Instructor: Kevin Mooney
Office hours: by appointment (TC 217)
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Class meetings: Wednesdays 1:30–4:30 (SH 2348)

Overview

“El original no es fiel a la traducción”
— Borges

Les mots et les choses (1966) appeared fifty years ago and became an immediate if unlikely bestseller. The archaeological method advanced in this book turned away from human subjects as makers of meaning toward the impersonal frameworks or epistemes that allowed thought to be thought, knowledge to be known. “Man” emerged as a kind of homo factum in Foucault’s text, a figure of discursive logic, as impermanent as a “face drawn in sand.”

This course will examine questions of language and representation in the writings of Foucault, Benjamin, Wittgenstein, and Borges. Do words represent things or are they wholly in themselves, pointing as it were to the nonexistence of things? Do things, insofar as they exist for us, exist sub specie verbi, as the shadows cast by words? Such questions, still unsettled, have elicited responses from a diversity of thinkers. The quartet I’ve assembled is improbable on many counts, but on the ground of “words and things” each member elucidates the others by setting the scope of language anew. By studying them together, we gain perspective on a range of topics: Translation/translatability, language and power, linguistic determinism, and constructed languages are a few of the branches of words and things.
Course Texts

Electronic copies of all texts will be provided, but you may want to buy the following:


AbeBooks.com is a good option for discounted texts.

Requirements

- Position paper (15%)
- Seminar presentation (20%)
- Final paper (50%)
- Participation (15%)

Evaluation

- Position Paper (1000 words)
  You will stake out a position in response to some idea, debate, or problem encountered in one or more of the readings. This might be a short-form exploration of a final paper topic or a stand-alone analysis of something else. (Due March 1.)

- Seminar Presentation (40 minutes)
  The readings will tempt us down paths that are not part of the main itinerary. Any of these sidelines could be the basis for a seminar presentation. Generally, I’d like you to begin with ideas from the readings, but feel free to redirect these toward relevant interests of your own. Your presentation is an opportunity to steer the course “off course” and teach us something while you’re at it. A 1000-word overview will be due one week after your presentation.

- Final Paper (4000-5000 words)
  Your topic is open, but it should treat some aspect of language and representation. It should also be discussed with me several weeks in advance of the due date (approx. April 12).

Participation

I expect you to come prepared and ready to make thoughtful, space-opening contributions to each class. This includes engaging with each other generously and using difference to advance the conversation.

Boilerplate

“Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, as found here:“

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf


**READINGS**

**Week 1 (1/11): Introduction**


**Week 2 (1/18): Wittgenstein**


**Week 3 (1/25): Wittgenstein**


**Week 4 (2/1): Wittgenstein**


**Week 5 (2/8): Benjamin**


**Week 6 (2/15): Benjamin**


**Reading Week (2/22): No class**
Week 7 (3/1): Foucault


Week 8 (3/8): Foucault


Week 9 (3/15): Foucault


Week 10 (3/22): Constructions


Week 11 (3/29): Translatability


Week 12 (4/5): Post-truth?

