

Philosophy of Language (730-210)
Spring 2019, Prof. Pietroski
MW6 (4:30-5:50), Frelinghuysen A4

Course Description

What's a language? Is English *a* language, or is there a family of English languages? Why are human children so good at acquiring languages like English (Japanese, Urdu, Navajo, ASL, French, Walpiri, Mandarin, Edo, ...)? Is there something special about these languages and/or human children? Do other animals—perhaps even bees—have languages of their own? Are there languages of thought? Could you think in Morse code? Do languages have to be used, at least sometimes, for communication? What are words? Does 'dog' have the same meaning as 'chien' in French? What are meanings? Why does 'ready to eat' have more than one meaning, while 'eager to eat' and 'easy to eat' are less ambiguous? How do we know what sentences mean, and what they don't mean, even if we haven't previously heard or read them? How is written English related to spoken English? How can we use words and sentences to convey information, ask questions, make requests, tell jokes, and so on? What's a metaphor? How is it possible to communicate "indirectly", as when we speak sarcastically, or criticize by using "faint praise"? How are sentence meanings related to episodes of people using sentences to make claims that are true or false? How are word meanings related to episodes of people using words to refer to things? How are we able to talk about things that don't exist? How do we understand phrases like 'the largest prime number', words like 'unicorn', and names like 'Vulcan'? What are names? Do they have meanings of a special kind? Do words like 'this', 'I', 'here', and 'now' have meanings of a special kind? What does a child acquire when she acquires a language like English? In what respects is the process of human language acquisition like paradigm examples of learning a new skill—e.g., learning to play a musical instrument—or learning facts about one's environment? In what respects is the process more like paradigm examples of innately driven development, like going through puberty, or a caterpillar transitioning into a butterfly? Why have philosophers been interested in these issues?

Unsurprisingly, the course will not provide definitive answers. But one goal is to provide an introduction to the topic and some relevant literature, in a way that will help you understand the questions well enough to appreciate some potential answers that have been offered—and then pursue the issues further if you are so inclined. Another goal is to focus on what some philosophers have said about language as a case study of how the intellectual tools of philosophy can be useful in the study of human nature, while recognizing that an interdisciplinary toolkit is required to answer the interesting questions about language that philosophers have highlighted. A related goal is to help you develop some of the intellectual skills that are sharpened by doing philosophy—in particular, the capacity to write clearly about complex issues that are initially far from clear, after reading and understanding some abstract prose that was produced by smart but very fallible people who were wrestling with hard questions.

Required Reading

—*Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language*, edited by Robert Stainton (Broadview Press)
—Other readings via the Canvas site for the course (<https://rutgers.instructure.com/courses/4840>)

Recommended: *The Language Instinct*, by Steven Pinker (Harper)

Contact Information

Any announcements about the class will be made via the Canvas site.

My office: 528 Gateway Building (5th floor), 106 Somerset St.

Office hours (tentative): Tuesdays 4-5, Wednesdays 1:30-2:30, or by appointment

Email: paul.pietroski@rutgers.edu

Course Requirements and Grading

- (a) Four 2-page essays (double spaced, 1-inch margins, font not larger than Times-12).

Each of these essays will be worth 15% of your final grade.

Starting Jan 30th, and ending April 24th, I will provide an essay topic in class each Wednesday, except for March 13th and 27th). *You must submit essays on exactly four of the ten weekly topics, and you must submit at least two essays before Spring Break.*

The essays will be due at 4:30 the following Wednesday. ***No late essays will be accepted.***

But the first essay can be rewritten in light of comments, within one week of return; and I'll split the difference between the original grade and the grade for the rewrite. Subsequent essays can be rewritten, within one week of return, for extra credit that I'll consider when assigning your final grade for the course (taking any trend of improvement into account).

- (b) a take-home mid-term, on the same scale as an in-class (75 minute) exam, worth 15%

- (c) a final exam worth 25% of your final grade. The exam will be open-note.

It will be straightforward for those who have done the readings and attended classes.

- (d) Class participation can help your final grade.

Tentative Class Schedule (PPL is the anthology, with essays numbered)

Jan 23, 28: Introduction and *What are Languages?* (via Canvas)

Jan 30: excerpt from Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (via Canvas)

Feb 4, 6: *Meaning* (Grice, PPL-6)

Feb 11, 13: Subjects, Predicates, and Sentences: *Logical Form, sections 1-2* (via Canvas)

Feb 18, 20: Language of Thought: *Propositional Attitudes* (Fodor, PPL-7)

Feb 25, 27: Acquiring Knowledge and Human Nature: *Meno* (via Canvas)

Mar 4, 6: *Knowledge of Language* (Chomsky, PPL-1)

Mar 11, 13: *Performative Utterances* (Austin, PPL-10)

SPRING BREAK

Mar 25, 27: *What is a Speech Act* (Searle PPL-11) [midterm distributed on March 25th]

Apr 1, 3: *Logic and Conversation* (Grice, PPL-12) [midterm due on April 3rd]

Apr 8, 10: *On Sense and Reference* (Frege, PPL-2)

Apr 15, 17: *Descriptions* (Russell, PPL-3)

Apr 22, 24: *On Referring* (Strawson, PPL-13)

Reference and Definite Descriptions (Donnellan, PPL-14)

Apr 29, May 1: *What Metaphors Mean* (Davidson, PPL-15).

May 6: Wrap up and Review for Final Exam