Description

Our guiding question emerges from the story of Babel: why are there many languages? Should we view linguistic diversity on par with superficial cultural differences, as reflecting essential differences in modes of thinking, or as products of incommensurate world views? This question will be explored across disciplines, from the philosophical discussion of the (im)possibility of translation, through the literary theoretic debate about the connection between speech and writing, to recent discussions in psychology and anthropology about linguistic determinism (language determining thought or culture determining language). These debates across intellectual traditions center around the key question of the source of linguistic universals: do commonalities among languages reflect an innate brain "organ" or do they reflect commonalities in human culture and in general human cognitive capabilities. The linguist’s argument for an innate universal grammar invites us to view language history in biblical terms, as the cultural fall from a single original language, fixed by biology, but such biological determinism is also consistent with the idea that the multi-lingual cosmopolitan human has always been our natural state.

Intended Learning Outcomes

- Analyze and critique original research articles
- Write a clear and coherent expository synopsis of an explanation of the unity and diversity of human languages
- Explain why the central question of Babel resonates throughout intellectual history
- Differentiate the evaluation process for a scientific theory from the explanatory fit of a literary or historical model

Teaching and Learning Methodologies

The Problem of Babel is a reading and discussion class in which the students learn how to analyze and critique texts, in particular texts from the social and cognitive sciences. Class discussion will be supplemented by written interactions on the “forum” section of the class website. In class discussions will be guided, sometimes forcefully, by the instructor, who will also always provide background material and a map to understanding the readings.
Grading:  
Class presentations of questions from the week’s readings  10%
Forum discussion postings                      10%
First paper, first draft  
    Due September 27  
First paper, final draft  
    Due October 18  
Second paper, first draft  
    Due November 15  
Second paper, final draft  
    Due December 13

Attendance:  Attendance is mandatory. Please let the instructor know if you need to miss class for any reason; a compensatory make-up experience will be negotiated.

Assignment:  Four 5-page papers = 2 paper assignments, with first and revised drafts of each.

Paper 1:  First draft, Final draft,
Paper 2:  First draft, Final draft,

First paper:  (A more extensive description of the topic will be provided during the first weeks of class) Explain the problem of Babel. From what perspectives do the large variety of the worlds’ languages constitute a problem or puzzle? Should a member of a contemporary cosmopolitan society embrace the view that languages are truly different, the view that languages are fundamentally the same, or both, apparently conflicting, views?

Second paper:  Discuss the difference between the scientific stance (of the “natural” sciences), in which theories are evaluated with respect to their predictions about experimental outcomes, and the literary and social science stance (for history and some types of sociology, anthropology, economics and political science), which provide interpretations of observations that are evaluated for persuasiveness of the explanations they provide. Compare a predictive and an interpretive claim about whether languages differ fundamentally or only superficially.

Course schedule, with readings.

NOTE:  The exact readings will be available in late August, and posted on the Classes Web Site for registered students. The length of reading assignments will vary with the difficulty of the reading; some weeks, readings will amount to ~30 pages, while other weeks will involve longer, easier, reading assignments.

Week 1 (September 6):  Story of Babel, Genesis 11

4 And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.
5 And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.
6 And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.
7 Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.
8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.
9 Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.
—Genesis 11:4–9

Week 2 (September 13) Babel, Intelligibility, Translation. Selections from (you’ll be told which pages to read carefully):


Week 3 (September 20) If languages truly differ, are some simpler than others? (Excerpts from DeGraff)

McWhorter, John H. "The world’s simplest grammars are creole grammars." Linguistic typology 5.2/3 (2001): 125-166.

Week 4 (September 27) Is writing a debased form of speech, or is speech a debased form of writing? Which came first? Selections from:


Week 5 (October 4) Orthography: What do differences in writing systems tell us about language? Sections from:


Week 6 (October 11) A unique language, shaped by a unique culture?

Everett, Daniel L. "What does Pirahã grammar have to teach us about human language and the mind?." Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science 3.6 (2012): 555-563.

Week 7 (October 18) Language shapes thought? Selections from:


Week 8 (October 25) Are multilingual speakers different? In a good or bad way?


Week 9 (November 1) Language use in multilingual communities.


Week 10 (November 8) Languages are truly different?


Week 11 (November 15) The challenges of diversity. Typology and acquisition.


Week 12 (November 29) Language diversity as variations on a rule. Selections from:

Week 13 (December 6) Revitalize dead or dying languages? Why? Selections from:


Week 14 (December 13) Linguistic Uniformity and the evolution of language.