

Linguistics 98a: Semantic Internalism and Externalism

Harvard University, Fall 2013

Instructor: Laine Stranahan
stranahan@fas.harvard.edu

Tuesdays 3:00-5:00pm, 9/17–10/22; Robinson Hall 208

Course iSite:

<http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k97942&pageid=icb.page612848>

Office Hours: TBA, or by appointment

Description

The foundational ontology of semantic theories is rarely discussed in semantics courses but is nevertheless central to semantics. One question in particular has sparked extensive debate among linguists and philosophers about how to interpret semantic theories and what constitute criteria for their success: Does a semantic theory relate linguistic expressions to mental objects, “internal” to the mind, or objects in the world, “external” to it? The internalism/externalism debate has a long and rich history in philosophy, where it pertains not only to semantic content but to mental content in general—belief, knowledge, and other mental states—and has spawned active discussion at the intersection of linguistics and philosophy about the status of the semantic content of linguistic expressions. Meanwhile, throughout its history, linguistic semantics has taken much by way of its defining questions, methodology, and theory directly from philosophy of language, where semantic externalism has been dominant. Thus, while many practicing linguistic semanticists see their theories as relating linguistic expressions to mental entities, much of the theoretical machinery, methodology, and ontology they employ has its roots in an explicitly externalist tradition of philosophical semantics.

This tutorial will uncover aspects of this historical tension underlying contemporary semantics by exploring the arguments made by both linguists and philosophers for and against semantic internalism and externalism, focusing on both structure of argumentation and implications for practicing semanticists. It will not only help students to develop an understanding of the foundational ontological issues facing the scientific study of meaning, but will also provide historical perspective by illustrating the continuous influence of analytic philosophy on linguistic semantics (and vice versa). While designed to be accessible to students with no prior experience in philosophy, the course is ideal for students with a background in linguistics and philosophy. Close readings of philosophical papers will introduce students to the logical structure of philosophical argumentation, in turn preparing them to read the many classic papers in semantics written in the analytic philosophical tradition.

Policies

This will be a reading-based course with a focus on deep understanding of the logical structure of specific arguments. Meetings will consist of a 60-minute lecture followed by a ten-minute break and a 40-minute critical discussion period. Students are required to submit a short response paper each week addressing one or more issues raised in the text. In class, brief short-answer quizzes and in-class exercises will be given periodically during the discussion period to encourage direct engagement with the text. At the end of the course students will be required to submit a term paper which can be either a thorough critique of or response to an argument encountered in the course or an independent attempt to answer a foundational question about the internal or external status of meaning in light of the literature covered in class.

Background/Prerequisites: This course is intended for students who have taken at least one course in linguistic semantics and (optionally) one or more courses in philosophy of language or philosophy of mind.

Grading:

Attendance & Participation:	15%
Reading Responses:	40%
Final Paper:	45%

Since the texts are dense and often difficult to navigate, the background material presented in lectures and the opportunity to ask questions and engage in open discussion of the readings are critical aspects of this course. Students are required to attend and participate actively in every meeting. Unexcused absences will result in deduction from the Attendance & Participation portion of the grade.

With the exception of the first meeting (at which a separate assignment is due) and the final meeting, a 1-to-2-page reading response must be submitted via email by 12pm the day before each class. Reading responses can be brief, but must be concise and carefully written. Responses can constitute either criticisms of assertions made or defended in the text, or, if you happen to agree with the text in full, a reply to a possible counterargument. Unexcused late submissions will not be accepted. Failure to submit any of the four reading responses will result in a deduction from the Reading Responses portion of the grade, unless the student chooses to write a make-up paper (6-8 pages) in response to a text from the optional reading list, in which case a fraction of the original weight of the grade commensurate with the quality of the paper can be earned back. Prior to the first meeting, students are required to prepare a list (~1 page) of critical questions or discussion prompts concerning the text assigned for that meeting.

The final paper (10-15 pages) must be either (a) a thorough and extended response to one of the arguments presented in one of the primary texts, or (b) an original philosophical attempt to answer a foundational question about the internal/external status of meaning presented in the context of the philosophical discourse introduced by the class. Papers of the (a) type will be evaluated on the basis of the depth of their engagement with both the specific argument addressed and with the larger intellectual context (e.g., papers which replicate a response to an argument already addressed in class are not acceptable), their clarity and logical structure, and the thoroughness and quality of the ideas presented. Papers of type (b) may require additional readings and will be graded based on how much fluency in and direct engagement with the literature they demonstrate, their clarity and logical structure, and the thoroughness and quality of the ideas presented.

Readings: Texts for this course will be made available in digital form in the “Readings” section of the course iSite. Weekly readings listed on the Schedule are mandatory; a list of optional readings features texts which augment the primary readings and are eligible for make-up papers (see above).

Office Hours: Office hours provide an occasion for students to ask clarification questions, follow up on in-class discussions, seek feedback on past writing assignments, or receive guidance while preparing a future assignment. Each student is required to attend office hours at least once. If you are unavailable during the designated time, individual appointments with the instructor may be scheduled by email. Students with no background in philosophy may find this subject material particularly challenging; those who find themselves struggling to meet the course requirements for this reason may earn up to 5% of the original grade in extra credit by attending all office hours or meeting individually with the instructor on a weekly basis.

Schedule

#	Date	Pre-Class Reading	Assignment Due	Topic
1	9/17	Frege, Gottlob. 1892. Sense and Reference. (1948 English translation from German)	~1 page list of response questions	Intro: Internal and External Aspects of Meaning
2	9/24	Putnam, Hilary. 1973. Meaning and Reference.	Reading Response 1	“Twin Earth”: Putnam’s Argument for Externalism
3	10/1	Burge, Tyler. 1986. Individualism and Psychology.	Reading Response 2	Burge’s Argument for Externalism
4	10/8	(1) Chomsky, Noam. 1995. Language and Nature. (2) Chomsky, Noam. 2000. Chapter 2: Explaining Language Use. From <i>New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind</i> .	Reading Response 3	Internalism: Chomsky’s Reply to the Philosophers
5	10/15	(1) Ludlow, Peter. 2003. Referential Semantics for I-Languages? From <i>Chomsky and His Critics</i> . (2) Chomsky’s reply.	Reading Response 4	Semantic Externalism and Linguistic Internalism
6	10/22	Searle, John. 1983. Chapter 8: Are Meanings in the Head? From <i>Intentionality</i> .	None (Term paper due 10/29)	Internalism from a Philosophical Perspective/Internalism from a Linguistic Perspective

Optional Reading

Bezuidenhout, Anne. 2006. Language as Internal. from *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*.

Burge, Tyler. 1979. Individualism and the Mental.

McGilvray, James. 1998. Meanings are Syntactically Individuated and Found in the Head.

Pietroski, Paul. 2003. The Character of Natural Language Semantics.

Pietroski, Paul. 2005. Meaning Before Truth.

Pietroski, Paul. 2008 Minimalist Meaning, Internalist Interpretation.

Putnam, Hilary. 1975. The Meaning of ‘Meaning.’