

PHIL 3200
M 2:30-5:30

M. A. Khalidi
Office hours: TBA

Philosophy of Language

Course Description and Objectives

Philosophical questions about language may be divided into two broad categories. The first category of questions has to do with language as a mental capacity, or as part of our psychological makeup. In the first part of the course, we will look at contemporary work on the origin and nature of language. We will examine the hypothesis that the human capacity to use language is an innate mental endowment, which is unique to the human species. Then, we will consider some arguments that challenge this claim and argue that language is a cultural product acquired mainly through instruction. We will also critically discuss hypotheses concerning the function of language and its manner of evolution in the human species, as well as the question of the continuity or discontinuity of human language with the communication systems of other animals. Finally, we consider the issue of the relationship of language to thought, particularly the theses of linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism.

The second category of questions has to do with language as a means of communicating and conveying meaning. Hence, in the second and third parts of the course we will focus on the communicative role of language. In the second part, we will be concerned with investigating how language manages to convey meaning, and how inert symbols can be used to transmit semantic content. We will survey a few different theories of linguistic meaning, and examine the distinction between sense and reference. The way in which proper names and definite descriptions convey meaning and reference will be explored in some detail. We will also investigate the role of intention in making linguistic utterances meaningful and the role of interpretation in ascribing meanings to utterances. In the third part of the course, we will go on to explore the non-literal aspects of language: conversational implicature, metaphor, speech acts, and other pragmatic phenomena. In so doing, we will assess the relative contributions made by intention and convention to the meaning of an utterance. We will also try to understand the difference between literal and non-literal uses of language, if indeed there is such a distinction, and will consider whether there is such a thing as pure literal meaning.

Throughout, the aim will be to carefully examine philosophical arguments or bring philosophical analysis to bear on empirical information. The aim of the course is therefore not only to acquaint students with some of the principal philosophical questions relating to language, but also to engage their critical faculties and exercise their argumentative skills.

Course Requirements

In-Class Exam (25%): This exam has been scheduled relatively early in the semester (see reading schedule) and will consist of short-answer questions. Sample questions and further information will be distributed at least one week in advance. It will take place in class and will be 75 or 90 minutes in duration (during the first half of the class session). If for some reason you have to be absent from the exam, you should email me in advance to say so and then produce proper documentation within a week of missing the exam, e.g. a medical report. In such cases, a makeup will be administered (please note that make-up exams tend to allow students less choice than the actual exam).

Take-Home Exam (30%): Around two-thirds of the way into the semester you will be asked to write a take-home exam consisting of two or three short essays in response to a set of pre-set questions. There will be a firm deadline for turning in the take-home exam; late submissions will be penalized.

Final Exam (35%): The final exam will contain some short-answer questions and some essay questions. Please make sure that you do not make travel plans during the examination period until the date for the final exam has been set by the university. The same policy applies for a makeup exam as for the quiz (see above).

Attendance and Participation (10%): You will be given a mark of 0-5 on attendance; each unexcused absence will be deducted from the maximum of 5 marks (so if you are absent 5 or more times, you will receive a zero for attendance). Absences should be excused in advance (by telling me in person or sending me email) and should be for a valid reason. You will also be marked 0-5 on participation in class, coming to see me during office hours, or participating in the Moodle discussion Forums (see below). The two marks for attendance and participation will be added for a maximum total of 10 marks.

Moodle: All registered students will be automatically added to the course's MOODLE site:

1. Go to <http://moodle.yorku.ca>
2. Enter your Passport York id in the username field
3. Enter your Passport York password in the password field.

Important announcements concerning the course and course policies will be posted on Moodle, so you are responsible for checking the Moodle site on a regular basis. I will also post all Powerpoint lectures on Moodle. Periodically, I will post questions for discussion in Moodle Forums (i.e. discussion boards); your participation will count towards the participation portion of your grade (see above). Please note that you should send me email via Moodle, rather than my standard York email account.

Reading Schedule

1. Language: Its Nature and Origin (Weeks 1-6)

Week 1: Sept 10

Introduction

Week 2: Sept 17

S. Pinker, "Chatterboxes," *The Language Instinct* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), Chapter 2, pp.12-43. **(C)**

D. Bickerton, "The Continuity Paradox," *Language and Species* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), Chapter 1, pp.7-24. **(C)**

N. Chomsky, "Recent Contributions to the Theory of Innate Ideas," *Synthese* 17 (1967), pp.2-11. **(M)**

Week 3: Sept 24

H. Putnam, "The Innateness Hypothesis and Explanatory Models in Linguistics," *Synthese* 17 (1967), pp.12-22. **(M)**

N. Goodman, "The Epistemological Argument," *Synthese* 17 (1967), pp.23-28. **(M)**

Pullum and Scholz, "Empirical Assessment of Stimulus Poverty Arguments," *Linguistic Review* 19 (2002), pp.9-50 (omit: pp.23-36). **(M)**

Week 4: Oct 1

R. Dunbar, "Theory of Mind and Evolution of Language," in Hurford, J. R., Studdert-Kennedy, M. and Knight C., editors, *Approaches to the Evolution of Language: Social and Cognitive Bases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.92-110. **(C)**

R. M. Martin, "Animal and Machine Language," in *The Meaning of Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), Chapter 10, pp.97-107. **(C)**

D. Cheney and R. Seyfarth, "Meaning and Mind in Monkeys," *Scientific American* 267, December 1992, pp.122-129. **(C)**

Week 5: Oct 8--HOLIDAY

Week 6: Oct 15--IN-CLASS EXAM (first 90 minutes)

B. L. Whorf, "Science and Linguistics," in *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964), pp.207-219. **(M)**

D. Dennett, "How to Do Other Things with Words," in John Preston ed., *Thought and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.219-235. **(C)**

II. Meaning: Sense, Reference, and Intention (Weeks 7-10)

Week 7: Oct 22

W. Alston, "Theories of Meaning," in *Philosophy of Language* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1964), Chapter 1, pp.10-31. **(C)**

G. Frege, "On Sense and Reference," in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, ed. Peter Geach and Max Black (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), pp.42-55. **(M)**

G. Frege, "The Thought," *Mind* 65 (1956), pp.289-311. **(M)**

Week 8: Oct 29

B. Russell, "Descriptions," in *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2002), Chapter 16, pp.167-180. **(C)**

J. Searle, "Proper Names," *Mind* 67 (1958), pp.166-173. **(M)**

K. Donnellan, "Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions," *Synthese* 21 (1970), pp.335-358. **(M)**

Week 9: Nov 5

P. F. Strawson, "On Referring," *Mind* 59 (1950), pp.320-344 [omit sections IV, V]. **(M)**

K. Donnellan, "Reference and Definite Descriptions," *Philosophical Review* 75 (1966), pp.281-304. **(M)**

Week 10: Nov 12

H. P. Grice, "Meaning," *Philosophical Review* 66 (1957), pp. 377-88. **(M)**

D. Davidson, "Thought and Talk," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.155-170. **(C)**

III. Non-Literal Meaning: Force and Context (Weeks 11-13)

Week 11: Nov 19

- H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp.22-40 (omit pp.22-23). **(C)**
- J. Searle, "What Is a Speech Act?" in *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp.39-53. **(C)**

Week 12: Nov 26

- D. Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," in *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978), pp.31-47. **(M)**
- J. Searle, "Metaphor," in *Expression and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp.76-116. **(C)**
- R. Rorty, "Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor," in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers vol.1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.162-174. **(M)**

Week 13: Dec 3

- A. Duranti, "Intentions, Self, and Responsibility," in *Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse*, eds. Jane H. Hill and Judith T. Irvine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Chapter 1, pp.24-47. **(C)**
- D. Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. E. Lepore (New York: Blackwell, 1989), pp.433-446. **(C)**

There is one required text for this course, a Coursekit available from the York University Bookstore, which contains around half of the required readings. Readings marked **(C)** above are contained in this Coursekit. The other half of the readings will be made available on the course website on MOODLE (see above). These readings are marked **(M)** on the Reading Schedule, and you are responsible for accessing these readings, downloading them, and printing them out. All readings should be done before the class session in question.

Cheating and Plagiarism

All students are expected to abide strictly by standards of academic honesty. Please familiarize yourselves with the University Senate policy on academic dishonesty:

<http://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/legislation/senate/acadhone.htm>

If you have any questions concerning what constitutes cheating or plagiarism, please consult with me.