

MILANO



UNIVERSITÀ
CATTOLICA
del Sacro Cuore

Dipartimento di Scienze linguistiche e letterature straniere

The Muse of fire

Narrating conflict: forms, languages, and cultures across literature and linguistics

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano

Conference

April 16, 2026

“O for a muse of fire [...]”

William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, v. 1

This conference offers a unified framework bringing together two complementary perspectives. The Literature and Media section examines how conflict takes shape in narrative, from classical epic to modern anti-epics and audiovisual representations, focusing on the narrative devices and aesthetic strategies that construct meaning around wars, crises and traumas. The Linguistics section considers language as a site of conflict, analyzing how political and media discourse, multilingual practices, language policies and specialized lexicons produce exclusion, resistance or mediation. Tools such as discourse analysis, corpus linguistics and minority language studies enable us to interpret these dynamics.

The conference aims to foster dialogue between these two areas, offering an overview of the forms, languages and cultures of contemporary conflict and demonstrating how narration and language intertwine in its representation and possible transformation.

LITERATURE AND MEDIA SECTION

Sing, o goddess. The epic in contemporary culture: meaning, forms, manifestations

Epic emerged as an oral form of cultural transmission and retains, even today, a legacy that interweaves poetic dimension, literary aspects, narrative devices and thematic content related to the crucial questions of its time. The *Iliad*, in this sense, offers a foundational model of conflict epic, focusing on the human passions that war brings into play and on Achilles' wrath as its emotional and narrative core.

In the twentieth century, epic assumed plural forms: from the trauma of war in Céline, to the modernist anti-epics of Joyce, to the American epic of Steinbeck and Faulkner. In the case of South African writer J. M. Coetzee, the cultural functions of epic are adapted to the historical and moral condition of modern South Africa: works such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Disgrace* (1999) explore the crisis of authority, colonial trauma, and individual responsibility, constructing an epic of disintegration, mourning and moral transformation that exposes the founding myths of white South African nationhood. Naturally, epic has not remained confined to literature. Audiovisual narrative has also reworked the epic legacy in new forms: from early cinema and Hollywood historical epics, to works that reflect on the metamorphoses of power and society, such as *The Leopard* or *Apocalypse Now*. Contemporary serialized television – from *The Wire* to *Game of Thrones* – has in turn revived epic structures and motifs to construct new choral and mythopoetic narratives.

Conflict thus remains one of the fundamental engines of epic, as a moment of rupture and redefinition of meaning: through its forms, ancient and contemporary, we can read the historical and social dynamics that transform individuals and communities.

Building on these premises, this section aims to investigate the forms and transformations of epic in the contemporary world, in its various literary and media manifestations. By way of orientation, papers may address – but are not limited to – the following themes:

- Forms, functions, and the presence (or disappearance) of contemporary epic literature; the very notion of the epic today; the persistence or decline of epic poetry in Western and global contexts;
- New configurations of epic narrative devices –from the centrality of the journey and warfare to the role of fate – in contemporary literature, cinema, and serial audiovisual production;
- Modes of representing contemporary wars, crises, and social conflicts in the arts; history as the driving engine of epic; narrative as a tool for recovering and constructing meaning;
- Minority narratives: epic-poetry traditions among minoritized languages or oppressed peoples; postcolonial counter-epics; the epic as a vehicle of cultural resistance;
- Anti-epics and genre deconstructions: works that subvert, ironize, or invert the classical canon; epics of the ordinary person and the antihero; epics of failure, collapse, or disintegration;
- Linguistic and stylistic dimensions: language use in contemporary epic forms; stylistic registers; orality and performance; translation and adaptation of classical epic texts;
- Epic and national or collective identity: how epic narratives construct, celebrate, interrogate, or dismantle the founding myths of a community; epic in contexts of historical transition or collective trauma;
- Epic and boundaries: the border as a generative force within the epic tradition—whether understood as a geographical, political, cultural, or linguistic threshold, and as a site of encounter, tension, and confrontation.

LINGUISTICS SECTION

The polyphonies of conflict

Language is inherently configured as a space of encounter and tension, in which differences are expressed, negotiated and sometimes clash. To speak of conflict in linguistics means to interrogate how words narrate fracture and how linguistic practices become terrain for resistance, power or mediation. From this perspective, language contributes to constructing or dissolving collective identities, defining mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

Building on reflections on the nexus between language, culture and collective identity developed in intercultural communication studies, the linguistics section of this conference aims to explore how linguistic practices and policies contribute to constructing, representing and narrating conflict. From political and media discourses that shape public perception of events, to language policies that affect the survival or marginalization of minority languages, traces of conflict emerge in communication and in choices of code, register and expressive form, which are never entirely neutral. Through tools such as discourse analysis, corpus linguistics and studies on minority languages and multilingualism, we can investigate how words participate in narrating dissent and representing diversity.

This section aims to promote interdisciplinary dialogue capable of connecting diverse perspectives on language as a space of conflict and transformation. The study of “linguistic contrasts”, whether ideological, semantic or pragmatic in nature, allows us to illuminate the dynamics of communicative power and to reconceive language as an active space of negotiation and intercultural dialogue.

The following research areas are proposed as possible points of departure, open to further developments and perspectives:

- Discourse linguistics and corpus linguistics: analysis of how political, media and institutional discourse narrates conflict through lexical choices, metaphorical resources, registers and persuasive strategies. The use of monolingual, bilingual, comparable or parallel corpora enables identification of recurring patterns, comparison of narratives by different actors involved (institutions, media, civil society) and testing of hypotheses

on framing, polarization and delegitimization, including in pedagogical approaches to developing critical literacy regarding conflict discourse;

- Terminology and specialized languages: analysis of how technical, sectoral or specialized lexicons become sites of semantic negotiation and construction of communicative power. Every specialized language creates shared meanings that ensure coherence and precision within its reference community but may produce opacity and distance for non-specialists. Studying these dynamics means observing how meaning is redefined through discursive practices that translate social, ideological and cultural tensions into linguistic terms;
- Minority languages and multilingualism: analysis of language policies, multilingual practices, and survival strategies of marginalized or minoritized languages in contexts of conflict; languages as instruments of identity construction or political assertion, particularly in situations of geopolitical tension; the role of local languages in education and in fostering openness to otherness; reflections on linguistic and cultural identity in postcolonial settings and in efforts toward the “decolonization of knowledge”.

Practical Information

Papers will be 20 minutes in length, with the possibility of using PowerPoint presentations. Remote participation will not be available.

Abstracts with paper proposals should be submitted by 31 January 2026 to: lamusadifuoco2026@gmail.com

Abstracts may be written in Italian or English, must not exceed 400 words, should specify which section you wish to participate in (Literature/Media or Linguistics), and should include essential bibliography (bibliographic references do not count toward the word limit). The file must also contain the author’s name(s), institutional affiliation and a brief biographical note.

Acceptance of proposals will be communicated by 28 February 2026.

Organizing Committee

Alberto Biscaldi, Giovanni Ceccatelli, Mariarosa Ferrari, Edoardo Galmuzzi,
Michela Mangiarotti, Lucrezia Marzo