

Philosophy 873—Seminar: Philosophy of Language
Fall 2011

Instructor: Ben Caplan
 Time: T 12:30 PM – 3:18 PM
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Description and readings

This seminar is on syntax—specifically, contemporary Chomskyan syntactic theory. We’ll be doing some philosophy of syntactic theory. And, to get a better sense of what it is that we’ll be doing some philosophy of, we’ll also be doing some syntactic theory. The seminar will thus proceed along two tracks simultaneously.

The first track will be a crash course in Chomsky’s Minimalist Program in syntactic theory. This track will occupy the first seminar meeting and the first hour of subsequent seminar meetings. (If we can set this up, I’d also be willing to, in effect, teach a section: to meet for one hour a week outside of seminar meetings to go over the syntactic theory introduced during that week’s seminar meeting.) In this part of the course, we’ll work our way through as much of Andrew Radford’s *Analysing English Sentences: A Minimalist Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) as we can.

Two disclaimers are in order. The first disclaimer is that we will be focusing exclusively on the Minimalist Program; we won’t be considering alternative theoretical frameworks, nor will be comparing those alternative frameworks with the Minimalist Program. If there are non-philosophical criticisms to be made here, they will be *theory-internal* criticisms. The second disclaimer is that, as much as I love syntactic theory, I am not a professional linguist. I think I can work my way through the textbook. But I won’t be able to do many things that a real syntactician would be able to do. In particular, I won’t be able to introduce you to much (if any) of the literature beyond what is contained in Radford’s book, nor will I be able to bring to bear a wealth of syntactic data from a range of languages. This means that the non-philosophical theory-internal criticisms will probably end up being rather limited.

The second track will be a leisurely stroll through Peter Ludlow’s *Philosophy of Generative Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). We’ll do as much, or as little, of this book as we want. Topics that I’m particularly interested in include the kind (or kinds) of explanation that the Minimalist Program offers, the role of speakers’ intuitions in syntactic theorizing, and the sorts of theoretical virtues (e.g. simplicity) at work in syntactic theorizing.

Both of these tracks converge (by the end of the quarter you should be in a position to realize that I just made a bad pun there) in Noam Chomsky's work. (We think of him primarily as a linguist, but I've heard linguists complain that he's a philosopher rather than a linguist because there isn't enough data in his papers.) If all goes well, towards the end of the quarter we'll read at least one of his papers. An obvious choice is "Beyond Explanatory Adequacy," *Structures and Beyond: The Cartography of Syntactic Structures*, ed. Adriana Belletti, vol. 3, Oxford Studies in Comparative Syntax (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 104-131. Another candidate is a more recent paper: "On Phases," *Foundational Issues in Linguistic Theory: Essays in Honor of Jean-Roger Vergnaud*, ed. Robert Friedin, Carlos P. Otero, and Maria Luisa Zubizarreta, Current Studies in Linguistics (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2008), 133-166.

An updated schedule will be maintained on the course webpage.

Requirements

The course grade will be based on one seminar paper (10-15 pages), which will be due at the end of the quarter. Participation can help (but not hurt) your grade.

Disabilities

Students who might need accommodations are encouraged to contact me and the Office for Disability Services (150 Pomerene Hall, 292-3307).

Academic misconduct

Academic misconduct is a serious offense. You are expected to know what counts as academic misconduct. You are also expected not to commit it. If I suspect that you have committed academic misconduct, I am required to report my suspicions to the Committee on Academic Misconduct (COAM), which may impose punishments that range from failure to suspension and expulsion.

Academic misconduct is defined in Section 3335-23-04 of the *Code of Student Conduct*, which you are expected to be familiar with. Ignorance of the *Code of Student Conduct* is no excuse for academic misconduct.

The *Code of Student Conduct* is available here:

<http://studentaffairs.osu.edu/pdfs/csc_12-31-07.pdf>.

Information on the Committee on Academic Misconduct is available here:

<<http://oaa.osu.edu/coam/home.html>>.