

McGILL UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY (2009-2010)
107-515B Philosophy of Language
Topic for 2010-11: Linguistically expressed meanings

Thursday 1535-1725 Leacock 927
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Office hours: TBA

We will discuss the nature of linguistically expressed meanings. The questions include: Which words 'have meaning'? What is the meaning of a word? a sentence? How does one study linguistic meanings? Are linguistic meanings learned? Are they innate? Where are linguistically expressed meanings – in the head, the mind, the world? These are all topics of current discussion.

Approximately 3/4 of the course is focused on the works of philosophers. Contemporary philosophical approaches to meaning tend to presuppose a picture of language, world, language users, and linguistically expressed meanings that Charles Morris in his classification of ways to study 'signs' would have called "pragmatics" – in essence, the use of language by people to accomplish various purposes and carry out various projects. Generally speaking, philosophers assume that people use the words and sentences of natural languages in order to communicate with others about themselves and the world – and sometimes fictional worlds. Their 'theories of meaning' presuppose that in some way or ways, the meanings of words are 'public' – that they are shared within the population or community of those who speak a specific language. Some focus on 'mentalistic' aspects of this complex – for example, Grice on communicative intention, Lewis on belief, Davidson on interpretation. Some others focus on linguistic roles or functions (the inferentially-constituted 'roles' of specific words and sentences as used or employed by people in a community); these include Wittgenstein, Sellars, Brandom, and Dummett. Others focus on words' and sentences' referents in the world (or perhaps in abstract realms, or possible realms); these include Putnam, Fodor, and others who have adapted Gottlob Frege's program to their own purposes. It also includes some who offer formal semantic theories. We will not discuss formal semantic theories, but we will read and discuss in detail the rest of the approaches indicated here.

The last 1/4 of the course will focus on the parts of some philosophers who also have an interest in current linguistics in the Chomskyan mode to develop an 'internalist' view of linguistic meaning. These include Paul Pietroski, Wolfram Hinzen, Chomsky, and myself. Where Morris's distinction between syntax (the study of words and sentences and their internal, intrinsic relations), semantics (relations between words and things and situations), and pragmatics (words, things, users of words) would place the work of most philosophers concerned with meaning within pragmatics, the work of these 'internalists' places the study of meaning inside the head, in syntax in a broad sense of the term. We will look at some of the work of some of these individuals and discuss why they take this surprising tack in their efforts to construct theories of the meanings of the words and

sentences of natural languages.