



# Philosophy of Language

## Phil 234, Spring 2009

**Course Description:** It has been argued that language is what sets us as human beings apart from our animal cousins. Language enables complex social interactions and facilitates the development of culture. It makes it possible for us to convey our thoughts, moods, and emotions to others. It also, arguably, is the tool that makes the contents of our own thoughts transparent to us. However we rarely reflect on what it is to be a language. What is a language? Do animals have language? If we came across beings from another planet could we tell if they had language? What is it that makes some sounds (or marks) meaningful and others not? What is it for a word to sound to represent, identify, or pick something out? What is it for a sentence to be true? What is it to know that Superman can fly but to justifiably believe that Clark Kent can't? In this course we will address these and a range of related questions about the nature of language through a philosophical lens. The course will be divided into three sections: *Animals & Humans*; *Meaning, Reference, & Truth*; and *Thought & Meaning*.

**Course Goals:** The aim of this course is to 1) introduce students to some basic problems in the philosophy of language, by 2) working through philosophical discussions of the origin and nature of language, and 3) evaluating the relationship between language and thought.

**Requirements:** You will be asked to write a 3-page paper, a 6-page mid-term paper and an 8-page final paper on assigned topics. Each paper is worth 30% of your final grade. The goal of these assignments is to encourage you to think through problems in the philosophy of language on your own.

**Attendance:** **CLASS PARTICIPATION IS A REQUIREMENT** (10% of your final grade). Attendance is a minimum requirement for student participation. Therefore, excessive absence will affect a student's final grade.

**Required Texts:**

- Michael Devitt & Kim Sterelny, *Language and Reality*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (MIT Press, 1999) (**DS**)
- A. P. Martinich, *The Philosophy of Language*, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2001) (**M**).
- Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (Harper Perennial, 1994) (**P**)
- Readings on Lyceum. (**LYCEUM**)

## **SCHEDULE OF READINGS:**

What follows is a provisional syllabus. I have included some recommended readings along with the required readings for each topic. These readings provide background material, further detail for interested students, and alternative views. They should be very helpful for constructing paper topics. Try to have a look at least some of them. I will add to these lists as the semester unfolds. It is a good idea to check back at the syllabus posted on Lyceum every week to keep track of these changes.

It is also likely that the reading schedule will change, as may the readings within it, as a result of class interest and time constraints. This type of syllabus flexibility enhances our capacity to accommodate your interests.

### *Topic 1: Animals & Humans*

#### ***The Language Instinct***

Devitt & Sterelny

Pinker

Introduction (*DS*)

An Instinct to Acquire an Art (*P*)

#### ***Animals & Humans***

Pinker

Wynne

Evans

Pepperberg

The Big Bang (*P*)

Talk to Me & (excerpts) (*LYCEUM*)

Cracking the Code: Communication and Cognition in Birds (*LYCEUM*)

Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Grey Parrots (*LYCEUM*)

#### ***Animal Language?***

Savage et al

Devitt & Sterelny

Animal Language: Methodological and Interpretive Issues (*LYCEUM*)

Syntax (*DS*)

#### ***Recommended***

Reznikova

Terrace et al

Intelligent Communication (*LYCEUM*)

Can an Ape Create a Sentence (*LYCEUM*)

### *Topic 2: Meaning, Reference & Truth*

#### ***Sense & Reference***

Devitt & Sterelny

Mill

Frege

Truth and Reference (*DS*)

Of Names (*M*)

On Sense & Nominatum (*M*)

#### ***Names & Descriptions***

Devitt & Sterelny

Russell

Russell

Russell

Strawson

Devitt & Sterelny

Donnellan

Description Theories of Reference: Names (*DS*)

Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description (*LYCEUM*)

On Denoting (*M*)

Descriptions (excerpt) (*M*)

On Referring (*M*)

Theories of Reference: Other Terms (*DS*)

Reference & Definite Descriptions (*M*)

#### ***Causal Theory of Names***

Devitt & Sterelny

Kripke

Putnam

Evans

A Causal Theory of Reference: Names (*DS*)

Naming and Necessity (*M*)

Meaning & Reference (*M*)

The Causal Theory of Names (*M*)

***Names and Demonstratives***

Searle  
Kaplan  
Perry

Proper Names and Intentionality  
Dthat  
The Problem of the Essential Indexical

***Speech Acts***

Austin  
Searle

Performative Utterances (**M**)  
The Structure of Illocutionary Acts (**M**)

***Recommended***

Grice

Logic and Conversation (**M**)

***The Private Language Argument***

Ayer  
Fodor

Could There Be A Private Language? (**LYCEUM**)  
Private Language, Public Languages (**LYCEUM**)

***Recommended***

Kripke

Rules and Private Language (**M**)

**Topic 3: Thought & Meaning**

***Language of Thought***

Devitt & Sterelny  
Pinker  
Pinker

Thought and Meaning (**DS**)  
Chatterboxes (**P**)  
Mentalese (**P**)

***Intention, Meaning, & Convention***

Grice  
Lewis  
Davidson

Meaning (**M**)  
Language and Languages (**M**)  
A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs (**M**)

***Recommended***

Devitt & Sterelny  
Davidson

Rational Psychology  
Radical Interpretation

***The Naturalized Turn***

Quine  
Millikan  
Devitt & Sterelny

Two Dogmas of Empiricism (**M**)  
Biosemantics (**M**)  
First Philosophy (**DS**)

## ASSIGNMENTS:

**First Paper** – Please write a 3 page (900 word) paper on one of the following topics. Your paper should be double-spaced in 12 point font with 1” margins. The purpose of this assignment is to give you a chance to stretch your philosophical legs, provide you with some feedback about the expectations of the class, and to evaluate your understanding of the course material.

Paper Topic (1a): Animal language studies don’t seem to hold out much promise. Evaluate attempts to teach primates artificial languages. What are the shortcomings of primate linguistic behavior? How do these studies shed light on the claim that linguistic communication is a biological adaptation?

Paper Topic (1b): Are referential signals like the alarm calls of vervet monkeys and the food calls of sebright chickens analogous to language? What is at issue in this debate? Are there criteria that can help adjudicate between alternative hypotheses?

Due Date: 02/10/09 @ 5pm

**Second Paper** - Write a 6 page paper (1800 words) on one of two topics to be announced on the distribution date for the midterm. Your paper should be double-spaced in 12 point font with 1” margins. The purpose of this paper is twofold: a) to evaluate a standard argument in the literature; and b) to demonstrate that you can synthesize the material covered in the 1st half of the semester into a coherent position. Make sure to hand in an electronic copy in the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Paper Dropbox* on LYCEUM and a hard copy in the mailbox on my office door (#202) in 75 Campus Avenue.

Paper Topic (2a): Discussions of eliciting conditions, signal structure, & receiver response in animal communication studies can arguably be seen as analogous to discussions of meaning, reference, and competence in philosophy of language. Evaluate this analogy paying careful attention to the distinction between nominal reference and the mechanisms available to a description theory.

Paper Topic (2b): Description theories of reference were designed to resolve problems related to the semantics of a range of types of sentences. Evaluate the proposed solution. Do you find it satisfactory?

Paper Topic (2c): Causal theories of reference were designed to resolve problems associated with description theories of names. What are these problems? Do you find the proposed solution satisfactory or does it come at too high a cost to a theory of meaning?

Due Date: 03/17/09 @ 5pm

**Third Paper** – Write an 8 page paper (2400 words) on one of the following topics. Your paper should be double-spaced in 12 point font with 1” margins. The purpose of this paper is twofold: a) to evaluate a standard argument in the literature; and b) to demonstrate that you can synthesize the material covered in the 1st half of the semester into a coherent position.

Paper Topic (3a): Can there be a private language of thought that grounds our linguistic abilities? In constructing your answer make sure to make reference to both the philosophical issues that give rise to this question and the range of case studies reported by Stephen Pinker.

Paper Topic (3b): Are you satisfied with Devitt & Sterelney’s strategy for closing the Gricean Circe? In constructing your answer be sure to discuss speaker meaning and the distinction between natural and non-natural meaning.

Paper Topic (3c): Discuss the relationship between Lewis’ account of conventions and Grice’s theory of meaning. Do you think that the conjunction of the two make for a satisfactory account of language and communication?

Paper Topic (3d): Why does Davidson assert that there is no such thing as a language? Do you agree with the thrust of his argument? In constructing your answer make sure to make reference to at least one other theory that we discussed during the

Topics Distributed: 03/26

Due Date: 04/10/09 @5pm

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

### **Topic 1: Animals & Humans**

- Michael Devitt & Kim Sterelny (1999). "Introduction," *Language & Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 1-15.
- Steven Pinker (1994). "An Instinct to Acquire an Art," *The Language Instinct* (New York: Harper Perennial), pp. 15-24.
- Clive D. L. Wynne (2004). "What Are Animals (excerpt)," *Do Animals Think* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), pp. 5-12.
- Clive D. L. Wynne (2004). "Talk to Me," *Do Animals Think* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), pp. 106-138.
- Clive D. L. Wynne (2004). "The Secrets of the Honeybee Machine (excerpts)," *Do Animals Think* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), pp. 21-37.
- Steven Pinker (1994). "The Big Bang (excerpt)," *The Language Instinct* (New York: Harper Perennial), pp. 332-349.
- Michael Devitt & Kim Sterelny (1999). "Syntax," *Language & Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 114-133.
- Christopher S. Evans (2002). "Cracking the Code: Communication and Cognition in Birds," in Marc Bekoff, Colin Allen, & Gordon M. Burghardt, *The Cognitive Animal: Empirical and Theoretical perspectives on Animal Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 315-321.
- Irene M. Pepperbeg (2002). "Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Grey Parrots," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 11(3), pp. 83-87.
- Sue Savage-Rumbaugh & Karen E. Brakke (1996). "Animal Language: Methodological & Interpretive Issues," In M. Bekoff and D. Jamieson. (eds.). *Readings in Animal Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 269-288.

### **Recommended**

- H. S. Terrace, L. A. Pettito, R.J. Sanders, & T. G. Beaver (1979) "Can an Ape Create a Sentence," *Science* 206(4421), pp. 891-902.
- Steven Pinker (1994). "How Language Works," *The Language Instinct* (New York: Harper Perennial), pp. 83-125.
- Zhanna Reznikova (2000). "Intelligent Communication," *Animal Intelligence* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 321-360.
- Terrence W. Deacon (1997). "A Loss for Words," *The Symbolic Species* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), pp. 47-63.

### **Topic 2: Meaning, Reference, & Truth**

- Michael Devitt & Kim Sterelny (1999). "Truth & Reference," *Language & Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 17-44.
- John Stuart Mill, "Of Names," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 284-289.
- Gottlob Frege, "On Sense & Nominatum," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 217-229.
- Michael Devitt & Kim Sterelny (1999). "Description Theories of Reference: Names," *Language & Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 45-65.
- Bertrand Russell (1912/1997). "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description," *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 46-59.
- Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 230-238.
- Bertrand Russell, "Descriptions," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 243-245.
- P. F. Strawson, "On Referring," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 246-260.
- Michael Devitt & Kim Sterelny (1999). "A Causal Theory of Reference: Names" *Language & Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 66-82.
- Saul Kripke, "Naming & Necessity," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 290-301.
- Hilray Putnam, "Meaning & Reference," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 288-295.
- Michael Devitt & Kim Sterelny (1999). "Theories of Reference: Other terms" *Language & Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 83-90; 101-104.
- Donald Davidson, "Truth & Meaning," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 114-125.
- J. L. Austin, "Performative Utterances," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 136-145.
- John Searle, "The Structure of Illocutionary Acts," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 146-156.

- A. J. Ayer, "Could There Be A Private Language," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 5th Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 136-145.
- Jerry A. Fodor, "Private Language, Public Languages," *The Language of Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 55-97.

*Recommended:*

- Keith Donnellan, "Reference & Definite Descriptions," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 247-258.
- Gareth Evans, "A Causal Theory of Names," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 296-307.
- Jon Barwise & John Perry, "Semantic Innocence and Uncompromising Situations," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 392-404 (**M**)
- W. V. O. Quine, "Quantifiers & Propositional Attitudes," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 355-360 (**M**)
- Alfred Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 69-91 (**M**)
- H. P. Grice, "Logic & Conversation," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 165-175 (**M**)
- Saul Kripke, "On Rules & Private Language," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 531-544 (**M**)

University Press, 2004), pp. 562-580.

- Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 473-484.
- Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 47, (1973 - 1974), pp. 5-20.
- W. V. O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 47-60.
- Ruth Millikan, "Biosemantics," in David J. Chalmers (ed.) *The Philosophy of Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 500-509.
- Michael Devitt & Kim Sterelny (1999). "

**Topic 3: Thought & Meaning**

- Michael Devitt & Kim Sterelny (1999). "Thought & Meaning," *Language & Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 135-165.
- Steven Pinker (1994). "Chatterboxes," *The Language Instinct* (New York: Harper Perennial), pp. 25-55.
- Steven Pinker (1994). "Mentalese," *The Language Instinct* (New York: Harper Perennial), pp. 55-82.
- H. P. Grice, "Meaning," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 92-97.
- David Lewis, "Languages & Language," in A.P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 273-288.

*Recommended*

- Michael Devitt & Kim Sterelny (1999). "Rational Psychology," *Language & Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 298-306.
- Donald Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," reprinted in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 2nd edition, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 125-140.

| <b>Date</b> | <b>Readings</b>   | <b>Assignments</b>                       |
|-------------|---|--|
| 01/13       | Devitt & Sterelny, "Introduction," pp. 1-15 ( <i>DS</i> )   |  |
| 01/15       | Pinker, "An Instinct to Acquire an Art," pp. 15-24 ( <i>P</i> )   |  |
| 01/20       | Pinker, "The Big Bang (excerpt)," pp. 332-342 ( <i>P</i> )<br>Wynne, "Talk to Me" & <i>excerpts</i> pp. 5-12; 106-138; 21-37 ( <i>LYCEUM</i> )  |  |
| 01/22       | Evans, "Cracking the Code: Communication and Cognition in Birds," pp. 315-322 ( <i>LYCEUM</i> )<br>Pepperberg, "Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Grey Parrots," pp. 83-87 ( <i>LYCEUM</i> ) |  |
| 01/27       | Savage-Rumbaugh & Brakke, "Animal language:...", pp. 269-288 ( <i>LYCEUM</i> )<br>Devitt & Sterelny, "Syntax," pp. 114-123 ( <i>DS</i> )  | 1 <sup>st</sup> paper topics distributed |
| 01/29       | Devitt & Sterelny, "Truth & Reference," pp. 17-44 ( <i>DS</i> )<br>Mill, "Of Names," pp. 284-289 ( <i>M</i> )   |  |
| 02/03       | Frege, "On Sense & Nominatum," pp. 217-229 ( <i>M</i> )   |  |
| 02/05       | Devitt & Sterelny, "Description Theories of Reference: Names," pp. 45-65 ( <i>DS</i> )<br>Russell, "On Denoting," pp. 230-238 ( <i>M</i> )<br>Russell, "Descriptions," pp. 243-245 ( <i>M</i> )     |  |
| 02/10       | Strawson, "On Referring," pp. 246-260 ( <i>M</i> )  | 1 <sup>st</sup> Paper Due                |
| 02/12       | Devitt & Sterelny, "Theories of Reference: Other Terms," pp. 83-104 ( <i>DS</i> )<br>Donnellan, "Reference & Definite Descriptions," pp. 265-276 ( <i>M</i> )                                       |  |
| 02/14-02/22 | Winter Recess   |  |
| 02/24       | Devitt & Sterelny, "A Causal Theory of Reference: Names" pp. 66-82 ( <i>DS</i> )<br>Kripke, "Naming & Necessity," pp. 290-305 ( <i>M</i> )  |  |
| 02/26       | Putnam, "Meaning & Reference," pp. 306-313 ( <i>M</i> )   |  |
| 03/03       | Evans, "A Causal Theory of Names," pp. 314-325 ( <i>M</i> )   | 2nd paper topics distributed             |
| 03/05       | Austin, "Performative Utterances," pp. 136-145 ( <i>M</i> )   |  |
| 03/10       | Searle, "The Structure of Illocutionary Acts," pp. 146-156 ( <i>LYCEUM</i> )  |  |
| 03/12       | Ayer, "Could There Be A Private Language," pp. 449-456 ( <i>LYCEUM</i> )  |  |
| 03/17       | Fodor, "Private Language, Public Languages," pp. 55-97 ( <i>LYCEUM</i> )  | 2nd paper due                            |
| 03/24       | Devitt & Sterelny, "Thought & Meaning," pp. 135-165 ( <i>DS</i> )<br>Pinker, "Chatterboxes," pp. 25-54 ( <i>P</i> )<br>Pinker, "Mentalese," pp. 55-83 ( <i>P</i> )                                  |  |
| 03/24       | Grice, "Meaning," pp. 108-113 ( <i>M</i> )  |  |
| 03/26       | Lewis, "Language and Languages," pp. 656-660  | 3rd paper topics distributed             |
| 03/31       | Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," pp. 585-595 ( <i>M</i> )  |  |
| 04/02       | Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," pp. 5-20 ( <i>LYCEUM</i> )   |  |
| 04/07       | Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," pp. 63-76 ( <i>M</i> )   |  |
| 04/09       | Catch-up, Discussion, Wrap-up   | 3rd paper due 5pm 04/10                  |

\* = Recommended