

Seminar, Phil 490, Spring 2010
Philosophy of Language
Dr. Jennifer McErlean
Siena College

Course Purpose

This course is designed for highly motivated, upper-level students who are interested in language, particularly how language reflects, reinforces, and potentially disrupts power inequities in society. Traditionally, Philosophy of Language is the reasoned inquiry into the nature, origins, and use of language. It is hard to overestimate the importance and ubiquity of language, yet we rarely pause to think systematically about questions of meaning and theories of language. This course has three primary aims. First, it seeks to expose students to questions and responses customarily associated with the field: How do words come to have meaning? What is the relation between thought, language, and the world? What is the nature of metaphor, translation, interpretation, and truth? Do all languages have a universal structure or are they essentially distinct? Second, the course will require students to consider how language has contributed to how we understand ourselves and others, as well as the role of language in mechanisms of both oppression and liberation. To this end, students will critically assess readings relating language to gender, race, and the environment. Thirdly, as a seminar course in philosophy, students will bear significant pedagogical and research responsibility, concentrating on primary sources and producing a sustained research essay.

By the end of the course, students will (1) have increased basic academic skills (reading, writing, research, public speaking), (2) be familiar with key thinkers and their respective positions about linguistic meaning and its relation to truth and reality, (3) have increased ability to bring scholarly studies and concepts to bear on practical issues of contemporary multiculturalism and the environment, (4) recognize and have gained skill in articulating unmarked or invisible norms, and (5) be able to critically reflect on the intertwining of language with identity and social power.

Course Evaluation

Précis/Teaching	20%
Participation/Preparation	30%
2 Response Papers (10% each)	20%
Final Paper	30%

Précis: Each student will lead a class discussion during the semester, including introducing others to the reading through providing a brief, accurate analysis (a précis) of the text for the day. In addition to summarizing the essentials of the text, you will want to relate the work to other authors of the course, describe additional materials (by the same author or critical of the author) beyond the immediate text, and develop discussion questions.

Participation/Preparation: Especially in philosophy, which prizes development of thought through dialectical conversation, participation and preparation is of vital importance in the seminar. Being an informed participant requires that readings are completed (i.e., you have carefully read and taken notes concerning the argument/article) prior to class and thought ahead about the strengths and weaknesses. No student is permitted more than 2 class absences. “An instructor is entitled to give a student a failing grade (U) for excessive absences.”

Response Papers: These brief (2-3 page) papers are in response to a speaker or event on campus and should be organized so as to include

1. Name of speaker and subject of the presentation or event
2. Central theme or claims made by the speaker, or evident in the event, which you will discuss
3. An explicit analysis of the event as speech/language (how did the speech reflect the social location of speakers? What markers indicate identity? Were there indicators of the speaker’s worldview, culturally bound metaphors, a dynamic of power being expressed?)
4. Consideration of how the speaker or event relates to or compares to other articles, views, or claims we have studied in the course

Final Paper: As the course will build towards a polished academic essay of about 15 pages, there will be several stages in the writing process.

1. Brief paragraph identifying the topic or question you wish to pursue, followed by a conference with the instructor, due Feb 16
2. List of at least 3 relevant articles in the secondary literature with a summary of each and an indication of how the claims connect with one’s topic or question, due Mar 4
3. Detailed Thesis Proposal and paper outline, due Mar 11
4. Draft (to be presented in class), due Mar 25
5. Final Paper/Draft, due Apr 29

Additional Policies and Contact Information

Office hours will be Mondays and Wednesdays 11:30 – 12:30 pm, Tuesdays and Thursdays 11 – 12:30, and by appointment, Siena Hall 414, (x4129). My home phone is xxx-xxxx. My email is mcerlean-at-siena.edu .

It is expected that each student is familiar with, and will adhere to, Siena's guidelines on academic integrity. Plagiarism includes the failure to acknowledge and reference any and all sources, as well as the handing in of any work that is not your own as if it was. Permitting someone else to use your work in this way is also plagiarism, as is using the same material for more than one course without the explicit permission of all instructors. See your College Catalog for more information on Academic Integrity.

Should the college close for a health or other emergency, and providing students, the instructor, and the internet are alive and functioning, please bring course materials home with you and we will attempt to continue the course via distance learning.

I will gladly make necessary accommodations for students with disabilities. Those needing accommodations should work through Siena's Disability Services Office (Mr. Michael Kelly, x4239).

Tentative Schedule

Jan 19: Introduction

21: Plato (from the *Republic*), Anselm (from the *Proslogium*)
excerpt on Definitions from Hughes and Lavery Critical Thinking

26: Nancy Holmstrom, "Firming Up Soft Determinism"
Burton Leiser, "Is Homosexuality Unnatural?"

28: Alfred Jules Ayer, "The Elimination of Metaphysics"

Feb 2 and 4: (Early) Wittgenstein, from the *Tractatus*

9: Ray Jackendoff, *Patterns in the Mind: Language and Human Nature*

11: Benjamin Whorf, from *Language, Thought, and Reality*

16 and 18: (Late) Wittgenstein, from *Philosophical Investigations*

23 and 25: Winter Break

Mar 2: Lakoff and Johnson, from *Metaphors We Live By*

4: Joel Sherzer, "Forms of Speech Play in Context"

9: Carolyn Merchant, excerpts from *The Death of Nature*

11: Catherine MacKinnon, from *Only Words*

16: Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like A Girl"

18 and 23: David Abram, from *The Spell of the Sensuous*

25: Joshua Glasgow, "On the Methodology of the Race Debate"

30: Frantz Fanon, from *Black Skin, White Masks* (video by Issac Julien, same title)

Apr 1: Easter Break

6: SP (= 2 students presenting their drafts)

8: SP

13: SP

15: SP

20: SP

22: Reading on White Privilege (perhaps Shannon Sullivan or Frances Kendall)

27: Marcyliena Morgan, "'Nuthin' but a G thang': Grammar and language ideology in Hip Hop identity"

29: Bonnie Urciuoli, "Containing Language Difference: Advertising in *Hispanic Magazine*"

General Course Outline

January - February: Traditional and Ideal Language Philosophers

February: Post-Traditional and Ordinary Language Philosophers

March: Language and Gender, Language and Race, Language and the Environment

April: Student Essays