

Philosophy of Language

Phil 411, Sec. 01, Fall 2014

Location: Jepson 107

Meeting Days and Time: Tuesdays and Thursdays 2:40-3:55

Office Hours: MW 1-3, and by appt¹

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“If a lion could speak, we could not understand him.”

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Course Description

Philosophy of language investigates primarily the matter of *meaning* — what is meaning? We talk about meaning all the time. (“What did she mean by *that*?” “*Hola* means ‘hello’ in Spanish.”) It’s familiar enough, but as soon as we ask the question, we’re a bit lost. Is it like the question “What is a *gnu*?” or is it like “what is addition?” or does the question even make sense?

To get at this, we’re going to take a tour through a handful of areas of philosophy of language. We’ll focus on questions about the nature of language, mind and communication, animal communication, translation, and feminism and language.

Course Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Distinguish two modes of philosophizing about language: beginning with language as a formalizable system of signs and beginning with language as a mode of social interaction
2. Articulate how language can be used as a tool to silence others
3. Collaborate to present and discuss philosophical issues in language
4. Develop and argue for a philosophical thesis concerning some dimension of language
5. Identify differences between technical use of a term in their chosen field and ordinary language uses of that term.

Course Texts

1. A.P. Martinich and David Sosa, *The Philosophy of Language*, 6th ed.
2. P.H. Matthews, *Linguistics: a Very Short Introduction*

Other required readings will be placed on Blackboard.

Course Work

1. *Group presentations:* Students will be divided up into groups of *three* and each group will be assigned a reading. The role of the group will be to: present the major philosophical positions in an accessible way and propose questions to facilitate class discussion

¹ Note that this includes nights and weekends via Skype and Google+. If you want to arrange for this, please feel free to email to set up a time.

On the day of the presentation, the group will submit to me a **four page** document in which they: (i) briefly summarize the philosophical conclusions, (ii) present their questions to facilitate class discussion, and (iii) offer tentative responses to those questions they use to facilitate class discussion.

Purpose: This is to provide an opportunity for students to work collaboratively. Additionally, it's a chance for students to exercise having to frame dense material in an accessible way. It's one thing to *read* it and get what's going on; it's a whole new ballgame to explain that dense material to someone else. Finally, your having to propose questions requires you to connect what you've read with other issues we've discussed or with observations/experiences from your lives. Connecting the material for which you're responsible with other ideas can help (i) better solidify the material for you and (ii) help you devise strategies for cognitively owning the material. *Satisfies objectives 1, 3, 4*

2. *Term papers:* Students will write a paper exploring some topic in further depth. There is no minimum or maximum word length but students are required to submit a 100 word abstract with their papers. Additionally, all students will be required to submit a proposal of at least 200 words. I will meet with each student to discuss the proposal. Please note that the proposal is a working document and is *not* graded. Let me stress, however, that it's in your best interest to put some time into the proposal. If your paper idea needs some serious tweaking, it's best to know that before sitting down to write the paper.

Purpose: This exercise offers students a chance to explore a topic of their choosing in greater depth. It provides a chance to sharpen critical thinking, writing, and researching skills. Also, this opportunity lets students pursue and deepen their curiosity into the mysteries and complexities of language. (Consider that it takes years of constant exposure and practice to master your native language; imagine you practiced an instrument as often as you spoke or heard someone speak. And speakers of Tsez don't become fluent until around 13 years old.) *Satisfies objective 4*

3. *Corpus project:* Brigham Young University has the massive Corpus of Contemporary American English (aka COCA) available at <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>. After a one-class training session on how to search the corpus, students will select a term that is specific to their discipline — one bit of jargon that everyone in the field knows — but also as a non-disciplinary use. For example:

philosophy: "intention"
clinical psychology: "depression"
psychology: "consciousness"
art history: "surreal" (or "surrealism")
English literature: "poetry"
physics: "force," "quantum mechanics"
mathematics: "integral"

You will likely need to search for common variations of that term (e.g. "surrealism," "surrealistic"). For the term you select, identify the 10-15 most common words/phrases found with that term. Answer the following questions:

1. How is the term used in your discipline? What does it mean? (Provide examples.)

2. What do you think John and Jane Q. Taxpayer thinks that the expression means, given your findings in the corpus?
3. If John and Jane Q. Taxpayer were to sit in on a class in your field, how do you think their prior understanding of the term (as reflected in COCA) would affect their grasp of one of your field's central concepts?
4. How would you as a representative of your field have to compensate for that if you were to explain to Jane and John why they should invest in research in your field/bother learning about it/encourage their children to study it/think of it as significant whatsoever?
5. Might the ordinary usage of the term shape developments in the field? If yes, how? If not, then are we dealing with two different terms entirely? (Discuss)

As a kind of motivation in thinking about this, imagine that you're applying for federal funding for a research project in your discipline, and it's up to John and Jane Q. Taxpayer to decide whether you get the funding. Is it up to you to morph your language usage and meaning to their preset understanding? Or rather, is your usage the *real, proper* usage? Or rather, are they different meanings/words entirely and you're doomed to talk past each other? (And if they're different meanings/words entirely, then why is there the one word covering both uses?)

Purpose: This gives students a chance to connect what we learn in this class with what they learn in their own disciplines. Language is everywhere and developing a philosophical eye with language means (in part) becoming sensitive to its manifold uses, both pedestrian and technical. But an important question is if those pedestrian and technical uses have anything in common and what that can mean for both pedagogy and engagement in disciplines. *Satisfies objectives 1, 4, 5*

4. *Silencing project:* Students will find *three* examples of silencing and explain (1) *how* each example is an instance of silencing and (2) *who* is being silenced in each case. Each case needs to be a documented one, e.g. one found in blog comments or found using COCA. Please no making any up.

Purpose: This affords students the opportunity to identify instances of silencing "in the wild." It's important because silencing is ubiquitous and often difficult to spot. Becoming attuned to it better prepares students to avoid speech acts that silence others. *Satisfies objectives 2 and 4*

5. *Short essay:* Students will write a short (750 word) essay on the two views of language that we'll discuss in this class. The paper will be posted on Blackboard during the first two weeks of class.

Purpose: The essay will allow students to consider some of the philosophical difficulties in thinking about language. It is, on the one hand, a system of social interaction, but it is also one that has a number of salient formal properties (as discussed in our anthology's introduction). No matter what position one adopts, the evidence for the alternative side has to be considered; otherwise, one has a radically incomplete theory of language. *Satisfies objectives 1 and 4*

6. *Participation:* Students can participate in a number of ways. In addition to discussion in class, students may email questions and come to see me during office hours to discuss class material (for those who are not yet comfortable with talking in class). Here's how participation fits into the grade. If student S participates very little or not at all, then no points are added to S's final grade. If S

participates occasionally, .1 is added to S's final grade. If S participates in almost every class, .2 is added to S's final grade. *Satisfies objective 4*

Here is how your final grade is calculated:

Short essay: 10%

Silencing project: 15%

Corpus project: 25%

Term papers: 25%

Group presentations: 25%

Participation: * (explained above)

Attendance

Students are permitted *four* absences (i.e. twice the number of weekly meetings). If you exceed the number of absences permitted, your grade will go down one letter for each additional day missed. Exceptions include: documented illness, religious holidays, travelling for sports events (or comparable extracurricular activity, e.g. debate team).

Late Work

Papers are penalized by one letter grade for each class it is late. If students know ahead of time that they will have some difficulty meeting a deadline, please contact me. I'll be more than happy to take other commitments you might have into consideration when assigning due dates.

Cell Phones, Tablets, Laptops, etc.

Please do not use your phones during class except in the case of an emergency. If you have to call or text someone, please step out of the room to do so. Texting during class is disruptive for me, you and other students. For me, I'm distracted by the fact that you're disengaged from the class. For you, you're disengaged from the class. For other students, there are at least two participants in the class (me and you) who are disengaged, which undermines our class as a place of focused attention and critical examination.

In the past, I've had trouble with students bringing laptops and tablets to class: they have very good intentions of using them only for classwork but the temptation to browse the Interweb during class won out. So please do not bring a tablet or laptop to class. **One exception to this is on 12/19/2014 when we do class evaluations.** I will allow exceptions on a case by case basis if a student needs to use a laptop during class for taking notes, etc.

Statement Concerning Sexual Misconduct

Gonzaga University recognizes the inherent dignity of all individuals and promotes respect for all people. Sexual misconduct will NOT be tolerated at Gonzaga. If you have been the victim of sexual misconduct we encourage you to report this matter promptly. As a faculty member, I am interested in promoting a safe and healthy environment, and should I learn of any sexual misconduct I must report the matter to the Title IX Coordinator. Should you want to report to a confidential

source you may contact the following:

- Gonzaga Health Center | [509.313.4052](tel:509.313.4052) | 704 E Sharp Avenue
- Gonzaga Counseling Center | [509.313.4054](tel:509.313.4054) | 324 E Sharp Avenue
- Any priest serving as a sacramental confessor or any ordained religious leader serving in the sacred confidence role. | [509.313.4242](tel:509.313.4242)
- University Lutheran Community Services and SAFeT | 509.624.RAPE

Plagiarism and Cheating

Plagiarism, or taking someone else's work without giving credit to the original author, can and must be avoided at all costs. It violates the integrity of scholarship and academic honesty. It is certainly fine to build on or explain the work of others, and in fact, such communal work is necessary to expand our knowledge. But, to claim the other's work as your own is dishonest, and honesty is essential to the life of a student.

Plagiarism and cheating are not tolerated. The first instance of plagiarism results in a 0 for the assignment. The second instance results in a failing grade for the course. All cases of plagiarism are reported to the Dean's office. Please see the University's "Code of Academic Honesty" in the student handbook, available online through the University website. If you have any questions about what does or does not count as plagiarism or cheating, please feel free to ask me.

Course Schedule

Note: This is a projected reading schedule. We may get a little behind if some concepts require further fleshing out or generate discussion. That's ok. We'll compensate accordingly. Readings in *The Philosophy of Language* anthology are indicated by "PoL." Readings from *Linguistics: a Very Short Introduction* are indicated by "L." Readings on Blackboard are indicated by "Bb."

9/2 — Introductions

What do philosophers of language do?

9/4 *Some useful background: a logical and scientific primer to philosophizing about language*

- "Introduction" (PoL) — skip section VI, *skim* sections VII-IX (this will be old hat if you've taken a course in formal logic, computability theory, or model theory), skip section XI
- Chapter 1 (L)

9/9 *Philosophers of language ought to focus on social concerns in the study of language*

- Jennifer Hornsby, "Feminism in philosophy of language: communicative speech acts" (Bb)

What is a language?

9/11 *Language is the outward representation of inward thoughts.*

- John Locke, “Of Words” (PoL, reading 43)

9/16 *Language is a kind of social activity*

- Gilbert Ryle, “The Theory of Meaning” (Bb), **Group 1 presents**
- Nigel Love, “Cognition and the Language Myth” (Bb) (strongly recommended but not required)

9/18 *Really, language is little of both: a formal system correlating meanings with sentences that is used according to social conventions*

- David Lewis, “Languages and Language” — read sections I-III (PoL, reading 46)

In what sense is language-use rule-governed?

9/23 *Tutorial on COCA*, **Short essay due**

9/25 *Rules for language are biologically programmed into us.*

- Noam Chomsky, “Language and Problems of Knowledge” (PoL, reading 48), **Group 2 presents**
- Chapter 7 (L)

9/30 *Rules for language are like guidelines for using tools: use the best one to get the job done*

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, “From *Philosophical Investigations*” (PoL, reading 44)
- more from *Philosophical Investigations* (Bb)

10/2 *We can never know the rules for language; we only pragmatically accept that they’re there.*

- Saul Kripke, “From *On Rules and Private Language*” (PoL, reading 38),
- Lewis Carroll, from chapter 6 of *Alice through the Looking-Glass*

How does meaning connect with communication?

10/7 *Sentence meaning is a product of speaker’s communicative intentions*

- H.P. Grice, “Meaning” (PoL, reading 21)
- H.P. Grice, “Logic and Conversation” (PoL, reading 24)

10/9 *We do things with words in communication.*

- J.L. Austin, “Performative Utterances” (PoL, reading 22) **Group 4 presents**

10/14 *Meaning isn’t always up to the speaker*, **Corpus project due**

- Deborah Tannen, chapters 4 and 5 from *That’s Not What I Meant!* (Bb)

- Chapter 6 (L)

What issues can philosophical treatments of language help clarify? (Or: an excursion into applied philosophy of language)

10/16 *Pornography as hate speech*

- Rae Langton and Caroline West, “Scorekeeping in a Pornographic Language Game” (Bb), **Group 3 presents**
- **Midterm course evaluations (for instructor purposes)**

10/21 *Language sets bounds on the kinds of things that can be brought up in communication*

- Mary Kate McGowans, “Conversational Exercitives: Something Else We Do With Words” (Bb)

10/23 *Language can silence others.*

- Ishani Maitra, “Silencing Speech” (Bb)

10/28 *Slurs*

- Adam Croom, “How to Do Things with Slurs” (Bb), **Group 5 presents**

10/30 *Translation and interpretation*

- Davidson, “Radical Interpretation” (Bb)
- Chapter 5 (L)

11/4 *Translation issues*

- Douglas Hofstadter, from *Le Ton Beau de Marot* (Bb), **Groups 6 presents**
- Chapter 4 (L)

11/6 *Translating the Bible and Qur’an*

- Metzger, “Consistent Problem Confronting Bible Translators” (Bb)
- Ali, “Word Repetition in the Qur-an — Translating Form or Meaning?” (Bb)

What can nonhuman animals tell us about the evolution of language?

11/11 *Basically nothing.*

- Hauser, et al, “The Mystery of Language Evolution” (Bb)
- Chapter 2 (L)

11/13 *Rather a lot, actually*

- Michael Tomasello, “From *The Origins of Human Communication*” (Bb) **Silencing project due**

11/18 *Wait, in what sense can animal communication be said to be meaningful?*

- Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth, “Truth and Deception in Animal Communication” (Bb), **Group 7 presents**
- Andrew McAninch, Goodrich, and Allen, “Animal Communication and Neo-Expressivism”

11/20 *It depends on how we think of our starting points in investigating the origins of language*

- Dorit Bar-On, “The Origins of Language: Must we ‘Go Gricean?’” (Bb),

Does language shape how we see and think about the world?

11/25 *Absolutely not*

- Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” (Bb)

11/27 — **Thanksgiving: no class**

12/2 *If you mean the social world, then yes.*

- John Searle, “From *The Construction of Social Reality*” (Bb)

12/4 *Not only the social world, but the nonsocial world too*

- Lera Boroditsky, “Linguistic Relativity” (Bb), **Group 8 presents**
- Lera Boroditsky, Lauren Schmidt, and Webb Phillips, “Sex, Syntax, and Semantics” (Bb)

What’s the relationship between meaning and the world?

12/9 *Meaning is abstract; therefore, the meanings of names are abstract even if their referents are concrete.*

- Gottlob Frege, “On Sense and Reference” (PoL, reading 2)
- **Course evaluations**

12/11 *The meaning of a name is the referent of that name.*

- Saul Kripke, “From *Naming and Necessity*” (PoL, reading 4)

12/18 (10:30-12:30) *Final class meeting — discussion and future directions, Term papers due*