

**Philosophy of Language (730-210)**  
Spring 2021, Prof. Pietroski  
Tues/Thurs 6:10pm-7:30pm (Eastern)  
class meetings (Zoom) via the Canvas course site  
<https://rutgers.instructure.com/courses/106404>

**Course Description**

What is a language? Is English *a* language, or is there a family of English languages? Why are children so good at acquiring languages that seem so diverse? What's so special about these languages (like English, Japanese, ASL, Urdu, Navajo, ...) and human children? Do other animals—perhaps even bees—have languages of their own? Are there languages of thought? Could you think in Morse code? Do languages have to be used for communication?

What are words? Does 'dog' have the same meaning as 'chien' in French? What are meanings? Why does 'ready to eat' have more than one meaning, while 'eager to eat' and 'easy to eat' are less ambiguous? How do we know what sentences mean, and what they don't mean, even if we haven't previously heard or read them? How is written English related to spoken English?

How can we use words and sentences to convey information, ask questions, make requests, tell jokes, and so on? What's a metaphor? How is it possible to communicate "indirectly", as when we speak sarcastically, or criticize by using "faint praise"? How are sentence meanings related to episodes of people using sentences to make claims that are true or false? How are word meanings related to episodes of people using words to refer to things? How are we able to talk about things that don't exist? How do we understand phrases like 'the largest prime number', words like 'unicorn', and names like 'Vulcan'? What are names? Do they have meanings of a special kind? Do words like 'this', 'I', 'here', and 'now' have meanings of a special kind? What does a child acquire when she acquires a language like English? In what respects is the process of human language acquisition like paradigm examples of learning a new skill—e.g., learning to play a musical instrument—or learning facts about one's environment? In what respects is the process more like paradigm examples of innately driven development, like going through puberty, or a caterpillar transitioning into a butterfly? Why have philosophers been interested in these issues?

Unsurprisingly, the course will not provide anything like definitive answers to these questions. But one goal is to provide an introduction to the topic and some relevant literature, in a way that will help you understand the questions well enough to appreciate some potential answers that have been offered—and then pursue the issues further if you are so inclined. Another goal is to focus on what some philosophers have said about language as a case study of how the intellectual tools of philosophy can be useful in the study of human nature, while recognizing that an interdisciplinary toolkit is required to answer the interesting questions about language that philosophers have highlighted. A related goal is to help you develop some of the intellectual skills that are sharpened by doing philosophy—in particular, the capacity to write clearly about complex issues that are initially far from clear, after reading and understanding some abstract prose that was produced by smart but very fallible people who were wrestling with hard questions.

**Required Reading**

—*Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language*, edited by Robert Stainton (Broadview Press)  
—Other readings via the Canvas site (<https://rutgers.instructure.com/courses/106404>)

## Contact Information

All announcements about the class will be made via the Canvas site.

My email: [paul.pietroski@rutgers.edu](mailto:paul.pietroski@rutgers.edu)

“Office” hours via zoom: Tuesdays at noon, Thursdays at 5:15 pm

if you want to drop in, but can't be there in the first 15 minutes, let me know in advance;  
if nobody drops in during the first 15 minutes of a session, I may end that session early.

## Course Requirements and Grading

- (a) Four 2-page essays (double spaced, 1-inch margins, font not larger than Times-12).  
*Each of these essays will be worth 15% of your final grade.*  
Starting Feb 2nd, and ending April 20th, I will provide an essay topic each Tuesday, except for March 9<sup>th</sup> and 16th. *You must submit essays on exactly four of the weekly topics, and you must submit at least two essays on topics provided before Spring Break.*  
Essays will be due before class on the following Tuesday.  
***Any essays submitted late will be penalized one letter grade (e.g. 'B+' to 'C+') per day.***  
Your first essay can be rewritten in light of comments, within one week of when I return it.  
Subsequent essays can be rewritten, within one week of return, for extra credit that I'll consider when assigning your final grade for the course.
- (b) a take-home mid-term, on the same scale as an in-class (75 minute) exam, worth 15%
- (c) a take-home final exam worth 25% of your final grade. The exam will be open-note.  
It will be straightforward for those who have done the readings and attended classes.
- (d) Class participation can help your final grade.

## Tentative Class Schedule (PPL is the anthology, with essays numbered)

- Jan 19, 21: Introduction, *Languages: Knowing and Using* (via Canvas)  
Jan 26, 28: excerpt from Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (via Canvas)  
Feb 2, 4: *Meaning* (Grice, PPL-6)  
Feb 9, 11: Subjects, Predicates, and Sentences: *Logical Form, sections 1-2* (via Canvas)  
Feb 16, 18: Language of Thought: *Propositional Attitudes* (Fodor, PPL-7)  
Feb 23, 25: Acquiring Knowledge and Human Nature: *Meno* (via Canvas)  
Mar 2, 4: *Knowledge of Language* (Chomsky, PPL-1)  
March 4<sup>th</sup>, take home mid-term distributed, due March 12<sup>th</sup>  
***late submission will be penalized one letter grade (e.g. 'B+' to 'C+') per day.***  
Mar 9, 11: *Performative Utterances* (Austin, PPL-10)  
SPRING BREAK  
Mar 23, 25: *What is a Speech Act* (Searle PPL-11) [midterm distributed on March 25th]  
Mar 30, Apr 1: *Logic and Conversation* (Grice, PPL-12) [midterm due on April 3rd]  
Apr 6, 8: *On Sense and Reference* (Frege, PPL-2)  
Apr 13, 15: *Descriptions* (Russell, PPL-3)  
Apr 20, 22: *On Referring* (Strawson, PPL-13)  
*Reference and Definite Descriptions* (Donnellan, PPL-14)  
Apr 27, 29: details depending on time available...Re-read *Meaning* (Grice, PPL-6), and  
*either* (a) *Fiction and Naming* (Kripke, via Canvas)  
*or* (b) *What Metaphors Mean* (Davidson, PPL-15).  
Review for the take-home Final Exam (due date TBA, but not before  
the exam day scheduled by the university for classes in our time slot)

## Other Links and Information

Rutgers has a detailed policy on Academic Integrity and Code of Student Conduct:

<http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-at-rutgers>

Please familiarize yourself with this policy. If you have any questions about what counts as plagiarism (cheating, etc.), talk with before submitting work for grading.

We'll talk explicitly in class about some of the things that are OK, and some that are not-OK, in the context of discussing experimental design and jointly authored work.

### *Student-Wellness Services*

Just In Case Web App: <http://codu.co/cee05e>

Access helpful mental health information and resources for yourself or a friend in a mental health crisis on your smartphone or tablet and easily contact CAPS or RUPD.

Counseling, ADAP & Psychiatric Services (CAPS) (848) 932-7884

17 Senior Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901

<http://www.rhscaps.rutgers.edu>

CAPS is a University mental health support service that includes counseling, alcohol and other drug assistance, and psychiatric services staffed by a team of professional within Rutgers Health services to support students efforts to succeed at Rutgers.

Violence Prevention & Victim Assistance (VPVA) (848) 932-1181

3 Bartlett Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901

<http://www.vpva.rutgers.edu>

The Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance provides confidential crisis intervention, counseling and advocacy for victims of sexual and relationship violence and stalking to students, staff and faculty.

Disability Services (848) 445-6800

<https://ods.rutgers.edu>

Rutgers welcomes students with disabilities into all of the educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the office, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation:

<https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>

Scarlet Listeners (732) 247-5555

<http://www.scarletlisteners.com>

Free and confidential peer counseling and referral hotline, providing a comforting and supportive safe space