audiences might have received these messages? In what ways might they reveal a renegotiation of the concept of manhood?

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