UNIVERSITY
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INTERNATIONAL
PROGRAMMES

Philosophy of language [PY 3210]

Introductory reading

Blackburn, S. Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). Readable, if opinionated, treatment of the central areas of philosophy of language, with large amounts of metaphysics thrown in for free.

Larson, R. and G. Segal Knowledge of Meaning: an Introduction to Semantic Theory. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995). A thorough introduction to philosophy of language for both philosophy and linguistics students.

McCulloch, G. The Game of the Name: Introducing Logic, Language and Mind. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). A vigorous introduction to issues in the theory of reference.

Sample examination questions

1.   'Human communication has some extraordinary properties, not shared by most other kinds of human behaviour. One of the most extraordinary is this: If I am trying to tell someone something, then (assuming certain conditions are satisfied) as soon as he recognizes that I am trying to tell him something and exactly what it is that I am trying to tell him, I have succeeded in telling it to him' (SEARLE). Which speech acts have this extraordinary property? Was Searle right to think that the property plays an important part in an account of speech acts?

2.   Does the presence of non-indicative sentences in a language show that *truth* cannot be used as a central semantic notion in a theory for that language?

3.   How should differences between 'and' and 'but' and differences between 'money' and 'dosh' be accounted for?

4.   What is Carnap's concept of intensional isomorphism? Does it solve the problem it is designed to solve?

5.   What difficulty, according to Quine, arises when we try to specify the semantic representation of a sentence like 'John believes that someone is a spy', on at least one of its readings? Assess Quine's solution of this difficulty.

6.   Is knowing a statement's truth conditions (a) necessary and (b) sufficient for knowing what it means?

7. Wittgenstein describes one picture of language as follows: 'Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.' (*Philosophical Investigations* §1) Davidson suggests that this picture, correct or not, is no help when it comes to constructing a semantic theory of a language. Is Davidson right?

8. EITHER

(a) 'Many sentences of English have never been uttered, and no one has ever meant anything by uttering them. Therefore their meaning cannot be determined by speaker's intentions.' Discuss.

   OR

(b) 'The Gricean line of explanation [of meaning] is hence essentially no more than a sophisticated version of the code conception of language.' (DUMMETT) Discuss.

9. How does Grice distinguish between what is said by an utterance and what is implicated by it? Is this distinction defensible?

10. EITHER

(a) 'Quine's thesis of indeterminacy of translation is a *reductio ad absurdum* of his behaviourism.' Discuss.

   OR

(b) What is Quine's proxy-function argument? Is it convincing?

11. In what ways is the semantics of a language compositional? What reasons are there for expecting it to be?

12. Explain Kaplan's notions of character and content. What role do they leave for truth in the semantics of a language?

13. 'For it is a fashionable mistake to take as primary "(The sentence) 'S' is true (in the English language)". Here the addition of the words "in the English language" serves to emphasize that "sentence" is not being used as equivalent to "statement", so that it precisely is not what can be true or false.' (AUSTIN) Why is this a mistake? Can the mistake be rectified by relativising truth to parameters?

14. EITHER

(a) 'B is true :=: (∃p). B is a belief that p & p. Def' (RAMSEY). Is this an adequate definition of 'true' as it applies to individual states of belief?

   OR

(b) 'As a philosophical account of truth, Tarski's theory fails as badly as it is possible to fail.' (PUTNAM) Discuss.