

Philosophy 1760

Philosophy of Language

Course Website: <http://frege.org/phil1760/>

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Course Description

Philosophy of Language is a very large and extremely active area, and no semester-long course could possibly introduce students to all of it. In this course, we will cover three main topics: Questions about meaning and communication; questions about the dependence of meaning on context; and questions about literal meaning and metaphor.

Language is used, among other things, for communication. In part, this is because words mean things, and because we understand them. What is it to understand what someone says? What is it for words to mean what they do? How do we know what our words mean? And how does this knowledge enable us to use language as we do? We will study these questions and others through readings by such philosophers as Donald Davidson, H.P. Grice, Jim Higginbotham, Scott Soames, and Peter Strawson.

Now, it is obvious that words have meaning, and that what a word means in part determines what you can use it to say. But it is also obvious that what a word means does not always completely determine what it is used to say when it is uttered. This is most obvious for words like “this” and “that”: Which object one refers to with “this” depends upon details of the circumstances when one uses it. Much the same is true for “I”, “you”, “here”, “now”, “yesterday”, and the like. And there are lots of other words that seem to exhibit similar behavior. So the use of language seems to involve a complex interplay between relatively stable features of language, such as what a word means in English, and the shifting features of communicative context. We’ll spend some time exploring this matter.

Concerning metaphor, our interest will be in how metaphors work, and in particular how “metaphorical meaning” is related to the literal meanings of words. We will read a series of classic papers laying out the main options, and then look at a recent alternative view.

Prerequisites

Contemporary analytic philosophy began with certain discoveries in formal logic, and much of the work we shall be reading is informed in one way or another by logic: Arguments, premises, and conclusions are often stated using the concepts of formal logic. A working understanding of basic logic, such as one would acquire in Phil 0540, is therefore essential.

Prior exposure to philosophy is essential: Much of the material we will be reading is difficult. As usual with 1000-level courses, then, at least one prior course in philosophy is really quite essential, and two are really preferred.

Readings

There are no textbooks for the course. All readings are accessible from the course website (though you will need the username and password for many of them). That said, we will be reading quite a few papers that are collected in Donald Davidson's *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, so it would be worth getting a copy, really.

Course Structure and Requirements

The course will meet Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 1pm, in Salomon 203. As far as possible, the class will be conducted entirely by discussion. Students should arrive appropriately prepared with questions, comments, and criticisms. Otherwise, it will be very quiet.

Please note that course requirements are still subject to change. But these are approximately correct. Probably there will be only two short papers, each of them also subject to revision in response to comments.

There will be three short papers of about 3-5 pages, with a maximum length of 1500 words. Lists of 'topics' will be distributed on 12 February, 7 March, and 11 April; the papers will be due on 19 February, 14 March, and 18 April, respectively. The 'topics' will be short quotations from various of the papers we read, and the object of the exercise will be expository: You will be asked to explain the passage and its significance.

The final requirement for the course is a shortish term paper, which will be due by 5pm on the last day of reading period, 10 May. The paper should be a maximum of 4500 words (roughly 15 pages), but can be as short as 3000 words (roughly 9 pages). The paper should be in the style of a submission to the journal *Thought*, of which I am one of the Associate Editors. Articles published in *Thought* are brief, direct discussions of tightly specified issues. (Students should look at a few of these papers to get a sense for their style.) The topic of the paper is up to the student but must relate directly to at least two of the papers we have read. It also must be cleared with the instructor no later than 3 May. This means sending me an email outlining the topic. Students are encouraged to work together, if they wish, on this assignment: I.e., joint papers are acceptable. But no more than two authors on a given paper, please.

Warning: I do not accept late work, under any circumstances. On the other hand, I am extremely flexible about due dates. That is to say: If someone should need an extra day or two, she need only

ask; no reason even need be given. If someone should need more time than that, then some reason does need to be given, but the request will usually be granted. Since I am so flexible, there can be no excuse for one's not asking for an extension. It's really just a matter of respect.

Syllabus

The syllabus for the course is available online at <http://frege.org/phil1760/>. That page also contains links to the readings.

27 January Introductory Meeting

Literal Meaning

29 January H.P. Grice, “Meaning”, *Philosophical Review* 66 (1957), pp. 377–88

1 February P.F. *Introduction to Logical Theory* (London: Methuen, 1952), sections 3.2 and 7.1

3 February H.P. Grice, “Logic and Conversation”, in *Studies in the Ways of Words* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 22–40

Meaning and Truth-Theory: Davidson’s Proposal

5 February Donald Davidson, “Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages”, in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 3–15

8 February Donald Davidson, “Truth and Meaning”, *Synthese* 17 (1967), pp. 304–23; reprinted in *Inquiries*, pp. 17–36

10 February P.F. Strawson, “Meaning and Truth”, in his *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 170–89

12 February David Lewis, “Languages and Language”, in his *Philosophical Papers*, vol.1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 163–88
You should concentrate on sections I-III, in which Lewis summarizes the more extensive account of linguistic meaning given in his book *Convention* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), and on pp. 175–81 (pp. 17–24 of the PDF), where Lewis discusses a series of objections connected to compositionality.

Topics for first short paper announced

Meaning and Truth-Theory: The Foster Problem

15 February John Foster, “Meaning and Truth-Theory”, in G. Evans and J. McDowell, eds., *Truth and Meaning: Essays in Semantics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 1–32
You need only read sections 1–2, on pp. 1–16, carefully. The discussion in section 3 concerns Davidson’s “revised thesis”, which we have not yet encountered, and section 4 contains Foster’s emendation of Davidson’s position, which is known to fall to a version of Foster’s own objection to Davidson.

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- 17 February Donald Davidson, “Reply to Foster”, in *Inquiries*, pp. 171–9, and “Radical Interpretation”, *Dialectica* 27 (1973), pp. 314–328; also in *Inquiries*, pp. 125–39
- 22 February No Class: Presidents’ Day Holiday
- 24 February Scott Soames, “Truth, Meaning, and Understanding”, *Philosophical Studies* 65 (1992), pp. 17–35
- 26 February James Higginbotham, “Truth and Understanding”, *Philosophical Studies* 65 (1992), pp. 3–16
- 29 February Michael Dummett, “What Do I Know When I Know a Language?”, in *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 94–105
- 2 March Ian Rumfitt, “Truth Conditions and Communication”, *Mind* 104 (1995), pp. 827–62
- 4 March Richard Heck, “Reason and Language”, in C. Macdonald and G. Macdonald, eds., *McDowell and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 22–45
- 7 March Discussion
Topics for second short paper announced

Tacit Knowledge

- 9 March Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1965), chapter 1, sections 1–6
- 11 March Gareth Evans, “Semantic Theory and Tacit Knowledge”, in his *Collected Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 322–42
- 14 March Discussion
Second short paper due
- 16 March Martin Davies, “Meaning, Structure, and Understanding”, *Synthese* 48 (1981), pp. 135–61
- 18 March Elizabeth Fricker, “Semantic Structure and Speakers’ Understanding”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series 83 (1982–1983), pp. 49–66
- 21 March Louise Antony, “Meaning and Semantic Knowledge”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, sup. vol. 71 (1997), pp. 177–209
- 23 March Steven Gross, “Knowledge of Meaning, Conscious and Unconscious”, in *The Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic, and Communication*, Vol. 5: *Meaning, Understanding, and Knowledge* (2010), pp. 1–44

Contextualism, For And Against

25 March	John Searle, "Literal Meaning", <i>Erkenntnis</i> 13 (1978), pp. 207–24
28 March–1 April	No Class: Spring Break
4 April	Robyn Carston, "Implicature, Explicature, and Truth-theoretic Semantics", in R. Kempson, ed., <i>Mental Representations: The Interface Between Language and Reality</i> (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 155–82
6–8 April	Jason Stanley and Zoltán Gendler Szabó, "On Quantifier Domain Restriction", <i>Mind and Language</i> 15 (2000), pp. 219–61
11 April	Jason Stanley, "Making It Articulated", <i>Mind and Language</i> 17 (2002), pp. 149–68
	Topics for third short paper announced
13 April	Emma Borg, "Minimalism versus Contextualism in Semantics", in Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter, eds., <i>Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 339–60
15 April	Ishani Maitra, "How and Why To Be a Moderate Contextualist", in <i>Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism</i> , pp. 112–32
18 April	Discussion Third short paper due

Metaphorical Meaning

20 April	Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean", <i>Critical Inquiry</i> 5 (1978), pp. 31–47; also in <i>Inquiries</i> , pp. 245–64
22 April	Elizabeth Camp, "Contextualism, Metaphor, and What is Said" (<i>Mind & Language</i> 21 (2006), pp. 280–309
25 April	Catherine Wearing, "Metaphor and What Is Said", <i>Mind and Language</i> 21 (2006), pp. 310–332
27 April	Josef Stern, "Metaphor as Demonstrative", <i>Journal of Philosophy</i> 82 (1985), pp. 677–710
3 May, 5pm	Topic for final paper must be cleared with instructor
10 May, 5pm	Final Paper Due