

Philosophy of Language

This unique textbook introduces linguists to key issues in the philosophy of language. Accessible to students who have taken only a single course in linguistics, yet sophisticated enough to be used at the graduate level, the book provides an overview of the central issues in philosophy of language, a key topic in educating the next generation of researchers in semantics and pragmatics. Thoroughly grounded in contemporary linguistic theory, the book focuses on the core foundational and philosophical issues in semantics and pragmatics, richly illustrated with historical case studies to show how linguistic questions are related to philosophical problems in areas such as metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Students are introduced in Part I to the issues at the core of semantics, including compositionality, reference and intentionality. Part II looks at pragmatics: context, conversational update, implicature and speech acts, whilst Part III discusses foundational questions about meaning. The book will encourage future collaboration and development between philosophy of language and linguistics.

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Preface

This is a book on philosophy written for linguists and for philosophers who have some familiarity with linguistics. Our primary aim is to offer a text that can be used in graduate-level or advanced-undergraduate courses educating the next generation of researchers in semantics and pragmatics. The ideal audience for such a course would consist of students who have already taken their first class in semantics and/or pragmatics, and are seeking a better grasp of the foundational issues in these fields. It can also be used for undergraduates who have had a course in linguistics or several courses in philosophy. We have used the draft of this book successfully in classes attended by both graduates and undergraduates.

Over the last forty years, linguistic research in semantics has become increasingly technical, and this has changed how philosophers must think about meanings and theories of meaning. Although formal semantics, as practiced by linguists, began in the crucible of philosophy, many philosophers are not acquainted with the technical details. And some linguists who may be interested in this book may not have been exposed to the topic. For readers who want to learn more about formal semantics, the most commonly used textbook is Heim and Kratzer (1997). We also recommend Gamut (1991a,b), as a reliable and readable source of information about the relevant logical and linguistic theories.

Having said this, we very much hope that the book will be read by philosophers as well. From their perspective, the distinctive feature of this book is that, unlike previous introductions to philosophy of language, it is thoroughly grounded in contemporary linguistic theory. Philosophers will be aware that many of the issues we discuss are controversial. We both have opinions (which occasionally diverge) on these, and they no doubt show. Still, it was our aim to present the live options in these debates fairly and charitably.

Philosophy gave birth to modern semantics and pragmatics. This is not surprising – the same can be said for physics, economics, and psychology. Like those older siblings, semantics and pragmatics have become independent disciplines, pursued by researchers with well-accepted theoretical tools and with aims that are now detached from the philosophical interests that initially gave rise to their development. Most physicists, economists, and psychologists flourish in their work while (and perhaps even because) they manage to keep philosophy at arm's length. So, if you are a linguist why bother with the philosophy of language? There are three main reasons.

First, the boundaries between philosophy and science are much more fluid in semantics and pragmatics than, say, in biology. Linguists working in these fields will bump up against philosophical problems quite often. Do semantic theories tell us what sorts of things there are in the world? Does communication require knowing other people's minds? Is vagueness a semantic phenomenon or a feature of reality? When this happens, it is good to be clear about the status of the relevant philosophical debates.

Second, the philosophical literature of the last hundred years is filled with valuable but largely unsystematized insights about natural language. This literature may still serve to inspire novel linguistic theories. But this is only possible if the texts can be properly understood, which in turn requires an appreciation of the distinctively philosophical concerns.

Finally, thinking philosophically about the subject matter of a scientific inquiry is useful because it can free the mind from the tyranny of custom. If you study the semantics of cleft-constructions or the pragmatics of scalar implicatures, you won't spend a lot of time thinking about why you seek a compositional semantics or what exactly it means for speaker and hearer to coordinate their behavior in conversation. You have a working knowledge of these things and they serve you well – most of the time. But every now and then, an unexamined assumption or an insufficiently clear concept will lead you to a theoretical dead-end. And when you are stuck, you need to take a step back. Philosophy will help.

The first two parts of the book deal with core foundational and philosophical issues in semantics and pragmatics. These are illustrated with historical case studies showing how linguistic questions are related to philosophical problems in areas such as metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Part I introduces students to core issues in semantics such as compositionality, reference, intensionality, and intentionality. Part II deals with pragmatics: context, conversational update, implicature, and speech acts. And Part III discusses foundational questions about meaning.

We recommend reading the four case studies and Chapter 1 on Frege and Tarski in any course that uses this book. Other than this, the book can be used flexibly. A course concentrating on semantics could read Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and perhaps 7, perhaps supplementing this with source readings from the literature as well. A course concentrating on pragmatics could read Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11, again supplementing them with other readings. A course following the entire text in order will cover the central issues in both meaning and language use.

We would like to thank Jessica Keiser, Jeff King, Jeff Pelletier, and Craige Roberts, who read and commented on chapters of the book, and Nick Allott, who read and commented helpfully on the entire book. Thanks too to our editor, Rosemary Crawley, and students in courses we have taught at Yale and Michigan.

We dedicate this book in gratitude to our teachers in both philosophy and linguistics, in the hope that it will improve and strengthen the close and fruitful relations that already bind the two subjects together.