

Linguistics 97r: Semantics and Philosophy of Time

Harvard University, Spring 2013

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Dates: TBA; Location: TBA
Course iSite: TBA
Office Hours: TBA, or by appointment

Description

Interdependencies between linguistic semantics and metaphysics—in particular, philosophy of time—are typically neither obvious nor direct but have nonetheless been important factors in the development of philosophical scholarship on time and linguistic scholarship on the semantics of temporal expressions. In the analytic tradition, debates in the philosophy of time often turn on details of the semantic analysis of temporal expressions—the precise manner in which temporal indexicals refer, for instance, can make or break a metaphysics of time committed to the reality or unreality of tensed facts or of the passage of time. In linguistics, theoretical ontologies and research programs in semantics are adopted both from the work of philosophers of language with guiding metaphysical commitments about time and philosophers of time who in the course of arguing for one or another metaphysical theory of time make critical observations about the expression of time in natural language.

This tutorial will cover a selection of issues at the interface which are simple enough for students to grasp quickly and on the basis of a feasible amount of reading, but profound enough to offer some real insight into the struggles underlying any attempt to completely ground any theory of time or of temporal language. Topics to be covered include the role of indexical expressions in theories of time, Davidson's arguments for the ontological primacy of events and the role of events in current semantic theory, and McTaggart's paradox and the ensuing debates over whether tensed or untensed facts are fundamentally truth-bearing. After completing the course, students will have a deeper understanding of the historically significant and ongoing relationship between analytic philosophy and formal semantics with respect to both content and form. Through the microcosm of time and tense, students will learn about the more general relationship, often characterized by fluidity of boundaries and the sharing of common goals, ontologies, formal tools, and results, between the two disciplines.

Students will be asked to submit response papers weekly, possibly augmented by short in-class quizzes or exercises to enforce reading requirements and reinforce deep comprehension of the argumentation presented in the text. (A set of take-home exercises may be useful to the extent that practice working with a simple semantics of tense proves beneficial to learners.) Final projects will be longer papers responding to a particular line of argumentation discussed in class or developing an original perspective on an issue addressed in the course.

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 suitable for students with little to no prior exposure to linguistics or philosophy, but students who have taken one or more courses in linguistic semantics, philosophy of language or philosophy of mind may find it easier to integrate the course content with their prior knowledge.

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 ($\sim \frac{1}{2}$ 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 semantics or metaphysics of tense presented in the context of the philosophical and linguistic 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 the philosophical materials 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	TBA	Chapter 2 of Klein, Wolfgang. <i>Time in language</i> . Psychology Press, 1994.	$\sim \frac{1}{2}$ page list of response questions	Intro: The Expression of Time in Natural Language
2	TBA	McTaggart, J. Ellis. "The unreality of time." <i>Mind</i> 17.68 (1908): 457-474.	Reading Response 1	McTaggart's Paradox and the A- and B-Theories of Time
3	TBA	Le Poidevin, Robin. "Why tenses need real times." <i>Time, tense and reference</i> (2003): 305-324.	Reading Response 2	Tensed vs. Untensed Facts
4	TBA	Lecture II from Bach, Emmon. <i>Informal lectures on formal semantics</i> . Suny Press, 1989.	Reading Response 3	A Basic Semantics of Tense
5	TBA	Braun, David, "Indexicals", <i>The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i> (Summer 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) OR Casati, Roberto, and Achille Varzi. Events. <i>The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i> (Summer 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)	Reading Response 4	Temporal Indexicality OR Events in Philosophy and Linguistics
6	TBA	Falk, Arthur. "Time plus the whoosh and whiz." <i>Time, Tense and Reference</i> (2003): 211-50.	None (Term paper due in 1-2 weeks)	Tense, Cognition, and Perception

Optional Reading

Davidson, Donald. "The logical form of action sentences." *Essays on actions and events* 5 (1967): 105-148.

Kaplan, David. 1989a. "Demonstratives." In Almog, Perry, and Wettstein 1989, pp. 481–563.

Prior, Arthur N. *Changes in events and changes in things*. Department of Philosophy, University of Kansas, 1962.

Mellor, D. H. "The unreality of tense." *The Philosophy of Time* (1993): 47-59.