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In/Un-Natural: Literary, Language-Education and Linguistic Perspectives between the Natural and the Artificial

10th Doctoral Conference

Ca' Foscari University of Venice, November 26-27, 2026

Today the border between the "natural" and the "artificial" is in the spotlight and it is going through a process of epistemological redefinition that affects every field of the Humanities. The title of this conference, *In/Un-Natural*, plays with the triple significance of the prefix: on the one hand it underlines what lies within the concept of nature, and on the other hand it implies the analysis of what goes against nature and what simulates nature by means of the artifice.

This doctoral conference therefore wants to explore the various interpretations of the concept of nature across different interdisciplinary fields. The idea of nature in language will be addressed through themes such as ecocriticism and climate change, but also from ontogenetic and phylogenetic perspectives, as well as through a more in-depth examination of the naturalness of spontaneous acquisition as opposed to guided learning.

This event, organized by the students enrolled in the 41st cycle of the PhD program in Modern Languages, Cultures and Societies and Language Sciences at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, aims to reflect on the dichotomies nature/culture and nature/artifice in literary, linguistic and language education studies, with particular attention to the following areas, which are not to be taken as constraining:

- Literature: "Aesthetics of the Anthropocene: The Literary Landscape across Nature, Artifice and Hybridisation"
- Educational Linguistics: "Natural Approach and Hybrid Environments in Language Acquisition"
- Linguistics and Psycholinguistics: "The natural component of language"
- Computational Linguistics: "Natural and artificial language: models, competence and cognitive plausibility"

The doctoral conference features presentations by Professor L. De Capitani (Ca' Foscari University of Venice), Professor P. Balboni (Ca' Foscari University of Venice) and Professor G. Gagliardi (University of Bologna).

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Literature: "Aesthetics of the Anthropocene: The Literary Landscape across Nature, Artifice and Hybridisation"

The aim of this conference is to investigate the literary representations of the natural and the artificial by approaching these categories not as fixed and timeless oppositions, but as dynamic constructs shaped by historical contexts. Literature functions not only as a site of representation but also as a critical tool which enables the analysis of the current climate crisis, the contemporary ecological transformations and the postcolonial issues. Contributions may approach the topics using both analytical and synthetic methods, considering the role of subjectivity and the interaction of texts within a field that is continually being redefined theoretically.

For instance, Timothy Morton's reflections on the concept of *Dark Ecology* (2016) and Bruno Latour's works (1993; 2004), which challenge the dichotomy between the natural and the artificial, open up a networked and hybrid understanding of an ecological experience in which the artificial is also included. Another concept that fully represents the hybrid interplay between the natural and the artificial is the Anthropocene, understood as the result of the technological progress that led to radical urban and spatial transformations. In this framework, the literary narrative of the Anthropocene encourages reflections on the landscape metamorphoses: cities that embed and disrupt the rural space, disseminated suburbs, forsaken areas, which can all be assimilated to concept of the "Third Landscape" theorized by Gilles Clément (2004).

The ideas of Rob Nixon's "slow violence" (2011) and Jason W. Moore's Capitalocene (2016) play a key role in this discourse as they bring out the political, economic and colonial character of the relationship between the natural and the artificial. Within the postcolonial field, nature is portrayed as an active participant in dynamics of exploitation, exoticization and marginalization, as it arises, for example, in the literary works of Chinua Achebe, J. M. Coetzee and Arundhati Roy, where the landscape becomes a place of cultural and political conflicts.

Lawrence Buell's works and Serenella Iovino's perspectives on *Material Ecocriticism* (2014) are fundamental to literary ecocritics, providing tools to analyse the symbolic and material construction of the environment in literary texts.

Thematic Areas

We welcome contributions exploring the relationship between narrative, the natural and the artificial, with particular attention to:

- Literary representations of natural and artificial environments;
- Literary representations of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene, *Dark Ecology* and the climate crisis;
- Nature and exploitation in colonial and post-colonial contexts;
- Perspectives from *Material Ecocriticism* and non-human agency;
- Urban spaces, suburbs and the "Third Landscape" in literary texts.

Bibliographical references

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Educational Linguistics: "Natural Approach and Hybrid Environments in Language Acquisition"

Within the area of educational linguistics, the concept of the "natural" can be investigated through cognitive-acquisitional and humanistic-affective perspectives. Therefore, in the light of Terrell's Natural Approach (1977) and Krashen's distinction between learning and acquisition (1981), the latter is conceived as an unconscious

process oriented toward communication in L2/FL, inherent to human beings. From this perspective, the Natural Approach goes beyond a vision focused exclusively on the formal internalisation of rules through "unnatural" exercises (Balboni, 2014), prioritising instead the development of language skills in meaningful and emotionally safe contexts. Such awareness finds further grounding in brain-based learning (Jensen, 1998), which promotes a neuroscientific approach to teaching based on the enhancement of learners' natural cognitive capacities through compatible instructional pathways.

The teacher, as a facilitator, aims to enhance students' natural predisposition to learn, provided that it is not discouraged. In this context, the emotional dimension takes on particular importance: from the affective filter and input appraisal (Arnold, 1960) to the link between emotion and awareness (Damasio, 1994).

At the same time, the "natural" may be interpreted from an ecological perspective, considering the external environment as a catalyst for linguistic interaction, capable of spontaneously stimulating curiosity, desire to communicate, and imagination, especially in childhood and in multilingual contexts (Richardson et al., 2024).

Furthermore, in recent decades, the ecosystem of language acquisition has expanded to encompass the technological dimension, thereby inaugurating a new era. In particular, the spread of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has made it necessary to redefine the boundaries between natural and artificial in language teaching, requiring appropriate pedagogical balances in a "liquid" educational context (Balboni, 2023). In this scenario, Prator's principle of "adapt, don't adopt" (1968) appears once again as the guiding criterion for an ethical and conscious integration of innovation.

Thematic Areas

We welcome contributions relevant to the following topics, which are not intended to be exhaustive:

- The Natural Approach and acquisition perspectives in L2/LS teaching;
- Emotional dimension, motivation and affective filter in L2/LS acquisition processes;
- Natural environments and ecological approaches to the development of communicative competence in L2/LS;
- Multilingualism and educational mediation, intended as a practice based on the idea of the learner as a social actor and oriented towards reproducing the communicative nature of real contexts of L2/LS in the classroom (Council of Europe, 2020);

- Natural language acquisition between digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence.

Bibliographical references

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Linguistics and Psycholinguistics: "The natural component of language"

One of the crucial aspects through which linguistics has inquired into the concept of nature concerns language acquisition. Human language is acquired through a natural process, without explicit teaching, and on the basis of limited and variable input (Guasti, 2017). Since the 1970s, the debate has focused on the mechanisms underlying this process, addressing in particular the role of an innate language faculty (Chomsky, 1965) or, more generally, the biologically grounded predispositions inherent to human nature that respond to the linguistic environment (Tomasello, 2003). This debate traces back to the dichotomy between nature and nurture and in the longstanding opposition between innatism and empiricism developed in philosophy and in psychology. The difficulty of resolving this tension continues to make research on the topic particularly compelling.

Parallel to this ontogenetic view, the question of nature also arises in the phylogenetic development of language. Natural language, understood as a communicative code characterized by a hierarchically structured syntax, is unique to the human species (Terrace et al., 1979). This has led to considering language as an evolutionary innovation that emerged at a specific point in the species' history, perhaps in relation to the development of capacities responsible for forms of protolanguage (Hauser et al., 2002). This evolutionary innovation appears to be the human capacity to combine words and create sentences – a capacity not present in other species.

The issues relevant to this section of the call can be summarized by the three formulas used by Chomsky (1986): Plato's problem (how the language faculty develops in the individual), Humboldt's problem (what the language faculty is), and Descartes's problem (how the language faculty is put to use), as well as the more recent Darwin's problem (how evolution led to the development of the language faculty in the human species), defined by Hauser et al. (2002).

Furthermore, the exploration of what is "natural" in language involves the field of clinical linguistics, which investigates atypical language. The analysis of populations with language disorders, aphasia, or neurodivergent profiles – such as autism or dyslexia – offers a privileged perspective on the cognitive mechanisms underlying language acquisition and functioning, thereby enriching linguistic theory (Chinellato, 2007).

Finally, the concept of nature can also be framed in a methodological sense. The collection of linguistic data can be carried out in more or less ecological contexts, and the distinction between experimental data and naturalistic data raises crucial questions about the relationship between method and object of study. The use of corpora and non-invasive collection techniques allows for the observation of language in contexts that aim to faithfully reflect its natural use (Labov, 1972), demonstrating how the nature of the data can influence linguistic analysis.

Thematic Areas

We welcome contributions relevant to the following topics, which should be considered non-exhaustive:

- Natural language acquisition;
- Formal analysis of the natural features and components of language (from both generative and usage-based perspectives);
- Biolinguistics: the phylogenetic development of language;
- Clinical linguistics: language in populations with atypical development;
- Ecological contexts for data collection.

Experimental and interdisciplinary contributions are particularly encouraged, provided they maintain a clear focus on language.

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Computational Linguistics: "Natural and artificial language: models, competence and cognitive plausibility"

The dialectic between the natural and the artificial in computational linguistics requires a rigorous confrontation between the natural fluidity of human language and the formal precision of mathematical systems. As noted by Lenci et al. (2025), Natural Language Processing (NLP) develops methods and tools aimed at enabling computers to analyze, understand, and generate natural language, as well as to use it in interaction with human beings. Within this framework, Large Language Models (LLMs)represent an epistemological turning point: on the one hand, they display emergent abilities — ranging from the generation of coherent texts to the solution of complex problems and adaptation to novel linguistic contexts — while, on the other, they raise fundamental questions about the nature of linguistic competence itself.

Although LLMs are capable of using language in ways that appear to presuppose a form of semantic understanding, the gap between their performance and human semantic competence remains substantial in many respects (Lenci, 2023). At present, their mastery may be described as 'quasi-semantic', insofar as it leaves substantial questions about whether they genuinely understand the linguistic structures they generate. LLMs do not have a model of the world or a mental representation of interlocutors: they repeat the statistical regularities of language learned during training, configuring themselves — according to the provocative label coined by Bender et al. (2021) — as stochastic parrots.

But is this definition really sufficient? Do LLMs know the meaning of the expressions they generate? And to what extent, if at all, is this knowledge comparable to human knowledge? The comparison with natural language acquisition makes this tension even more acute. To achieve impressive performance in numerous linguistic tasks, LLMs require exposure to orders of magnitude more data than a human being processes in a lifetime: while a 12-year-old child has typically encountered less than 100 million words, models such as BERT, RoBERTa, GPT-3, or Llama 2 are trained on hundreds of billions of tokens (Warstadt et al., 2023). This imbalance not only raises doubts about the validity of such models as tools for studying human language acquisition, but also makes research less accessible due to the high computational cost required to train systems of this size in terms of energy and carbon emissions. To address these critical issues, an emerging field known as Green Deep Learning has emerged, promoting more responsible and sustainable model development, with a particular focus on reducing energy and environmental costs (Xu et al., 2021). In this context, the dichotomy between natural and artificial also extends to the axis of progress and sustainability: it is not just a theoretical issue concerning the nature of language, but a practical and epistemic choice about the computational and scientific models we decide to build. It remains an open question whether the social benefits of generative AI models can justify the considerable environmental costs they entail. In this context, the BabyLM Challenge is a community-driven initiative aiming to develop language models trained on smaller, more realistic datasets, comparable to the linguistic input humans experience. The challenge encouraged the use of datasets containing more ecological stimuli, the adoption of curriculum learning approaches and the implementation of simplified architectures.

The BabyLM Challenge has a twofold objective: first, to make research on language models more inclusive and sustainable, enabling participation even by groups with limited resources; and second, to enhance the cognitive plausibility of the models themselves by adopting learning strategies that better reflect the constraints and processes of natural language acquisition.

Thematic Areas

We welcome contributions relevant to the following topics, which should be considered non-exhaustive:

- Human and machine language learning;
- Competence and generalization in language models;
- Cognitive plausibility of models versus natural acquisition;
- Model training strategies and architecture;
- Language performance analysis: syntax, morphology, semantics;

- Model interpretability and comparison with human cognitive processes;
- Sustainability and accessibility implications in modeling research.

Bibliographical references

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Xu, J., Zhou, W., Fu, Z., Zhou, H., & Li, L. (2021). *A survey on green deep learning.*

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Submission Guidelines:

The Call for Papers is addressed to master students, PhD candidates and researchers interested in contributing to the conference debate. The abstract, of a maximum of **350 words** and **no more than 5 bibliographical references** (excluded from word count), must be sent to the scientific-organizing committee **by May 4, 2026** by filling out the form available on the conference website. Contributions are to be delivered as an oral presentation up to a maximum of 20 minutes (+ 5 minutes for questions). The abstract must be uploaded in PDF format and renamed Surname_CD_Unive26. The file must also contain a short **biography of about 150 words**. Each applicant is allowed to submit a maximum of one contribution as first author, and only files uploaded through the submission form will be accepted.

The conference languages will be Italian and English. For further information, feel free to contact us at convegnophd.lcsmsl@unive.it. The event will be held in-person at Ca' Bernardo Room B (Sala B) and registration will be free of charge. Online

participation or presentation will not be offered. Travel costs are covered by attendees. In addition, the organizers will not arrange accommodations or cover expenses for visas.

Deadline Recap:

– Submission: from March 16 to ~~May 4~~ June 4 [EXTENDED], 2026, no later than 11:59 PM (CEST).

– Notification of the Selection Outcome: by June 30, 2026.

– Registration: September 1-15, 2026.

Scientific and Organizing Committee:

Beatrice Colina, Claudia Cusano, Gregorio Max Gambato, Anse Kom, Camilla Longo, Simone Mazzoli, Rosangela Misciagna, Alice Stroppa, Julian Zhara.

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Abstract submission form:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSe_pRWj5cLivcfhWKwOR2mj33ilnWl1hRGwc3RZ3utu5qJ52A/viewform?usp=dialog