

Philosophy 682: Proseminar on Meaning

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Summary. Two different kinds of theories often go under the heading ‘theory of meaning’: semantic theories, which are descriptive theories which say which meanings are paired with which expressions, and foundational theories of meaning, which try to explain the nature of the relation which holds between expressions and their meanings. The two kinds of theories are clearly related; adherence to a certain semantic theory might encourage certain views about foundational questions, or vice versa. Nonetheless, the two sorts of theories are distinct. This seminar will focus on contemporary approaches to the foundations of meaning.

Other issues which will be relevant to the seminar include the relationship between thought and language, the relative priorities of communities and individuals in the explanation of intentionality, the immanence of language, the relationship between use and meaning, and the nature of linguistic rules.

Requirements. Students will be required to write a term paper, give one or more presentations in the seminar, and participate in discussions.

Texts. The papers and selections of books which we’ll be discussing will be made available for photocopy.

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1 Mentalist theories I: Grice on speaker-meaning and intentions

Grice, "Meaning"; Grice, "Utterer's Meaning and Intentions."

A version of the mentalist view that the contents of linguistic expressions are determined by more fundamental facts about the contents of thought: specifically, the view that the meanings of sentences are determined by what speakers mean by uttering them, and that what speakers mean by utterances of sentences are a function of their communicative intentions.

2 Mentalist theories II: Lewis on convention and belief

Lewis, "Language and Languages."

A second version of mentalism, which holds that the meaning of a sentence is inherited from the belief with which it is conventionally correlated.

3 Interpretational theories: Davidson on meaning and interpretation

Davidson, "Thought and Talk" and "Radical Interpretation."

Davidson's view that the meaning of an expression is whatever an ideal interpreter would assign to it, and the idea that an ideal interpreter is one who maximizes the true beliefs of the agent to be interpreted.

4 Causal theories of meaning

Devitt and Sterelny, *Language and Reality* (selections from chs. 4 & 5).

The externalist view that the meaning of an expression is determined, at least in part, by what causes utterances of that expression.

5 Use theories I: Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (selections)

Wittgenstein's view that the meaning of an expression is its use in a community.

6 Use theories II: Sellars

Sellars, "Notes on Language Games" and "Meaning as Functional Classification."

Sellars' attempt to work out a rigorous theory of meaning along Wittgensteinian lines.

7 Use theories III: Dummett

Dummett, "What Does the Appeal to Use Do for the Theory of Meaning?" and "Language and Communication."

Dummett's version of the use theory of meaning, and his criticism of rival mentalist and Chomskian views of the foundations of meaning.

8 Use theories IV: Horwich

Horwich, *Meaning* (selections).

Horwich's idea that expressions have their meaning by virtue of having the property of being accepted by members of a community in certain circumstances.

9 Use theories V: Brandom

Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, Chapter 3, ‘Linguistic Practice and Discursive Commitment’.

Brandom’s idea that meaning is determined by social practices of ‘giving and asking for reasons.’

10 The rule-following paradox

Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Part I.

Kripke’s presentation of a paradox, which he finds in Wittgenstein, which seems to rule out any foundational theory of meaning.

11 Internalism I: Chomsky’s critique of traditional views of meaning

Chomsky, *Knowledge of Language* (selections from ch. 1 and ch. 4).

Chomsky’s criticisms of some of the foregoing theories of meaning, including the view of linguistic rules employed in Dummett’s theory of meaning and Kripke’s skeptical paradox.

12 Internalism II: Meaning and creativity

McGilvray, “Meaning and Creativity.”

The distinction between a theory of language and a theory of language use, and the connection of innateness to a Chomskian view of meaning.

13 Internalism III: Pietroski’s Chomskian view of meaning

Pietroski, “Meaning Before Truth.”