PHIL 306

PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

SPRING 2016

PROFESSOR: Chris Latiolais
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Offices Hours:
• Tuesday: 10:30 - 11:30
• Thursday: 10:30 - 11:30
• By Appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course provides students with a basic and yet intensive introduction to a special branch of linguistics called “speech act theory” or “pragmatics”: the study of what we do with words. This focus upon pragmatics – the study of utterance acts – is, however, linked to semantics – the study of sentences – by a substantial claim on the part of the instructor: namely, that the two are inextricable interlinked. We will then examine the semantics/pragmatics divide with a special emphasis upon formal pragmatics (study of speech acts) instead of formal semantics (study of sentences). More specifically, we will be interested in the basic question of a theory of meaning: What are the necessary and sufficient conditions of understanding the meaning of a speech act? First, we will examine John Searle’s classic formulation of a theory of meaning in his inaugural speech act theory, which he developed in the later ‘60s and 70s after study with John Austin and Paul Grice at Oxford. We then turn our attention to a far-reaching – if ultimately untenable – theory of meaning offered by Jurgen Habermas in the ‘80s and ‘90s. Habermas developed a formal pragmatic theory of meaning that highlighted the role of communicative reason” and “communicative freedom” in everyday language use, and his expansive treatment of what we do in speech provides an important development in the field. We will then examine Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of meaning – a naïve and yet illuminating account of the complexities of everyday language use – which forces us to cross the threshold from formal to empirical linguistics. We will probe these theories of meaning by examining three movies by David Mamet – namely, Glengarry Glen Ross, American Buffalo, and Oleanna – which are themselves an examination of the contortions and distortions of contemporary language use in the context of real estate sale, small business environment, and, indeed, the classroom. Finally, we will familiarize
ourselves with the most sophisticated and emphatic pragmatic theory of meaning on the contemporary scene – namely, Francois Recanati’s truth-conditional pragmatics – which allows us to stabilize the intuitions and insights of Habermas’s formal pragmatics and Bakhtin’s empirical pragmatics.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Students are required to (1) take bi-weekly vocabulary quizzes (30%), (2) write two midterm assignments (2 @ 15% = 30%) and (3) a final essay (25%). Students will also be responsible for in-class presentations and discussion (15%). Faithful attendance is expected, and active contribution to class discussion is required. Three absences will result in the grade being lowered one full mark. All assignments must be completed for a passing grade, and late assignments will be marked down a half a grade per day.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

- Bakhtin, M. M. *Speech Genre and Other Late Essays* (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1986).
- Searle, John: [Handouts]
  o “What is a Speech Act,” from *Speech Acts.*

FILMS:

- *Twelfth Night* (http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth_night/full.html)
- *Glengarry Glen Ross*
- *American Beauty*
- *Oleanna*
- *Do The Right Thing*

POLICIES:

Open, respectful, well-informed, critical, and cooperative discussion is crucial to participating in this course. Students are expected to demonstrate these virtues of working well with others in the course, which requires not only sound preparedness by reading course materials and attending to lecture but also respect and cooperation in interacting with others. In particular, students are required to address others in a cooperative, caring, and coordinated manner, and any competitive, adversarial, or combative debate-style engagement will be considered a infraction of classroom behavior. Any discussion that falls below the
threshold of preparedness, cooperation, and civility described above will be sharply redirected by the professor. Of course, attentiveness to the individual contributions of others is crucial for maintaining this cooperative setting of discussion, and talking side-by-side instead of within the forum of classroom discussion will not be permitted.

E-mail correspondence provides students with lecture materials important for our interpretation and criticism of texts, and students are expected to check their email at least once a day to pick up classroom correspondence. Weekly written responses to reading questions allow the professor to test students’ comprehension of basic issues and prepare students for participation in classroom discussion. Midterm assignments and the final paper offer students the opportunity to respond in depth to a single topic. The final paper is due on the day scheduled for the final examination. Late papers are graded a half grade down each day that they are late, and all assignments must be turned in to receive a grade for the course. 3 unexcused absences will result in a full grade reduction of the course grade. Attendance at movies is required, and students are expected to discuss course materials with others students in the course.

The following are course rules:

- No electronic devices such as computers, ipads, cell phones, or other instruments are allowed: they must be turned off for the duration of the class.
- Classroom notes are not to be shared or in any manner distributed beyond the roster of students and professor.
- Aggressive or combative behavior toward other students or insubordination toward the professor will not be tolerated.
- Students are required to maintain (1) attention to the progressive and cumulative nature of course material and (2) attentiveness to classroom discussion or lecture.

Three infractions of the above expectations will result in being suspended from the course.

**READING SCHEDULE**

**INTRODUCTION**

**TUESDAY:** WEEK ONE
- Course Mechanics.
- Pragmatics, Semantics, Syntax, and Other Modes of Abstraction.

**THURSDAY:**
- "What is a Speech Act" (John Searle, 1965).
- Quiz #1.

**TUESDAY:** WEEK TWO
- Reading of Amelia Bedelia.
- "Literal Meaning" (John Searle, 1979).
THURSDAY:
- Visit website for ten-minute gloss on indirect speech acts: http://comment.rsablogs.org.uk/2011/02/14/rsa-animate-language-window-human-nature/
- Medina: “Meaning, Sense, and Interpretation.”
- Quiz #2.

2: OVERVIEW OF KEY ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE:

TUESDAY: WEEK FOUR

THURSDAY:
- Medina: “Linguistic Creativity and Relativism.”
- Medina: “Speakers, Linguistic Communities and Histories of Use”
- Quiz #3.

3. THE CLASSIFICATION, FUNCTIONS AND VALIDITY DIMENSIONS OF SPEECH-ACTS: COMMUNICATIVE VERSUS STRATEGIC ACTION:

TUESDAY: WEEK FIVE
- Medina: “Language and Identity.”
- Habermas: Introduction
- Habermas: “Social Action, Purposive Activity, and Communication”
- First Essay Assignment.

Wednesday Evening Movie: Glen Gary, Glen Ross (8:00 PM, Dewing 103).

THURSDAY:
- Habermas: “Social Action, Purposive Activity, and Communication” (Continued)
- Quiz #4.

TUESDAY: WEEK SIX

Wednesday Evening Movie: American Buffalo (8:00 PM, Dewing 103).

THURSDAY:
• Habermas: “Communicative Rationality and the Theories of Meaning and Action”

TUESDAY: WEEK SEVEN
• Habermas: "Toward a Critique of a Theory of Meaning."
• Quiz #5.

Evening Movie: Oleanna (8:00 PM, Dewing 103).

THURSDAY:
• Review and Discussion.
• Essay due.

3. THE PROBLEM OF SPEECH GENRES AND EMPIRICAL PRAGMATICS:

TUESDAY: WEEK EIGHT
• Bakhtin: Introduction.
• Bakhtin: “The Problem of Speech Genres.”

THURSDAY:
• Bakhtin: “The Problem of the Text.”
• Quiz # 6.

4. IS THERE ANY SUCH THING AS “LITERAL MEANING”? THE DEBATE BETWEEN SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC APPROACHES TO LINGUISTIC MEANING:

TUESDAY: WEEK NINE
• Recanati: “Two Approaches to What is Said.”
• Recanati: “Primary Pragmatic Processes.”

THURSDAY:
• Recanati: “Relevance-theoretic Objections”
• Recanati: “The Syncretic View”
• Quiz # 7.

TUESDAY: WEEK TEN
• Recanati: “Non-literal Uses.”
• Recanati: “From Literalism to Contextualism.”
• Medina: “Linguistic Creativity and Relativism.”
THURSDAY:
- Recanati: “Indexicalism and the Binding Fallacy”
- Recanati: “Circumstances of Evaluation”

TUESDAY: WEEK TEN
- Recanati: “Contextualism: How Fare Can We Go.”
- Recanati: “Conclusion.”

THURSDAY:
- Review and Closing Comments: