Topics in Philosophy of Logic and Language

Philosophy 431 — Syllabus
TR 12:40 – 2:00

Professor:

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http://www.msu.edu/~orourk51/

Office hours: 11:00-12:00 Tuesday, 2:30-3:30 Thursday, or by appointment

Room:

001 Natural Resources Building

Texts:

*Philosophy of Language*, Scott Soames, Princeton University Press
*Reference*, Barbara Abbott, Oxford University Press
*Reference and Referring (R&R)*, ed. by Kabasenche, O’Rourke, and Slater, MIT 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 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. And while our focus will be primarily on the *language* part of the course title, *logic* will not be forgotten—logic supplies the primary method for analyzing language in all three of our books.

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. I combine breadth and depth in my advanced courses, with the first half focusing on breadth and the second half on depth. Through the week after spring break, I hope to work with you to build a general framework for thinking about the conceptual side of language. The outlines of this framework will be supplied by Soames and several supplementary readings. The supplementary readings are classic essays, and you must read them to be conversant in the philosophy of language. During the final few weeks of the course, we will focus on *reference*. The books that will ground our investigation into reference are Abbott’s *Reference* and a new edited collection, *Reference and Referring* (R&R), published this past month by MIT Press. Abbott is a relatively recent attempt to address the theory of reference that is sensitive to the linguistic study of language. R&R is a collection of new work from philosophers and linguists that addresses various aspects of reference and referring, and we will use this to supplement Abbott. 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:

- **Wonder 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, Soames and Abbott provide us with insight into how linguists handle these issues.

- **Know details about the development of contemporary analytic philosophy of language.** The Soames volume offers insight into current trends in the logical study of language. I will point you to supplementary readings as we go that will deepen his treatment of the topic. The reference volumes are read and debated by professionals in language study, and can serve as an access point into the literature on reference.

- **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.** To this end, I have sacrificed breadth in favor of depth so as to give you the opportunity to engage in a sophisticated way with current research trends in the theory of communication. We will carefully work through three texts that explore the issues mentioned above, along with articles that supplement these works, 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 Soames book. I will ask you to read an essay or two in conjunction with each chapter in this book, and these will be available as pdfs on my website. We will conclude our semester by focusing on reference, arguably the most central topic in philosophical semantics in the last century. Abbott, supported by R&H, will be the principal texts for this part of the course. During the month of April, Dr. Abbott will be joining us for a class—the time for that is TBD. I will also Skype in (or the equivalent) for a few class meetings this semester—I will need a bit of assistance with that.
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. Thursday will be focused primarily on presentations and discussion. The Thursday session will begin with whatever lecture bits are leftover from Tuesday and then a 10 to 15 minute presentation by a student (or students) on some topic related to the assigned reading for the week, followed by discussion. This presentation requirement is described below. 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 Thursday, January 17. I will post these as Word files to the Handouts page of my website, and I will also distribute them via the course email list.

**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 research paper on a topic in the philosophy of language. You will be responsible for selecting the topic. The paper should be no less than 10 pages and no more than 15 pages in length. It will be a research paper, and I will require you to use at least five recent sources (i.e., within the last two years). This will mean that you should spend time in the library exploring current discussions of your topic. 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 April 4 and the final draft is due as a Word attachment by 5 pm on Wednesday, May 1. *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 April 4. Late research papers will be docked a letter grade for each class period they are late, unless you contact me on or before April 3 and give me a compelling reason for your late submission.

In addition to the research paper, you will produce six bi-weekly 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 two-week period since the previous essay. I will give you topic ideas for the first two essays, but then you will need to select the subject of each 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, January 24. 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 Friday, January 11. 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 two points that will be folded into your reading essay total. I will reply to each message I receive.

There will also be some in-class writing that will not be graded. This writing will be done in advance of some discussions as well as after some discussions. You learn philosophy by thinking about it, and you learn to think about it through writing.

Presentation. You will be responsible for kicking off discussion of one of the topics this semester. This presentation should be at least 10 minutes in length and no more than 15. You may select any aspect of the assigned reading as your focus, and you can approach that focus from any angle (e.g., analytical, critical, etc.). You will need to write these presentations out (they should be 4 to 5 pages in length) and meet with me no later than the class day before you are scheduled to give your presentation. If you do not contact me before the presentation with drafts of your work, I will deduct a letter grade from the final evaluation. When you arrive for class on the day of your scheduled presentation, you will need to submit a draft of the presentation to me and a handout to the class; you will have five days after your presentation to submit the final draft, which you should do as a Word attachment in an email to me. The presentation write-up will count as one of your reading essays. The grade you receive for your presentation will be based primarily on the written piece you present, although I will also evaluate the effectiveness of the presentation itself and your ability to direct the discussion that you kick up. (Together, the quality of the presentation and the facilitated discussion count as much as the essay.) A handout that describes my expectations for these will be available on the website. Please begin thinking about what you would like to present; I will circulate a sign-up sheet on January 17 and presentations will begin on Thursday, January 24. I encourage you to pair up for your presentations.

Grading:

Class participation will be determined on the basis of a 100-point scale, 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 evaluated using a ✓/- system, with “✓” indicating adequacy and “-” inadequacy. 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 this part of the course. Every “-” received will result in the loss of 1/12 of this part of the grade.

Reading essays, presentation write-ups, and the long essay (each part) will be graded on a 100-point scale.

Each of these assignment categories will be converted to a 100-point scale and then multiplied by a factor corresponding to the percentage of the final grade. (See below.) Those earning between 90% and 100% overall 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.

Percentages of the final grade associated with each assignment category:
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<th>Assignment</th>
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<td>Research Paper</td>
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<td>Reading Essays</td>
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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](https://www.msu.edu) 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](https://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 130. 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. The only exception is

**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](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:**

See Handouts page. The jargon-laced section titles will probably do you little good at this point, but you will know what they mean when we get to them.