

The Dream of a Perfect Language

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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.**

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