

# LANGUAGE, TIME, AND NATURE.

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## Summary

When people have conversations, do they make implicit philosophical assumptions? Does the way I talk lock me into any particular beliefs about what could or couldn't exist, or about how the laws of the universe are set up? Some have thought so; others have disagreed. At one point, around the middle of the 20th century, it was common for philosophers in the US and UK to take this idea for granted. But today, there is a wider spectrum of opinion as to how viable the approach is, and even its proponents are more cautious in their optimism.

Let's consider an example of how a philosophical conundrum might be tucked away in our use of language. Suppose I tell you that the other day, my significant other gave me a kiss. How literally should we take that remark? Perhaps all this business about giving me something is just a manner of speaking. To say that she 'gave me a kiss,' on such a view, is simply to say that she kissed me—that a certain moment in the past, she and I stood in the relation of kisser to kissee. But you might also argue that there really was *a thing that she gave me*, at least in some sense of the term. Now that I've been kissed, I am quite literally in possession of something that I will be able to cherish for months to come. Or, alternatively, you might think that this entire line of discussion fails to make sense, in which case the interesting challenge is to say why.

Now, although that was a somewhat frivolous case, it leads very quickly into deeper waters. Just now, for instance, I alluded to a certain moment in the past. But what is a moment? Are there really any such things, and if so, what does it mean to say that the past is made out of them? Are we implicitly committed to a theory on which time is a linear concatenation of moments, solely on the basis of the fact that we use the past, present, and future tenses?

This course will explore how insights into the workings of language and insights into traditional philosophical questions are related. During the first two weeks, we will look at an influential argument to the effect that one can draw philosophical conclusions from linguistic investigations, as well as a very serious criticism of that argument. To address this criticism, we will spend the next six weeks of the course exploring two topics in some depth. For the first three of those six weeks, we will consider whether linguistic phenomena like tense and grammatical aspect have anything to tell us about the structure of time. Then, over the following three weeks, we will consider whether the behavior of the loose generalizations we make in everyday conversation has anything to tell us about the characteristics of natural and artificial kinds. Finally, to conclude the course, we will revisit the major line of criticism against linguistic philosophy and consider whether, in light of our work on tense and kind reference, there is anything to say in response.

## Course Requirements

Work for the course consists of readings, weekly exercises, and a paper (5-10 pages). You may choose whether you would prefer to write a midterm or a final paper. The final grade breakdown is as follows:

70% Weekly Exercises

30% Paper

...and a final adjustment of the final grade by at most one +/- for class participation

Attendance is required and regular participation is expected. Frequent, on-point participation receives a '+' mark, regular, on-point participation receives a '0' mark, and infrequent or irrelevant participation receives a '-' mark.

The weekly exercises will be a mix of technical problems designed to make you comfortable with the formal tools we'll be using in the course, and more open-ended conceptual problems. Typically, they will ask you to put the ideas we discuss into practice—sometimes this means applying them to problems that we haven't talked about, and sometimes it means revisiting old problems. Although students with a leaning toward the philosophy of language will find much in this course to stimulate their interest, nonspecialists are especially encouraged to take part: *the technical problems that appear in the exercises require no background in logic, mathematics, or linguistics*. You will be taught everything you need to do them. For the more open-ended questions there will often be many different correct answers—though note that this is not to say that every possible answer is a correct answer. Your principal goal in doing each exercise should be to come up with well-reasoned discussions of the problems you encounter, followed by clear arguments in favor of your proposal. Although **late assignments will not be accepted**, your lowest assignment grade will be dropped.

The paper will involve providing an exposition of one of the main arguments we dealt with in class, and either critically responding to it or building on it yourself.

## Assignment Schedule

Marked below are the dates by which you should plan to have read the various texts for the course, as well as the due dates for the assignments. All readings will be made available on chalk.

	Mon/Tue	Wed/Thu
Week 1	Introduction	Willard van Orman Quine, 'On What There Is'
Week 2	Donald Davidson, 'The Logical Form of Action Sentences' <b>Exercise 1 due</b>	Achille Varzi, 'Words and Objects'
Week 3	NO CLASS	Leibniz/Clarke correspondence (excerpts) <b>Exercise 2 due</b>
Week 4	Bertrand Russell, 'Logical Atomism' <b>Exercise 3 due</b>	Zeno Vendler, 'Verbs and Times'
Week 5	Emmon Bach, 'On Time, Tense, and Aspect,' pp. 63-72. <b>Exercise 4 due</b>	Emmon Bach, 'On Time, Tense, and Aspect,' pp. 72-80.
Week 6	Aristotle, <i>Categories</i> , chaps. 1-5. <b>Exercise 5 due</b> <b>Midterm paper due</b>	Porphyry, <i>Isagoge</i>
Week 7	Saul Kripke, <i>Naming and Necessity</i> . Chapter 1 (excerpts) <b>Exercise 6 due</b>	Saul Kripke, <i>Naming and Necessity</i> . Chapter 3 (excerpts)
Week 8	Gregory Carlson, 'Generic Terms and Generic Sentences,' pp. 145-158. <b>Exercise 7 due</b>	Gregory Carlson, 'Generic Terms and Generic Sentences,' pp. 158-171.
Week 9	Emmon Bach, 'Natural Language Metaphysics,' pp. 573-583. <b>Exercise 8 due</b>	Emmon Bach, 'Natural Language Metaphysics,' pp. 583-594.
Week 10	Conclusion <b>Exercise 9 due</b> <b>Final paper due</b>	