Topics in Mind and Language

New York University, Fall 2010, V83.0104

Time:	Tuesday & Thursday 11:00am-12:15pm
Place:	5 Washington Place, Room 302
Website:	Blackboard
Instructor:	William Starr
Email:	will.starr@nyu.edu
Office:	5 Washington Place, Office 409
Office Hours:	Tuesday & Thursday 12:15-1:15pm; By Appointment

Course Description

This is a seminar on the theory of meaning. Broadly construed, the theory of meaning examines the practice of ascribing semantic properties (truth, reference, consistency, etc.) to sentences, thoughts and other kinds of representations. This seminar will examine the details and explanatory point of this practice in two related domains.

(1) Meaning and Language: revolutionary work in linguistics on the form (syntax) of natural language inspired Donald Davidson, Richard Montague and David Lewis to extend Frege and Tarski's work on the semantics of artificial languages to the study of natural languages. What do these theories look like, what do they intend to explain and how do these explanations compare to the kinds of explanations offered in the natural sciences? We will consider Davidson's attempt to integrate his semantics for natural language with a general theory for explaining the behavior of rational agents. Robert Stalnaker's attempt to carry out this kind of project for a semantics like Montague's or Lewis's will also be studied. We will also discuss the work of some authors who think that semantics plays no interesting role in explaining linguistic behavior and some general ideas on the nature explanation.

(2) Meaning, Computation and Mind: in discussion of Davidson and Stalnaker it will become clear that it is not just sentences and their semantics that are potentially implicated in explaining human behavior. Intuitively, mental states like belief and desire also play a role in explaining what people do. Further, these explanations seem to require that these beliefs and desires are about things in the world. Hence, their semantic properties seem to play an important role in these kinds of explanations. We will discuss in depth the work of Fodor, Dretske and Dennett, and their quite different ways of coping with the idea that beliefs, desires and their semantics are part of scientific theory of human action. Prominent in these discussions will be the idea (due to Alan Turing) that the mind is a computer. This will require getting comfortable with some of the basic ideas of computer science and the role semantics plays in those ideas. If time permits, we will discuss the role of semantics in theoretical (programming language design) and applied (Google vs. Bing on search) computer science.

Readings

All readings will be made available electronically through Blackboard. If this is going to be a problem for you, please contact me immediately to make another arrangement.

Here is some advice on how to approach the readings. It is more important to have a basic grasp of the overall point of a reading than to understand any particular detail. Accordingly, I advise

you to do each of the readings once quickly in a single sitting and then return to the details you missed. If, on a second reading, you cant sort out some specific detail, write down what you dont understand and bring it to class for discussion. Do your best to raise your question at a point in the class where that detail is relevant to whats being discussed. It is much more likely that you will get a satisfying answer if you ask your question at the appropriate time. In all the readings, it will be helpful to ask yourself what is the problem or issue at stake here? and then what solutions or positions is the author arguing for here?

Grading

- **25%: Paper 1, 1500 Word Limit** (≈ 5 pages) See schedule for due date. Topics will be suggested, but with approval you may write on a topic of your choice.
- **10%: Peer Review of Paper 1** See schedule for due date. You will anonymously comment on a fellow student's paper. You will be assigned this paper and you will not know who's paper you are commenting on. You will therefore also receive comments on your paper from one of your peers. The paper's grade will be assigned by the professor and the comments will have no direct impact on that assignment. Your commentary should begin with a summary of the writer's argument or position and then provide a critical assessment of the author's defense of that argument or position. This should be less than 300 words (≈ 1 page).
- **35%: Paper 2, 2400 Word Limit** (≈ 8 pages) See schedule for due date. Topics will be suggested, but with approval you may write on a topic of your choice.
- **30%: Study questions** In each class I will provide two study questions for the following class. Both should guide your reading and you must answer one in writing (typed, 150 words or less). I will collect them roughly every other Thursday through Blackboard (see schedule) and grade them on a three point scale:
  - 0 (not turned in/completely wrong/largely incomplete)
  - 1 (missed an important point)
  - 2 (covered all of the important points)

Schedule

Readings marked with '*' are optional. Readings may change as the semester goes on. Updated versions of this syllabus will be posted on Sakai as changes are made.

Date	**Notes**	**Reading**	**Topics**
Week 1			*Introduction*
09.07	SQ 1, 2	None	Introduction, Theory of Meaning
09.09	SQ 3, 4	[17: 208-223], [17: 194-208]*	Frege's Logic & Semantics
Week 2			*Tarskian Semantics*
09.14	SQ 5, 6	[1: §§1.1-1.3, 2.1-2.2, 3.1-3.3]	Logic Review/The Semantics
		[1: §§7.1-7.2, 9.1-9.4], [1: §§18.1-18.2]*	
09.16	**SQ 1-6 Due**	[40: §§1-13, 16], [20]*	What is the Semantics For?

Date	Notes	Reading	Topics
Week 3			*Quine & Linguistics*
09.21	SQ 7, 8	[35: Ch.2], [34]	Quine on Indeterminacy
09.23	SQ 9, 10; **No Class**	[2], [19: 1-20]	Chomsky on Behaviorism
Week 4			*From Syntax to Semantics*
09.28	SQ 11, 12	[19: 89-106,138-146,§3.3.3], [3: Ch.1]*	Universal Grammar
09.30	**SQ 7-12 Due**	[5], [22: Ch.4]*	Davidsonian Semantics
Week 5			*Davidsonian Explanation*
10.05	SQ 13, 14	[6], [33], [23]*	Truth, Meaning & Behavior
10.07	SQ 15, 16	[7], [22: Ch.16]*	Truth, Meaning & Behavior
Week 6			*Davidson & Montague*
10.12	SQ 17, 18	[24: Ch.9]	Criticism
10.14	**SQ 13-18 Due**	[1: §§18.1], [18: §§3.1-3.3.1]	Model Theory, Modality
Week 7			*Possible Worlds Semantics*
10.19	SQ 19, 20	[31], [18: Ch.6: 139-50]* [18: Ch.4: 73-9, 92-102, 109-16]	Basic Montagovian Semantics
10.21	SQ 21, 22	[29], [18: §5.8]*, [24: Ch.10]*	Intensional MS
Week 8			*Interpretation, Evaluation*
10.26	SQ 23, 24	[38], [37]*	Stalnaker
10.28	SQ 25, 26	[21], [30], [39: Ch.1]*	Critical Discussion
Week 9			*Computation and the Mind*
11.02	SQ 27, 28; **Paper 1 Due**	[41], [10]*	Computation and the Mind
11.04	SQ 29, 30	[36], [4: Ch.2]	Symbol Systems
Week 10			*Cognitive Explanation*
11.09	SQ 31, 32; **Comments Due**	[32: Ch.2], [32: Chs.1 & 3]*	Levels
11.11	SQ 33, 34	[28]	The Knowledge Level
Week 11			*Levels, Vision, Marr*
11.16	SQ 35, 36	[25: selections]	Marr's Theory of Vision
11.18	**SQ 29-36 Due**	[14]	Marr, Computation, Content
Week 12			*What's Behavior?*
11.23	SQ 37, 38	[12: Chs.1, 2]	Dretske on Behavior
11.25	**No Class**		Thanksgiving
Week 13			*Content Explains Behavior*
11.30		[12: Ch.3], [11]*	Representational Systems
12.02		[12: Ch.4], [13]*	Meaning Explains Behavior

Date	Notes	Reading	Topics
Week 14			*Millikan & Fodor*
12.07		[26], [27]*	Biosemantics
12.09		[15]	Asymmetric Dependence
Week 15			*Dennett*
12.14		[9], [8: Ch.2]*	The Intentional Stance
12.16	**No Class**		Reading Day
12.23	**Paper 2 Due, No Class**		

Website

There is a Blackboard site for this course. You can access it by going to home.nyu.edu, logging in and clicking on the 'Academics' tab. Your Blackboard courses will appear in a box on the right side of the page. Select "TOPICS IN LANGUAGE & MIND". It will be tremendously helpful for you to check site regularly. I will post readings, this syllabus, lecture slides, study questions and announcements on the website. The discussion board can be used to post questions about the readings, assignments or lectures.

References

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