

# Language in the Middle Ages

## **Instructor:**

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## **Description of Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes**

The course deals with the religious, cultural, and social history of language use in the European Middle Ages. Arising from the classical thought and validated by the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, the notion that language is inherently connected with human history pervades medieval thought and practice. Language and writing are being approached not merely as mechanisms of memory preservation and recovery of the past but as a corpus of tangible signs that have mystical links to observable and unobservable worlds. In practical application, such as government, administration, education, or ministering, the choice of a specific language or script often plays a defining role, from community-building to wielding power and authority.

The course aims to provide students with an advanced understanding of how language was imagined and used in medieval Christian communities with a special focus on central, eastern, and southern European lands. The goal of the course is to help students build sensitivity to the linguistic aspect of primary sources that they study for their own research projects and help them place these sources in a context of linguistic and historiographic theories.

No prior knowledge of linguistics or medieval languages is required to participate. Sessions consist of lectures and discussions of assigned primary and secondary sources, partly led by students. Material is presented both in a survey-like manner and through specific case studies.

## **Session 1 (90 min) Introduction: Main Concepts, Sources, and Methods**

Today we live in a world of prescriptive standardized literary languages and nation-states that speak one language. Medieval societies functioned very differently. In our introductory session we will talk about languages and scripts of medieval Europe, focusing on Slavonic and Latinate traditions. Come prepared to talk about the languages and writing systems that you are using in your own research project.

## **Session 2 (180 min) Language and Writing: Language Arts**

Linguists like to emphasize that language is an oral affair. In the first half of this session we examine the interplay between language and writing. We will talk about the medieval semiotic culture of writing, the introduction of literacy during Christian conversions, and the politics of alphabets. As a case study, we focus on the development of writing among the Slavs: from the creation of the Old Church Slavonic language and the origins of the Cyrillic and Glagolitic alphabets to the adoption of the Roman alphabet by the Latinate Slavs.

In the second half of this session we examine attitudes to language among the learned. We will talk about two ecclesiastical languages that were in use in central, southern, and eastern European lands: Church Slavonic and Latin. Almost none of the humanistic disciplines that are part of modern academic curricula existed in medieval scholarship. In the Latinate West (including east central European lands), literature, linguistics, philosophy, and history lived under the umbrella of the so-called *trivium*, the “language arts” inherited from the classical tradition: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. In the Slavic Orthodox East, writing itself had spiritual meaning and scholars focused on orthographic traditions and practices of translation. As case studies, we examine a primary source from each tradition.

### **Session 3 (180 min) Language as Fossilized History: Etymology and Historical Method**

History as we know it is a modern discipline. In the Middle Ages, scholars writing about the past envisioned the trajectories of their nations in the framework of Christian discourse and the story of Salvation. In this session, we talk about how language is brought into play when authors confront mythical and legendary stories in their historical writings. We discuss approaches to language both as a vehicle of narration and as an object of study in its own right. Our focus will be on the practice of etymology and its application in a variety of discourse contexts. We examine medieval theory of etymology and contemplate the relationship between language, myth, and history and examine how the etymological argumentation is used as a category of historiographic thought.

### **Session 4 (180 min) The Search for the Perfect and Universal Language**

The idea that the language spoken in the Garden of Eden was a language which perfectly expressed the essence of all possible objects and concepts has occupied the minds of scholars for more than two millennia. In defiance of the biblical story about the confusion of languages, they strived to overcome divine punishment and discover the path back to harmonious existence. For philosophers, the possibility of recovering or recreating a universal language meant comprehending the laws of nature. For theologians, it meant direct experience of the divine; for mystic-cabalists – access to hidden knowledge. In our last session we explore the historical trajectory, from antiquity to the period of humanism, of the idea that there once was, and again could be, a universal and perfect language to explain and communicate the essence of human experience. (Among discussed topics are the biblical story of the Tower of Babel and its reception, Dante’s “perfect vernacular,” Cabala and Gematria, Ramón Llull, Giordano Bruno, Athanasius Kircher and cryptography, real character of Francis Bacon, “Pansophia” of Jan Amos Comenius, philosophical language of John Wilkins).