



NKU HNR 303 – Fall MMIX Seminar – Humanity and the Imagination

<The Dream of A Perfect Language/>



*What is the history of the idea of a “perfect” language?
We trace the arc from dawn (the myth of Babel) to twilight (deaths of indigenous languages).*

instructor 教 Kevin Kirby, 373 ST (572-6544, kirby@nku.edu).
授 Office hours: 1:30-3:00pm Tuesday; 10:00-11:30am Friday. But feel free to stop by anytime.

scheduling 9:25 – 10:40pm Tuesdays and Thursdays. Honors House room 111.

- topics**
- ☰ **Perfect as Primeval:** Eden, Babel, the Kabbala and linguistic mysticism
 - ☷ **Perfect as Pictorial:** Fantasy vs. reality re Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese characters
 - ☱ **Perfect as Universal:** 17th century artificial languages to 21st century computer science
 - ☵ **Loving the Imperfect:** Linguistic relativism, linguistic diversity and language death

books 읽 *The Search for the Perfect Language* by Umberto Eco. Blackwell, 1995.
다 *Babel 17*, by Samuel R. Delany. Vintage, 2002 [1966].

Books to buy and hold in your hands.

short selections

- from *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* by Jorge Luis Borges (1962).
- from *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought* edited by Roy Harris and Talbot J. Taylor, 2nd Ed. (1997).
- from *When Languages Die* by K. David Harrison (2007).
- & maybe a few others...

Electronic library reserves

films *π* by Darren Aronofsky (1998).
The Pillow Book, by Peter Greenaway (1996).

These are rated R for “disturbing images.” Please note.

assorted handouts

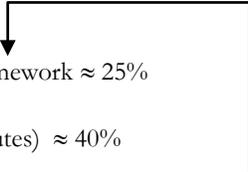
- ↶ Language families
- ↷ The Hebrew alphabet
- ☞ Chinese characters
- ↷ The Semantic Web and Ontology Engineering
- ↵ The Scheme programming language
- ‡ Mayan grammar (Mam, Popti’)

“learner outcomes”

- 一 You will be able to discuss, with detailed examples, the history of the idea of a “perfect language.”
- 二 You will have had experience engaging with difficult books, stories, and films.
- 三 You will know how the Semantic Web applies 17th century ideas to contemporary computing.
- 四 You will be able to compose short pieces of software in the language Scheme.
- 五 You will know the Hebrew alphabet, several Chinese characters, and their cultural influence.
- 六 You will be able to discuss parts of some extremely non-English-like grammars.

“assessment”

- ⌘ Weekly short response papers or blog entries and occasional practice homework ≈ 25%
- ⌘ A midterm test ≈ 10%
- λ A term paper / project (about 15 pages) and presentation (about 15 minutes) ≈ 40%
- 7 Informed class participation ≈ 25%



This might include practice in the grammar of strange languages (human and computer)

...on the relevant language topic of your choice. I can provide suggestions. Something connected to your major is good.

Since this is a seminar, participation in discussion is essential. Infrequent or continually uninformed participation can lower a grade.

A necessary (but of course not sufficient) condition for earning an A is to miss no more than 3 classes. These 3 classes are set aside for life’s little (or big) emergencies, not “days off”—please save them and ideally never use them.

Occasionally, our meetings will be up to one half “lecture” when some background material needs to be introduced, but in most meetings all of our time will be spent in discussion.

“Discussion” means (mostly) working together to...
A. understand the readings (some are difficult);
B. find connections to other ideas (some near, some far).

information, polices, and advice

As in any 3 credit course, you should be prepared to spend 5-6 hours outside class per week [NKU Catalog 2009-10, p.35]. The difference in an Honors class lies not in the amount of time needed, but in the expectation that you enjoy wrestling with unfamiliar and often recalcitrant material.

Students with disabilities who require accommodation must register with the Disability Services Office in UC 320 (859-572-6373).

Passing off others’ work as your own can lead to an ineradicable F for the course, or even suspension from the university. If unsure about what is and what is not plagiarism, ask the instructor.

Last date to drop the course with a grade of ‘W’: November 2.



π



The Pillow Book