

Philosophy of Language

Philosophy 360 — Syllabus
TR 12:40 – 2:00

Professor

Michael O'Rourke, South Kedzie 508, 517-355-4490, orourk51@msu.edu,
<http://www.msu.edu/~orourk51/>

Office hours: 10:15-11:15 Tuesday and Thursday, or by appointment

Room

138 Brody Hall

Texts

Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction, William Lycan, Routledge Press
The Philosophy of Language, ed. by Aloysius Martinich & David Sosa, Oxford University Press

These books should be on sale at the MSU Bookstore. There will be recommended readings that I will distribute as pdfs from time to time. The syllabus, the handouts, my lecture notes, and pointers to relevant philosophy sites will be available on this website at <http://www.msu.edu/~orourk51/>. I will not be using Angel or D2L in this class; if you wish to know your grade, please email me and I am happy to let you know how things stand. If you miss class, you will need to obtain a copy of the lecture notes and the handouts you missed off the website.

Something about the Course

It's hard to overestimate the importance of language to human beings. It is the medium of choice for salutation, conversation, adulation, congratulation, solicitation, and communication in most of its forms. You see it in front of you right now, you hear it from me, you look up and you see it in the room, and when you leave the room, you'll see it and hear it all around you. We use it to mediate our interaction with each other and the world, and we rely on it to make possible the expression of thought. And it does not stop there; in fact, there are those who argue that language is fundamental to thought—that without it, there would be no thought.

Perhaps the last time you systematically reflected on the character of language was in a foreign language class. Think about what you did in that class: you were introduced to the structure of sentences in the new language, and you were given words and expressions, along with their translations into your home language, that fit into the structural categories identified. (An assumption behind this approach is that you are already familiar with a language.) Once you

had acquired enough vocabulary and structural knowledge, you were asked to start piecing words together into sentences with specific meanings. Your instructor would speak to you in the new language and expect a response; to succeed, you had to interpret what was said and craft an appropriate response in the new language.

The foreign language experience is useful by way of introduction because it exposes many aspects of language that we'll puzzle over in this class. Among these are the syntactical structure of language and its relation to the significance (or semantics) of language, the relation of the meaning of the word to the meaning of the sentence, and the interpretation of utterances. But we also worry about a number of other topics: truth, reference, the methodology of language study, the difference between language in general and specific languages, what it is to know a language, and non-literal employments of language (e.g., metaphor) just to name a few.

It is important to recognize that *philosophical* inquiry into language is different from, say, psychological or linguistic inquiries. Psychology and linguistics are empirical sciences: practitioners of those disciplines float hypotheses and then design experimental situations in which to test them. Claims stand or fall based on the empirical evidence adduced in their favor. Philosophical approaches involve a different methodology: they are conceptual and not empirical. When a philosopher turns her attention to language, she focuses on the concepts that figure into description of the character and use of language, as well as those that figure into the empirical explanations offered by psychologists and linguists. She is interested in analyzing these concepts so as to make sure that, as used, they are internally coherent and figure into a consistent conceptual network. This analysis involves the use of traditional philosophical machinery, such as the tools of formal logic. But even though the work of a philosopher is not empirical, it had better relate in principled ways to empirical research, especially when the concepts that are analyzed have such an obvious role in empirical studies. Thus, a philosopher of language must evaluate conceptual claims not only on the basis of their relationship with other conceptual claims, but also on the basis of their relationship to the relevant empirical evidence. I like to think of it this way: a philosopher is out to build and maintain the conceptual models that empirical investigators use in their research. (Note that this does not preclude investigators who are not card-carrying philosophers, e.g., linguists, from doing philosophy in the service of their scholarly work.)

We will critically examine several of these models in here. We will spend the semester working slowly through a secondary discussion of philosophy of language, supplemented by some of the most important contributions from the field. My principal goal will be to help you build a general framework for thinking about the conceptual side of language. The outlines of this framework will be supplied by Lycan, and the details will be supplied by essays in the Martinich & Sosa volume. The supplementary readings are classic essays, and you must read them to be conversant in the philosophy of language. The material I will ask you to read will be difficult. I consider this to be an advanced course in philosophy, and so I will expect quite a lot out of each of you.

Learning Goals

As a Michigan State student, you are part of an educational institution that has certain, well-defined learning goals and objectives. You have a right to expect that these goals and objectives will guide your instructors as they design their courses. Just as a reminder, here are the Michigan State University learning goals and outcomes (from <http://undergrad.msu.edu/learning>):

Analytical Thinking (AT)

The MSU graduate uses ways of knowing from mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts to access information and critically analyzes complex material in order to evaluate evidence, construct reasoned arguments, and communicate inferences and conclusions.

- Acquires, analyzes, and evaluates information from multiple sources
- Synthesizes and applies the information within and across disciplines
- Identifies and applies, as appropriate, quantitative methods for defining and responding to problems
- Identifies the credibility, use, and misuse of scientific, humanistic and artistic methods

Cultural Understanding (CU)

The MSU graduate comprehends global and cultural diversity within historical, artistic, and societal contexts.

- Reflects on experiences with diversity to demonstrate knowledge and sensitivity
- Demonstrates awareness of how diversity emerges within and across cultures

Effective Citizenship (ECit)

The MSU graduate participates as a member of local, national, and global communities and has the capacity to lead in an increasingly interdependent world.

- Understands the structures of local, national, and global governance systems and acts effectively within those structures in both individual and collaborative ways
- Applies knowledge and abilities to solve societal problems in ethical ways

Effective Communication (ECom)

The MSU graduate uses a variety of media to communicate effectively with diverse audiences.

- Identifies how contexts affect communication strategies and practices
- Engages in effective communication practices in a variety of situations and with a variety of media

Integrated Reasoning (IR)

The MSU graduate integrates discipline-based knowledge to make informed decisions that reflect humane social, ethical, and aesthetic values.

- Critically applies liberal arts knowledge in disciplinary contexts and disciplinary knowledge in liberal arts contexts

- Uses a variety of inquiry strategies incorporating multiple views to make value judgments, solve problems, answer questions, and generate new understandings

This course is related most closely with the first, fourth, and fifth of these goals and outcomes. I have several specific, course-related goals:

- *Learn about the structure and significance of language, and in particular, the language(s) you speak.* To this end, I plan to accompany you through several issues fundamental to the investigation of language, among them the nature of language generally, the use of language to communicate, meaningfulness, literality and non-literality, truth, and reference. By semester's end, these concepts should be familiar to you, and you should be able to think in systematic ways about them.
- *Know a little bit about the relationships among linguistics, logic, and the philosophy of language.* These are different—linguistics is an empirical science, logic is a mathematical science, and philosophy is a conceptual science. Their methods are different even when their focus is the same. While this is a philosophy course, Lycan provides us with some insight into how linguists handle these issues.
- *Know details about the development of contemporary analytic philosophy of language.* The Lycan volume offers insight into current trends in the conceptual study of language. The Martinich & Sosa volume supplies readings that will ground his treatment of the topic.
- *Develop critical reading, listening, and writing skills.* Good philosophers are charitable readers and listeners, and they are also cogent writers. Philosophical writing is difficult, but clear thinking and clear writing go hand in hand. You will be given the opportunity to exercise these skills in this class.
- *Begin developing sustainable views of your own about the conceptual intricacies of language.* We will carefully work through texts that explore the issues mentioned above, and in so doing we will develop our own intuitions about these matters. Philosophy isn't about memorizing the positions of others or about mastering a vernacular. Philosophy isn't about memorization—it's about intellectual growth.

Lectures

We'll start by discussing language at a somewhat general level. We then turn to the philosophical examination of language, guided by the Lycan book. I will ask you to read an essay or two in conjunction with each chapter in this book, to be drawn from the Martinich & Sosa volume.

I plan to lecture on the chapters before I turn things over to discussion. Beginning with the third week, my lectures will occupy the Tuesday sessions. The Thursday session will begin with whatever lecture bits are leftover from Tuesday and then group work or structured individual work, followed by discussion. The lectures will be informal and you are encouraged to interrupt me with questions, challenges, jokes, etc.

Requirements

Class Participation. You will not be required to contribute to the discussions, but you will be expected to prepare by doing the readings and attending class, remaining attentive and engaged while there. I will take attendance daily. You will be allowed two unexcused absences, and every unexcused absence after that will result in the loss of class participation percentage points (see below). Furthermore, you will be expected to turn your assignments in regularly and on time. The topics we will consider are complex and challenging—if we hope to acquire understanding of them, we must work together.

Reading Responses. I will ask you to respond to 4 or 5 short answer questions on the readings each week. These will typically be due on Tuesday at the beginning of class. The first one is not due until Tuesday, January 27. I will post these as Word files to the Handouts page of my website.

Papers. I am convinced that the best way to learn philosophy is to write, so I will have you write quite a bit in this class. The most substantial piece of writing will be a long argument analysis paper focused on material from one of the essays we read for the class. The paper will be 5 to 6 pages in length. I will ask that you do a bit of research to prepare for the paper, but the primary purpose of the assignment is to engage in close evaluation of an argument. You will need to identify the topic for this paper, but I will assist you in finding something that is the right grain size. You will submit two drafts of this essay to me for evaluation. The first draft must be submitted to me as a Word attachment by class time on March 31 and the final draft is due as a Word attachment by 5 pm on Wednesday, May 6. **IMPORTANT:** the first paper you submit should not be your first and roughest draft. I would encourage you to think "paper topic" from the get go in this class. I am happy to look at and comment on rough notes, outlines, or early drafts prior to March 31. Late research papers will be docked a letter grade for each class period they are late, unless you contact me on or before March 30 and give me a compelling reason for your late submission.

In addition to the long paper, you will produce three reading essays over the course of the semester. These essays will be two pages in length and they will concern some argument or issue in the assigned reading for the period since the previous essay. I will give you topic ideas for the first essay, but you will need to select the subject of the two remaining essay. (An important part of your philosophical development is learning how to get puzzled by what you read.) You should devote the first half of the essay to reconstruction of the argument or issue you focus on and the second half to your comment. This comment can be critical in nature, but it need not be. For example, if you focus on an argument that you find compelling, you could devote the comment to consideration of the argument's implications. The first of these is due in class on Thursday, February 5. I will not accept late reading essays, where "late" means submitted after class has started on the day the assignment is due. If you know you will have a conflict, you will need to speak with me in advance and get the paper to me before class. These will be submitted to me electronically as Word attachments.

The first written assignment is due by midnight on **Thursday, January 22**. You will need to compose an e-mail message on the account you use most often and send it to me at orourk51@msu.edu. Please put the course number in the subject line. In this message, I want you to tell me how much philosophy you've studied and then explain to me why you took this class and what your expectations are for it. Also, I would like a paragraph in which you give me a definition of 'language'. This is worth twenty points. I will reply to each message I receive.

The work I have you do on Thursdays will often involve writing. I will collect what is

produced and review it, evaluating it for points much in the way I'll evaluate the reading responses for points. If you take this seriously, you should receive all the points available for in-class writing. You learn philosophy by thinking about it, and you learn to think about it through writing.

Grading

Class participation will be worth 100 points, with 80 points associated with attendance and 20 with the quality (*not* the quantity) of your participation. Every unexcused absence after the second will result in 8 point reduction of the attendance part of this grade, so 12 unexcused absences means you will get a 0 for that part of the grade. The quality points will be allocated based on my assessment, which I am happy to share with you.

The reading responses will be worth 10 points each. I will read these with a view to making sure that you have done the reading. If you do the readings and prepare thoughtful responses to the reading response questions, you will receive full credit on each of these.

Reading essays will be graded on a 100-point scale. The first draft of the long essay and the associated abstract will be worth 100 points together, and the revised paper will be worth 200 points.

Those earning between 90% and 100% of the available points will earn a 4.0 for the course, 85% and 89% a 3.5, 80% and 84% a 3.0, 75% and 79% a 2.5, 70% and 74% a 2.0, 65% and 69% a 1.5, 60% and 64% a 1.0 and 59% and below a 0.0.

Points associated with each assignment category:

Long Paper	First Draft + Abstract	100
	Final Draft	200
Email Message		20
Reading Essays		300
Reading Responses		100
In-class Writing		100
Class Participation		100
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Policies

Attendance

Attendance is required in this class. Excused absences are those excused by the university for official activities, those excused by me in advance, or those excused subsequently for documented reasons (e.g., health problem, family emergency). When you attend class, please be respectful of the others in the room—turn all sounds off on your cell phones, refrain from reading the newspaper, etc.

Academic Honesty

Article 2.III.B.2 of the [Academic Freedom Report](#) states, "The student shares with the faculty the responsibility for maintaining the integrity of scholarship, grades, and professional standards." In addition, the Department of Philosophy adheres to the policies on academic honesty as specified in General Student Regulations 1.0, *Protection of Scholarship and Grades*; the all-University Policy on *Integrity of Scholarship and Grades*; and Ordinance 17.00, Examinations. (See [Spartan Life: Student Handbook and Resource Guide](#) or the MSU Web site: www.msu.edu.) You are expected to complete all course assignments without assistance from any source that I have not authorized. You are expected to develop original work for this course; therefore, you may not submit course work you completed for another course to satisfy the requirements for this course, and you may not pass off the work of others as your own (i.e., plagiarize). Also, you are not authorized to use the <http://www.allmsu.com> Web site to complete any course work in Philosophy 360. Students who violate MSU academic integrity rules may receive a penalty grade, including a failing grade on the assignment or in the course. If you are unsure about the appropriateness of your course work, please contact me. (See also <https://www.msu.edu/unit/ombud/academic-integrity/student-faq.html>.)

Deadlines

All assignments must be handed in as you arrive in class on the day they are due. I do not accept late work unless class was missed for a documented emergency that arose without time for you to submit your work in advance. If you know that you will miss a class session prior to that session, you will need to submit your assignment in advance.

Incompletes

The MSU policy for incompletes is as follows:

The I-Incomplete may be given only when: the student (a) has completed at least 6/7 of the term of instruction, but is unable to complete the class work and/or take the final examination because of illness or other compelling reason; and (b) has done satisfactory work in the course; and (c) in the instructor's judgment can complete the required work without repeating the course.

I do not give out incompletes unless the "compelling reason" mentioned above is documented, and you must discuss this with me in advance of finals week.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities (from the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD))

Michigan State University is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services, and activities. Requests for accommodations by persons with disabilities may be made by contacting the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities at 517-884-RCPD or on the web at <http://rcpd.msu.edu>. It is your responsibility to promptly register with RCPD because some arrangements must be done well in advance (e.g. alternative test taking place or time). Once your eligibility for an accommodation has been determined, you will be issued a verified

individual services accommodation (“VISA”) form. Please present this form to me at the start of the term and/or two weeks prior to the accommodation date (e.g., paper due date). Requests received after this date will be honored whenever possible.

Tentative Schedule

<u>Date</u>	<u>Topic</u>	<u>Reading</u>
1/15	<u>Introduction to the Philosophy of Language</u>	Syllabus
1/20	<u>A Historical Look</u>	Locke – Ch. 43 in Martinich & Sosa (MS) Swift, Augustine, and Carroll – on homepage Lycan – Ch. 1
1/22, 1/27	<u>The Nature of Language</u>	Lewis and Chomsky – Chs. 46 & 48 (MS)
2/3, 2/5	<u>Definite Descriptions</u>	Lycan – Ch. 2 Russell – Chs. 8, 9 (MS)
2/12, 2/17	<u>Proper Names: The Description Theory</u>	Lycan – Ch. 3 Frege, Searle – Chs. 1, 2 (MS)
2/19, 2/24	<u>Proper Names: Direct Reference</u>	Lycan – Ch. 4 Mill, Kripke, Putnam – Chs. 1, 4, 5 (MS)
2/26, 3/3	<u>Traditional Theories of Meaning</u>	Lycan – Ch. 5 Dummett – Chs. 31 (MS)
3/5	<u>“Use” Theories</u>	Lycan – Ch. 6 Wittgenstein – Ch. 44 (MS)
3/17, 3/24	<u>Psychological Theories</u>	Lycan – Ch. 7 Grice – Ch. 21 (MS)
3/26	<u>Verificationism</u>	Lycan – Ch. 8 Quine – Ch. 32 (MS)
3/31, 4/2	<u>Truth-Condition Theories: Davidson’s Program</u>	Lycan – Ch. 9 Davidson – Ch. 30 (MS)
4/7, 4/9	<u>Truth-Condition Theories: Possible Worlds</u>	Lycan – Ch. 10 Stalnaker – Ch. 35 (MS)
4/14, 4/16	<u>Semantic Pragmatics & Speech Acts</u>	Lycan – Chs. 11 & 12 Searle – Ch. 23 (MS)
4/21, 4/23	<u>Implicative Relations</u>	Lycan – Ch. 13 Grice – Ch. 24 (MS)
4/28, 4/30	<u>Metaphor</u>	Lycan – Ch. 14 Martinich – on homepage