

# PHIL 336: Language and Meaning

Whitman College – Spring 2012

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## Course Description

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.

More broadly, 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.

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 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.

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*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (MIT Press, 1999).

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. I strongly recommend that you print out the readings so that you can mark them up, and have them available in class and when writing papers. If you do print them out, I strongly encourage you to print on both sides of the paper, if possible. (Most campus printers can print double-sided – if you’re unsure how, just ask.)

## Summary of Requirements and Grading

### Part 1 (through Feb. 28)

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 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 address 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 tenuous, 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 Response Papers** (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.

### Part 2 (starting March 1)

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 response papers and the completion of a take-home final examination. That choice will be made around Spring Break, 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** – *Philosophy majors should choose this track; others are welcome to.*

**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 papers 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 around Spring Break.

**Track #2**

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

**Three More Brief Response Papers** (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 papers. 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 papers. But it is **not permitted** for you to use someone else's words or specific ideas in your written work 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, please read them in the order listed.)

Tue. Jan. 17      Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 1 secs. 1-3

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

Thu. Jan. 19      Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 2 secs. 1-2 and 7  
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 6 secs. 1-2  
Martin, "Function and Object"

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Tue. Jan. 24      Russell, "On Denoting," pp. 479-82, 484-5, and 488-93  
Russell, "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description"

Thu. Jan. 26      Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 2 secs. 5-6  
Frege, "On Sense and Reference"

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Tue. Jan. 31      Frege, "Thoughts"

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

\* *Fri. Feb. 3*      *response paper due by noon on material through Jan. 31*

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Tue. Feb. 7      Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 71-6 and 78-90  
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 3 secs. 3-4

Thu. Feb. 9      Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 90-7  
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 4 secs. 1-4

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Tue. Feb. 14      Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," pp. 216-29 and 233-7  
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 5 secs. 1-3

### (b) Language and the Mind

Thu. Feb. 16      Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 7 secs. 1-2  
Fodor, "Why There Still Has to Be a Language of Thought," pp. 135-8 and 141-51

\* *Fri. Feb. 17*      *response paper due by noon on material from Feb. 2 to Feb. 14*

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Tue. Feb. 21 Grice, "Meaning"  
Searle, "How Language Works," pp. 135-46  
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 7 secs. 4-5

Thu. Feb. 23 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 10 secs. 1-3  
*skim:* Pullum, "The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax"  
Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme"

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Tue. Feb. 28 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 8 secs. 1-5 and 9

## II. Challenges and Alternatives (a) Holism & Interpretationism

Thu. Mar 1 Quine, "Ontological Relativity," pp. 26-39 and 45-51

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\* *Mon. Mar. 5 response paper due by noon on material from Feb. 16 to Feb. 28*

Tue. Mar. 6 Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning"  
Davidson, "Radical Interpretation"

Thu. Mar. 8 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 15 secs. 1 and 3-5

## ——— SPRING BREAK ———

### (b) Anti-Realism

Tue. Mar. 27 Schlick, "Positivism and Realism," pp. 86-95  
Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language," pp. 65-80

Thu. Mar. 29 Dummett, "What Is a Theory of Meaning? (II)," excerpts

\* *Fri. Mar. 30 deadline for choosing your assignment "track" for part II of the course*

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Tue. Apr. 3 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 11 secs. 1-4

Thu. Apr. 5 Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, ch. 1 and ch. 3 secs. 1-2  
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 12 secs. 1 and 4

\* *Fri. Apr. 6 response paper due by noon on material from Mar. 1 to Apr. 3*

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Tue. Apr. 10 NO CLASS – Undergraduate Conference

**(c) Meaning-Skepticism**

Thu. Apr. 12 Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, pp. 7-24  
Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 9 sec. 5

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**(d) Meaning as Use**

Tue. Apr. 17 Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, pp. 69-78, 86-95, and 107-9

Thu. Apr. 19 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, secs. 1-49 and 65-71

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\* **Mon. Apr. 23** *response paper due by noon on material from Apr. 5 to Apr. 19*

Tue. Apr. 24 Sellars, "Some Reflections on Language Games," secs. 1-38

Thu. Apr. 26 van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be If Not Computation?," pp. 345-55, 358-9, and 374-81

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Tue. May 1 Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, pp. 1-30

Thu. May 3 Devitt & Sterelny, ch. 9 secs. 1-4

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\* **Mon. May 7** *response paper due by noon on material from Apr. 27 to May 3*

Tue. May 8 semester wrap-up

\* **Mon. May 14** *seminar-paper due by noon*

## Response Papers

The purpose of the response papers is to give you a forum throughout the semester to develop, express, and defend your own thoughts about the course material, and to receive my feedback and guidance about those thoughts. The only requirements are:

1. **Your essay must make substantial contact with at least one specific, significant idea or passage from at least one of the identified readings.**
2. **Your essay must explain and support a single, main claim (i.e., it must have a thesis).**

While our ultimate goal in the class is to work toward a comprehensive theory of language, you shouldn't try to do that in a single response paper. Neither should you try to address all of the different ideas and arguments from the identified readings. Rather, the goal of any single paper is for you to *an* argument in relation to the course material, as a *step* toward that comprehensive understanding. You'll be able to stitch those arguments together across response papers if you'd like, and then more fully in either the seminar-paper or the final exam.

Some possible tasks for a response paper include:

- Identifying one of the important assumptions behind an author's view.
- Providing further or different support for one of an author's central claims.
- Presenting an objection to one of an author's central claims.
- Defending one of the main alternative views that an author argues against.
- Proposing a new alternative view of your own development.
- Resolving an explicit or implicit debate between two authors.
- Reconciling an apparent conflict between two authors' views.
- Exploring some other kind of connection between two different aspects of an author's view, or between two authors' views.

These are only suggestions; any other topic is fine, as long as it satisfies the two requirements listed above. And I'll be more than happy to meet with you as you develop your ideas, to help ensure that their scope and content are appropriate for this assignment.

**Length:** Each paper should be about **1000-1200 words**. Those aren't absolute limits, but the further you are from them the more you should worry that your topic and/or level of depth are not appropriate.

### Format:

- Your essay should be typed using 12-point Times New Roman font, with one-inch margins all around.
- In the upper left-hand corner of the first page, single-spaced, you should list your name, the course, my name, and the date (in that order).
- The title of your essay should appear next, centered and in bold font. It should indicate the specific issue, view, and/or author that you will discuss. (Cleverness is optional.)
- The body of your paper should be double-spaced.
- You should use parenthetical citation, not footnotes or endnotes.
- You should *not* include a list of works cited, *unless* you use sources that aren't assigned for the class.
- Multiple pages must be stapled together. If possible, please print on both sides of the paper.

**Citation (*very important!*):** If you use someone else's exact words, you *must* put them in quotation marks, and you must give proper acknowledgment. You *must* also acknowledge the source of any specific passages or ideas that you paraphrase. **Failing to include proper citations, whether intentionally or not, could be deemed to be a form of plagiarism and result in an 'F' for the course!**

For this assignment, you should use an informal citation format. After the end of the quote or paraphrase, include a brief parenthetical citation in the text. For outside sources, just include enough information for your reader to be able to find the original source.

**Due:** Papers are due **by noon** on the date listed on the assignment schedule, unless you take an extension (see below). All papers should either be handed to me in class, or left in my mailbox in the main Olin office. Please do *not* slide a paper under my office door or send it to me through e-mail, except by prior arrangement.

**Extension Policies:**

- If you have a Whitman-sanctioned activity (such as a sport), a religious observance, or a pre-planned family event (such as a wedding), you should talk with me in advance, and I'll be happy to make any reasonable accommodation.
- If you have an unexpected emergency (such as a significant illness or death in the family), you should talk with one of Whitman's Powers That Be (such as the Dean of Students or Counseling Center) as soon as you can afterwards. Once I get official clearance, I will be happy to make any reasonable accommodation.
- For any other reason you like, or for no particular reason at all, you may take an extension on *any one* (and only one!) of the response papers before Spring Break. Students who choose "track #2" may also take an extension on *any one* (and only one!) of the response papers after Spring Break. You don't need to tell me in advance; you can simply submit that paper at a later time. Papers due on a Friday may be extended to the following Monday, while papers due on a Monday may be extended to that Friday. Note that taking an extension does *not* change which material is available for you to write about.

**\* *Late papers will not be accepted for credit under any other circumstances!!!***



**Grading Standards:** It is important to understand that the quality of your understanding and insight cannot directly be graded. All that can be graded is the *product* of that understanding and insight: your paper. These are the standards of evaluation that I employ:

An **OUTSTANDING** (A-level) paper:

- Reveals a thorough and careful understanding of the reading.
- Contains sophisticated and penetrating insights into the reading and issues.
- Draws interesting and thought-provoking connections among ideas.
- Moves well beyond our class discussions.
- Is written in lucid and elegant prose.
- Is well-organized, with a logical flow.
- Displays a clear structure, with a (brief but) helpful introduction, transitions, and conclusion.
- Is virtually flawless in its mechanics: almost no typos, misspellings, or mistakes of grammar or punctuation.

A **GOOD** (B-level) paper:

- Indicates a good grasp of the reading and issues.
- Proposes a thesis that goes beyond what's directly stated in the text and what we directly discussed in class.
- Develops a coherent line of argument.
- Is written clearly enough to convey its points.
- Follows a discernible structure.
- Has few mechanical errors, such as typos, misspellings, and mistakes of grammar and punctuation.
- May compensate for weakness in some aspects with particular strength in others.

A **POOR** (C-level) paper:

- Displays some understanding of the reading and issues.
- Meets the fundamental requirements of the assignment.

*BUT* has serious flaws, such as:

- Significantly incomplete or mistaken views about the reading and/or issues.
- Too little substance beyond summarizing the reading.
- Insufficient evidence and argumentation to articulate and support its basic claims.
- Lack of a central line of argument or discussion, instead jumping from topic to topic.
- Writing that is too unclear to convey specific thoughts.
- Major mechanical errors – too many typos, misspellings, and/or mistakes of grammar and punctuation.

**UNACCEPTABLE** (failing) work may include any of the following:

- A complete misunderstanding of the material.
- A lack of substance normally found in college-level work.
- Incomprehensible writing.