

Sample Advanced Seminar Syllabus
Topics in Philosophy of Language: Semantics
Fall 2019

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Office Hours: [TBA]

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Course Description

It is common to think of a theory of meaning for the declarative fragment of a natural language as a formal device for pairing each disambiguated sentence (perhaps relative to a context of utterance) with a unique proposition: its meaning. This simple and theoretically appealing picture of the semantic enterprise is adequate for many purposes. But there are certain linguistic phenomena which pressure us to move away from it and toward a framework in which disambiguated sentences are assigned *multiple* propositions along a number of distinct “dimensions” of meaning. As a result, it is now generally recognized by both linguists and philosophers of language that a theory of meaning must be considerably more complex than a simple pairing between sentences and propositions.

This course is an advanced introduction to the philosophy of language through the lens of semantics. Its focus is on two phenomena — presupposition and conventional implicature — which have been thought to necessitate a departure from the simple “one sentence, one proposition” model of natural-language meaning. We will begin with two readings (one historical, one contemporary) motivating the idea that the business of a semantic theory is to associate sentences with the propositions they express. We will then shift our attention to the historical debate between Russell and Strawson on the semantics of definite descriptions and related contemporary literature on presupposition. Next, we will study the phenomenon of conventional implicature, starting with Grice and ending with contemporary multi-dimensional treatments. Finally, we will consider how the idea that a semantic theory must in some cases pair a sentence with more than one meaning can be brought to bear on three puzzling classes of expressions: slurs, expressives, and normative predicates.

Textbook

There will be no textbook for this course. All readings will be made available online.

Assignments and Grading

Grades in this course will be based on one term paper of approximately 8,000 words to be submitted at the end of the semester. Term paper topics must be related to the themes

of the course, though they need not engage directly with any of the readings. I highly recommend discussing your paper ideas with me well in advance of the deadline.

Semester Overview

Unit 1: Sentences and Propositions

Week 1: Gottlob Frege, "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry"

Week 2: Irene Heim and Angelika Kratzer, *Semantics in Generative Grammar*, Ch. 1, "Truth-Conditional Semantics and the Fregean Program" and Ch. 2, "Executing the Fregean Program"

Unit 2: Definite Descriptions and Presupposition

Week 3: Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting"

Week 4: P. F. Strawson, "On Referring"

Week 5: Robert Salnaker, "Pragmatic Presuppositions"

Week 6: Irene Heim, "On the Projection Problem for Presuppositions"

Unit 3: Conventional Implicature

Week 7: H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation"

Week 8: Kent Bach, "The Myth of Conventional Implicature"

Week 9: Christopher Potts, "Into the Conventional-Implicature Dimension"

Week 10: Elin McCready, "Varieties of Conventional Implicature"

Unit 4: Puzzle Cases: Slurs, Expressives, and Normative Language

Week 11: Christopher Potts, "The Expressive Dimension"

Week 12: Timothy Williamson, "Reference, Inference, and the Semantics of Pejoratives"

Week 13: Elisabeth Camp, "A Dual Act Analysis of Slurs"

Week 14: Cameron Domenico Kirk-Giannini, "Slurs Are Directives"

Week 15: Mark Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics*, Ch. 10, "The Hybrid Gambit"