

PHIL 336: Language and Meaning

Whitman College – Fall 2018

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Mon 2-4 & Fri 1-2:30

Course Description

Language is a topic of fascination because of its apparent role as an intermediary between the human mind and the world around us – which suggests the possibility of understanding the mind and/or the world through an understanding of language. Language also seems to be fundamental to human social interactions, raising the prospect that understanding language will shed important light on the nature of those relations. And since language is unique to humans (at least, such sophisticated language is, as far as we know), there is also the possibility that understanding language will help us understand what is distinctive about human nature.

Philosophers have been concerned with the nature of language at least since the time of the ancient Greeks. For instance, many of Plato's dialogues are significantly concerned with the difference between merely verbal definition and argument (sophistry) and true understanding (philosophy) – implying that careful attention to language is one of the keys to philosophical wisdom. That conviction has been maintained, to varying degrees and in varying ways, by nearly every Western philosopher since. Some have argued, in fact, that careful attention to language is *all* that's needed for philosophical wisdom, with philosophical problems and dilemmas arising only from linguistic confusions.

In this course, we will begin by focusing on different views about the nature of linguistic *meaning*, which will be the fundamental concept for our semester. Those views will relate language in different ways to things in the world, our thoughts, and our interactions with other people. In the process, we will consider what (if anything!) language can reveal about the (individual? human?) mind, and about the (individual? cultural? objective?) world.

While language has occupied philosophers for millennia, in this class we will focus on current approaches and theories, ranging over the last century or so. This means that we will be examining some difficult and complicated texts in contemporary philosophy. Nonetheless, this course is meant as an introduction to the topic, and does not assume any specific background (though experience with philosophy in general would certainly be helpful). We will take the time to make sure that at least the main ideas are clear and accessible to everyone.

In my view, the philosophy of language is importantly related to empirical disciplines that also study language, like linguistics, psychology, and anthropology. I would say that the philosophy of language is different from those fields only by matters of degree: philosophy is generally more abstract, and considers implications for other such abstract issues, like the ones mentioned above. The view that the philosophy of language is continuous with empirical inquiry is shared by some other philosophers (such as Devitt and Sterelny, the authors of our touchstone text), but also opposed by many. Unfortunately, we will not have time to pursue many of the links between philosophical reflection and empirical inquiry, or the debate about whether those (alleged) links are truly productive. But I hope that you will keep those issues in mind, and I'll be happy to discuss them at (nearly) any time.

Texts to be Used

Michael Devitt & Kim Sterelny, *Language and Reality*, 2nd edn. (MIT Press, 1999).

(Our library's copy is available on 3-hour reserve at the Circulation Desk.)

Other readings are available on the course CLEo site. They are posted in folders under the "Resources" tab, cleverly labeled as "Readings," and organized according to the units identified in the schedule. You will need to be able to mark up those readings, and to have access to them during our class-discussions.

Technology

- **E-Mail:** I will often distribute important announcements, reminders, and clarifications through the class list-server. It is your responsibility to *check your Whitman e-mail account every day!*
- **In the Classroom:** You are welcome to use a computer, tablet, or smart-phone in the classroom, as long as it is *exclusively* focused on our immediate tasks of accessing the readings and taking notes. You should never, *never, never* take even a moment to check your e-mail, tweet your snapchat on The Facebook, etc.

Summary of Requirements and Grading

First Half of the Semester

The first part of the course will develop the fundamental ideas of the dominant contemporary approach to the philosophy of language, along with some of the key debates within that approach. That material is foundational in the field, and will be foundational in the course. Students will demonstrate their initial mastery of that material in two ways:

Participation in First-Half Class Discussions (10% of your overall grade)

This course will be structured as a seminar, which relies on the active and collaborative engagement of everyone in the room. Students should not just be prepared if called on, or make a point of saying one thing each meeting, as you might in a large lower-level course. Rather, you should consider yourself jointly responsible for how productive our class meetings are, each and every day. I'll serve as the moderator of the discussion, and will sometimes shape the agenda – but you should also make sure to develop your *own* sense of the key passages, ideas, arguments, questions, and objections as you work through the readings.

In our conversations, you should engage with your classmates, and not just me. You should also be willing to think out loud, to raise questions that might seem basic, to offer interpretations that might seem uncertain, to propose links that might seem flimsy, to make arguments that might seem sketchy, and otherwise to take intellectual risks. This is very difficult material, and our class will only succeed to the extent that we're willing to struggle through it together.

Three Brief Essays (30% of your overall grade)

As we are developing this approach and the variations within it, it is important for you to reflect on the ideas presented and to develop your own thoughts in response. About once every two or three weeks (as indicated on the schedule below), you will articulate and support your views on the material in a brief essay. More details about the expectations and grading standards are provided below.

Second Half of the Semester

The second part of the course will develop a series of challenges and alternatives to the dominant approach to the field that was developed in the first part of the course. You will have a choice about how you work with this material: you can emphasize greater depth and focus through the composition of a moderate-length seminar-paper, or you can emphasize greater breadth through the continuation of the brief essays and the completion of a take-home final examination. That choice will be made in late October, so you will have plenty of time to become familiar with the kinds of issues and materials that you'll be working with before committing yourself. More information about the choice will be made available when the time comes.

Track #1

Continued Participation in Class Discussions (20% of your overall grade)

Because your written work will be focused more narrowly, it will be more important for you to show your understanding of and engagement with the full range of readings through our class discussions. Thus, this component of your grade will be worth twice as much as in the first part of the course.

Seminar-Paper (40% of your overall grade)

The moderate-length (about 10-12 pages) seminar-paper will allow you to explore a particular topic or view in some depth. The paper should build from the assigned readings, and then include additional material that will help you develop a more complete and refined position. There will be a series of steps to help you work toward the final paper, from an initial meeting with me to discuss your interests, through the development of a tentative reading list and topic-proposal, then an interim progress-report and refined reading list and topic, and finally an outline/sketch of your overall argument. More details about both the paper and the steps leading up to it will be made available when it's time to choose assignment tracks.

Track #2

Continued Participation in Class Discussions (10% of your overall grade)

Three More Brief Essays (30% of your overall grade)

Final Examination (20% of your overall grade)

The final examination will be comprehensive, with the questions giving you an opportunity to demonstrate that you have understood, synthesized, and reflected on the issues and views that we've examined throughout the semester. The exam will be take-home with a time-limit of 24 hours, and it will be available for you to complete at your convenience anytime during the exam period. More details will be provided toward the end of the semester.

Academic Honesty

All of the work that you submit in this course must be entirely your own. Of course, you can seek help in a variety of ways as you're working on the writing assignments. So it is **permitted** (and even encouraged!) for you: to consult additional readings, to search for material on the internet, to discuss your ideas with other students, to exchange notes with other students, and to read and to discuss drafts of each other's work. But it is **not permitted** for you to use someone else's words or specific ideas without providing a proper citation to the source. Even if it's an accident, it's still plagiarism! You have a responsibility to keep track of the sources of the words and ideas in your work, and to include citations to them.

Plagiarism will *not* be tolerated in any form. You have signed a statement indicating that you understand and will abide by the College policy on plagiarism. **Any student caught plagiarizing will automatically fail the course, and may be expelled from the College.** For more details, see the Student Handbook.

If you have *any* questions about what would or wouldn't be plagiarism in this context, please just talk with me about it *in advance*.

Tentative Schedule of Topics & Assignments

(Note: when there are multiple readings for a single class meeting, you should read them in the order listed.)

Tue. Aug. 28 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 1 secs. 1-3

I. Meaning as Truth-Conditions (a) Language and the World

Thu. Aug. 30 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 2 secs. 1-2 and 7
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 6 secs. 1-2
Martin, "Function and Object"

Tue. Sep. 4 Russell, "On Denoting," pp. 479-82, 484-5, and 488-93
Russell, "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description"

Thu. Sep. 6 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 2 secs. 5-6
Frege, "On Sense and Reference"

Tue. Sep. 11 Frege, "Thoughts"

Thu. Sep. 13 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 3 sec. 1 and ch. 3 sec. 2 *only* through p. 51
Searle, "Proper Names"

* **Mon. Sep. 17** *everyone: brief essay due by noon on material through Sep. 11*

Tue. Sep. 18 Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 71-6 and 78-90
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 3 secs. 3-4

Thu. Sep. 20 Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 90-7
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 4 secs. 1-4

Tue. Sep. 25 Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," pp. 216-29 and 233-7
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 5 secs. 1-3

Thu. Sep. 27 Saul, "Politically Significant Terms and Philosophy of Language"

* *Mon. Oct. 1 everyone: brief essay due by noon on material from Sep. 13 to Sep. 27*

(b) Language and the Mind

Tue. Oct. 2 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 7 secs. 1-2
Fodor, "Why There Still Has to Be a Language of Thought," pp. 135-8 and 141-51

Thu. Oct. 4 NO CLASS – Fall Break

Tue. Oct. 9 Grice, "Meaning"
Searle, "How Language Works," pp. 135-46
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 7 secs. 4-5

Thu. Oct. 11 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 10 secs. 1-3
Pullum, "The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax"
Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme"

* *Mon. Oct. 15 everyone: brief essay due by noon on material from Sep. 27 to Oct. 11*

II. Challenges and Alternatives

(a) Holism and Interpretationism

Tue. Oct. 16 Quine, "Ontological Relativity," pp. 26-39 and 45-51

Thu. Oct. 18 Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning"
Davidson, "Radical Interpretation"

Tue. Oct. 23 Kirk Ludwig, "Davidson"
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 15 secs. 1 and 3-5

(b) Verificationism and Anti-Realism

Thu. Oct. 25 Schlick, "Positivism and Realism," pp. 86-95
Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language," pp. 65-80

* *Fri. Oct. 26 deadline for choosing your assignment "track" for the second half of the course*

* **Mon. Oct. 29** *track-2'ers: brief essay due by noon on material from Oct. 16 through Oct. 25*

Tue. Oct. 30 Dummett, "What Is a Theory of Meaning? (II)," excerpts
(available with or without my markings; my outline also available)

Thu. Nov. 1 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 11 secs. 1-4

Tue. Nov. 6 Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, ch. 1 and ch. 3 secs. 1-2
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 12 secs. 1 and 4

(c) Meaning-Skepticism and Meaning as Use

Thu. Nov. 8 Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, pp. 7-24
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 9 sec. 5

* **Mon. Nov. 12** *track-2'ers: brief essay due by noon on material from Nov. 6 to Nov. 8*

Tue. Nov. 13 Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, pp. 69-78, 86-95, and 107-9

Thu. Nov. 15 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, secs. 1-49 and 65-71

— — — **THANKSGIVING BREAK** — — —

Tue. Nov. 27 Sellars, "Some Reflections on Language Games," secs. 1-38

Thu. Nov. 29 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 8 secs. 3-5
van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be If Not Computation?," pp. 345-55, 358-9, and 374-81

III. Oppressive Speech as a Test Case

* **Mon. Dec. 10 @ noon** – *track-2'ers: brief essay due by noon on material from Nov. 13 to Nov. 29*

Tue. Dec. 4 Hornsby, "Meaning and Uselessness: How to Think about Derogatory Words"
McGowan, "Oppressive Speech"

Thu. Dec. 6 Langton, "Beyond Belief: Pragmatics in Hate Speech and Pornography"

* **Fri. Dec. 14 @ 4 p.m.** – *track-1'ers: seminar-paper due*

– *track-2'ers: latest time to submit final exam (even if you've had it for less than 24 hours!)*