The Origins of Language and its Place in Western Thought
IDSEM-UG 1706, Fall 2012
Instructor: Luke Fleming,

COURSE DESCRIPTION:
How did language emerge? Language is arguably the most important of social institutions and yet its origins and what it reveals about human nature have posed a persistent and unresolved riddle to philosophers and evolutionary biologists alike. This course looks at the long history of thought about the origins of language in the Western tradition, from enlightenment thinkers like Condillac and Rousseau through modern linguists like Chomsky and Pinker, as a way to explore how ideas of the human and of society are theorized. As we will see, each theory of language origins invariably involves a theory of human nature, of the relationship between emotions and rationality, and of the individual to society. How do various theories of language presuppose theories of society and human nature? How do thinkers about language origins account for linguistic diversity and what implications does it have for their understandings of human nature and difference? The course will engage with a lineage of texts from philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, and evolutionary biology in order to explore these questions.

READINGS:
The following, required, books are available at the NYU bookstore or at Shakespeare & Co.:


All other readings will be posted as PDFs on the Blackboard website.
### The Origins of What?

**Week 1**

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sep. 7</td>
<td>In the beginning ...</td>
<td>Introduction to the course and its participants</td>
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**Week 2**

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4. Deacon “The Symbol Concept” pp. 393-405  
5. Aarsleff, “The Rise and Decline...” <if it arrives> |

### The Language of Action

**Week 3**

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2. Condillac, Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge, pp. 3-220  
["If you feel you may not read the whole thing begin with Part II, 111-220"] |

**Week 4**

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(Skim: Knowlson, “The Idea of Gesture as a Universal Language in the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries”) |

### The Paradox of Origins

**Week 5**

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[Read this first...]  

**Week 6**

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| Oct. 12 | The Origins of Writing                   | 1. Boltz, selections from The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System, pp. 3-72  

**Week 7**

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(Optional: The Singing Neanderthals, pp. 28-104, Chapters 3-7) |
### Reason, Evolution, and our Animal Other

#### Week 8

**Oct. 26**


3. Aarsleff, selections from *From Locke to Saussure*, pp. 194-199, 278-292

#### Week 9

**Nov. 2**

1. Darwin, “Comparison of the mental powers of man and the lower animals,” from *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*.

2. “Darwin on Expression and the Evolution of Language”


4. Reading on bird song dialects

5. Reading on variation in culture among whales


#### Week 10

**Nov. 9**

1. Müller, “The Theoretical Stage, and the Origin of Language,” from *Lectures on the science of language*, pp. 391-448 <also available @ google books>

2. Müller, *Lectures on Mr. Darwin’s Philosophy of Language*, Second Lecture, read especially p. 666 [Beginning: “It is easy to understand...”] to p. 678


4. Harris, Ch. 8, pp. 168-187, from *The Language Makers*


#### Week 11

**Nov. 16**


   *****scheduling conflict****

   **Rescheduling To Be Determined**

#### Week 12

**Nov. 23**

*****Thanksgiving***

#### Innate v. Learned

#### Week 13

**Nov. 30**

1. Pinker, pp. 1-118

2. Wittgenstein, selections from *Philosophical Investigations*

3. Taylor, “To Follow a Rule”, pp. 165-181
### Week 14
**The “Poverty of Stimulus” and the Autonomy of Language**

(Look back at Harris’ chapter from *The Language Makers*)  
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pp. 231-381, 419-448, Chapters 8-11 & 13.

### Week 15
**Lying, Cheating, Plotting, Planning**

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2. Gómez, “Pointing Behaviors in Apes and Human Infants”, 729-733  
pp. 3-15  
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4. Tomasello & Moll, “The Gap is Social: Human Shared Intentionality and  
Culture”, pp. 331-350  