

COML 6177. The Quest for a Universal Language

Prof. Julia Verkholtantsev

Course meets: Fall 2024, Williams Hall 737, Wed 1:45 - 4: 45

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“The story of Babel is more than an archaeological report (say, on the Babylonian ziggurat); more than an etiological theory (on the diversity of languages and on the name Babel/Babylon); more than a historical reminiscence (about the Babylonian melting pot of the 6th century BCE); and, needless to say, more than entertainment. Genesis 11 speaks to our *imagination*. It belongs to *mythos*.”

André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist*, 69.

Course Description

This seminar is an exploration of European intellectual history. It traces the historical trajectory of the idea that a universal and perfect language once existed and could exist again. From antiquity to the present day, the tantalizing question of such a language has been a vital and thought-provoking inquiry throughout human history. If recovered or invented, this language could explain the origins, physical reality, and meaning of human experience, fostering universal understanding and world peace. Greek philosophers grappled with the capacity of names to correctly name things. In Judaic and Christian traditions, the notion that the language spoken by Adam and Eve perfectly expressed the nature of the physical and metaphysical world captivated intellectuals for nearly two millennia. Defying the biblical myth of the confusion of languages and tribes at the Tower of Babel, scholars persistently endeavored to overcome divine punishment and rediscover the path to harmonious life. In the 19th century, Indo-Europeanist philologists saw an avenue to explore the early stages of human development by reconstructing a proto-language. In the 20th century, romantic idealists like Ludwik Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto, constructed languages to further understanding among estranged nations. For writers and poets of all times, from Cyrano de Bergerac to Velimir Khlebnikov, the concept of a universal and perfect language has served as an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Today, this idea reverberates in theories of universal and generative grammars, in the global spread of English, and in various attempts to devise artificial languages, including those intended for cosmic communication.

Each week, we examine a particular period and a set of theories to explore universal language projects. At the core of the course, however, lies an examination of what language is and how it is used in human society.

Course Requirements

Course Participation (Attendance, preparation, contribution to class discussions)

The format of the course is a seminar, and thus most of our meetings will be organized around discussions of the assigned readings. I will also take time to provide background information and systematize the reading material.

Class preparation: In addition to reading assigned materials, students will post short reflections on the assigned readings and share them with the rest of the class before the meetings. All students should read these reflections before coming to class.

Attendance: All of the course topics are interconnected, and mastering the class material depends on consistent participation. Inconsistent attendance and preparation lead to ineffective learning. Therefore, attendance is a part of the “course participation” grade.

Written Reflections and Class Discussions

To support your homework and enhance our class discussions, students will contribute reflections on home readings and class discussions.

Reflections on Home Readings (no more than 1000 words): For each class, students will post a written reflection on the assigned readings. These reflections should demonstrate a thorough reading and analysis of the material, including key themes, arguments, and any questions you may have. If you encounter any ideas or sections that are difficult to understand, make a note of them and raise your questions in class. When relevant, we will divide the readings among students to allow for more focused and in-depth analyses of specific works and sections of works. (Undergraduates will receive simpler assignments.) Written reflections should be concise yet comprehensive, highlighting the main points of the readings and how they relate to the overall course questions and objectives. These reflections are due by 10:00 AM on Wednesdays. They will serve as starting points for class discussions.

Reflections on Class Discussions (about 900 words): Throughout the semester, each student will contribute at least three scheduled written reflections on class discussions, connecting them to other course topics. These reflections will provide an opportunity for students to critically engage with the material, draw connections between different themes, and deepen their understanding of the subject matter. Each reflection should thoughtfully analyze the discussion points, highlight key insights, and relate them to broader course concepts. A sign-up schedule will be provided to ensure that reflections are evenly distributed throughout the semester. These reflections are due by midnight on Saturdays following the respective seminar. We will take 5-10 minutes at the beginning of each class to discuss them.

Creative Final Project

A proposal for a universal/perfect language. The project should include an outline of the theoretical background, the main principles of the project, and their exemplification, taking into account the achievements and failings of previous attempts. Project presentations will take place during the last seminar.

Course Evaluation:

Course participation 20%

Home Reading Reflections for Class Discussions 20%

Reflections of Class Discussion 20%

Final Project 40%

Schedule of Seminars

Seminar 1. Wed, August 28

[Introduction to Course Topics. Language Diversity. Writing. From Adam to the Tower of Babel](#)

Language and Alphabet. Is Writing a Good Thing? (Plato/Socrates on the forgetfulness of writing). Language Diversity. Christian Outlook. Relationship between Names and Things: creation of the world by naming (Genesis 1:3-4), Adam gives names to things (Genesis 2:16-17); Diffusion of languages after the Flood from the sons of Noah (Genesis 10); The Tower of Babel and *confusio linguarum*: confusion of languages as a divine punishment (OT, Genesis 11); Pentecostal gift of tongues (NT, Acts of the Apostles). Medieval chronicles on the confusion of languages and the divine curse. Genealogy of human history.

Seminar 2. Wed, September 4

[The Tower of Babel: Exegesis and History. Origins of Language and Semiotics. Language and Thought](#)

Theories about the origin of languages. Language and Sign. Language and Writing. Relationship between language and thought. Semantics – the study of words and their meaning. Language as a mirror of culture. Theories of linguistic relativity. Sapir–Whorf hypothesis.

Seminar 3. Wed, September 11

[Philosophy of Signification. Language as Fossilized History: Etymology and the Origins of the World](#)

Philosophical discussion on language, whether words signify naturally or by convention. Plato's *Cratylus*, Stoic's philosophy of language. *Etymologia* as a way to gain knowledge about the world. Marcus Terrentius Varro (116-27 BC) and Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636)

Seminar 4. Wed, September 18

[Hidden Knowledge: Kabbalah and the Art of Combination](#)

Hebrew as the original language (pro and contra). Attempts to rediscover the original speech of Adam. The claim of Hebrew. Hebrew Letters and Kabbalah: *Sefer Yetzirah* (The Book of Creation). The art of Gematria: Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia (1240-ca.1292).

Seminar 5. Wed, September 25

[Latin vs. Vernaculars. The Perfect Language of Dante. Ramon Lull: A Perfect Language for Conversion. The Search for a Mother Tongue](#)

Latin as the language of Europe. The rise of the vernacular languages. The original language: “*Ydionoma Tripharium*.” Features of a perfect language. Vernacular as a perfect language. Language as a means of peaceful dialog between different religious groups. A system for a perfect language to convert the infidel: Raymond Lull (1232/3-1315/6) and his *Ars Magna*.

Seminar 6. Wed, October 2

[Universal Language of Images: the Mysteries of the Alphabet and Cryptography](#)

The Development of Lull’s combinatorial method and kabbalistic principles: The imaginative logic of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) and his wheels of the Universal Language. Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516), *Polygraphia*, *Steganographia* (1606). Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680), *Polygraphia nova* (1663) and the art of cryptography. Voynich Manuscript

Seminar 7. Wed, October 9

[Universal Language of Images: Mysteries of the Hieroglyphics](#)

Hieroglyphic writing as representation of ideas. Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica* (around 5th century A.D.). Egyptian hieroglyphics. The birth of Egyptology and Athanasius Kircher

Seminar 8. Wed, October 16

[Universal Philosophical Language: Real Character and Taxonomy](#)

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) on the Real Character. Pansophic language of John Amos Comenius (Jan Amos Komenský, 1592–1670)

Seminar 9. Wed, October 23

[Universally Characteristic Language and Numbers](#)

Philosophical language of George Dalgarno (1626–87) and John Wilkins (1614–72). Universally characteristic language (*lingua characteristica universalis*) of Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716). Relationship with Lull. Universal language and calculus. The idea of a universal encyclopedia

Seminar 10. Wed, October 30

[Imaginary Universal Languages \(aka "Premodern Sci-Fi"\): Lunar & Solar Languages Satire on the UL Projects](#)

Ptolemy and Copernicus-Galileo scientific revolution: the existence of many parallel worlds. Francis Godwin (1562–1633), Lunar language, influences on Wilkins and Cyrano de Bergerac (1619–55). Jonathan Swift.

Seminar 11. Wed, November 6

[UL Reconstructed: The Search for Proto-Indo-European. "The Lunatic Lover of Language": Nicholas Marr \(1863–1934\)](#)

The birth of the comparative method. Reconstruction of the Indo-European proto-language. August Schleicher's linguistic interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution. Schleicher's fable in a proto-language. Tree theory vs. wave theory. Russian Imperial / Soviet linguistics and Nicholas Marr

Seminar 12. Wed, November 13

[Imaginary Universal Languages \(Modern\)](#)

Languages and Images of Avant-Garde. Khlebnikov's Transmental Language and Glossolalia. Tatlin's Tower of Babel. Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel*, etc.

Seminar 13. Wed, November 20

[Language Universals, Universal Grammar, Constructed Languages, AI, Cosmic Linguistics, Global English](#)

LINCOS (language for cosmic intercourse); The International Auxiliary Languages: history, theoretical problems, and challenges. Esperanto. International languages. Russian as a lingua franca of the Soviet and post-Soviet space. English as a global tongue. Reports on Universal Language projects

Seminar 14. Wed, December 4

[Final Projects](#)