

PHIL 364 | FALL 2016 | HW506 | MON+THURS | 11:10-12:25

PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

TAUGHT BY DANIEL HARRIS

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course website: danielwharris.com/teaching/364/

ABOUT THE COURSE

Language has been one of the central topics in philosophy for more than a century. In this course, we'll introduce ourselves to the philosophical study of language by considering some of the influential ways that philosophers have answered the question, *What is language?* According to some of the theories we'll consider, language is:

- a system of symbols
- a way of acting
- a tool for communication
- a medium of thought
- a cognitive structure
- a means for creative expression
- a social building block
- an expression of cultural identity

These answers aren't mutually exclusive, and each one captures something important about the nature of language and how we should understand it and its role in human life.

It's far from obvious how all of the theories that have accompanied these answers should fit together, and so the overarching theme of the course will be the multifacetedness of language: how does language play all of the roles that it plays in our lives?

READINGS AND WEBSITE

You'll need to buy one book:

Meaning: A Slim Guide to Semantics, by Paul Elbourne. Oxford University Press. 2011. ISBN: 9780199696628.

All of the other required readings will be available on the course website:

danielwharris.com/teaching/364

username: hunter

password: language

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Short Essays: 40%

Term Paper Draft: 20%

Comments on Other Students' Drafts: 10%

Term Paper: 30%

SHORT ESSAYS

Over the course of the semester, you should submit at least 6 short (~300-500 word) essays. In each essay, you will give a single argument concerning some point raised the previous week. You have two options:

- Object to an idea defended in one of that week's readings readings.
- Defend the reading against an objection raised in class.

You have very limited space in these short essays. Focus on making a single argument that is clear, concise, and convincing. Make sure that every word in your essay plays some role in making this argument better. You can also think of the short essays as a place to test out ideas that could eventually make it into your term paper.

These short essays will be worth 40% of your overall grade. There will be 14 weeks on which you can hand one in, but at least three of them must be submitted in the first six weeks. (I.e., by October 9th). Each week's essay is due by email at midnight on the Sunday at the end of that week. (So, for example, the first week's due date is Sunday, Sept 4th.)

I will average the grades from your six best essays to calculate your final short-essay grade. That means that if you get a grade you don't like, you can try to cancel it out by handing in an extra one in a future week. I recommend that you start handing in short essays consistently early in the semester.

TERM PAPER

Your term paper should be a sustained defense of a single philosophical thesis about language, and should be about 2500 words long. I'll have some suggestions about topics, but

you're also free to choose your own. Either way, you should consult with me about your topic.

In addition to having read all of the relevant required readings for class, you'll be responsible for understanding some of other philosophical literature that's relevant to your topic. This means that you should research what authors other than those we've read in class have to say about a topic. There is no specific number of works you need to cite, but you should talk to me about whether you've covered enough of the bases during your office visit.

DRAFT AND COMMENTS

You'll hand in a draft of your essay no later than one week before the last day of class. This draft should be at least about 1500 words long. It should be a highly polished essay, not "rough". I will grade it the way I would normally grade a term paper. The reason for this is that the purpose of this draft is to get feedback from me and from other students to make your final essay *better* than an average term paper, and it's hard to give useful feedback on an unfinished draft. (This needn't be the first draft of the essay I see. I will be happy to look at earlier drafts ahead of time, and to meet with you to discuss the paper.) I will get you comments on this draft no later than the last day of class. The final essay will be due a week later.

These drafts will also be distributed to other members of the class for feedback. Each student will be responsible for writing at least a page of comments on at least two other students' papers, and each paper will be read by at least two other students. These comments will be given back to the essay's writer, and to me for grading. The comments should begin with a 200-word summary of the essay's argument, and should then provide at least 300 words of constructive feedback about points in the essay that could use more work.

The goal of this exercise is to improve each other's papers, and to become better at giving and receiving helpful feedback. Good philosophical writing is almost always the result of a slow and collaborative process involving several drafts. (If you don't believe me, look at how many people get thanked for their feedback at the start of most philosophy books and essays.)

I will grade the comments on the basis of how well you understand the paper being commented on, and on the helpfulness of your comments. Of course: criticisms and objections can make very helpful comments, if they show a gap or an unclarity in the author's argument. But good comments are always respectful and aimed at making the paper better in the long run.

Your grade on the final draft of your term paper will take into account how well you incorporate the help from the comments you receive.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

If all goes well, here's what will happen this semester:

- You'll learn about some central philosophical questions about language and the ways that some influential philosophers have tried to answer them.
- You'll get better at thinking like a philosopher. This means thinking clearly about hard questions, taking a rationally critical attitude toward your own and others' answers to those questions, and being willing to go where the best reasons and arguments lead.
- You'll get better at reading like a philosopher. This means identifying what's important and controversial in an author's claims, distinguishing between rational and irrational support for those claims, and noticing the weak spots in their arguments.
- You'll get better at writing like a philosopher. This means being clear about what you're trying to say, giving the best possible rational support for your claims, and anticipating the objections of those who disagree.
- Since these ways of thinking, reading, and writing are useful for dealing with issues outside philosophy, you'll gain some skills that you can use in other courses, and in your everyday life.

HOW TO GET A GOOD GRADE

Getting an A in this course will require you to do all of the following:

- Do all of the readings before we discuss them in class, and preferably again afterward.
- Show understanding of the weekly readings in short essays.
- Regularly engage in class discussion. Visit my office hours or email me for further discussion.
- Work hard at understanding and thinking critically about the theories we discuss.
- Learn to write in the clear, concise, and convincingly argumentative style that philosophers prefer.
- Ruthlessly revise and proofread your essays until they are written in clear and grammatical English.

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

Hunter College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The College is committed to enforcing the CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty according to the Hunter College Academic Integrity Procedures.

1		August 25 (Introduction)
2	August 29 John Locke: 'Of Words'	September 1 John Stuart Mill: 'Of Names'
3	September 5 NO CLASS (LABOR DAY)	September 8 Gottlob Frege: 'On Sense and Reference'
4	September 12 Bertrand Russell: 'Descriptions'; 'Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description' (Guest Instructor: Cosim Sayid)	September 15 Kripke: <i>Naming and Necessity</i> (excerpt) (Guest Instructor: Cosim Sayid)
5	September 19 Paul Elbourne: <i>Meaning</i> , chs.1-3	September 22 Putnam: 'Meaning and Reference'
6	September 26 Lila Gleitman and Elissa Newport: <i>The Invention of Language by Children</i>	September 29 Richard Larson: <i>Grammar as Science</i> (excerpt)
7	October 3 NO CLASS (Rosh Hashana)	October 6 Daniel W. Harris: 'Crash Course on Formal Languages and Logic'
8	October 10 NO CLASS (Yom Kippur)	October 13 Paul Elbourne: <i>Meaning</i> , chs.4-5
9	October 17 Paul Elbourne: <i>Meaning</i> , ch.6	October 20 Richard Larson: 'Semantics'
10	October 24 Ludwig Wittgenstein: <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> (excerpt)	October 27 Paul Elbourne: <i>Meaning</i> , ch.7
11	October 31 David Kaplan: 'Demonstratives' (excerpt)	November 3 David Lewis: Scorekeeping in a Language Game
	November 7 H. P. Grice: 'Meaning'	November 10 Susan Carey: 'Agency' (excerpt) Paul Bloom: 'Word Learning and Theory of Mind'
12	November 14 H. P. Grice: <i>Logic and Conversation</i>	November 17 John Searle: <i>Metaphor</i> Ernie Lepore & Matthew Stone: <i>Against Metaphorical Meaning</i>
13	November 21 Elizabeth Camp: 'Metaphor and that Certain <i>Je Ne Sais Quoi</i> ' Elisabeth Camp: 'Slurring Perspectives'	November 24 NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)
14	November 28 Geoff Nunberg: 'The Social Life of Slurs' Jeremy Waldron: <i>The Harm in Hate Speech</i> (excerpt)	December 1 Paul Elbourne, <i>Meaning</i> , ch.8
15	December 5 Sally Mcconnell-Genet: 'Language, Gender, and Sexuality' Essay Draft Due	December 8 Rae Langton: 'Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts' Jason Stanley: 'Ways of Silencing'
	December 12 TBD	