PH3245 Language and Thought

Daniel Waxman

This course explores central philosophical questions about the connections between language and thought. Can animals without language think? Does all thought take place in a language-like medium? Does language merely express our thoughts, or does it also shape how we think? How do sentences and thoughts manage to represent the world around us? Can large language models understand language, think, or refer to things?

Unit 1: Connections Between Language and Thought

Week 1: **Introduction and Overview: Is Language Sufficient for Thought?**
Turing: Computing Machinery and Intelligence (focus on pp. 443–452)
Block: Psychologism and Behaviorism

Week 2: **Can LLMs Understand Language?**
Bender and Koller: Climbing towards NLU: On Meaning, Form, and Understanding in the Age of Data
Mahowald et al.: Dissociating Language and Thought in Large Language Models

Week 3: **Is Language Necessary for Thought?**
Stich: Do Animals Have Beliefs?
Gallistel: Prelinguistic Thought
*Andrews: Animal Cognition (SEP entry), esp. sections 2–4
*Camp and Shupe: Instrumental Reasoning in Nonhuman Animals
*Phillips et al.: Knowledge Before Belief, esp. section 4.1

Week 4: **The Language of Thought Hypothesis**
Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson: The Language of Thought
Camp: Thinking with Maps
*Crane: *The Mechanical Mind*, Ch. 4 (Feel free to skip the part on the modularity of mind.)

Week 5: **Does Language Make Us Smarter?**
Carruthers: The Cognitive Functions of Language
Fedorenko, Piantadosi and Gibson: Language Is Primarily a Tool for Communication Rather Than Thought
*Lupyan and Clark: Words and the World: Predictive Coding and the Language–Perception–Cognition Interface

Unit 2: Explaining Linguistic and Mental Content

Reducing Linguistic Content to Mental Content

Week 6: **Reductions I: Grice on Speaker Meaning**

Grice: Meaning

*Lycan: *Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction*, Ch. 7

*Glüer and Pagin: Meaning Theory and Autistic Speakers

Week 7: **Reductions II: Lewis on Meaning and Convention and LLM Reference**

Lewis: Languages and Language

Mandelkern and Linzen: Do Language Models' Words Refer?

*Hawthorne: A Note on 'Languages and Language'

*Grindrod: Large Language Models and Linguistic Intentionality

Theories of Mental Content

Week 8: **Theories of Mental Content I: Causal Theories of Content**

Crane: *The Mechanical Mind*, Ch. 5, pp. 169–184 (Feel free to skim the last two pages, on Fodor's asymmetric dependence theory.)

Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson: *Philosophy of Mind and Cognition*, Ch. 11, pp. 203–210

*Loewer: A Guide to Naturalizing Semantics, pp. 1–9

*Adams and Aizawa: Causal Theories of Mental Content (SEP entry)

Week 9: **Theories of Mental Content II: Teleosemantic Theories of Content**

Millikan: Biosemantics

Neander: Swampman Meets Swampcow

*Crane: *The Mechanical Mind*, Ch. 5, pp. 185–207 (Focus on pp. 189–194.)

*Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson: *Philosophy of Mind and Cognition*, Ch. 11, pp. 210–215

*Neander: Teleological Theories of Mental Content (SEP entry)

Week 10: **Theories of Mental Content III: Conceptual Role Semantics**

Harman: (Nonsolipsistic) Conceptual Role Semantics

Block: Advertisement for a Semantics for Psychology

*Fodor and Lepore: Why Meaning (Probably) Isn't Conceptual Role

Week 11: **Student Presentations**

Week 12: **Theories of Mental Content IV: The Intentional Stance**

Dennett: True Believers

Week 13: **Do LLMs Have Mental Representations?**

Piantadosi and Hill: Meaning Without Reference in Large Language Models

Beckmann and Queloz: Mechanistic Indicators of Understanding in Large Language Models (selected sections)

*Li et al.: Emergent World Representations: Exploring a Sequence Model Trained on a Synthetic Task