

# Course description

## Content

Each of us uses language all the time; so it is surprising that there are some pressing philosophical questions about language that resist easy answers.

- Philosophers are interested in the nature of thought, and our ability to speak seems intimately connected to our ability to think. But what *is* the ability to speak? What would we want to see apes do, for example, before saying that they are actually using language? Is it good enough if the ape says "apple" when it sees an apple? If not, what more does it need to be able to do?
- Philosophers are interested in the nature of knowledge, and in how it is to be acquired. It seems that our ability to *refer to* things in speech seems an important part of our ability to *know about* them. But again, what does it take to have the former ability?
- Philosophers often end up arguing over the meanings of words, sometimes saying that some claim is not only obviously true, but is somehow "part of the meaning" of some word the claim involves. How could this be? What are meanings, anyway? And how does a particular meaning get attached to a particular word? (Those are separate questions!)

In this course we will look at how philosophers in the late-nineteenth and twentieth century raised, and proposed answers to, some of these questions.

As is often the case in philosophy, we will sometimes focus on very specific issues, so as to isolate the features we wish to understand; thus the study of *proper names* (e.g. "Barbara Partee", "Moscow") will be important. But we will also consider some very general questions, such as whether language embodies a "conceptual scheme", and how it is that a statement can *suggest* something it does not literally *say* (e.g. "You're looking sober today!").

## Work

Each student will...

- Bring to class each Tuesday (starting September 21) a finely crafted one-page (~300 words) philosophical reaction to some point made in the preceding week's reading or discussion;
- write two short (8-page) philosophical essays, the first due on **October 5** and the second on **November 9**;
- Write a final take-home exam, due **December 10**.

## Readings

- William Lycan, *Philosophy of Language: a Contemporary Introduction*, second edition. Routledge. ISBN 978-0415957526.
- Other articles as PDFs linked from the "schedule" page.

## Lectures

Tuesday and Thursday, 2:30–3:50pm in [MacKinnon](#) 226.

## Grading

<i>Item</i>	<i>Value</i>
One-pagers (11 are written, 6 chosen at random are graded, best 4 count)	$4 \times 7.5\% = 30\%$
Papers	$2 \times 20\% = 40\%$
Final exam	30%