

# Philosophy of Language: Pragmatics

DAMIEN STOREY | 2018

Document version 1.3

## WHERE AND WHEN:

Wednesdays: 16.00–17.00 room 2043 (Arts Building)

Thursdays: 16.00–17.00 room 2037 (Arts Building)

MY OFFICE: Arts 5008 (behind Sarah's office, 5009)

MY OFFICE HOURS: Friday 11–1

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## COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course aims to provide an introduction to a selection of topics in philosophy of language, focusing on pragmatics—the study of linguistic utterances in the contexts in which they are performed. While semantics studies the literal meaning of sentences largely independently of context, pragmatics tries to explain how speakers often use sentences to convey more than or even something different from what they literally mean. We'll look at the development of pragmatics by philosophers such as J.L. Austin and H.P. Grice, and its application in explaining linguistic phenomenon like irony and metaphor.

At the end of this course, you'll be able to:

- Understand what pragmatics is and how it can be distinguished from semantics.
- Understand and assess several pragmatic theories.
- Engage critically with a number of specific applications of pragmatic theory.

## GENERAL READING

A good introduction to the topic is:

1. William G. Lycan, *Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction*, 2nd edition, (Routledge: Oxford, 2008), especially parts III and IV.

The following is a useful collections of essays:

2. Steven Davis (ed) *Pragmatics: A Reader* (OUP: Oxford, 1991)

## COURSE OUTLINE

The following is course outline by *topic* rather than by lecture: many topics will be covered over a number of lectures. Be sure to get the latest version of this document to keep up with reading recommendations.

### **1. J. L. Austin and illocutionary force [1–2 lectures]**

1. William G. Lycan, *op. cit.*, 315–338, chapters 11 and 12
2. J.L. Austin ‘Performative Utterances’ in Austin *Philosophical Papers* (OUP: Oxford, 1961) [Also widely available online]

### **2. Grice and conversational implicature [1–2]**

1. William G. Lycan, *op. cit.*, 315–338, chapters 13
2. Grice ‘Logic and Conversation’ in Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard University Press: Harvard, 1967) [Also widely available online]

### **3. Non-literal language [1]**

1. Kent Bach, ‘Speaking Loosely: Sentence Non-literality’ *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXV (2001), 249–263; partially reprinted with helpful commentary in Hornsby and Longworth (eds.) *Reading Philosophy of Language: Selected Texts with Interactive Commentary* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2006)

### **4. Application 1: Irony [1–2]**

1. Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber ‘Explaining Irony’ in Wilson and Sperber *Meaning and Relevance* (CUP: Cambridge, 2012) pp. 123–145 [on blackboard]

### **5. Application 2: Metaphor [3–4]**

1. William G. Lycan, *op. cit.*, chapters 14
2. Donald Davidson ‘What Metaphors Mean’ *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978) 31–47
3. John Searle ‘Metaphor’ in *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1979)

### **6. Application 3: Slurs [.5–1]**

1. Geoffrey K. Pullum ‘Slurs and Obscenities: Lexicography, Semantics, and Philosophy’ in D Sosa (ed.) *Bad words* (OUP: Oxford, 2016) [on blackboard]

### **7. Application 4: Bullshit [.5–1]**

1. Harry Frankfurt *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2005) [This is a 5000-word ‘book’ – and widely available online]
2. The following website has many useful resources, including a helpful bibliography: [callingbullshit.org](http://callingbullshit.org)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Note that the suggested readings are mere suggestions—you might well want to take the essay in a different direction and you are encouraged to do independent research for your essays. Above all, make sure that whatever you read, you read it extremely carefully.

**1. Explain and critically assess Grice's theory of conversational implicature.**

1. William G. Lycan, *op. cit.*, 315–338, chapters 13
2. Grice ‘Logic and Conversation’ in Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard University Press: Harvard, 1967)
3. Wayne Davis ‘[Implicature](#)’ *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*
4. Claudia Bianchi ‘Implicating’ in Sbisà and Turner (eds) *Pragmatics of Speech Actions* [on blackboard]

**2. What are the shortcoming of Grice's account of irony? How, if at all, are these shortcomings overcome by other accounts of irony?**

1. Grice ‘Logic and Conversation’ in Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard University Press: Harvard, 1967)
2. Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber ‘Explaining Irony’ in Wilson and Sperber *Meaning and Relevance* (CUP: Cambridge, 2012) pp. 123–145
3. Herbert H. Clark and Richard J. Gerrig ‘On the pretense theory of irony’ *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 113 (1984) 121–126
4. Dan Sperber ‘Verbal Irony: Pretense or Echoic Mention?’ *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 113 (1984) 130–136
5. Gregory Currie ‘Why Irony is Pretense’ in Nichols (ed.) *The Architecture of Imagination* (OUP: Oxford, 2006) 111–133

**3. Compare and contrast the accounts of metaphor offered by Davidson and Searle. Do either of them successfully explain metaphor?**

1. William Lycan, *op. cit.*, chapters 14
2. David Hills ‘[Metaphor](#)’ *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*
3. Donald Davidson ‘What Metaphors Mean’ *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978) 31–47
4. John Searle ‘Metaphor’ in *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1979)
5. William Lycan ‘An Ironic Idea about Metaphor’ *Philosophy* 88 (2013) 5–32 [on blackboard]
6. Elisabeth Camp ‘Metaphor and that Certain ‘Je Ne Sais Quoi’’ *Philosophical Studies* 129 (2006) 1–25

## SOME ESSAY ADVICE

Please pay close attention to the following advice, especially 1 and 2. They try to cater for the most common and most easily solved problems I find in students' essays. Please take them seriously.

1. *Explain.* In short: explain *everything*. It should be possible for an intelligent peer who hasn't studied philosophy to fully understand your essay without needing to read the authors you're writing about. So, for example: if you use a technical term or mention a concept that has particular significance for an author, make sure you clearly define/explain it. Similarly, for any argument or position you discuss, you must clearly explain it to your reader. This is partly because good academic writing should be explicit and easily understood, but this is not the only or even the main reason. Rather, your ability to explain the ideas you're discussing—clearly, precisely, and succinctly—is one of the principal things you're being assessed on. You might well know, say, what a categorical imperative is, but you need to *show* that you know it and how precisely you know it. Explaining even small, simple ideas well is a lot harder than you might think; don't underestimate how important it is, and how much work it takes.
2. *Justify.* Assume that for every claim you make, the reader is asking 'why should I believe that?' In a philosophy essay, there should always be an excellent answer to this question. You should consider this to be, above all else, your aim when writing an essay. The worst thing you can do is to make bold assertions without defending them, and the second worst is to make bold assertions and defend them weakly. Note that this includes interpretive claims: if you write 'Plato believes that p', you need to show your reader, perhaps by giving a supporting quote, that this is indeed something Plato believes.

*A bad essay:* 'p!'

*A good essay:* 'For reasons x, y, and z, it seems that p.'

*An excellent essay:* 'Reasons x, y, and z give us good grounds for thinking that p, although someone might offer an objection along the following lines ... However, I think there is a promising response to this objection ...'

3. *Use headings.* Before you start writing, sketch a structure for your essay. When writing, use headings that reflect this structure. A typical essay might have 2–4 headings.
4. *First understand, then assess.* Be careful not to rush into criticisms of what you read before you've fully understood it. Approach everything you read with charity. That is, assume (since it's likely) that the author has thought intelligently and carefully about what they've written, so is unlikely to have

made obvious mistakes. For example, if you notice a *prima facie* objection to something you're reading, read it again carefully to see if there's a way to understand it that avoids the objection or try to think of a plausible implicit assumption the author might have made that caters for the objection.

5. *Go from general to particular.* The topics we'll look at are broad. One could reasonably spend years writing hundreds of pages about them—you only have a few pages and few weeks. This presents a challenge: on the one hand, you want to cover the whole topic, showing that you're familiar with all the major issues that arise; on the other hand, you want to do more than simply scratch the surface, never looking at anything in detail. This can be a difficult balance to achieve, but in general it is much better to *err on the side of detail*. A good approach might be to devote about the first third or half of your essay to a more general discussion and then use the last half or two-thirds to examine one or two smaller points in much greater detail—you might, for example, focus on one argument, premise, or objection that you think is especially important or interesting.
6. *Ensure your conclusions reflect your arguments.* You might have been taught that strong, persuasive prose requires confident assertions, rather than hesitant, qualified ones. This is not the case in philosophy: your assertions should reflect the actual degree of confidence that is warranted by the evidence you've provided. Decisive arguments are rare—even rarer are decisive arguments in just a few lines of a student's essay. So be very careful not to mistake considerations that give us a good reason for believing that p for an argument that shows conclusively that p. A good essay is likely to have a large range of (appropriate) qualifying phrases: 'this shows decisively that p'; 'this is a strong reason to believe that p'; 'this suggests that p'; 'this makes it less implausible that p'; and so forth. Be especially careful with strong 'success' verbs like refute or prove.
7. *Use quotes.* Especially in historical subjects, including quotes from the relevant primary texts can be an excellent way to illustrate, justify, and give some focus to your discussion. One way (of many ways) to use a quote would be the following: make a claim; present a quote that you think backs up the claim; and then explain and interpret the text of the quote in order to show that and why it backs up your claim. Two cautions: first, quotes from secondary sources are less useful; second, avoid using a quote as a way of *saying* something—rather, a quote should be presented as evidence *about which* you have something to say.