

PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE: COMMUNICATION & MISCOMMUNICATION

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Note: This is an abridged sample syllabus designed for a 15-week semester. An intermediate undergraduate course that builds on skills students have been introduced to in a previous philosophy course. It is designed for students with interests in philosophy, psychology, linguistics, cognitive science, communication studies, literature, and related disciplines.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Language is a central part of social life: the language we speak shapes the way we think, allows us to communicate with others, lets us express ideas, beliefs, and attitudes, and enables us to perform actions like orders, apologies, and promises. Sometimes we use language cooperatively—to share information or to coordinate action. But in other contexts, we use language to insinuate, subordinate, mislead, bullshit, and silence. In this course, we will explore philosophical approaches to theorizing about the different roles language plays in our lives. We will survey some key concepts philosophers of language have developed to help us understand how language works and then use these tools to analyze political uses of language.

Some of the questions we will examine include:

- What is the point of having a language?
- When is something implied rather than meant?
- How can language be used to insinuate or dogwhistle?
- Can speech be used to subordinate or silence?
- What is the meaning of “oops!”?
- Can language be a tool of colonization?
- What is lost when a language becomes extinct?

This course will be relevant to students with interests in philosophy, linguistics, cognitive science, psychology, race and ethnicity studies, gender studies, sociology, anthropology, and literature.

COURSE GOALS

Students in this course will develop and cultivate the following skills and forms of knowledge:

- An understanding of key philosophical theories, concepts, and debates about language, communication, and miscommunication
- The ability to charitably read, interpret, and critically evaluate complex texts in philosophy

- The ability to apply philosophical theories and tools to everyday uses of language, particularly political speech
- The ability to develop your own perspective on different approaches to theorizing about language
- The ability to respectfully discuss philosophical ideas with a diverse group of thinkers
- The ability to clearly explain complex ideas verbally and through writing

ASSESSMENT

- **Participation (26%):** Active participation in discussion sections over the course of the semester. Some ways you can participate include:
 - Contributing verbally in whole-class discussions (especially in a way that shows completion of the reading and critical reflection on the course texts and lectures).
 - Contributing verbally in small group discussions (especially in a way which helps others in your group join the discussion).
 - Bringing a specific question you have about the reading or lecture to class.
 - Coming to my office hours to have a discussion about the reading or course content.
- **Reading reflections (24%):** reflections are due weekly, by the night before our first class. Reflections should be around 3-4 sentences and should raise a question or offer a comment about one of the upcoming readings/viewings. Each reflection is worth 2%. You can miss 3 reflections over the semester.
- **Two short assignments:**
 - Assignment 1 (10%, 500 words): Pick one real-life example of bullshit speech, insinuation, or dogwhistling. Using at least one course text, explain how your example illustrates one of the communicative mechanisms in Unit 2.
 - Assignment 2 (10%, 500 words): Pick one real-life example of subordinating speech. Using at least one course text, explain two elements of language use (from Units 4 or 5) which enable this speech to subordinate.
- **Paper outline (10%, 1 page):** An outline of your paper, including a brief statement of your paper's thesis, two central claims, an objection to your view, your response.
- **Final paper (20%, 2000 words):** An argumentative essay, with a choice between 3 topics.

SCHEDULE & READINGS

UNIT 1: WHAT IS THE POINT OF LANGUAGE? (3 WEEKS)
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Day 1: Language as the representation of ideas

- John Locke, Book III, Chapters i-iii, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Day 2: Language as sense and reference

- Gottlob Frege, “Sense and Reference”

Day 3: Language as sense and reference

- Gottlob Frege, “Sense and Reference”

Day 4: Language as social coordination

- Michael Tomasello, “Origins of Human Language”, Chapter 1, *The Origins of Human Communication*

Day 5: Language as a rule-governed game

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, §1-16, *Philosophical Investigations*

Day 6: Language as a rule-governed game

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, §16-32, *Philosophical Investigations*

UNIT 2: KEY CONCEPTS & TOOLS—MEANING, CONTEXT, IMPLICATURE (3 WEEKS)
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Day 7: Convention

- David Lewis, “Languages and Language”

Day 8: Speaker meaning

- Paul Grice, “Meaning”

Day 9: Presupposition & accommodation

- Robert Stalnaker, “Pragmatic Presupposition”

Day 10: Implicature & cooperative maxims

- Paul Grice, “Logic and Conversation”

Day 11: Context

- Craige Roberts, “Context in Dynamic Interpretation”

Day 12: Scorekeeping

- David Lewis, “Scorekeeping in a Language Game”

Day 13: Bullshit

- George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”

UNIT 3: CASE STUDY—BULLSHIT, INSINUATION & DOGWHISTLES (1.5 WEEKS)

Day 14: Bullshit

- Harry Frankfurt, selections from *On Bullshit*

Day 15: Insinuation

- Elisabeth Camp, “Insinuation, Common Ground, and the Conversational Record”

Day 16: Dogwhistles

- Jennifer Saul: “Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation and Philosophy of Language”

Assignment 1 due

UNIT 4: KEY CONCEPTS & TOOLS—SPEECH ACTS (2 WEEKS)

Day 17: Speech acts—What is a speech act?

- John Austin, “Performative Utterances”

Day 18: Speech acts—Intention vs. convention

- Peter Strawson, “Intention and Convention in Speech Acts”

Day 19: Speech acts—Indirect speech acts

- Clark & Carlson, “Hearers and Speech Acts”

Day 20: Assertion

- Robert Stalnaker, “Assertion”
- Robert Brandom, “Asserting”

UNIT 5: CASE STUDY—SUBORDINATING SPEECH (2 WEEKS)

Day 21: Subordinating & silencing speech acts

- Rae Langton, “Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts”
 - Content note: hate speech, sexual assault

Day 22: Subordinating & silencing speech acts

- Ishani Maitra, “Subordinating Speech”
 - Content note: hate speech

Day 23: Discursive injustice

- Quill R. Kukla, “Performative Force, Convention, and Discursive Injustice”

Day 24: Action-engendering speech acts

- Lynne Tirrell, selections from “Genocidal Language Games”
 - Content note: racialized violence, hate speech

Assignment 2 due

UNIT 6: KEY CONCEPTS & TOOLS—EXPRESSIVE & RELATIONAL SPEECH (2 WEEKS)

Day 25: Second-person calls

- Mark Lance & Quill R. Kukla, “‘Leave the Gun; Take the Cannoli!’: The Pragmatic Topography of Second-Person Calls”

Day 26: Expressives

- David Kaplan, “The Meaning of ‘Ouch’ and ‘Oops’”

Day 27: Group-directed speech

- Cassie Herbert & Quill R. Kukla, “Ingrouping, Outgrouping, and the Pragmatics of Peripheral Speech”

UNIT 7: CASE STUDY—THE VALUE OF LANGUAGE(S) (1.5 WEEKS)

Day 28: Linguistic colonialism

- Frantz Fanon, Chapter 1, “The Black Man and Language,” in *Black Skin, White Masks*

Day 29: Linguistic diversity

- April Baker Bell, Chapter 1, “Black Language is Good on Any MLK Boulevard,” in *Linguistic Justice*

Day 30: Language extinction

- Ethan Nowak, “Language Loss and Illocutionary Silencing”

Final paper due