

Philosophy 165: Philosophy of Language

Spring 2008

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Overview

When we start to think about ourselves we start to think about language. Is the world we see just a projection of our words, and the thoughts we express with them? One way to give flesh to this idea is *linguistic relativity*, the Whorf/Sapir hypothesis that what we can see and understand depends on the language we speak. If that's right, then my world (and your world) depends on your language. So what are language, and world, and how do they relate?

What's crucial to language is that it has meaning: it's about things, it refers to things, you can make true or false statements in language. What is meaning, then? If simpler creatures—like bees—have a language, we can investigate the idea of meaning in those simpler creatures.

But maybe bees and other animals really don't have language, since they don't really have the faculties of reason and thought. Reason and thought get us access (some philosophers think) to a (Platonic) realm of meanings whose nature is to be about things. The 19th century logician Gottlob Frege argued for such a view, and also for the view that sentences, rather than words, are the smallest items that relate to these unusual entities. Bertrand Russell showed how to use modern logic to improve and broaden Frege's idea.

But others find the continuity of human animals with other animals much more impressive than our ability to do logic. Wittgenstein argues against Plato, Frege and Russell and holds that that language is a human activity and that meaning stems from patterns of use. Strawson argues that Russell's account of the structure of referring phrases doesn't do justice to the ways speakers understand these phrases. Quine showed how to understand meaning in terms of the ways speakers relate to the world, but with the dismaying result that there's no fact of the matter about what our utterances mean. Davidson, less skeptical about meaning, shows how to put Quine's idea together with key insights from Frege and Russell.

With Quine and Davidson's account of the relations between language and the world in hand we will return to the question of linguistic relativity. Then we end up with metaphor and malapropism: when Melville wrote, "Christ was a chronometer," did what he wrote literally mean that Christ was a chronometer, or does this phrase have only a metaphorical meaning? When Mrs Malaprop says, "a nice derangement of epitaphs," does she mean a nice derangement of epitaphs, or a nice arrangement of epithets?

Texts

- Bennett, J. (1989). *Rationality*. Hackett, Indianapolis. A reprint of the 1964 Routledge edition, with a new preface by the author.
- Harvey, G. (1998). *Writing with Sources*. Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis.
- Martinich, A. (2006). *The Philosophy of Language*. Oxford University Press, New York, fifth edition.
- Dardis, Anthony. Logic Handouts.

Requirements

Seven papers: 6 short (2 pages) and one longer (10 pages).

Papers

- (a) The short papers. Every two weeks you will select one of our texts. The aim of the paper is to state a critical response to the argument of the text. The text can be one of the ones we've worked on in class; or you may, with consultation with me, either pick another article from our anthology, or an article from the contemporary literature. The aim of these papers is to hone your skills in finding the arguments in such articles, in describing them, and in critically evaluating them. I place more emphasis on a thoughtful imaginative critical evaluation than on description.
- (b) The long paper. The aim of this paper is to work out your own view of language. Your paper must work with at least three sources from the readings we are doing in class (see below), and must in addition draw on at least three other articles. There are many places to look for additional sources. A good guide to philosophy sources is available at http://www.hofstra.edu/Libraries/lib_srg_philosophy.cfm. The articles we are reading frequently refer to other texts. The *Philosophers Index* is a database of all nearly all philosophical writing published for the last 60 years (it is available on-line through the Hofstra Library Web page). And don't forget the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which often contains very good overviews of topics in philosophy. In the syllabus below I note some points at which you will need to turn in work toward the completion of this paper.

Good papers have three features: good thinking (interesting, insightful, accurate critical response to the reasoning); good understanding (accurate and insightful description of philosophical reasoning, especially from texts); and good mechanics (organization, spelling, grammar).

You will be writing about recent works in the philosophy of language. Each short paper must include at least one bibliographic reference, in the form of a footnote or an endnote; the long paper will have at least six such references. I do not have any preferences about the form of the reference, except one: the reference should as far as possible uniquely identify what you are talking about, by specifying the city of publication, the year of publication, the publisher, the page, and (where appropriate) the "standard pagination" of the text you are referring to. (For example, editions of Descartes's works always include a pagination in the margin from the standard edition of Adam and Tannery; the first line of the *Meditations* thus occurs at AT 7, 17.) You should also include a reference if you use or discuss the ideas of others, for instance ideas that have come up in class from me or from your classmates.¹ See the required text (Harvey, 1998) for how to cite. There are citation style guides at the Hofstra Library main web page; your instructor tends to use a version of the Chicago author-date style in his work.

All papers must be typed, using standard margins and standard typefaces and fonts. A standard page has from 250 to 275 words on it.

Policies

- No late papers accepted.

¹I want to thank James Wilkerson for discussion of ideas about how to organize a syllabus.

- Any paper except the final paper may be rewritten; no rewrite will be accepted after two weeks after the original due date.
- Excuse clause: stuff happens. If for some reason you are unable to hand in work, let me know as soon as possible, and be ready to provide documentation.
- A paper with no complete bibliographic reference will receive the grade of F.
- Turn off your phone or beeper before class.
- If you must leave class early, please inform me before class starts.
- If you cannot attend class, please inform me.
- **Plagiarism.** If I have reason to believe that any kind of plagiarism whatsoever has occurred I will request a discussion of the work. If plagiarism has occurred, I will ask for the work to be completely rewritten. If rewritten work contains plagiarism, I will award the grade of F **for the course**. If there is plagiarism in the final paper, I will award the grade of F for the course. I will always file an academic dishonesty form with the Dean of Students if I believe that plagiarism has occurred.

Schedule

We will discuss the following readings more or less during the weeks noted below. Do the reading before class.

Date	Readings	Due dates
Jan 29, 31	The Whorf Hypothesis (“An American Indian Model of the Universe”, “The Punctual and Segmentative Aspects of Verbs in Hopi,” “A Linguistic Consideration of Thinking in Primitive Communities”, all on reserve)	
Feb 5, 7	Plato’s Philosophy of Language (<i>Cratylus</i> (read 383-392 seriously, lightly skim or skip 392-421, read 421-440 seriously); <i>Phaedo</i> 72-76; <i>Theatetus</i> 201-210; these texts are on reserve)	
Feb 11, 13	Plato; Frisch on Bees; Bennett on Frisch (Frisch’s <i>Bees: Their Vision</i> , . . . pp.69-144, on reserve; Bennett’s <i>Rationality</i> , Chapters 1-3)	First short paper due 2/14
Feb 19 Feb 21	No class: Presidents Day Bennett, <i>Rationality</i> Chapters 4-12	
Feb 26, 28	Frege’s “Über Sinn und Bedeutung” (“On Sense and Nominatum”) in Martinich	SP2 (2/28)
Mar 4, 6	Russell’s Theory of Descriptions (“On Denoting,” in Martinich, “Descriptions,” in Martinich; “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description” on reserve)	
Mar 11, 13	Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy of Language (Philosophical Investigations, §§1-65), on reserve	SP3 (3/13)
Mar 18, 20	Spring Recess - NO CLASS	
Mar 25, 27	Meaning and Speaking (Strawson, “On Referring,” in Martinich, Grice, “Meaning” in Martinich)	SP4 (3/27); one paragraph on final paper topic
Apr 1, 3	The Empiricist Theory of Meaning (Hempel, “Empiricist Criteria . . .” in Martinich; Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” in Martinich)	Conferences on final paper topic
Apr 8, 10	Meaning and Behavior (Quine, “Translation and Meaning” in Martinich)	SP5 (4/10)
Apr 15, 17	Truth and Meaning (Tarski, “The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics,” in Martinich, and Davidson, “Truth and Meaning” in Martinich)	bibliography for final paper
Apr 22, 24	Truth, Meaning and Psychology (Davidson, “Belief and the Basis of Meaning” in Martinich)	SP 6 (4/24)
Apr 29, May 1	Meaning and Relativism (Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”, on reserve)	draft of final paper (at least 2 pp.)
May 6	(last class) Metaphor and Malapropism (Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean” in Martinich; Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” in Martinich)	
May 13	Final paper due by 5:00pm.	