

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
Undergraduate Course Outline 2011-12

Philosophy 4210F/9607 - The Semantics-Pragmatics Boundary

Fall Term 2011

Fridays, 12:30-3:30 p.m.

Classroom: Middlesex College 6

Office Hours: Wednesdays, 12:30-1:30 p.m.

Instructor: Robert J. Stainton

Contact Info: Stevenson Hall 3126

661-2111, ext. 82757

rstainto@uwo.ca

DESCRIPTION

Arguably, the central issue in Analytic philosophy of language of the last quarter century has been the semantics/pragmatics boundary – i.e., which aspects of language use in general, and utterance content in particular, trace to linguistic meaning, and which trace to other factors. This seminar will provide an overview of the issue. It will begin with an introduction to the semantics/pragmatics boundary, drawing on a half-dozen canonical works. We will then turn to the role of pragmatics in literal speech acts, and on alleged pragmatic determinants of truth conditions. Time permitting, the course will end with a discussion of applications of the semantics/pragmatics boundary to philosophical concerns more broadly, with special attention paid to issues of propositional attitudes and skepticism in epistemology.

1. Canonical Foundations: Ordinary Language, Formal Semantics and Cognitive Science

I will introduce the issue of the semantics/pragmatics boundary, draw some key terminological distinctions, and consider the relationship between the boundary and issues in cognitive science. We will then turn foundational readings.

These are divided into three sub-sections, starting with J.L. Austin's "Performative Utterances" and H. Paul Grice's "Logic and Conversation". Continuing with foundational readings, we will move from the "Ordinary Language Philosophy" approach to pragmatics to consider a detailed example from the "Formal Semantics" camp, specifically David Kaplan's "Demonstratives". In the 1980s, the issue of the semantics-pragmatics boundary took an important cognitive turn. As a final element of canonical background, we will discuss Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's "Précis of Relevance".

2. Pragmatic Determinants of Literal Content: For

In this second segment, I turn to the specific issue of the semantics/pragmatics boundary and literal speech act content. What role does pragmatics have to play in literal speech? In what ways, if any, can it impact upon the truth conditions of utterances, rather than merely effecting what speakers convey? The readings will be John Searle, "Literal Meaning" and Robyn Carston, "Implicature, Explicature and Truth-Theoretic Semantics". These both urge, in different ways, that literal truth conditions are deeply and unsystematically impacted upon by pragmatics.

3. Pragmatic Determinants of Literal Content: Against

There have been two main responses to Carston *et al.*

Jason Stanley, in a now very widely discussed article, offers an important and linguistically sophisticated response. He maintains that all truth conditional effects of context actually trace to the Logical Forms of the sentences spoken, including, crucially, unpronounced elements of syntax. I will present Stanley's position and his empirical arguments for it, and then consider two critical responses. The readings will include Stanley's "Context and Logical Form", Ray Elugardo & Robert Stainton, "Shorthand, Syntactic Ellipsis and the Pragmatic Determinants of What Is Said", and François Récanati, "Unarticulated Constituents".

In trying to explain away the alleged deep and unsystematic contribution of pragmatics to literal truth conditions, Stanley grants that the truth conditions are what they appear to be in the examples at issue – but proposes, in effect, that because of unpronounced syntactic structure, semantics does rather more than meets the eye to yield those truth conditions. A different rebuttal, one pursued by Semantic Minimalists, is to insist people are frequently mistaken about the actual truth conditions. The readings here will be Herman Cappelen & Ernie Lepore, "A Tall Tale in Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism" and Emma Borg, "Minimalism versus Contextualism in Semantics".

4. Case Studies

For the most part, the course focuses on the semantics/pragmatics boundary as discussed in philosophy of language. However, the issue is by no means merely of interest to language theorists. Indeed, from the earliest work on the topic, the motivation was always the philosophical and cognitive scientific implications of how and where the boundary is drawn. The point will arise throughout the course. This final segment, time permitting, will take such implications as its focal point, addressing in particular the import of the boundary for propositional attitude reports and skeptical arguments in epistemology. The readings will include Jennifer Saul, "Substitution and Simple Sentences" and David Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge".

TEXTS

M. Ezcurdia & R. Stainton (eds.)(2011). *The Semantics-Pragmatics Boundary in Philosophy: A Reader*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.

[If this text is not yet in print, the contents will be made available electronically.]

OBJECTIVES

- Familiarity with a key issue in contemporary philosophy of language, namely the semantics-pragmatics boundary, and its broader implications.
- Improved ability to read closely and understand very challenging linguistico-philosophical articles.
- Improved ability to write advanced scholarly papers and engage in abstract debate.

REQUIREMENTS

- Five Briefing Notes on selected articles (500-1000 each): 35%

- Participation: 15%
- Short Final Essay (3000-4000 words): 50%

- *Briefing Notes*: At the outset of the relevant classes, students will hand in two to four pages of typewritten notes on the chapter assigned. These “briefing notes” will consist of two parts: an outline of the main argument being made (which might not follow the structure of the paper as written), and some critical questions and comments.

- *Essay*: The paper should be the sort of thing one could submit to a student conference – ideally about 12 double-spaced pages in length, definitely not more than 14 pages. It may be either more empirical or more philosophical, depending upon the interests and background of the student.

AUDIT

Students wishing to audit the course should consult with the instructor prior to or during the first week of classes.

The **Department of Philosophy Policies** which govern the conduct, standards, and expectations for student participation in Philosophy courses is available in the Undergraduate section of the Department of Philosophy website at <http://uwo.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/policies.html>. It is your responsibility to understand the policies set out by the Senate and the Department of Philosophy, and thus ignorance of these policies cannot be used as grounds of appeal.