Language has often been claimed to be the “Rubicon” that no animal could ever cross — that which separates humans from all non-human animals. In this course, we will explore questions such as: What is unique about human linguistic communication? How is it different from bee dances, bird songs, dolphin and whale whistles, apes’ gestures, and animal alarm calls? If there are important differences, what do they tell us about the nature of the human mind, and about the place of humans in nature? In the course of exploring these questions, we will be looking at analyses of linguistic communication offered by linguists, psychologists, biologists, and philosophers, as well as at exciting recent findings about animal communication systems that have been alleged to challenge the “Rubicon” claim.

The course will have three parts:
1. What is special about human language? (Philosophy of Language and Linguistics)
2. What are animal communication systems like? (Ethology)
3. How could language evolve from animal communication? (Language Evolution)

Our daily meetings will include presentations by the professors, class discussions, and student presentations. Each week will culminate in a written assessment (with a final exam on the last day).

Schedule permitting, we will try to incorporate an organized tour of the Duke Lemur Center http://lemur.duke.edu/ with a special focus on the study of primate communicative behavior.