

Seminar in the Philosophy of Language

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Place & Time: TBD

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Office Hours: TBD

Course Description: The aim of this class is to discuss informationalism, the view that models language only as a means for the exchange of information, together with a series of challenges to it. These challenges do not deny that one of the goals of language is to exchange information, but they hold that this is not the whole story. The following quotations from Stalnaker in *Context* (2014) and Camp in her review of it, *Pragmatic Force in Semantic Context* (2017), exemplify the opposition between these two views.

Our general background story says that language is a device for conveying information.
(p. 23)

The fundamental model of discourse as ‘an enterprise of negotiating over the evolution of a body of information’ is a compelling one; [...] But like any abstract, idealized model, it ignores and distorts phenomena that don’t fit. [...] the actual function and operation of natural language—and specifically, I would submit, of semantics—is more multi-dimensional, messier, and more directly engaged in the world than a uniformly informational model acknowledges. (pp. 1625–6)

The course will first trace the impact that Grice had on the informationalist picture of language with respect to the main pragmatic phenomena. Learning what these phenomena are will later be necessary to understand how the informationalist picture tackles “multi-dimensional, messier” linguistic phenomena such as slurs, dogwhistles, and insinuation. In the weeks that follow, we will first examine the choice points informationlists face when relating the semantics of natural language to what is communicated when a sentence is asserted at a context, and then take a brief tour of the main notions of variationist sociolinguistics. These weeks lay the groundwork for a series of objections to the informationalist model of language, the Standard Model, beginning with Camp and Nowak’s paper *Linguistic Variation, Agency, and Style*, which rests on the social meanings speakers convey by using sentences that are truth-conditionally equivalent to one another but differ with respect to their linguistic form. At the end of the course, we will investigate how, through the work of Austin, Kukla, Caponetto, and Langton, recognizing the role of language as also a means of performing certain actions may make sense of why some speakers see their range of actions as unjustly limited. In the final week, we will read an unpublished manuscript by Egan and Sundell on how informationlists may respond to some of the criticisms encountered during the course.

Learning Objectives: By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- (1) command the central concepts and arguments introduced during the course;
- (2) critically evaluate primary texts in the philosophy of language;
- (3) gain the familiarity and curiosity needed to present and assess the linguistic data from semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics relevant to the philosophical discussion;
- (4) develop an original line of argument on a topic of their choice and defend it in writing at the level of a high-quality, polished draft;
- (5) draw on a broad base of sources to support future research projects in the philosophy of language.

Assessment: Your grade comes from four components.

1. Reading Responses: 20 points of your course grade. Over the course of the semester, you will write seven reading responses. The idea is to zero in on a narrow question the paper raises (a premise in the larger argument, a distinction it draws, a reconstruction it offers, or an ambiguity in the text) and respond to it. Your response can go either way: you might push back against the author, or you might build on a point and strengthen it. Each response is capped at 250 words, which is meant less as a constraint than as an invitation to say what you think as concisely as you can. You are welcome to reuse this material in your final paper, and you will receive feedback on every response.

2. Outline: 20 points of your course grade. By the end of Week 8, you will submit an outline of your final paper; however, you are encouraged to submit it as soon as you have a clear idea. It should lay out the paper's main argument together with a sketch of two objections you anticipate. The word limit is 1000 words.

3. Final Paper: 30 points of your course grade. The final paper should show familiarity with the relevant literature while also striving to make an original point. The word count should be between 6000 and 8000 words. The submission date is TBD.

4. Oral Exam(s): 30 points of your course grade. There are two oral exams, each lasting at most thirty minutes. The first takes place during the discussion of your outline; the second follows the submission of your final paper. Questions come in two kinds. Most will concern your outline and final paper. The remaining questions will draw on your reading responses, and may extend to the main definitions or the central argument of the texts you responded to.

Schedule: below, you can find the plan for the semester. I marked optional readings with “*”.

Week 1, Introduction

Paul H. Grice, *Logic and Conversation*.

Paul H. Grice, *Further Notes on Logic and Conversation*.

Week 2, Conventional Implicature

Kent Bach, *The Myth of Conventional Implicature*.

Christopher Potts, Chapter 2 of *The Logic of Conventional Implicatures*.

Week 3, Conversational Implicature

Michael Blome-Tillmann, *Conversational Implicatures (and How to Spot Them)*.

Julia Zakkou, *The Cancellability Test for Conversational Implicatures*.

Week 4, Scalar Implicature and Presupposition

Gennaro Chierchia, Danny Fox & Benjamin Spector, Sections 1–3 from *Scalar Implicature as a Grammatical Phenomenon*.

Robert Stalnaker, *Pragmatics*.

Week 5, Truth-conditional Semantics

Irene Heim & Angelika Kratzer, Sections 2.1–2.3 from *Semantics in Generative Grammar*.

Kai von Fintel & Irene Heim, Chapter 1 of *Intensional Semantics*.

Week 6, Assertion and Context

Robert Stalnaker, *Assertion*.

David Kaplan, Sections I–XV from *Demonstratives*.

Week 7, Intermezzo: Sociolinguistics

Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, *Accent, (ING), and the Social Logic of Listener Perceptions*.

Penelope Eckert, *Three Waves of Variation Study: The Emergence of Meaning in the Study of Sociolinguistic Variation*.

Heather Burnett, *Social Meaning*.

*William Labov, *The Social Motivation of a Sound Change*.

Week 8, (Against) The Standard Model

David Lewis, *Index, Context, and Content*.

Elisabeth Camp & Ethan Nowak, *Linguistic Variation, Agency, and Style*.

Week 9, Sociolinguistic Variants

Ethan Nowak, *Sociolinguistic Variation, Slurs, and Speech Acts*.

Heather Burnett, *Signalling Games, Sociolinguistic Variation and the Construction of Style*.

Week 10, Dogwhistles and Insinuation

Robert Henderson & Elin McCready, Chapter 2 of *Signaling without Saying: The Semantics and Pragmatics of Dogwhistles*.

Elisabeth Camp, *Insinuation, Common Ground, and the Conversational Record*.

*Jennifer Saul, *Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language*.

Week 11, Expressives

Christopher Potts, Sections 1–2.6 from *The Expressive Dimension*.

Robin Jeshion, *Expressivism and The Offensiveness of Slurs*.

*David Kaplan, *The Meaning of Ouch and Oops*.

*Daniel Gutzmann, Section 2.1 of *Use-conditional Meaning*.

Week 12, Unspeakable Acts

John Langshaw Austin, Lectures VII–VIII from *How to Do Things with Words*.

Laura Caponetto, *Undoing Things with Words*.

Rae Langton, *Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts*.

Week 13, Unsuccessful Acts

Quill Kukla, *Performative Force, Convention, and Discursive Injustice*.

Ethan Nowak, *Sociolinguistic Variation, Speech Acts, and Discursive Injustice*.

Week 14, Standard Model (Again)

Andy Egan & Tim Sundell, *All Update is Goat Update*.