

PHILOSOPHY 409: PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE  
WINTER 2022

Professor Eric Swanson

Office hours (<https://zoom.us/my/e.swanson>): Fridays 12:15–2:15, and by appointment.

Over the last 150 years or so, philosophers of language have made major advances in our understanding of human language understanding. Many of these advances raise fascinating questions about the prospects for artificial intelligence systems that deal with language. How much of language understanding is purely conventional? How much is innate? How much is social? How much is mediated by our causal connections to the world? How much is rule-governed? In what sense? How much is affected by our values, interests, and goals, and our knowledge of them? How much does language understanding depend on other forms of understanding? What kinds of answers should we expect to questions like “What does that sentence mean?” How do the answers to these questions matter for AI? In what ways is some language harmful? How can we tell? How could an AI tell? This course investigates these questions and more, providing a foundation in analytic philosophy of language and the basics of contemporary artificial intelligence (at a high level of abstraction — no coding expected!) All this will allow us to discuss questions about automated content selection, promotion, and moderation with an improved sense of what makes such work so important and so challenging.

COURSE WEB SITE

UM Slack: <https://um-wn22-phil409.slack.com>

Use the Slack #general channel to ask questions that aren’t specific to you! This helps everyone, especially because in this course everyone has different strengths and areas of expertise. Use DMs on Slack to ask me questions that are specific to you.

BOOKS YOU SHOULD BUY OR BORROW

*Artificial Intelligence: A Guide for Thinking Humans*, by Melanie Mitchell

*Language and Meaning*, by Betty Birner

*What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language* (second edition), by Gary Kemp

Other texts and media are available in the #general channel on Slack, tagged with a :book: emoji:

<https://um-wn22-phil409.slack.com>

CLASS

Mondays and Wednesdays 1–2:20, **2271 Angell Hall**

I encourage you to attend class in person if you’re healthy! If you’re not, no worries:

<https://leccap.engin.umich.edu/leccap/site/fd9shwy8ni5n8930kep>

## GRADING

20%: reading responses, graded amazing/pass/fail. Please submit these in the #general channel on Slack with a :memo: emoji so everyone can see them and interact with them easily.

20%: participation (real time and on Slack *both* count!)

20%: paper 1, developing a question or idea from one of your reading responses. About 3 pages for undergraduates; about 6 pages for graduate students. Due by February 25 as a DM to me with a :memo: emoji.

20%: paper 2, developing a question or idea from one of *someone else's* reading responses. About 3 pages for undergraduates; about 6 pages for graduate students. Due by April 22 as a DM to me with a :memo: emoji.

20%: final exam from 4:00–6:00 on 4/25.

## EXPECTATIONS

*Things will change in ways that we can't anticipate, so this syllabus is utterly incomplete. Pay close attention to changes in course policy, announced in lecture and on Slack.*

Keep up with the readings. They demand close attention and careful thought. If you fall behind you'll miss much of what's going on for the rest of the semester.

We'll be discussing controversial issues in this course, and challenging our beliefs throughout. Be polite, respectful, and generous in discussion with your classmates and teachers.

I expect all students to understand the College of LSA's standards of academic integrity:

<https://lsa.umich.edu/lsa/academics/academic-integrity.html>  
<https://www.lib.umich.edu/academic-integrity>

Read them carefully and contact me on Slack if you don't understand them fully! We encourage you to discuss the material with your classmates, but all work you turn in must be your own. Cheating or plagiarism will result in a grade of 0 for that assignment and disciplinary action by the University.

If you might need an accommodation for a disability, please let me know at your earliest convenience. Some aspects of this course may be modified to facilitate your participation and progress. As soon as you make me aware of your needs, we can work with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) to help us determine appropriate academic accommodations. SSD (734-763-3000; [ssd.umich.edu](http://ssd.umich.edu)) typically recommends accommodation through a Verified Individualized Services and Accommodations (VISA) form. Any information you provide is private and confidential.

University of Michigan is committed to advancing the mental health and wellbeing of its students. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, services are available. For help, contact Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at (734) 764-8312 and

<https://caps.umich.edu/>

during and after hours, on weekends and holidays, or through its counselors physically located in schools on both North and Central Campus. You may also consult University Health Service (UHS) at (734) 764-8320 and

<https://www.uhs.umich.edu/mentalhealthsvcs>

or for alcohol or drug concerns, see

<http://www.uhs.umich.edu/aodresources>

For a listing of other mental health resources available on and off campus, visit:

<http://umich.edu/~mhealth/>

Wednesday 1/5	Organizational meeting
Saturday 1/8	<b>Slack DM introducing yourself to me due</b> <b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b> <b>Please remember to use a :memo: emoji for your reading responses!</b>
Week of 1/10	Prologue and Part I of <i>Artificial Intelligence: A Guide for Thinking Humans</i>
Sunday 1/16	<b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b>
Week of 1/19	Parts II and III of <i>Artificial Intelligence: A Guide for Thinking Humans</i>
Saturday 1/22	<b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b>
Week of 1/24	Part IV of <i>Artificial Intelligence: A Guide for Thinking Humans</i>
Saturday 1/29	<b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b>
Week of 1/31	Part V of <i>Artificial Intelligence: A Guide for Thinking Humans</i>
Saturday 2/5	<b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b>
Week of 2/7	Chapters 1 and 2 of <i>Language and Meaning</i>
Saturday 2/12	<b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b>
Week of 2/14	Chapter 3 of <i>Language and Meaning</i>
Saturday 2/19	<b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b>
Week of 2/21	Chapters 4 and 5 of <i>Language and Meaning</i> <b>First paper due by this week. Please remember to DM it to me with a :memo: emoji.</b>
Saturday 3/5	<b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b>
Week of 3/7	Introduction and Chapters 1–3 of <i>What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?</i>
Saturday 3/12	<b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b>
Week of 3/14	Chapters 4–6 of <i>What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?</i>
Saturday 3/19	<b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b>
Week of 3/21	Chapters 7–9 of <i>What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?</i>
Saturday 3/26	<b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b>
Week of 3/28	Chapters 10–12 of <i>What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?</i>
Saturday 4/2	<b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b>
Week of 4/4	Eric Swanson, “Slurs and Ideologies” Katharine Gelber and Susan J. Brison, “Digital Dualism and the ‘Speech as Thought’ Paradox”
Saturday 4/9	<b>Reading response to readings for upcoming week due</b>
Week of 4/11	Heather M. Whitney and Robert Mark Simpson, “Search Engines and Free Speech Coverage” Jack M. Balkin, “How to Regulate (and Not Regulate) Social Media”
Week of 4/18	No additional readings. <b>Second paper due by this week. Please remember to DM it to me with a :memo: emoji.</b>
Monday 4/25	<b>Final exam, 4:00-6:00</b> <b>We discuss five questions in class, the exam has four of them, you answer three of those.</b>