Philosophy of Language

Daniel Waxman

This course will examine a number of issues that arise from the philosophical study of language. We will consider questions like these:

Humans understand a potential infinity of novel sentences. For example, you have (probably) never heard the following sentence: "yesterday I was violently tickled by a hippopotamus wearing a Fedora in the upper floor of the Deck". Nevertheless, you manage to understand it perfectly well. How is this possible?

How do certain noises or inscriptions have the remarkable property of possessing meaning? For example, how does my use of the word or symbol "cats" refer to the furry four-legged creatures in the world?

Sometimes we communicate things that we do not literally say. For example, if I write a recommendation letter for a student that says "his handwriting is excellent and he is very punctual", that is not a ringing endorsement! How does this all work? What is the role of intention and convention in it?

Weekly readings are tentative and subject to revision, especially for later weeks. An asterisk marks optional readings.

Week 1: **Introduction to Philosophy of Language**

Week 2: **Frege's Puzzle**

Frege: On Sense and Reference

Kemp: *What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?*, Chs. 1–2

Week 3: **Russell on Meaning, Reference and Descriptions**

Russell: On Denoting

Kemp: *What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?*, Ch. 3

Week 4: **Kripke on Names**

Kripke: *Naming and Necessity* (selections)

*Kemp: *What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?*, Ch. 4, sections 1–6 (pp. 54–63)

Week 5: **Is Meaning in the Head?**

Putnam: Meaning and Reference

Putnam: Brains in a Vat (*Reason, Truth, and History*, Ch. 1)

*Kemp: *What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?*, Ch. 4, section 7 onwards (pp. 63–70)

Week 6: **Verificationism**

Ayer: *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Ch. 1

Hacking: A. J. Ayer's Verification (*Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?*, Ch. 9)

Week 7: **Truth-Conditional Semantics**
Davidson: Truth and Meaning
Kemp: *What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?*, Ch. 9

Week 8: **Beyond Truth-Conditional Semantics I: Pragmatics and Implicature**
Grice: Logic and Conversation
Simons: Foundational Issues in Presupposition
*Davis: Implicature (SEP entry)
*Beaver and Geurts: Presupposition (SEP entry), esp. sections 1–3

Week 9: **Beyond Truth-Conditional Semantics II: Expressivism**
Ayer: *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Ch. 6
Schroeder: What Is the Frege–Geach Problem?

Week 10: **How Is Meaning Possible? Kripkenstein I**
Kripke: *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (selections)

Week 11: **How Is Meaning Possible? Kripkenstein II**
Millikan: Truth Rules, Hoverflies, and the Kripke–Wittgenstein Paradox
Lewis: New Work for a Theory of Universals