# Conversation and Social Theory

*Philosophy 508: Recent and Contemporary Philosophy*

Sam Berstler                                                 Wednesday 6:00-8:50 pm
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## Overview.

> I am, however, enough of a rationalist to want to find a basis that underlies these facts, undeniable though they may be; I would like to be able to think of the standard type of conversational practice not merely as something that all or most do *in fact* follow but as something that it is *reasonable* for us to follow, that we *should not* abandon.
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>                                       H.P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation"

What is conversation, and why does a theory of conversation matter for the philosophy of language? Does our theory of conversation help to explain our theory of meta-semantics, assertion, and communication?  Or is it the other way around?  What, if at all, is the theoretical significance of "non-canonical" conversations, that is, conversations that are deceptive, quietly non-cooperative, or openly antagonistic?  How should we evaluate such conversations morally?  What is the theoretical significance of the "common ground," and how does our answer relate to our theory of meaning? What would a good theory of conversation even *look like*?  Is such a theory possible?

This course takes as its starting place *Grice's Point*.  Grice's Point was that conversation is a form of rational, cooperative human behavior.  Accordingly, we can use general rational principles to explain why conversation has the nature and structure that it has (and why it *should* have the nature and structure it *in fact* has).  If Grice's Point is right, then our theory of conversation (and, insofar as it depends on our theory of conversation, our theory of meaning) presupposes a theory of rational, cooperative human behavior.

Grice's Point continues to cast a long (if often unacknowledged) shadow over the philosophy of language.  Nonetheless, Grice's project remains radically incomplete.  It is entirely unclear how to use principles of human behavior to explain a whole host of conversational phenomena—including the classical Gricean conversational implicature.  The moral, for some philosophers of language, has been to give up on the Gricean project. The moral, for me, and (I hope) for this seminar, is not to give up on the Gricean project but to develop it and see where it leads us.

This course assumes no technical background.  Readings are drawn from philosophy of language, formal pragmatics, sociolinguistics, social psychology, anthropology, and ethics.

# Logistics.

**Audience.** This course is a graduate-level seminar in philosophy. If you are not a PhD student in philosophy, please come talk to me about taking the course.

**Half-course reminder.** Please note that this course **only** meets for the **first six weeks** of the term. You may, but do not need to, concurrently enroll in Dan Hoek's course, which meets at the same time during the last six weeks of the semester.

**Readings.** Readings and handouts will be available on the course website. I will distribute the password to the course website on the first day of class. The readings for the first day are available online for free. Email me if you are having difficulty finding any readings.

**Units.** I *am* permitted to do units with the grads. If you want a unit associated with this course, please come talk to me about it. The default option is to write a course term paper.

**Writing practice.** I won't (and can't) require this, but if you would *like* to gain practice regularly writing philosophy, and receiving feedback on your writing, in a low stakes environments, here's what I'm offering. Feel free to email me **one paragraph** each week (or for some of the weeks), sometime before seminar, sketching an objection to or development of some aspect of the week's reading. I'll send you feedback on both the style and substance of the paragraph. Also, it will probably be fun. If you want to do this, you don't need to talk to me in advance.

**Presentation practice.** Again, I won't (and can't) require this, but if you would *like* to gain experience presenting, or receiving feedback on some work that is related to the themes of the course, or if you just have some strong feelings about some aspect of the material, we will *most likely* have time to incorporate student presentations into class. Also, doing a presentation will probably be fun. Come talk to me if you'd like to do this.

**Meetings.** I'm around a lot during the week. Drop in on me, or drop me a line, anytime, and we can set up a time to chat.

# Boilerplate.

**Academic dishonesty.** It's bad. Don't do it.

**Accommodations.** If you need some kind of accommodation, you can always feel free to reach out to me directly. But you *needn't* feel obligated to discuss accommodations with me directly. At any time, you can reach out to the relevant office at Princeton, who can talk to me on your behalf, should it be necessary. For official academic accommodations, your primary contact point is the Office of Disability Services. You can also schedule a consultation with someone at the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning.

*Readings are provisional (as of 5.September.2019) and subject to change.*

| Week | Theme | Readings |
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| **Week 1**<br>11 Sept 2019 | The long shadow of Grice | 1. H.P. Grice, "Meaning" (1957)<br>2. H.P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation" (1967)<br>3. Robert Stalnaker, "Common Ground" (2002) |
| **Week 2**<br>18 Sept 2019 | What's assertion, metasemantics, and the common ground got to do with any of this? | 1. David Lewis, "Language and Languages" (1975)<br>2. Donald Davidson, "Communication and Convention" (1984)<br>3. Seth Yalcin, "Expressivism by Force" (2018), particularly pg. 400-408<br><br>Background to 3: J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words,* lecture VIII |
| **Week 3**<br>25 Sept 2019 | What does the non-cooperativity critique really amount to? | 1. Rae Langton, "Blocking as Counter-Speech" (2018)<br>2. Elisabeth Camp, "Insinuation, Common Ground, and the Conversational Record" (2018)<br>3. Sam Berstler, "Implicature in the Real World" (MS) |
| **Week 4**<br>2 Oct 2019 | The structure of conversation, with and without goals | 1. Craige Roberts, "Information Structure in Discourse: Towards an Integrated Formal Theory of Pragmatics" (1996), especially pg. 91-96 (formal discussion may be skipped)<br>2. Marilyn A. Walker, "Redundancy in Collaborative Dialogue" (1992)<br>3. Eija Ventola, "The Structure of Casual Conversation in English" (1979)<br>4. Emer Gilmartin et al, "Just talking: Modeling Casual Conversations" (2018)<br>5. N. J. Enfield, "Language Presupposes an Enchronic Infrastructure for Social Interaction" (2013)<br><br>It looks like a lot. It's not. These are not philosophy papers, and most of them can be read quickly. |
| **Week 5**<br>9 Oct 2019 | Social interaction and its prerequisites | 1. Steve Darwall, "Respect as Honor and as Accountability (2013)<br>2. David Vellemen, "Genesis of Shame" (2001)<br>3. Sam Berstler, "Pretense Run Amok: On Domination and Interpretation" (MS) |
| **Week 6**<br>16 Oct 2019 | Mimicry, appearance, and morality | 1. Lauren E. Scissors et al, "Linguistic Mimicry and Trust in Text-based CMC" (2008)<br>2. Sarah Buss, "Appearing Respectful" (1999)<br>3. Sam Berstler, "Conversational Momentum" (MS) |