

PHIL 526 (B1): Philosophy of Language

Winter 2011
Mon 2.00—4.50
ED 128

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This seminar will discuss in depth two related topics in the philosophy of language: generics and mass terms. Surrounding these topics is the meta-philosophical issue of the relation between “how one talks” and “what reality is like”, and that is a general topic that will also be discussed throughout the term.

So far as the meta-philosophical topic is concerned, we will look at the notion of “descriptive metaphysics” in an influential work by P.F. Strawson: his 1959 book *Individuals*; and as well, some reactions to the language side of his view. In this same vein, we will look at the attitude of Benjamin Whorf and some more current advocates of “the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”, and also at “natural language metaphysics” as advocated by Emmon Bach.

With regards to the language-oriented topics, we will look at what generic statements are and what areas of inquiry (within philosophy) make implicit use of them. The goal is to see if it is possible to develop a theory of truth for generic statements—that is, a theory that gives the conditions under which a generic statement is true. Along the way we will investigate metaphysical questions (should we admit genera into our ontology?) to the logical (how can we maintain the truth of a generic statement while simultaneously acknowledging exceptions?) to the psychological (how do people reason using proto-typical information?). Similar questions come to the fore when we consider mass terms: is reality comprised of objects? Or, of matter that the objects are composed of? Or both? How can we reason about stuff as opposed to things? What makes people think of things as opposed to the stuff of which they are made?

And finally, there are some more strictly linguistic issues concerning the syntactic and semantic restrictions on just what can support genericity, and on restrictions relevant to the mass/count distinction. In passing, we will investigate how the mass-count distinction is manifested in a few other languages.

Texts:

There are no required texts for the course. I will make available some papers and others will be assigned from the journals. However, there are two books that might be considered as “recommended texts”, which people who are *really keen* on these topics ought to have.

G.N. Carlson & F.J. Pelletier (1995) *The Generic Book* (Univ. Chicago Press) paperback, ISBN: 0-226-09292-5 (C\$31.56 from Amazon.ca)

F.J. Pelletier (2009) *Kinds, Things and Stuff* (Oxford Univ. Press) paperback not yet available. Hardback ISBN: 978-0-19-538289-1 (C\$74.75 from Amazon.ca)...wait for the paperback.

Evaluation:

You will be evaluated on the following, although the exact amount of each item depends on the enrolment in the course:

Two short review papers (where you summarize some article):	15% each
Class Presentation (where you lecture about an article or compare a number of different articles or maybe try out a first draft of your final paper):	30%
Class participation (which includes attendance and also discussion especially of other students' presentations):	10%
Final paper (10-15pp):	30%

THERE IS NO FINAL EXAM.

The short review papers you are supposed to prepare essentially ask you to read some article(s) and write a summary of what their main point was, what innovations were presented, whether you think it is (or isn't) better than the alternatives (which we may be talking about in class or which you may have read independently).

The class presentation is where you give a lecture to the rest of the class. The idea is that you will read some paper(s) and then give a lecture about them, so that others will know what the author said and will know whether you think author is on the right track or not. You can also try out a version of your final course paper, looking to get feedback that will help you on the version you turn in. The exact length of the presentations depends on how many students are enrolled, but my current picture is that it will be about 60 minutes.

A crucial component of your participation grade concerns the attention you pay to other students' presentations and the sort of discussion you can have with them.

Your final paper can be an "original contribution" to the topics of the course (if you are so fortunate as to come up with one!), but more likely it will be to compare and contrast two authors on their different analyses, and make some sort of adjudication as to who is right.