I. Language Analysis

A. The Nature of Investigation

1. Philosophy of language is part of the broad project of discovery—we wish to learn about the way things work with a certain part of the world.

2. Empirical vs. Conceptual Investigation

a. Empirical investigation concerns the actual nature of the world; it involves observation; we propose hypotheses and let the world determine whether they are true or false. (See Chomsky, p. 736.)

b. Conceptual investigation concerns the logical nature of our concepts, understood as abstract representations of categories; it involves intuition; we propose hypotheses and let logically possibility determine whether they are true or false.

c. These forms of investigation are symbiotic—we rely on concepts (understood as at least an instrumentally valuable classificatory tool) to structure our empirical research, and we rely on the world to frame our conceptual labors.

3. Analysis vs. Synthesis

a. Analysis involves breaking complexes into components, and in particular, concepts into components; the deliverables are necessary and/or sufficient conditions that reveal where the concepts apply and where they do not.

b. Synthesis involves taking components and knitting them together into a complex structure; this can consist in the construction of theories, understood as systems of propositions that support knowledge and understanding in a
particular domain.

i. A theory is rooted in propositions, and propositions are rooted in concepts.

ii. Propositions place limits on conceptual application—we want to knit together those propositions that enable us to get the conceptual application correct.

iii. Can be done bottom-up or top-down or both.

4. These cross one another; in this class, our primary concern will be work on the conceptual side. We are especially interested in conceptual analysis and the construction of philosophical theories.

a. These are systems of propositions that concern concepts qua concepts—they are about systems of representations and their associated conditions.

b. Philosophical theories are contributions to our understanding, and so they can be correct or incorrect.

c. One Proposed Dynamic Model of Theory Construction: intuition (as rooted in concepts) + observation → reflective theoretical equilibrium.

B. The Investigation of Language

1. Linguistics

a. It is a human science that focuses on language as an organic, variable medium.

b. It employs a suite of methods: observation, historical analysis, test against intuition, social scientific methods (e.g., sociology, anthropology), scientific methods (e.g., psychology, biology)

c. It comes in a number of varieties:

i. Historical linguistics

ii. Structural linguistics: phonology, morphology,
iii. Psycholinguistics

iv. Neurolinguistics

d. For more on linguistics, see the Handouts page.

2. Philosophy of Language

a. Philosophers interested in language apply their conceptual methods to linguistic concepts, e.g., language, language change, meaning, reference, etc.

b. Most of the work done in the philosophy of language concerns semantics, i.e., the nature of linguistic meaning. (Why?)

c. The goal is to gain insight into the nature of the concepts we use to understand linguistic significance and thereby contribute to the empirical project of language understanding.

3. The Business of Language Study

a. We are interested in constructing a theoretical model of language, or more precisely, human language, if that restriction is necessary. This theory should support empirical investigation and give rise to both explanation and prediction.

b. The result should be a model that accounts for language as a system, i.e., an interdependent set of elements that are unified by a set of relations. This network of relations supports explanations of what we find and expectations of what will be.

c. We will employ primarily the methods of observation and abstraction. The goal will be to oscillate back and forth between these while examining particular episodes of language use, all the while aiming to identify regularities at various levels of abstraction.