The language of comics

Humans have remarkable abilities — to shape events and ideas in others' minds through language. How do we understand each other and messages we receive?

This seminar will explore language as represented in cartoons and comics (for instance, Bizarro, Dilbert and Zits), how we interpret it, and why we find comics funny. In particular, we'll explore language play (puns and rhymes, for instance); genderspeak and teenspeak; peeing about usage; and new and spreading usages. We'll discuss the "grammar of comics": how words and pictures can combine to create meanings that neither could create separately; and conventions of the genre, as they concern the representation of language in speech balloons and captions, lettering choices, obscenicons ($#!&), etc. Another major set of topics will be the narrative structure of the comics (the way events are represented as unfolding in time) and the representation of point of view (whose viewpoint we're seeing things from).

These topics allow us to approach language and the comics from several directions, all represented in different areas of linguistics: testing hypotheses about the way a language works (what are the real generalizations about those disputed usages?) by looking at crucial test examples; examining claims about languages and their use empirically and statistically (how do teenagers really speak, and on what occasions?); and devising frameworks for interpreting texts that allow us to understand their aesthetic properties (humor, for instance).