The Dream of a Perfect Language

What are the limits of language? What lies beyond? Is language all there is? Is it a prison? Is it a virus from outer space? Does it have a body? Can it be perfected? In this seminar we will examine what has engaged and confused humans past and present as they have reflected on the science and myth of language.

In the first part of the seminar we will read The Search for the Perfect Language by Umberto Eco. We follow Eco’s path from the languages of Eden, past the tower of Babel, on to linguistic mysticism (especially the kabbala), pictorial languages, and the languages of artificial intelligence. Along the way we will read fiction by Borges and Delany, view a few unusual films (π and The Pillow Book for example) and compose some beautiful code in Scheme.

In the second part of the seminar, we want to get a sense of the extremes of language. We explore issues of linguistic diversity, cultural-linguistic relativity, and language death. To make this concrete, we study a fragment of Mayan grammar. We end by seeking the limits of language in poetry, music, and beyond. Participants are urged to explore connections with their own majors.