

The University of Western Ontario
Department of Philosophy
Masters Program in Linguistics

Semantics

Instructor: Robert J. Stainton

Class Days and Hours:

Winter Term

M 2:30-5:30

TC310

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

An introduction to semantic theory at the graduate level. This seminar will cover both the philosophical foundations of contemporary semantics and its development within theoretical (broadly generative) linguistics.

Of interest to graduate students in both Linguistics and Philosophy, the focus of this seminar will be truth conditional compositional semantics. Topics will include: sense and reference; logic and quantification in natural language; philosophical theories of meaning; modality and tense; referential opacity; the semantics of actions and events; descriptions; the boundaries among syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Though basic background in Analytic philosophy of language, formal logic or generative syntax would be beneficial, a detailed knowledge will not be presupposed.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

In-Class Participation: 15%

“Briefing Notes” on Philosophical Articles (5): 25%

Problem Sets (5): 25%

Essay: 35%

- The course will be run as a seminar. It is thus crucial that all students be present, well-prepared and taking part. This is why there is a participation grade.
- At the outset of the relevant class, students will hand in one or two pages of briefing notes on the article assigned. (250-300 words is appropriate.) These briefing notes will consist of two parts: an outline of the main argument being made (which is not necessarily an outline of the paper), and some critical questions and comments. Each submission will be graded on a five point scale.

Briefing notes will be required on: Frege, Russell, Fodor, Davidson and Sperber & Wilson.

- The five problem sets will consist of exercises assigned from the textbook. Each will be graded on a five point scale.
- The paper should be the sort of thing one could submit to a graduate conference – ideally about 12 pages in length, definitely not more than 14 pages. The essay may be either more empirical or more philosophical, depending upon the interests and background of the student.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Kate Kearns (2000). *Semantics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Robert J. Stainton (2000). *Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language*. Peterborough: Broadview.

You will also need to acquire two journal articles not included in the anthology, one by Davidson and one by Sperber & Wilson. See below for details.

RECOMMENDED (for those new to Philosophy of Language): Robert J. Stainton (1996). *Philosophical Perspectives on Language*. Peterborough: Broadview.

COURSE OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- A. Kinds of Meaning
- B. Lexical Semantics
- C. Compositional Semantics

Required Readings:

Kearns, Ch. 1 (Section 1.2 may be skimmed)

II. Logical Background

- A. Logical Connectives
- B. Function and Argument
- C. Quantification in Formal Logic

Required Readings:

Kearns, Ch. 2

III. Philosophical Theories of Meaning

- A) Things
 - Denotations and Senses
 - Possible Worlds
 - Truth-theoretic Semantics
- B) Mental Representations
 - Intentions/Beliefs
 - Mentalese

C) Uses

Required Readings:

Gottlob Frege, “On Sense and Meaning” [BN]
Donald Davidson, “Truth and Meaning”
H. Paul Grice, “Meaning”
John L. Austin, “Performative Utterances”

IV. Modality and Possible Worlds

- A. Kinds of Modality
- B. Interpreting Modalities with Possible Worlds
- C. Counterfactuals

Required Readings:

Kearns, Ch. 3

V. Quantification in Natural Language

- A. From Logic to Natural Language
- B. Generalized Quantifiers

Required Readings:

Kearns, Ch. 4 (Except 4.5.2 through 4.6 inclusive)

VI. Descriptions

- A. Russell on ‘The’
- B. Definite Descriptions as Generalized Quantifiers
- C. Scopal Ambiguity
- D. Indefinite Descriptions and Other NPs

Required Readings:

Kearns, Chs 5 & 6
Bertrand Russell, “Descriptions” [BN]
Peter F. Strawson, “On Referring”
Keith Donnellan, “Reference and Definite Descriptions”

VII. Opacity

- A. Introduction
- B. Modals
- C. Propositional Attitudes
- D. Descriptions versus Names in Opaque Contexts

Required Readings:

Kearns, Ch. 5
Jerry A. Fodor, “Propositional Attitudes” [BN]
Saul Kripke, “Identity and Necessity”

VIII. Actions and Events

- A. Background: Tense and Aspect
- B. Davidson's Analysis of Action Sentences
- C. Thematic Roles
- D. Varieties of Event Sentences

Required Readings:

Kearns, Chs. 7-9

Donald Davidson, "The Logical Form of Action Sentences" [BN]

- In his *Essays on Actions and Events*, pp. 105-121.

IX. Semantics and Pragmatics

- A. Conversational Implicature
- B. Metaphor
- C. The Pragmatics of Literal Speech Act Content

Required Readings:

Kearns, Ch. 11

H. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation"

Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean"

Dan Sperber & Deirdre Wilson, "Précis of *Relevance*" [BN]

- In *Behavioral & Brain Sciences* 10: 4 (Dec 1987), pp. 697-710.