

# **Language and Historical Thought in the Middle Ages**

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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.

## Class Topics and Readings

### 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 written and spoken languages of medieval Europe, and their scripts focusing on Slavonic and Latinate traditions. Come prepared to talk about the languages and writing systems that you are studying and/or using in your own research project.

#### Read BEFORE the first class:

--- Tore Janson, “Greek – Conquest and Culture,” and “Latin – Conquest and Order,” in *The History of Languages. An Introduction* (Oxford, 2011), 77–102.

--- Julia Verkholtantsev, “Origins: Enigmatic Apostolate,” in *The Slavic Letters of St. Jerome: The History of the Legend and Its Legacy, or, How the Translator of the Vulgate Became an Apostle to the Slavs* (NIUP, 2014), 11–32, +notes.

--- Henrik Birnbaum, “The Vernacular Languages of East Central Europe in the Medieval Period,” in ...*The Man of Many Devices, Who Wandered Full Many Ways... Festschrift in Honor of János M. Bak*, ed. by Balázs Nagy and Marcell Sebök (Budapest, 1999), 384–396.

### Session 2 (180 min)

#### Language and Writing: Letters, Signs, Grammar

Linguists like to emphasize that language is an oral affair. In 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. One of the interesting aspects in the Slavic case is the existence of multiple myths and legends about letters and writing.

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.

### **Read for class:**

#### **Slavic**

--- *The Life of St. Constantine the Philosopher* in Marvin Kantor, *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes* (Ann Arbor, 1983), 25–96, especially chapters 1-4, 7-8, 13-18.

--- Roman Jakobson, “St. Constantine’s Prologue to the Gospels,” in *Selected Writings*. Vol. 6. Part 1. *Early Slavic Paths and Crossroads*. New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 1985. 191–206.

--- “*The Monk Hrabor’s Treatise on Letters*,” in *Monumenta Bulgarica. A Bilingual Anthology of Bulgarian Texts from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, ed. by Thomas Butler (Ann Arbor, 1996), 143–153.

#### **Latin**

--- “Aelius Donatus, *Ars Mino*, *Ars Maior*,” in *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric. Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300–1475*, ed. by Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter (Oxford, 2009), 82–99.

--- Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, in St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, transl. by D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis, 1958), 1.1.1–1.4.4, pp. 7–10 (on the theory of sacred signs and spiritual *realia* of Scripture); 2.1.1–2.4.5, pp. 34–37 (on language as a system of conventional signs); 2.16.23–25, pp. 50–52 (on figurative signs); 2.28.42–2.29.46, pp. 63–66 (on history).

Also see a synoptic outline of the whole work in Richard Leo Enos et al. (eds). *The Rhetoric of Saint Augustine of Hippo*.

--- “Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ca. 625. From Book 1: Grammar,” in *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric. Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300–1475*, ed. by Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter (Oxford, 2009), 232–41.

or

see complete text of Book 1, “Grammar,” in Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof, eds. *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, Cambridge, 2006, 39-67.

### **Session 3 (180 min)**

#### **History, Myth, and Etymology**

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 focus on the legendary section of histories and talk about how language is brought into play when authors confront mythical and legendary stories. 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 myths of origin and the practice of etymology in historical discourse. While examining primary sources we contemplate the relationship between language, myth, and history.

**Read for class:**

**Historical and Linguistic Thought:**

--- “Etymology Dossier, Introduction” and “Augustine, *De dialectica*,” in *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric. Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300–1475*, ed. by Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter (Oxford, 2009), 339–49.

--- Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof, eds. *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, Cambridge, 2006. “Book 1 Grammar,” 1.xl-xliv (“Etymology, Tropes, Fable. History”: 54–55, 60–64, 66–67), “Book 7, God, Angels, and Saints,” 7.i–ix (150–169), and “Book 9. Languages, nations, reigns, etc.” (191–203).

**Historical Narratives (fragments):**

- Cosmas, *Chronica Bohemorum*,
- Anonymous, *Gesta Hungarorum*
- Simon of Kéza, *Chronica Hungarorum*
- *The Primary Chronicle*

**Session 4 (90 min)**

**The Search for the Perfect and Universal Language**

In this session we will talk about the historical trajectory, from antiquity to the present day, of the idea that there once was, and again could be, a universal and perfect language among the human race. If recovered, this language can explain the origins and meaning of human experience, and can enable universal understanding and world peace. The tantalizing question of the possibility of a universal language has been vital and thought-provoking throughout the history of humanity. The idea that the language spoken by Adam and Eve was a language which perfectly expressed the nature of all earthly objects and concepts has occupied the minds of intellectuals for almost two millennia. In defiance of the Christian biblical myth of the confusion of languages and nations at the Tower of Babel, they have over and over tried to overcome divine punishment and discover the path back to harmonious existence. We will focus on the biblical narratives and Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia*.

**Read for class:**

- Language in the Bible (fragments)
- Umberto Eco, “Chapter 1. From Adam to Confusio Linguarum,” (7–24) and “Chapter 3. The Perfect Language of Dante,” (34–52) in *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford, 1997).
- Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. by Steven Botterill (Cambridge, 2005), “Introduction” and Book I.