Origins and Evolution of Human Language

When, how, and in what form did language first appear?

This question was long regarded as unanswerable, but the last ten to fifteen years have seen a resurgence of interest brought on by progress in linguistics, ethology, genetics, paleontology, and computer science. This course surveys the current state of the field, addressing questions such as

• Is language a biological adaptation? If so, for what? If not, how did it come about?
• Do restricted linguistic systems (pidgins, homesign, agrammatic aphasia, …) preserve “fossils” of early language?
• What do other animals' communication systems share with language, and in what ways do they fall short of it?
• Can agent-based computational modelling rule out hypotheses about language evolution?

The course is open to graduates and undergraduates. LING 101 or equivalent is a prerequisite.