

PHIL 4214/5214: Philosophy of Language, Fall 2023

Class times: 4–5.15pm Mon./Wed.

Lecture room: Pamplin Hall 1001

Main instructor: Dr. Dan Hoek, dhoek@vt.edu

Website: danielhoek.com/teaching/#language

Office hours: Wednesdays 2.30-3.30

Office: 217 Major Williams Hall

Course Description

Words have power. They can inform and deceive, delight and hurt. They can be rousing, illuminating, poignant or hilarious. Written words encode our laws and transmit knowledge and testimony across generations. How do the words we use get their



meanings? By what mechanism do sequences of arbitrary sounds combine to express thoughts and feelings? How does language enable you to express a new thought you had, even if it has never been thought before? Why do exaggeration, innuendo and metaphor exist in every language? In this seminar, we seek answers to these and other questions about language, guided by classic and contemporary philosophical texts.

Class Structure. Language is a fascinating and complex phenomenon, and in this course we will explore its mysteries *together*. Many of the texts we read in the course are written by people who have made revolutionary contributions to the study and understanding of language, like Gottlob Frege, Irene Heim, Paul Grice and Sarah-Jane Leslie. You will be reading their own thoughts in their own words, not the spark notes or the textbook version. This can be pretty challenging, but you are not alone! Each week, your task is to get as much of the gist of each reading as you can, and to write down what still puzzles you in the form of a *directed, specific question or comment*. In the first half of the course, you will submit your question/comment through Canvas ahead of the relevant class. In class, we will combine our thoughts, trying to put all the puzzle pieces together.

Assessment

Participation (10%). Doing the readings, showing up to class, participating in class discussions, paying attention to and responding to other people in the seminar.

Responses (15%). Until the midterm, submit a thought or question about every reading before each class to get an A. Graded by completion.

Compositionality Assignment (15%). A one-page write-up describing one of the three challenges to the principle of compositionality that we discuss in week 7.

Four-Sentence Essays (4214 only: 20%). After the midterm, submit a four-sentence essay on one of the readings every week, and respond to my feedback.

Class Presentation (5214 only: 20%). Everyone taking the 5214 course will give a presentation and initiate the discussion on one of the readings after midterm.

Term paper (40%). Suggested length: around 2000 words for 4214, or 3000 words for 5214. For 4214 students, the paper should be based on your best four-sentence essay. For 5214 students it should normally be based on your compositionality assignment or your presentation, but if you want to do another topics, that can be discussed.

Homework Submission. Submit your work in Canvas. The Compositionality Assignments and the Term Paper must be written entirely in *Google Docs*, in your VT account, so you can get peer feedback. (An added benefit is that it allows you to prove the work is all yours — so don't copy-paste from another word processor.)

Late Assignments. All homework assignments should be handed in by 8pm on the due date. Late completion exercises always get an *incomplete*. For graded assignments, late submission will lead to a grade penalty of half a grade point on the first day, and one grade point for each subsequent day. If you foresee that you will not be able to hand in your assignment on time, I will probably grant you an extension if you ask *well in advance* — no later than two days before the due date. Even if an extension is granted, there could still be a grade penalty. Don't be a perfectionist.

Academic Integrity. Hokies are expected to meet the academic integrity standards of Virginia Tech at all times. The normal sanction for a violation of the Honor Code is an F* as your final course grade, where the * indicates an integrity violation.

ChatGPT. One of the core aims of this class is to teach you think and write in clear and precise ways. This is one of the main criteria on which your work will be evaluated. For that reason, the use of AI Writing tools like ChatGPT is not permitted for any assignments in this class. If you do use these tools, it would be considered dishonest, and could result in an F* course grade.

Missing Class. If you need to miss a class session, always email me *at least a day in advance*. If you do miss a class, it is your responsibility to contact a fellow student to fill you in. If, after that, you still have questions about what was covered, meet with me in office hours to discuss them.

Office Hours. You are always welcome to come see me or your TA during office hours with any questions you have about the course, or about philosophy. If you are struggling to keep up with the course for any reason, do come and see me. My office hours are on Wednesdays 2.30-3.30 (before class), and you can find me in office 217 in Major Williams Hall. If you would like to speak to me outside office hours, e-mail dhoek@vt.edu.

Provisional Reading Schedule

I. Language and Thought

Knowing What You're Saying

August 21. Introductions.

August 23. Mark Forsyth, *The Elements of Eloquence*, "Hyperbaton."

Arthur Glenberg and Cameron Jones, "Why ChatGPT Doesn't Know What It's Saying."

Which Came First: Language or Thought?

August 28. Jerry Fodor, *The Language of Thought*, Ch. 2, excerpt.

August 30. Robert Stalnaker, *Inquiry*, Ch. 1: "The Problem of Intentionality."

Signals in Nature

September 4. **Labor Day: no class**

September 6. Chs. 2, 6 of Brian Skyrms, *Signals*.

II. The Structure of Language

Frege's Vision

September 11. Gottlob Frege, "The Thought."

September 13. Gottlob Frege, "Compound Thoughts."

Compositional Semantics

September 18. Gendler Szabó & Thomasson, *Philosophy of Language*, Ch. 2: "Compositionality"

September 20. Heim and Kratzer, *Semantics in Generative Grammar*, Ch. 1 and §2.1

Conversation & Assertion

September 25. Robert Stalnaker, "Pragmatic Presuppositions."

September 27. Irene Heim, "On the Projection Problem for Presuppositions."

III. Midterm Workshop: Beyond Information Exchange

Brainstorming

October 2. David Hills, "Metaphor," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

October 4. Gendler Szabó & Thomasson, *The Philosophy of Language*, §0.3, §1.1

Workshop

October 9. Peer Feedback, Round 1

October 11. Peer Feedback, Round 2

October 13. **Compositionality Write-Ups Due**

IV. Hurtful Language

Generics & Prejudice

October 16. Sarah-Jane Leslie, "Generics and the Structure of the Mind."

October 18. Sarah-Jane Leslie, "The Original Sin of Cognition: Fear, Prejudice and Generalization."

Slurs

October 23. Christopher Hom & Robert May, "Pejoratives as Fiction."

October 25. Bianca Cepollaro & Tristan Thommen, "What's wrong with truth-conditional accounts of slurs."

Language & Power

October 30. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. Lectures 1-2.

November 1. Mary-Kate McGowan, "Covert Exercitives."

V. Figurative Language*Implicature*

October 30. Paul Grice, "Notes on Logic and Conversation."

November 1. Paul Grice, "Further Notes on Logic and Conversation."

Metaphor

November 6. **No Class!**

November 8. Kendall Walton, "Metaphor as Prop-Oriented Make-Believe."

Exculpature

November 13. Steve Yablo, "Non-Catastrophic Presupposition Failure."

November 15. Daniel Hoek, "Conversational Exculpature."

November 17. **Term Paper Outlines Due**

Thanksgiving break (November 18-26)

VI. Term Paper Workshop*Writing*

November 27. Structured Writing, Round 1

November 29. Structured Writing, Round 2

December 1. **Paper Drafts Due**

Peer Feedback

December 4. Peer Feedback, Round 1

December 6. Peer Feedback, Round 2

December 9. **Final Papers Due**

December 14. Final grades posted