



**UNIVERSITÀ
DI PARMA**

DIPARTIMENTO DI DISCIPLINE
UMANISTICHE, SOCIALI E DELLE
IMPRESE CULTURALI

CALL FOR PAPERS

Grammars of Sexuality

Forms of Saying, Narrating, Performing

Parma, 10-11 December 2026

Interdisciplinary Doctoral Conference

Introduction

The conference aims to explore, from a critical and interdisciplinary perspective, the *grammars* of sexuality, understood both as norm and as a paradigmatic potential in shaping old and new forms of saying, narrating, and performing sexual identities, roles, and practices situated within different discursive, cultural, and social universes. By *grammars* we mean, on the one hand, what can be said, narrated, or performed within a given cultural and social context; and, on the other, a space in which rules and norms may be imposed, broken, or reinvented. The grammars of sexuality thus do not simply reflect existing cultural configurations, but actively participate in them, contributing to their continuous redefinition.

Sexuality constitutes one of the privileged dimensions in which language, literature, the arts, and social practices intertwine, shape one another, and transform over time: indeed, every culture elaborates its own grammars of sexuality through the languages that describe, represent, regulate, and censor it. Speaking of sexuality thus means interrogating its polysemy within a given linguistic and cultural community at a specific historical moment. Starting from these premises, the conference intends to promote an interdisciplinary dialogue on sexuality among young scholars in linguistics, literature, cinema, and the performing arts, in the belief that the comparison between different disciplinary and methodological perspectives can restore its complexity.

For this reason, the conference will be divided into three sections: Linguistics, Literature, and Performing Arts and Cinema.

Linguistics Section: Grammars of Saying

If conventionally the term ‘grammar’ designates the rules that make possible the production and interpretation of utterances, in a broader perspective, it can indicate the set of forms, conventions, codes, and practices that allow a community to construct meanings. The already widely discussed perspectives of linguistic relativism have opened up new conceptions of a grammar unhinged from its authoritarian and normative nature, moving closer to the notion of a «system» that gives shape (Sapir & Whorf, 2017). Consistent with the perspectives of this initiative, grammar is therefore understood in its sense as an interpretive paradigm of the forms, practices, and identities that discursively construct the sexual dimension.

If, when we speak of discourse, we refer to «practices which systematically form the object of which they speak» (Foucault, 1972: 49), then investigating the discursive space of sexuality becomes essential for a structural reading of its systems across different spaces, times, and contexts. This space is constituted through the practical realisations of language in use, that is, through the modes and practices of communication situated within real contexts of use (Simpson & Mayr, 2009). A clause is a minimal unit for representing the world and its reality (Balirano, 2017): it is starting from the organisation of clauses into discourse that the discursive space is constituted, structurally holding the revolutionary potential to establish or overturn regimes of truth, which can function both as devices of control and as discursive practices of emancipation (Foucault, 1976).

Following the embodied perspective, if language is not configured as an abstract and autonomous system, but finds its own anchoring in bodily experience, then the body constitutes one of the cognitive and linguistic conditions of sexuality. The verbal dimension stands alongside forms of the implicit, of silence, of interdiction, of haptics and proxemics, as well as gesture and embodied communication, up to signed linguistic forms, showing how meaning is constructed through the relationship between word, body, space, and context.

The grammars of sexuality can therefore be read as systems of signification in which bodily experience, language, imagination, and culture shape one another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).



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Literature Section: Grammars of Narrating

Literature has always been one of the privileged observatories of the grammars of sexuality. From the anthropological material sedimented in myth to erotic precept literature, from philosophical reflection on *eros* to its reworking within the Christian sphere, motifs related to sexuality and its representation run through the entire span of Greek, Latin, and Christian literatures. As Giulia Sissa (2003) writes: «The sensual nature – that is, infinitely desiring – of *eros* is the Greek question par excellence, becomes a crucial Roman question, and culminates in Christian anguish». This question then traces the entire arc of the literary tradition, passing from medieval lyric poetry to Renaissance erotic poetry, and finally arriving at the short and long forms of modern and contemporary narrative. Far from being a mere filler, the sexual motif functions as an organising principle that connects to a plurality of other semantic concretions: its almost omnipresent relationship with power, for example, in turn constitutes almost a *cliché*, variously articulated, and a social device (cf. Foucault, 1976); or again, the exploration of personal identity finds in it an unavoidable stage in the journey of self-discovery and discovery of the surrounding world (from the *Bildungsroman* to *queer studies*). These and other thematic threads can be investigated starting from the reading of works that expose sexuality more or less explicitly as the core of the narrative, but the analysis of those that instead relegate its telling to the margins, or conceal it entirely, will be all the more interesting: consider the cases in which, for the most varied reasons, the sexual act, although constituting the engine of the plot, is omitted, as, to give just one example, in Heinrich von Kleist's *Die Marquise von O...*, a sort of modern prototype of this kind of omission. Papers may then address the narratological analysis of the forms (perhaps distorted or ambiguous) through which sexual experience is rendered, probing, where present, its metaliterary resonances. Finally, one may also reread the critical and theoretical reflection on literature, which has often referred to eroticism as a hermeneutic and cognitive mode: in the twentieth century, it was Susan Sontag who inaugurated an «erotica dell'arte e della letteratura» understood as «un insieme di funzioni [...] che generano *l'energia dello stile* dell'opera artistica solo grazie alla loro dinamica compresenza», followed by Barthes's *Plaisir du texte* (1973) and by the joint theoretical-literary and epistemological reflection of Peter Brooks (cf. Scuderi, 2023).



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Performing Arts and Cinema Section: Grammars of Performing

The grammars of sexuality, in the territories of theatre, performance, and cinema, translate into spaces of action and friction. On stage and on screen, the syntax of desire is either instituted or radically deconstructed.

This trajectory has its roots in Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty (1937), where eroticism, stripped of its psychological dimension, becomes a metaphysical force and an organic contagion. A Dionysian impulse runs through the neo-avant-gardes – from the Living Theatre to Viennese Actionism – electing the body as a territory of liberation and of breaking taboos.

With Performance Studies, Richard Schechner's *restored behaviour* (1985) shows how social and, therefore, sexual codes are recombined and reinvented. Performance thus becomes the place in which gender reveals itself as citation and social construction (Butler, 1990), while the vulnerable body exposes itself as political territory (Phelan, 1993). In the contemporary scene, eroticism reaffirms itself as a generative principle of art (Abramović, 2018) and, in the feedback loop between performer and spectator (Fischer-Lichte, 2014), the experiments of Societas Raffaello Sanzio and of Angélica Liddell – for the latter, consider the *First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (2015) – put traditional aesthetics into crisis. More recently, this research has embraced non-conforming bodies and the critique of heteronormativity (Gallo, 2024), intertwining with questions of care, intimacy, and consent.

On the cinematic side, sexuality is historically organised through the gaze. Ever since Kenneth Anger's avant-garde underground, the screen has acted as a critical reagent. If feminist theory decodes visual pleasure, unveiling the asymmetries of the *male gaze* (Mulvey, 1989), and defines cinema as a technology of gender that reproduces power relations (de Lauretis, 1987), every image retains the possibility of exceeding the logics that structure it. Already in 1975, Chantal Akerman's deconstruction of the visual – consider *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, Bruxelles* – opened up new politics of representation, while visual media elaborated counter-narratives for historically marginalised subjectivities (Dyer, 2002). From the queer aesthetics of Céline Sciamma and Alain Guiraudie to the fluid geographies of mediatised sex (Landrini, Maina & Zecca, 2018), cinema continues to rewrite the boundaries of the visible.



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These references are not intended to trace rigid boundaries, but to offer themselves as a constellation of prompts. We encourage proposals that move freely across these areas, intersect their suggestions, or open up new methodological perspectives.

Possible Research Lines

Taking the notion of grammar as an interpretive category capable of relating linguistic forms, discursive practices, literary representations, and bodily performativity, the doctoral conference invites reflection on the following research lines, to be understood as illustrative and not exhaustive:

- Mutations, (re)definitions, and contestations of the grammars of sexuality in different linguistic, literary, and performative contexts.
- Linguistic, literary, and performative structures and practices that construct discourses on sexuality, and how these discourses interact with other discursive systems (legal, religious, medical, scientific, or political) in shaping the collective imaginary.
- Modes and expressive strategies of sexuality in spoken languages and in sign languages, in light of their respective media.
- Rhetorical and stylistic strategies that outline the representation of the body, desire, roles, and sexual identities across different media, offline and online.
- Processes of normalisation, censorship or interdiction, euphemization, resemantization, and innovation affecting the languages of sexuality in dominant cultures and in subcultures (queer, BDSM, underground, online communities).
- Definition and (re)construction of the erotic-affective imaginary through the study of language, literature, and the performing arts.
- Relations between languages, power, and subjectivity in the definition of sexual identities and forms of transgression and/or subversion of dominant grammars.
- The role of silence, implicature, omission, proxemics, gaze, and other non-verbal communicative practices in shaping the grammars of sexuality across multimodal forms.
- Languages, practices, and performances of sexuality in digital spaces governed by profit dynamics and algorithmic logics.
- Forms of censorship on, in, and through discourses and representations of sexuality, operating through law and explicit prohibition, but also through social expectations, moral codes, educational devices, algorithmic practices, and relational dynamics.



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- Languages of sexual and gender-based violence: how it is spoken, silenced, normalised, or denounced across dominant cultures and subcultures, from legal-media vocabulary to movements such as #MeToo, from institutional silence to resemantization by victims and activist communities, from literary works to artistic performances as tools of denunciation and reclamation of the narrative.

Modalities and Timeline for Participation

The conference welcomes proposals from the fields of linguistics, literature, and the performing arts, in either Italian or English. Proposals must be submitted by 30 September 2026 to the email address grammatichedellasesualita@gmail.com in .docx or PDF format and must include:

- name, surname, and any affiliation;
- title of the paper;
- *abstract* of the proposal (max 2000 characters including spaces);
- bio-bibliographical note (max 500 characters including spaces);
- section for which the proposal is submitted (Linguistics; Literature; Performing Arts and Cinema).

The CFP is open to PhD Candidates and to PhD holders who obtained their degree no more than three years ago.

Selection results will be communicated by **19 October 2026**. Information regarding the location and the final conference program will be communicated at a later date.

The time allotted for each paper is **20 minutes**. Participation in the conference is free of charge. Travel and accommodation expenses are the responsibility of participants. The conference will be held on **10 and 11 December 2026** at the Department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Cultural Industries (DUSIC) of the University of Parma.

Scientific and Organising Committee

Cassandra Dagani, Davide Dobjani, Giulia Govi Cavani, Giuseppina Pirozzi, Lorenzo Carlo Tore, Fabio Zarroli.



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