

PHIL 253
INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Fall 2022

Instructor: Megan Hyska	Time: T/Th: 9:30-10:50
Email: megan.hyska@northwestern.edu	Place: Kresge 2-415

Instructor Office Hours: In-person (Kresge 3-349) Thursdays 3:30-5:30 and by alternative arrangement.

Your TAs:

Amelia Perkins, AmeliaPerkins2024@u.northwestern.edu

Office hours: Friday 10:30-12:30

Sections: Thursday and Friday

On zoom: [Link here](#)

Bernardo Barzana, BernardoBarzana2025@u.northwestern.edu

Office hours: Tuesday 5-7

Sections: Monday and Wednesday

On zoom: [Link here](#)

Course Description and Objectives: This is an introduction to the philosophy of language taught through a combination of philosophical texts and works of literature. Some questions we will ask include: What is meaning? Can we ever really communicate with one another and, if so, how? How do we acquire a language? How do the languages that we learn shape our minds and the ways that we live? Do non-human animals use language? And how do metaphors and similes work?

This course aims to develop the capacity for critical reasoning and further the related [learning objectives of the Northwestern philosophy program](#).

Course Materials: All readings are available on Canvas under either “Files” or “Course Reserves”.

Important Dates:

Midterm October 18th, in class

Final Exam December 8th, 12-2pm

Course Outline:

DAY	READINGS AND COURSEWORK
1, 09.20	Introduction, no readings or assignments
	What is (a) language?
2, 09.22	David Lewis, excerpt from <i>Language and Languages</i> and Jorge Luis Borges, <i>The Library of Babel</i>
	Language, mind, and world
3, 09.27	John Locke, excerpt from <i>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> and Jonathan Swift, excerpt from <i>Gulliver’s Travels</i>

4, 09.29 John Stuart Mill, excerpt from *A System of Logic* and Ferdinand de Saussure, excerpt from *Course in General Linguistics*

Language Learning

5, 10.04 Noam Chomsky, excerpt from *Language and Problems of Knowledge* and Ursula K. Leguin, *The Nna Mmoy Language*.

6, 10.06 Louise Antony, *Naturalizing Radical Translation*

Linguistic Difference

7, 10.11 Ludwig Wittgenstein, excerpt from *Philosophical Investigations* and Ted Chiang, *The Story of Your Life*

8, 10.13 Guy Deutscher, *Crying Whorf*

9 10.18 Midterm

Language as Action

10, 10.20 J.L. Austin, *Performative Utterances* and Alice Walker, *Everyday Use*

11, 10.25 Rae Langton, *Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts**

Communication

12, 10.27 Herbert Paul Grice, excerpt from *Meaning*, excerpt from *Logic and Conversation* and Ursula K. Leguin, *Solitude*

13, 11.01 Thom Scott-Phillips, excerpt from *Speaking our Minds*

14, 11.03 Class cancelled

Language and Non-human Animals

15, 11.08 Dorothy L. Cheney and Robert M. Seyfarth, excerpt from *Baboon Metaphysics* and J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*.

16, 11.10 continued

Metaphor

17, 11.15 Donald Davidson, *What Metaphors Mean* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode (season 5, ep 2: "Darmok")

18, 11.17 Elisabeth Camp, *Why metaphors make good insults*

19, 11.22 Catch up, review

*Content advisory: this paper includes discussion of sexual violence.

Grade Breakdown: A midterm exam or paper (25%), a final exam or paper (30%), reading responses (35%), and participation and attendance (10%).

Reading Responses: To be handed in on any 8 normal class days over the course of the quarter (note that this excludes all dates when we are not guaranteed to be starting new material: 10.18, 11.03, 11.10, and 11.22). On those days when you opt to hand one in, it is due at 9am before class. Except in extraordinary circumstances, this assignment will not be accepted after the beginning of the class period on the day it's due. You will be responding to the reading that we are to discuss that day in class. On days where multiple readings are assigned, you may choose to address any one or more of them.

Responses should be approximately 200 words long. They should not be summaries of the readings, but rather a set of comments on what you found interesting or perplexing. At the end of each response, you should include one discussion question. Reading responses should refer to and *cite* specific comments in the reading. Responses without citations will receive a 0. When grading these responses, we will be looking for clear, technically proficient writing as well as evidence that you have grappled with the reading. Responses will receive 0, 1 or 2 as their grade.

Midterm and Final: For both your midterm and your final, you have the option of *either* writing an exam on the material covered in class, *or* writing a paper on a topic of your choosing. Note that you may not complete both and then default to which score is higher; in the event that you erroneously try to hand in both, we will ignore your exam grade and default to the paper grade.

Should you decide to write a paper for either midterm or final, it will be due at the time that the corresponding exam starts, and you then naturally don't have to attend the exam. Your paper may be either argumentative or exploratory, but must in some way take up material we have covered in class. In an argumentative vein, you might for instance decide to argue against Grice's conception of meaning (from 10.27), or to defend Quine against Louise Antony's objections (from 10.06). In a more exploratory vein, you might write an essay connecting some themes in Borges' *The Library of Babel* (from 09.22) to ideas in Austin (from 10.20), or give a reading of LeGuin's *Solitude* (from 10.27) using concepts from Deutscher (from 10.13)— these are just some examples, and you are encouraged to create your own paper topic. No matter what sort of essay you write, we are looking for you to be able to clearly articulate the project, to demonstrate excellent writing mechanics and sharp analytical abilities, and, perhaps most importantly to me, to demonstrate originality or creativity. The bar for essays is high, and for this reason, I encourage you to think of choosing the essay as a more challenging option than choosing the exam— however, one that I hope will be rewarding if you find yourself really interested in one particular topic during the quarter. A paper written for the midterm should be approx. 1500 words, and one written for the final should be approx. 2000 words. You are not required to find and use sources beyond those covered in class, but you are welcome to do so— with proper citation, of course, remaining of the highest importance. I very strongly encourage anyone interested in writing a paper to run their paper topic by the instructor or TAs well in advance.

Participation and attendance: You earn your participation grade largely by being active (asking questions, participating in conversation) in your discussion section, but participating in lecture also counts in your favor. This is an in-person class, so by default in-person attendance is required in both lecture and discussion section. Except in extraordinary circumstance, in order for an absence to be excused it must be communicated to your TA *in advance* of the lecture or discussion section you will be missing. Note that, per WCAS regulation, a student can not pass this course unless they are present for at least 50% of course meetings.

Prohibition of Recording of Class Sessions by Students: Unauthorized student recording of classroom or other academic activities (including advising sessions or office hours) is prohibited. Unauthorized recording is unethical and may also be a violation of University policy and state law. Students requesting

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Academic Integrity: Students in this course are required to comply with the policies found in the booklet, “Academic Integrity at Northwestern University: A Basic Guide”. All assignments submitted for credit in this course must be submitted electronically unless otherwise instructed by the professor. Your written work may be tested for plagiarized content. For details regarding academic integrity at Northwestern or to download the guide, visit: <https://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/index.html>

Students with Disabilities: Northwestern University is committed to providing the most accessible learning environment possible for students with disabilities. Should you anticipate or experience disability-related barriers in the academic setting, please contact AccessibleNU to move forward with the university’s established accommodation process (e: accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; p: 847-467-5530). If you already have established accommodations with AccessibleNU, please let me know as soon as possible, preferably within the first two weeks of the term, so we can work together to implement your disability accommodations. Disability information, including academic accommodations, is confidential under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

Support for Wellness and Mental Health: Northwestern University is committed to supporting the wellness of our students. Student Affairs has multiple resources to support student wellness and mental health. If you are feeling distressed or overwhelmed, please reach out for help. Students can access confidential resources through the [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#), [Religious and Spiritual Life \(RSL\)](#) and the [Center for Awareness, Response and Education \(CARE\)](#).