

ENG 386W Literature and Science: Inventing Languages

May 19 - June 25, Monday through Friday, 1:00-2:20
Callaway S105

Instructor: Claire Laville

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Office hours: Tue. & Thur. 11:30-12:30, Callaway N205

From the biblical story of Babel to politicians advocating the universal teaching of code, we have long imagined new and better languages. A perfect language is said to be one in which nothing is lost in translation. Is this an ambition which anthropologists and programmers share with authors and poets? And what can the failure of these universalizing projects tell us about the languages and cultures that do exist? This class will examine constructed languages in fiction, fact, and theory between the eighteenth century and the present. Our topics will include translation and metaphor, telepathy, and the forms of expression particular to animals and computers. We will track the use of linguistic concepts to describe the organic world (as in the “genetic code”), on one hand, and on the other, a tendency to describe language as a biological agent (as in Burroughs’s declaration that “the word is now a virus,” or the theory of memes).

Primary readings may include works by Jonathan Swift, H. G. Wells, Jorge Luis Borges, China Miéville, Ellen Ullman, and Christian Bök. We will also read a few classic essays in linguistics, cognitive science, and computer science.

Evaluation: Three short papers, two or three quizzes, and an informal presentation. Students will also create a blueprint for an original or improved language.

Learning objectives:

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Explain why *language* has been, and continues to be, such a tricky concept to define
- Provide examples of the way literary authors use (and creatively misuse) scientific and philosophical theories in order to imagine other worlds and other minds
- Summarize the main contributions of Locke, Darwin, Chomsky, Lakoff and Johnson, Searle, or Dennett for a general audience
- Reflect upon the political significance of language in contexts such as colonialism, feminism, disability culture, and animal rights
- Support an argument by way of *close reading*—that is, paying attention to an author’s choices of words and to the formal structure of a poem or work of fiction
- Support an argument by way of *contextualization*—in this case, explaining the way a piece of writing “talks” to contemporary scientific and linguistic ideas
- Present their thoughts in a precise, organized, and compelling manner, in written and oral form

This class fulfills the Humanities/Arts/Performance and Continuing Writing components of the GER. It also fulfills the theoretical/interdisciplinary requirement of the English major.

Texts required:

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Oxford)

H. G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Dover or any unabridged edition)

China Miéville, *Embassytown*

Ellen Ullman, *The Bug*

All other readings will be available on electronic reserves [<https://ereserves.library.emory.edu>]

Grading:

Participation	10%
Quizzes	15%
Presentation	10%
Short papers (3)	50%
Language model	15%

Attendance: You may miss *three* classes, no questions asked. Subsequent absences will result in a percentage point deducted from your total grade. Sleeping in class amounts to being absent. *If you miss a quiz*, you will receive a mark of zero unless you've notified me a week in advance.

Late assignments: You may submit *one* assignment up to three days late with no penalty, no questions asked. Otherwise, points will be deducted at the rate of 1/3 letter grade per day (e.g., a B+ paper submitted a day late will receive a B).

Documentation: Papers must follow the style of either the *MLA Handbook* (7th ed.) or the *Chicago Manual of Style* (16th ed.), both available as e-library resources.

Academic integrity: The Emory College Honor Code will be discussed and must be observed at all times (see http://www.college.emory.edu/current/standards/honor_code.html). Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and all suspected cases will be reported to the College Honor Council. Examples of *blatant* plagiarism include copying portions of a text or having someone write or rewrite a paper for you. *Accidental* plagiarism often involves using someone else's idea or an argument (even if you change the phrasing) without attributing it to him or her. The best way to avoid a mistaken charge of plagiarism is to keep a record of all stages of your work, including notes, outlines, and comments from peer reviewers. For more information about identifying and avoiding plagiarism, visit <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/01/>.

Writing support: The Emory Writing Center is a great place to bring any project, at any stage in your composing process. EWC tutors can talk with you about your purpose, organization, audience, design choices, or use of sources. They can also work with you on sentence-level concerns (including grammar and word choice), but they won't proofread your papers. Instead, they'll discuss strategies and resources you can use to become a better editor of your own work. Visit <http://writingcenter.emory.edu> or Callaway N-212.

ESL (English as a Second Language) tutors offer specialized help for non-native speakers. You can book a one-on-one session on TutorTrac or drop into the ESL Skills Lab at any time. It's located in Woodruff 422. There are also language resources at the SAAC.

Disability and access: Students with medical or health conditions that might impact academic success should visit Access, Disability Services and Resources (ADSR, formerly the Office of Disability Services) to determine eligibility for appropriate accommodations. Students who receive accommodations must present the Accommodation Letter from ADSR at the beginning of the semester, or when the letter is received. Accommodations cannot be made retroactively. Contact ADSR at 404-727-9877 or visit <http://www.ods.emory.edu>.

More generally, if there is anything you think we could adjust that will help you learn, I would be happy to work with you.

“But this is a summer class!” This section of ENG386 is worth the same number of credit hours as a full-semester class. In order to succeed, you should expect to put in the same level of effort. Be prepared to read between one and two hours a day, on average.

Mon. May 19 Genesis 11:1-9

“*HIchop!*” (Klingon karaoke video, YouTube)

Tue. 20

Skim: Thomas More, from *Utopia*: “Utopian Alphabet,” “Four Verses”

John Locke, from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

Book 1, ch. 2, paragraphs 1, 5, 15

Book 2, ch. 1, paras. 1-4

Book 3, ch. 1, paras. 1, 2, 5; ch. 2, paras. 1, 4, 7, 8; ch. 6, paras. 1-6

[<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/locke-the-works-vol-1-an-essay-concerning-human-understanding-part-1>]

Wed. 21

Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, Part 1: “A Voyage to Lilliput”

Thu. 22

Swift, Part 3, esp. chs. 1-2, 5-6 (Laputa), 9-10 (Luggnagg)

Fri. 23

Swift, Part 4: “A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms”

Week 2

Mon. 26

University closed for Memorial Day

First 200 words on Swift and/or Borges due by 9 p.m. (do not include your name)

Tue. 27

In-class work

Wed. 28

Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”

George Lakoff, from *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*: “Radial Categories”

Optional: Borges, “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins”

- Thu. 29 Charles Darwin, from *The Descent of Man* (1874), ch. 3 [http://darwin-online.org.uk/EditorialIntroductions/Freeman_TheDescentofMan.html]
Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, chs. 1-7
- Fri. 30 Wells, chs. 8-22
Paper #1, 4-6 pp., due by 9 p.m. (include all peer review material)
- Week 3
- Mon. June 2 Lewis Carroll, “Jabberwocky”
Steven Pinker, from *The Language Instinct*: “How Language Works”
Joe Velez (ASL translator), “Jabberwocky” (Gallaudet video, 2:09)
- Tue. 3 *Project Nim*, dir. James Marsh (screen before class)
- Wed. 4 Andrew Solomon, from *Far from the Tree*, pp. 60-70 (or “Defiantly Deaf,” *NYT*)
John Lee Clark, poems and “Translating ASL Poetry”
Rives, “Sign Language on Def Jam Poetry” (YouTube, 3:13)
- Thu. 5 Review
- Fri. 6 China Miéville, *Embassytown*, pp. 1-40
Optional: Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”
Quiz
- Week 4
- Mon. 9 Miéville, pp. 41-135 (Parts 1 and 2)
First 200 words of paper #2 (on animal or alien communication) due by 9 p.m.
- Tue. 10 Miéville, pp. 137-345 (Parts 3-9)
- Wed. 11 G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, “Primary Metaphor and Subjective Experience”
Richard Dawkins, “Viruses of the Mind”
- Thu. 12 Emily Martin, “The Egg and the Sperm”
Anne Carson, “Pronoun Envy”
Mike Vuolo, “The Real Story Behind *The New Yorker’s* ‘Pronoun Envy’ Poem”
- Fri. 13 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, chs. 5 and 7
Choose one: Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ch. 1
or Aneta Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind*, selections from chs. 5 and 7
Paper #2, 4-6 pp., due by 9 p.m.

Week 5

Mon. 16 TBA

Tue. 17 John Searle, "Is the Brain's Mind a Computer Program?"
Daniel Dennett, "Can Machines Think?"

Wed. 18 Searle and Dennett, cont'd
Eavan Boland, "Code"

Thu. 19 Ellen Ullman, *The Bug*, Parts 1-2

Fri. 20 Ullman, Parts 3-4 and postscript
Optional: K. Hayles, from *My Mother Was a Computer*: "Speech, Writing, Code"
Quiz

Week 6

Mon. 23 Christian Bök, "The Xenotext Experiment"
Language models: Presentations begin
Early submission date for paper #3 (for the option to resubmit)

Tue. 24 Language models: Presentations

Wed. 25 Language models: Presentations
Closing remarks

Thu. 26 No class. **Paper #3** due by 9 p.m.