

SYLLABUS  
**PHIL 378 | Philosophy of Language and Interpretation**  
Dr. James K.A. Smith

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## DESCRIPTION

This advanced seminar in philosophy of language and interpretation brings together two different, not-of-often-related strands of philosophical reflection on language: a “hermeneutic” tradition concerned with issues of interpretation and a more “analytic” tradition that considers language in relation to propositional logic. However, given that this is an advanced course in systematic philosophy, a mere survey is neither possible nor desirable.\* Thus each offering of the course will stage an in-depth engagement with a particular “strain” in philosophy of language and interpretation. Different course configurations might focus on the phenomenological tradition of semiotics, speech act theory, or hermeneutics. In every configuration of the course, we will be interested in how questions of language and interpretation are significant for philosophers working in the Christian tradition who confess that “in the beginning was *the Word*.”

For the fall 2009 rendition of the course, we will explore philosophy of language under the rubric of Wittgenstein’s claim regarding “meaning as *use*.” Rather than tethering meaning to reference or correspondence, Wittgenstein sees meaning as the effect of a social context. This gives rise to a “pragmatic” tradition in philosophy of language in the work of Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom. But it also echoes some themes in Augustine’s philosophy of language as articulated in *De doctrina christiana*.

In addition to this pragmatist focus, throughout the semester our philosophical reflections on language will also be disturbed and confronted by *poetry*, a distilled and condensed use of language that is not primarily concerned with communication. This poetic interruption of philosophy will function as a kind of limit case for our philosophical analysis of language.

## COURSE OUTLINE

- I. Introduction: Language, Interpretation and the Conditions of Finitude
  - A. Mapping Philosophy of Language: Emergences and Trajectories
  - B. Language, Interpretation, and Christian Philosophy
- II. An Ancient Source: Augustine’s Semiotics
- III. Doing Things With Words: A Pragmatic Tradition
  - A. Wittgenstein’s Language Games
  - B. Rorty’s Therapeutic Pragmatism
  - C. Brandom’s Rationalist Pragmatism

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\* PHIL 378: Philosophy of Language and Interpretation is also taught as a complement to PHIL 340: Contemporary Continental Philosophy, which focuses on the hermeneutic tradition through Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida. As such, PHIL 378 does not repeat this emphasis; those students looking for extensive engagement with Heidegger will want to enroll in PHIL 340.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

The goal of the course, broadly stated, is to reflect upon the nature of language and the necessity and conditions of interpretation from within an integral Christian worldview. Our objectives include the following:

1. To introduce students to contemporary questions and discussions of language and interpretation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, opening up horizons for further reflection and research.
2. To stage a dialogue on language and interpretation between the “analytic” and “continental” traditions, appreciating both their different universes of discourse but also the similarity of their concerns.
3. To critically evaluate different philosophies of language and interpretation from the perspective of a Christian (specifically Reformational) worldview and constructively consider the implications of such a worldview for our understanding of language and interpretation.
4. To help students develop research and writing skills within the discipline. As an advanced course, students will be expected to engage in high-level, independent research in the field of philosophy.

TEXTS [abbreviations used in course schedule below]

Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* [*De doctrina christiana*] (New City Press, 1994).  
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Macmillan, 1968). [PI]  
Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979). [PMN]  
Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons* (Harvard, 2000). [AR]

OTHER SUGGESTED SOURCES: A Very Select Bibliography

J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Harvard, 2005).  
John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* (Indiana, 1987).  
Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1984).  
Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena* (Northwestern, 1973).  
----, *Limited Inc* (Northwestern, 1988).  
Jorge J.E. Gracia, *How Can We Know What God Means?: The Interpretation of Revelation* (Palgrave, 2001).  
Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, First Investigation  
Gary Iseminger, ed., *Intention and Interpretation* (Temple, 1992).  
Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Blackwell, 1998).  
John Searle, “Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida,” *Glyph*.  
James K.A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (InterVarsity, 2000).  
----, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (Routledge, 2002).  
----, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory* (Continuum, 2005).  
Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Zondervan, 1998).  
Kevin Vanhoozer, James K.A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson, eds., *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads* (Indiana, 2006).

Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Baker Academic, 2009).  
 Samuel C. Wheeler III, *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy* (Stanford, 2000).  
 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflection on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge, 1995).  
 Jens Zimmerman, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Baker Academic, 2004).

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students who value learning for its own sake, who take responsibility for their work, who devote ample time to careful reading before class, who listen carefully and take conscientious notes, and who engage their peers in discussion will do well in this class. Students who are just jumping through a hoop, who are trying to do as little as possible, who lack any curiosity, who fail to attend class or engage in class discussions will *not* do well. With that in mind, the specific graded components are as follows:

1. Regular attendance, close reading of texts before class, thoughtful participation in class discussions, and timely submission of all assignments are considered a non-graded baseline for success in this course. [10%]

2. A mid-term exam, focused on Augustine and Wittgenstein, **Thursday, October 15**. Some class time will be devoted to review discussions. [25%]

3. A final exam, focused on Rorty and Brandom, **Friday, Dec. 18, 1:30pm**. Some class time will be devoted to review discussions. [25%]

4. Either two 5-page exposition papers, requiring detailed exposition of selected passages from course readings (selections determined in consultation with the instructor) and focused engagement with relevant secondary sources (paper 1 **due October 22**; paper 2 **due December 10**; or a cumulative research project on a specific question, figure, or text dealing with philosophy of language and/or interpretation. Students will be required to first submit a paper proposal with a preliminary bibliography, an outline of the paper and argument, and then a final version (**due December 10**). Further details about the projects will be provided. **Students must select one of these options and confirm with the instructor by September 22.** [40%]

## GRADING

Your final grade will be calculated on the basis of the above breakdown; *all assignments must be completed to receive a final grade*. Late assignments will not be accepted. Grade/percentile equivalents in the Department of Philosophy are as follows:

A 100-95	B+ 89-87	C+ 79-77	D 69-65
A- 94-90	B 86-83	C 76-73	F 64-0
	B- 82-80	C- 72-70	

Satisfactory completion of assignments constitutes C-level work; B-level work exhibits a comprehension and understanding of philosophical concepts, terms, and categories (and their relation) and well-reasoned reflection on the topics and texts; A-level work is characterized by all of the above plus a creative appropriation, understanding, and communication of philosophical ideas.

A note on grading philosophy: all grades are *earned*, and grades are assigned for the *quality* of work, not the *quantity* of work (which is why I generally have a policy against “extra credit” assignments). Some students seem to assume that they, in effect, begin with 100% and then “lose” points through the course of the semester. But in fact, the opposite is true: you begin with 0% and need to *earn* your points throughout the semester.

## ACADEMIC ETHICS

The instructor, and Calvin College, highly value academic integrity and excellence. As such, no violation of academic integrity (e.g., plagiarism, use of sources without citation, use of internet resources without documentation) will be tolerated. (Students are responsible for consulting and understanding the College’s policy on Academic Integrity, *Calvin College Student Conduct Code*, I.13-4). Any violation of academic integrity will result in failure of the course and referral to the Dean, where the violation will be put on record.

## A NOTE ON CLASS DISCUSSIONS

I hope that our class will involve lots of discussion, questions, and conversational give-and-take. In order to facilitate that, please know that I suffer from some hearing loss: because of the pitch range that is affected, I find it particularly difficult to hear higher-pitched speakers (usually women), and I have trouble making out consonants (so words sometimes sound mumbled to me). I note this only so that you don’t feel uncomfortable if I ask you to repeat an answer or question. If I do so, I’m not “calling into question” your contribution; I’m just trying to hear it. It is particularly helpful if I can see you when speaking to me, so you might keep that in mind. Thanks!

## AND A NOTE ON LAPTOPS IN CLASS

While I recognize that there can be benefits of taking notes on one’s laptop, there are also drawbacks to having laptops present in the classroom (the clicking of keys can be annoying to neighbors, the light of the monitor can be distracting, and the fleeting presence of wi-fi presents its own temptations). With the drawbacks in mind, the default is to *not* permit laptops in class, but I will entertain requests to use them and will certainly concede any recommendations made by Student Academic Services.

## COURSE SCHEDULE (subject to revision)

Date	Topic	Reading Assignment
September 8	<i>Introductory Session</i> : Words, the Word, and Philosophy of Language	
10	Mapping Philosophy of Language: Emergences and Trajectories	Introduction to Augustine, <i>Teaching Christianity</i> , 28-53
15	Augustine’s Theory of Signs	<i>Teaching Christianity</i> , Book I
17	Augustine’s Theory of Signs, <i>cont’d</i>	<i>Teaching Christianity</i> , Book II
22	Wittgenstein and Augustine	<i>PI</i> , §§1-23
24	Wittgenstein: Meaning as Use	<i>PI</i> , §§24-43

29	Wittgenstein: Language Games	<i>PI</i> , §§48-53, 65-93
October 1	Wittgenstein: Many Ways to Understand	<i>PI</i> , §§150-186
6	Wittgenstein: Obeying Rules, Forms of Life	<i>PI</i> , §§187-241
8	Wittgenstein: The Private Language Arg.	<i>PI</i> , §§242-315
13	Wittgenstein: Critical Discussion and Review	
15	<b>Mid-Term Exam</b>	
20	Rorty: Interpretation Therapy	<i>PMN</i> , 3-13
22	Rorty: The Illusions of Epistemology	<i>PMN</i> , 131-164
27	Academic Advising: NO CLASS	
29	Rorty: Beyond Representation	<i>PMN</i> , 165-212
November 3	Rorty: Traps in Philosophy of Language	<i>PMN</i> , 257-311
5	Rorty: From Epistemology to Hermeneutics	<i>PMN</i> , 315-356
10	Rorty: Hermeneutics and Edification	<i>PMN</i> , 357-394
12	Brandom's Project	<i>AR</i> , 1-22 + handouts
17	Brandom's Project in Historical Context	<i>AR</i> , 22-44
19	Brandom: Concepts, Propositions, Inference	<i>AR</i> , ch. 1
24	Brandom: Inference and Normativity	<i>AR</i> , ch. 2
26	Thanksgiving: NO CLASS	
December 1	Brandom: Perception and Reliability	<i>AR</i> , ch. 3
3	Brandom: Meaning as Social	<i>AR</i> , ch. 5
8	Brandom: Hermeneutic Rationality?	<i>AR</i> , ch. 6
10	Wrap-up and Review	