

Philosophy 135 - Theory of Meaning

Professor John MacFarlane

Spring, 2007

I can't see the planet Pluto, but just by uttering the words "Pluto is very cold," I can say something *about* Pluto, something whose truth or falsity depends on how things are millions of miles from Earth. How is this possible? What gives our words and sentences semantic properties (meaning, reference, truth)? Clearly, the semantic properties of words depend somehow on our thoughts and intentions: but how? And what gives our mental states *their* semantic properties? Are the meanings of our words and the contents of our mental states determined by what's going on inside our brains, or do they depend on features of our physical environments of which we may be unaware? Are they determined by how things are *now*, or do they depend on facts about our history (or even our futures)? Could there be facts about meaning we could only discover by looking in someone's brain? Are there objective facts about meaning at all? In exploring these and related questions, we will read the work of Quine, Davidson, Grice, Putnam, Dennett, Searle, Burge, Fodor, Dretske, and others.

Prerequisites

Two prior courses in philosophy or cognitive science, or permission of the instructor. We will not presuppose that you have taken courses in logic or the philosophy of language or mind. We *will* presuppose that you know how to write a critical analysis of a philosophical argument.

Books

All readings can be found in a course Reader, available at Copy Central on Bancroft.

Requirements

Students are expected to attend lecture and section regularly and keep up with the reading. Grades will be based on the following:

- **Study questions (20% of total).** For each reading, we will assign a few study questions which you are to answer in writing. The assignments will be announced in class and posted on the web. Keep your answers in a safe place (and make a copy or backup!). Three times during the term, we will collect your study questions and grade them (see the schedule for due dates). Answers to the study questions must be typed. It is fine to work with others on the study questions, but if you do so, you should be sure to write up your answers yourself, in your own words; duplicate answers will be considered cheating.

Note: For this assignment, you should use the up-to-date version of the study questions from the website, not the version in the back of your course Reader.

- **Two 5 page papers (25% each).** See the schedule for due dates. Late papers will be accepted (up to one week late), but penalized up to a full grade.
- **Peer review of first paper (5%).** This assignment will be completed on the website <http://turnitin.com>. You will be asked to comment anonymously on two randomly assigned papers by other students.
- **In-class final exam (25%).** Wednesday, May 16, 8–11 AM.

Section participation will not be formally graded, but will be taken into account in borderline cases.

Graduate students who are taking the course for credit should talk with me about requirements.

Lectures

Lectures will take place Tu 11–12:30 in 213 Wheeler. Attendance is expected. You will get the most out of lectures if you do the assigned reading before lecture, then again after lecture. Use the Study Questions to help guide you to most the important parts of the text.

Sections

Discussion sections will give you the opportunity to discuss course material in a small-group setting. All students who are taking the course for credit must be in a section. Section preferences will be solicited on Thursday, January 18. You will be informed of your section time and place by e-mail; if you don't hear from us by Sunday, January 21, please get in touch. Section meetings will begin the week of January 22.

Web site

Current course information (including class handouts, paper topics, announcements, study questions, interesting links, and an up-to-date schedule) can be found on the course web site, at

<http://sophos.berkeley.edu/macfarlane/135/>.

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism and cheating will not be tolerated in this course. Students caught plagiarizing will receive an F in the course. Please read the handout entitled "Plagiarism and Academic Integrity" (to be distributed with the first paper topics; also available on the web site), and review university policy at

<http://www.berkeley.edu/catalog/policies/conduct.html>.

Contact Information

Professor MacFarlane's office hours are Tu 12:30–2 and Th 2–3, or by appointment. His office is 231 Moses Hall, and his office phone number is 642–3174, but the best way to reach him is by e-mail: jgm@berkeley.edu.

Our GSIs are Stanley Chen GSIstan@gmail.com and James Stazicker stazicker@berkeley.edu. Their offices are in 301 Moses Hall. James's office hours at Tu 12:30–2 and by appointment.

Synopsis

The course is divided into six units. We will begin by investigating the relation between language and thought. It is natural to think that the intentionality of language is completely derivative from the intentionality of thought. In Unit 1, we will look at some philosophers who start from this assumption. These philosophers explain what it is for an utterance to have a certain meaning in terms of the intentions with which it is produced. This approach assumes that the intentionality of thought can be understood prior to and independently of the intentionality of language. It therefore raises the question: what is it for a thought (say, a belief or intention) to have a certain meaning or content?

In Unit 2, we begin to consider the problem of fitting the intentionality of thought into our scientific story about the world. What is it for a natural object to have intentionality? Is it enough if the object behaves in a way that would naturally be interpreted as meaningful? Could a computer come to have intentionality simply by running the right kind of program? We will look at three radically different approaches (those of Dennett, Block, and Searle).

It is natural to think that the semantic properties of our thoughts depend only on how things are in our brains. In Unit 3, we will consider some thought experiments (due to Putnam and Burge) that put pressure on that assumption. These thought experiments, if cogent, show that what my mental states are about depends not just on facts about my brain, but on facts about my physical and social environment. (As Putnam puts it, “meanings just ain’t in the head.”) We will also consider some responses to the thought experiments.

So far, we have assumed that there *are* semantic facts. This, too, has been questioned. Quine has famously argued that it is an illusion to think that our words have definite meanings or our mental states definite contents. More precisely, he has argued that there is no fact of the matter about how another’s speech should be translated; translation manuals that differ wildly in their translation of particular expressions may be equally adequate to the facts. In Unit 4, we will consider Quine’s arguments for this surprising conclusion and some responses to them.

Davidson accepts some of Quine’s indeterminacy arguments but thinks that there is still a place for talk of meaning. In Unit 5, we will study his sophisticated view. Davidson rejects the idea that mental intentionality is more fundamental than linguistic meaning; on his view, the meanings of a speaker’s words and the contents of her mental states can only be understood in relation to each other, as parts of a single package. He also gives reasons for thinking that there can be no account of intentionality in natural-scientific terms.

Finally, in Unit 6, we will consider recent attempts by Dretske, Fodor, and others to give reductive accounts of intentionality in scientifically acceptable terms, along with some criticisms of their proposals.

Schedule

This schedule is subject to change. Updates will be announced in class and posted on the website.

Date	Reading	Assignments
1/16	Introduction (no reading)	
	1. Thought & Language	
1/18	Grice, "Meaning"	
1/23	Searle, "Meaning" (focus on pp. 160–169)	
1/25	<i>Canceled due to illness</i>	
1/30	Lewis, "Coordination and Convention"	
2/01	Grice, "Logic and Conversation"	
	2. Thought, behavior, & programs	
2/06	Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence"	
2/08	Dennett, "True Believers"	
2/13	Block, "Psychologism and Behaviorism"	
2/15	Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs", "Intentionality and the Brain"	
	3. Semantic externalism	
2/20	Putnam, "Brains in a Vat"	Study questions for Units 1–2 due.
2/22	Putnam, "Meaning and Reference"	
2/27	Searle, "Are Meanings in the Head?", section I	
3/01	Burge, "Individualism and the Mental" (focus on IIab, IIIbcd, IVc)	
	4. Indeterminacy of meaning and reference	
3/06	Quine, "Ontological Relativity," pp. 26–40, 45–51; excerpts from <i>Word and Object</i> .	Topics for first paper handed out.
3/08	Quine, continued.	
3/13	Searle, "Indeterminacy, Empiricism, and the First Person", Quine, excerpt from "Reply to Chomsky"	
3/15	Hookway, "Translation and Explanation"	
3/20	Quine, continued.	First paper due.
	5. Meaning & interpretation	
3/22	Davidson and Tarski (handout on Tarski's theory of truth).	Study questions for Units 3–4 due.
4/03	Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning", "Radical Interpretation"	
4/05	Davidson, continued	Peer review of first paper due.
4/10	Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs"	
	6. Reductive naturalism	
4/12	Dretske, "If You Can't Make One, You Don't Know How It Works"	
4/17	Dretske, "Putting Information to Work", "The Nature of Thought".	
4/19	Fodor, "A Theory of Content I". Focus on pp. 70–79.	Topics for second paper handed out.
4/24	Dennett, "Evolution, Error, and Intentionality"	
4/26	Fodor, "A Theory of Content II", pp. 89–93, 96–100, 106–110, 119-end.	
5/01	TBA	
5/03	TBA	Second paper due.
5/08	Review or continued discussion of naturalizing intentionality.	Study questions for Units 5–6 due.
5/16	Final exam, 8–11 AM (126 Barrows)	