

Meaning

Version of September 24, 2023

Fall 2022, CORE-UA 400, Texts and Ideas

Lectures: Tue/Thu 4:55–6:10; Bldg:19UP, Room:102; Obligatory recitations: Fridays

Primary instructor: Professor Chris Barker, cb125@nyu.edu

Preceptor: Yana Makuwa, ycm235@nyu.edu

Preceptor: Nicole Parazini, np1489@nyu.edu

Preceptor: Ludwig Schmitz, lss424@nyu.edu



Subject and goals:

This course is about one of the supreme activities of the human race, namely, the creation of meaning.

What is meaning? What has it, and how do the things that have it get it? How has our conception of meaning developed over the centuries? And how do our attitudes towards meaning shape who we think we are?

This is NOT a course about spiritual meaning, in the sense of “the meaning of life”. Rather, it is about the meaning of texts, primarily, but not always, texts involving language.

We’ll study textual meaning in two different ways: by engaging with philosophers and linguists who have introduced influential new ways to think about meaning, from Aristotle to Francis Bacon to Wittgenstein to Grice; and by showing how these various conceptions of meaning provide new ways of interpreting important texts, from prehistoric cave paintings (see the image above) to comics and computer programs. In particular, we will confront the implications of deep learning and neural nets (Siri, Alexa, and the like) for our conception of ourselves. Does the fact that these machines can answer questions accurately mean that the human race no longer has a monopoly on meaning?

This course aims to fulfill the goals of the Texts and Ideas branch of the CORE through study of some of the literary and philosophical works that have been most influential in shaping the contemporary world, especially including instances in which these ideas have been rejected, replaced, or appropriated. Arguably, there is no subject closer to the heart of humanistic study of the liberal arts than the study of meaning itself. The overarching question is: how does our conception of meaning shape our conception of ourselves and our culture?

Modes of instruction:

This course is part of the Texts and Ideas section of the CORE curriculum. It consists of two lectures and one recitation per week. There is no way to learn the content of the course without attending the lectures. Likewise, recitations are also essential and obligatory; you must sign up for a specific recitation. Lectures and recitations will be conducted in person. Assignments will be submitted according to the requirements of your preceptor; typically, you will submit a PDF version via Brightspace.

Requirements and expectations

- Participating in lectures twice a week.
- Participation in recitation sessions once a week.
- Reading the assignments in advance of each lecture.
- 4 writing exercises, adding up to a total of 20 pages.
- 4 asynchronous online quizzes.

Weight of the requirements in the final grade: writing exercises, 70%; quizzes, 20%; participation 10%. A pattern of late assignments or missed lectures or recitations will lower the participation component of the final grade.

Topics and schedule

Dates with a superscript show when writing assignments are due; the number indicates the page limit. See the expanded syllabus further below for details about the nature of the assignments. The asynchronous, online quizzes will be available from Wednesday through Friday during each week an assignment is due.

Note that Tuesday 11 October is a legislative Monday.

Week	Tue	Thu	Topic	Main texts, authors
1	—	Sep 1	[class cancelled]	[no reading, no recitation this week]
2	Sep 6	Sep 8	Writing	Enuma Elish/cuneiform
3	Sep 13	Sep 15	Rhetoric	Cicero, Quintillian/Henderson&McCready
4	Sep 20	Sep 22	Metaphor	Song of Songs/Islandic kennings/Lakoff
5	Sep 27 ³ pages due	Sep 29	Logic	Aristotle/Bacon
6	Oct 4	Oct 6	Coherence	Hume/Kehler
7	[No class]	Oct 13	Structuralism	de Saussure
8	Oct 18	[NO CLASS]	(cont'd)	Wierzbicka (Durst)
9	Oct 25 ⁵ pages due	Oct 27	Language games	Wittgenstein, early/late
10	Nov 1	Nov 3	Limits on thought	Whorf/Everett
11	Nov 8	Nov 10	Performatives	Austin/Derrida
12	Nov 15	Nov 17	Sarcasm	Grice/Camp
13	Nov 22 ⁶ pages due	[xgiving]	Machine meaning	Turing/Searle
14	Nov 29	Dec 1	Social meaning	Labov/Eckert
15	Dec 6	Dec 8	Extraterrestrial meaning	Voyager/SETI
16	Dec 13	—	Summing up	[Final paper, 6 pages, due 16 December]

The writing assignments are described briefly further below (after the week by week expanded syllabus); detailed homework prompts will be provided well in advance of each due date. *Nota bene: we reserve the right to change any of the details below as the course unfolds, including the details of the writing assignments.* There are no books or other materials that you are required to purchase at the bookstore or anywhere else. All materials are available online for free, either via links, or in the Resources directory on the Brightspace site.

Week 1: [class cancelled]

Week 2: Writing.

- Tue Sep 6: Introduction, goals, structure of the course. What *has* meaning? Intentionality, interpretability, stability. Cave Art: seventeen thousand years ago people created images on the walls of caves near Lascaux, France. What kind of meaning could they have had? What kind of meaning, if any, can they have for us today?
- Thu: The Enuma Elish. How does writing work? What do those symbols mean? What is the role of spoken language? How many layers of meaning are there?
 - Reading 1: Tablet 1 of the Enuma Elish, edited by Joshua J. Mark. The translation of the first tablet ends at the top of page 7.
 - Reading 2: Enuma Elish in cuneiform with translation. This is a rendering (in Unicode) of the Enuma Elish in the original cuneiform, along with line by line translations provided by Chandra Lilac. Study the first several lines. Do you see any repeated symbols? What do the symbols correspond to in the column labeled “phonetic transcription”?
 - Optional background reading on cuneiform: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuneiform>
- **Writing assignment 1**, three pages, due on Tuesday 27 September. Homework prompt will be available this week, and the assignment will be discussed in class.

Week 3: Rhetoric.

- Tue: Cicero’s notion of oration. One of the key elements in successful oratory is conveying facts. But there is much more. What is there beside information? Reading 1: Cicero’s *de Oratore* Book 1. The key part is from the beginning of section XXXI [137] (page 14 in the version on Brightspace) until the end of section L [219] (page 24).
- Thu: Modern political discourse: dogwhistles. Henderson and McCready on dogwhistles. This article starts off highly readable, then gets super technical around page 6. Concentrate on reading and pondering the first 5 pages or so.

Week 4: Metaphor.

- Tue: Similes and metaphors: “Thy teeth are like a flock of ewes”. Reading 1: The Song of Songs (Please read all 8 one-page chapters) [There are links to listen to the poem in Hebrew!]
- Thu: Extreme metaphor: Icelandic kennings. Bracelets are “snakes of the hawk’s mountain” (since hawks perch on shoulders). Reading 2: Metaphors we live by. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. 2003. University of Chicago Press. First four chapters (22 pages).

Week 5: Scientific meaning: creating new knowledge using facts and reasoning

- Tue: Aristotle’s syllogistic deductions. We can discover new meaning by combining established meanings into logical proofs. Reading 1: Posterior Analytics, Book II (part of the Organon), Aristotle. 4th century BCE [2015]. Translated by G. R. G. Mure. Pages 46-70 in the edition in the Resources directory.

– **Writing assignment 1** due today; Writing assignment 2, 5 pages, due in three weeks, on 25 October.

- Thu: Bacon says Aristotle got it wrong: induction, not deduction! Reading: Francis Bacon. 1620 [2017] *The New Organon*. Translated by Jonathan Bennett. Read the following parts of Book 1: the preface, and in part 1, aphorisms concerning the interpretation of nature, 1–77, pages 1–23 (double columns).

Week 6: Coherence

- Tue: Hume. “To me there appear to be only three factors connecting ideas with one another, namely, resemblance, contiguity in time or place, and cause or effect.” Reading 1: Hume, David. 1748 [2017]. *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. First inquiry, section 2: the origin of ideas, and section 3: the association of ideas. Pages 7–11.
- Thu: Kehler. Connecting Hume to language. Reading 2: Kehler, Andy. 2002. *Coherence, reference, and the theory of grammar*. CSLI publications. Introduction: pages 1–8.

Week 7: Structuralism: words have meaning only in relation to other words.

- [Tuesday is a legislative Monday, no class]
- Thu: de Saussure: the signifier and the signified. Course in General Linguistics, Chapter 1. Linguistic meaning is purely relative to other linguistic objects.

Week 8: Structuralism continued

- Tue: Wierzbicka: semantic primes: the basic concepts out of which all word meanings are composed. *The Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach to linguistic meaning*. Uwe Durst. First 25 pages only, the first three sections.
- Thu: CLASS CANCELLED; recitation NOT cancelled

Week 9: Language games: meaning as behavior.

- Tue: Early Wittgenstein: logical positivism. Reading 1: *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. 1921. Ogden translation. Propositions 1, 2, and 3 (23 pages).
– **Writing assignment 2** due today; Writing assignment 3, 6 pages, due in three weeks on 22 November.
- Thu: Late Wittgenstein: pragmatism, behaviorism. Reading 2: *Philosophical Investigations*. 1953 [1958]. Basil Blackwell. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. First fifty aphorisms. (21 pages)

Week 10: Limits on thought. Does language limit what we can think?

- Tue: The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: “The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas.” Reading 1: *Science and linguistics* Benjamin Whorf. 1940. Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s *Technology Review*.
- Thu: Can the Pirahã count? Reading 2: Cultural constraints on grammar and cognition in Pirahã. Daniel L. Everett. 2005. *Current Anthropology* **46.4** 621–634.

Week 11: Performatives. Sometimes saying words does things!

- Tue: Some words are magic. Reading 1: *How to do things with words*. J. L. Austin. Please read (at least) the first two lectures, pages 1–25. 1962. OUP.
- Thu: Derrida deconstructs Austin. Reading 2: *Signature Event Context*. Jacques Derrida. 1972. 1–25.

Week 12: Sarcasm.

- Tue: Entailment versus implicature: the difference between what people say and what they mean. Reading 1: Logic and conversation. Paul Grice. 1975. In: *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. 3, *Speech Acts*, ed. by Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan. New York: Academic Press 1975, 41–58. Do not read the first two and a half pages, but start under the first major section heading (“Implicature”).
- Thu: The problem of sarcasm: sometimes things mean the opposite of what they say. Reading 2: Sarcasm, pretense, and the semantics/pragmatics distinction. Elizabeth Camp. 2012. *Noûs*. **46.4**: 587–634. Please read the first ten pages.

Week 13: Machine meaning. Do humans have a monopoly on meaning?

- Tue: what is the meaning of a program? Reading 1: Learning to program using Blockly, a visual programming language. Please try to solve the first game (“puzzle”), and the second game “maze”—but no more than first nine levels for the maze!
 - **Writing assignment 3** due today; Writing assignment 4, also 6 pages, due in four weeks on 16 December.
- [Thursday is Thanksgiving, no class]

Week 14: Computation continued; social meaning

- Tue: The Turing Test, and Searle’s Chinese room parable. Reading 2: *Minds, Brains and Programs*. John Searle. 1980. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3: 417–457.
- Thu: how the way we talk reflects social circumstances. The social motivation of a sound change. Bill Labov. 1963. *Word* **19**: 273–309.
 - how the way we talk creates social circumstances. The Emergence of Meaning in the Study of Sociolinguistic Variation. Penny Eckert. 2012. *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* **41**:87–100.

Week 15: Non-human meaning.

- Tue: Animal communication [reading TBA]
- Thu: How do we communicate with different species? Reading: Voyager’s Golden Record.

Week 16: Taking stock, review.

- Last class! No reading—bring questions and comments!
- Friday 16 December: **Writing assignment 4**, 5 pages, due at the end of this week.
- Quiz 4, the final on-line asynchronous quiz, available Wednesday, must be completed before midnight Friday 16 December.

Here are brief descriptions of the writing assignments. **More detailed homework prompts will be provided when each exercise is assigned.**

- Writing assignment 1, due Monday 27 September, page target 3 pages. Option 1: find one or two expressions that have been claimed to be dogwhistles in modern political discourse. Describe the circumstances in which the dogwhistle occurs. Explain who it is aimed at, and how the meaning differs for the in group versus the out group. Option 2: find a metaphor in some song or written text. Explain what its range of possible interpretations is, and then argue in favor of one interpretation as being the intended one.
- Writing assignment 2, due Monday 25 October, page target 5 pages. Option 1: Select a short written prose passage (100-200 words). Analyze which coherence relation governs each successive pair of sentences. Note whether there are any overt markers of coherence relations. Option 2: choose two words and build definitions for them using some specific set of semantic primes. Are

the definitions adequate, or does they miss some subtleties? Can you imagine a way of enlarging the set of primes that would fix your definitions? Comment on the viability of the semantic metalanguage strategy.

- Writing assignment 3, due Monday 22 November, page target 6 pages. Option 1: argue in favor or against the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis. You can use words or expressions from some language other than English that you know, or you can use slang terms from a dialect of English. Can you translate them accurately? If not, why not? Do you agree or disagree that our language limits what we are able to think? Explain your position and give at least one argument. Option 2: find a short passage in a written text (one or two sentences). Explain what the passage implicates: state the implicature, and say how the implicature follows from a specific Gricean maxim. For the second passage, find an instance of what you think might be sarcasm. Say what the literal meaning is, and then explain how the sarcastic reading arises. Are you satisfied with Camp's theory of sarcasm? Explain why or why not.
- Writing assignment 4, due Friday 16 December, page target 6 pages. Option 1: Argue for or against Searle's conclusion that the Turing Test is not an adequate way to recognize intelligence. Do you agree that intention is essential? Are modern digital assistants (Siri, Alexa, and so on) intelligent? Do they understand language? Why or why not? Option 2: Is meaning an essentially social activity? Meaning arises from one entity communicating with another entity, and therefore is in some sense about interaction. Take a position, and defend your thesis with discussion of examples taken from writing, computer programs, sociolinguistic signaling, etc.

Affirmations:

This syllabus should be accompanied by information from the CORE about the nature and purpose of the CORE, grading practices, and policies such as the policy on cheating. At the risk of repeating some of the information there, this course makes the following affirmations:

Inclusion. Every NYU student is warmly welcome in the course, regardless of which NYU school they are enrolled in, their background, identity, religion, or orientation. We value diversity.

Cheating. Presenting the work of another as if it were your own is unethical and wrong, and will not be tolerated. We encourage you to discuss the homework assignments with other people, including other classmates. However, you must write up your homework on your own. In particular, you may not look at anyone else's homework unless you have already handed in your homework write up. In addition, for writing exercises that involve discussing texts or passages, please select examples you have found on your own, and that are not the same as the classmates you've communicated with.

Help. Your instructors are committed to helping you succeed in this course. Please don't hesitate to contact any of us. If our office hours are not convenient for you, we would be happy to schedule an appointment. **Additional assistance** for this class is available to you free of charge at the University Learning Center located in University Hall at 110 East 14th Street. For information on one-on-one and group peer tutoring, please stop by the CLC or go to their website: <http://www.nyu.edu/ulc>.