

## PH2242 Philosophy of Language

*Lecture Time:* Wednesdays, 10am until noon.

*Venue:* AS1-0203

*Modular Credits:* 4

*Prerequisites:* Nil.

*Instructor:* Bob Beddor

*Email:* rbeddor@gmail.com

*Office Hours:* Tuesday, 3:30-4:30 and also by appointment

(My office is in the Philosophy Department, AS3, fifth floor.)

### **Description:**

Over the last hundred years or so, philosophers and linguists have made great strides in understanding linguistic meaning and communication. This course will provide a broad overview of some of the major developments on this front. We'll tackle topics such as:

- *The Nature of Meaning.* Humans have a remarkable ability to invest noises and written marks with meaning. How is this possible? What makes a particular word – say, my use of the word “cats” – mean what it does (namely, *cats*), rather than something else (e.g., *dogs*), or, for that matter, nothing at all?
- *Demarcating Sense and Nonsense.* Some uses of language seem to be altogether meaningless. Can we develop any sort of useful criterion for distinguish meaningful language from meaningless language? If so, can we use it to adjudicate whether various philosophical claims are meaningful?
- *The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction.* Sometimes we mean something (in a suitably broad sense of meaning) without directly saying it (e.g. sarcasm). What is the relationship between what is said and what is meant but not said?
- *Language Acquisition.* At any early age, humans acquire the ability to produce and understand a potentially infinite variety of new sentences – that is, sentences they've never previously encountered. How is this possible? What's the best explanation for this extraordinary ability?
- *Language and Thought.* Does language shape the way we think? If so, in what sense?

### **Grading**

The grade for the class will be a function of the following components:

*Attendance/Participation (15%)*

Participation – asking questions, raising objections - is crucial to the experience of doing philosophy. I expect students to participate in both the lecture and the recitation sections.

*Weekly Online Questions (5%)*

Every week there will be a single online multiple-choice question on IVLE. The goal of this is to provide a useful refresher of the material we've covered that week.

*First Paper (Short Response) (20%)*

The first paper assignment is to write a short written response to one of the articles we have covered thus far in the class. It should be focused on a particular argument in one of the papers – you should briefly summarize the argument, and then engage with it critically, by either offering an original criticism of it, or extending the argument in some way. The response should only be 500 words (750 words max) – the idea is to distill your commentary/criticism down to the essentials.

*Second Paper (25%)*

The second paper assignment is to write a somewhat longer paper tackling one of the main questions we've covered in class thus far. You will be expected to take a stand on one of the debates we've surveyed, and construct an argument in defense of your view. This paper should be 750 words (1000 words max).

*Final Paper (35%)*

The final paper is an opportunity to develop a longer, more sustained treatment of one of the topics covered in this class. The paper should offer a clear articulation and defense of your position, and respond to potential objections. This paper should be 1500 words (1750 max).

The breakdown for the final grade will be as follows:

- Attendance/Participation: 15%
- Online questions: 5%
- First Paper: 20%
- Second Paper: 25%
- Final Paper: 35%

*General Expectations:*

Inquiry thrives on debate; disagreeing with others is encouraged! At the same time, please strive to be respectful of others when you voice your disagreement: avoid interrupting others, and avoid belittling or ridiculing their views.

Please also avoid using cell phones or computers during class. (If you are convinced that you learn best while using a computer, please talk to me – I may be willing to make an exception. However, studies suggest that most students are less productive when they bring their computers to class.)

*Readings:*

You will be expected to have read the assigned texts in advance. Readings will be made available on IVLE.

(Note: We will be reading a few chapters from Gary Kemp's *What is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?* Students who prefer to have a hardcopy of relevant texts may thus wish to order a copy.)

### **Preliminary Schedule**

(Note: The following is subject to change as the course develops)

#### Unit 1: *Reference and Meaning*

Week 1 – Wednesday, January 16<sup>th</sup>  
Introduction to Philosophy of Language

Week 2 – Wednesday, January 23<sup>rd</sup>  
Frege on Sense and Reference

*Required Reading:*

- Frege, "On Sense and Reference"
- Kemp, *What is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?*, Chps.1-2.

Week 3 – Wednesday, January 30<sup>th</sup>  
Russell on meaning, reference, and descriptions

*Required Reading:*

- Russell, "On Denoting"
- Kemp, *What is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?*, Chp.3.

Week 4 – Weds, Feb 6th      NO CLASS – CHINESE NEW YEAR (Yay!)

Week 5 – Weds, Feb 13<sup>th</sup>      *First Short Paper Due* (boo!)  
Names and descriptions

*Required Reading:*

- Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (selections)

*Optional Reading:*

- Kemp, *What is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?*, Chp. 4, sections 1-6 (pp. 54-63)

Week 6 – Weds, Feb 20th  
Is Meaning in the head? Semantic externalism and brains in vats

*Required Reading:*

- Putnam, "Meaning and Reference"
- Putnam, *Brains in vats* (*Reason, Truth, and History*, chp. 1)

*Optional Reading:*

- Kemp, *What is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?*, Chp. 4, section 7 onwards (pp.63-70)

RECESS WEEK (woohoo!)

Unit 2: *The Pursuit of a General Theory of Meaning*

Week 7 – Weds, Mar 6th

From Verificationism to Truth Conditional Semantics

*Required Readings:*

- Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (chp. 1)
- Hacking, “A.J. Ayer’s Verification” (chp. 9 of *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?*)

Week 8 – Wednesday, Mar 13<sup>th</sup>      *Second Short Paper Due*

Beyond truth conditional semantics? Part 1: Implicatures and Presuppositions

*Required Readings:*

- Grice, “Logic and Conversation”
- Simons, “Foundational Issues in Presupposition”

*Optional Reading:*

- “Implicature”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
- Potts, “Conventional Implicature”
- “Presupposition”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, esp. sections 1-4.1.

Week 9 – Wednesday, Mar 20<sup>th</sup>

Beyond truth conditional semantics? Part 2: Taste talk, moral discourse, and expressivism

*Required Readings:*

- Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, chp. 6
- Schroeder, “What is the Frege Geach Problem?”

Unit 3: *How is Meaning Even Possible?*

Week 10 – Wednesday, Mar 27<sup>th</sup>

Foundations of Meaning: The Kripkenstein Paradox, Part 1

*Required Reading:*

- Selections from Kripke, “Wittgenstein on Private Language”

Week 11 – Wednesday, April 3<sup>rd</sup>

Foundations of Meaning: The Kripkenstein Paradox, Part 2

*Required Reading:*

- Millikan, "Truth Rules, Hoverflies, and the Kripke-Wittgenstein Paradox"
- Lewis, "New Work for a Theory of Universals"

Unit 4: *At the Margins: Intersections with Linguistics and Psychology*

Week 12 – Wednesday, Apr 10<sup>th</sup>

Language Acquisition: What Does it Take to Learn a Language?

*Required Readings:*

- Kuhl, "Early Language Acquisition"
- Cowie, "Innateness and Language", SEP entry, sections 1-2.2

*Optional Readings:*

- Saffran et al., "Statistical Learning by 8-Month-Old Infants"
- Pullum and Scholz, "Empirical Assessments of Poverty of Stimulus Arguments"
- Berwick and Chomsky, "Poverty of the Stimulus Revisited"

Week 13 – Wednesday, Apr 17<sup>th</sup>

*Final Paper Due*

Does Language Shape Thought?

*Required Reading:*

- Elbourne, *Meaning: A Slim Guide*, chp. 8
- Li and Gleitman, "Turning the Tables: Language and Spatial Reasoning"

*Optional Reading:*

- Winawer et al., "Russian Blues Reveal the Effects of Language on Color Discrimination"