Language & Politics

Government 6775 (Spring 2010)
Cornell University
M 2:30-4:25
Kramnick Seminar Room (Becker House)

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Office Hours: W 10:00-12:00 (and by appointment)

One should never forget that language, by virtue of the infinite generative but also originative capacity…which it derives from its power to produce existence by producing collectively recognized, and thus realized, representations of existence, is no doubt the principal support of the dream of absolute power.

Pierre Bourdieu, Language & Symbolic Power

The lordly right of giving names extends so far that one should allow oneself to conceive the origin of language itself as an expression of power on the part of rulers: they say “this is this and this,” they seal every thing and event with a sound and, as it were, take possession of it.

Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals

Course description

Much has been made of the linguistic turn taken by twentieth-century philosophy, but language has been a central topic of philosophical concern since (at least) Plato. Language has also played an important, if also sometimes neglected, role in political philosophy. This seminar will explore the consequences of different philosophies of language for the study and theorization of politics, and also the politics that attend different philosophies of language. While the course’s organization in largely chronological -- beginning with Hobbes’ Leviathan and ending with recent work by Pierre Bourdieu and Judith Butler -- it will focus largely on twentieth-century debates over the relationship between language, knowledge, and power, with particular emphasis on the positions taken by ordinary language philosophy (Austin, Cavell, Wittgenstein) and different versions of poststructuralism (Derrida, de Man, Butler). Wittgenstein’s later work stands at the center of the course and will occupy much of our time. We will not only spend several weeks exploring Wittgenstein’s own later writing (On Certainty and Philosophical Investigations), but also evaluating Wittgenstein’s impact on normative political theory, the history of political thought, and the philosophy of political inquiry. The course offers both a schematic survey of how language operates in several canonical political theories (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) and the central role it has come to play in contemporary theoretical debates.
Course mechanics

This is a graduate seminar in political theory. Students will be evaluated on a research paper (20-25 pages) due at the semester’s end (60% of the final grade), one (7-8 page) written presentations on the week’s reading (15%), and one 10 minute oral discussion of another student’s written presentation (15%). General participation will count for the remaining 10% of the final grade. We will begin each seminar with these oral student discussions. Please avoid summary and feel free to be contentious in your written presentations. These should be posted on blackboard no later than 10:00 Sunday morning before seminar. The 10 minute oral discussion should also avoid summary and instead pose a series of textually supported critical questions that can provoke a broader seminar discussion. A sign-up sheet for both presentations and discussions will be available the second week of class.

Books to purchase

Available at the University Bookstore:

J.L. Austin, *How to do things with words*
Cressida J. Heyes (editor), *The Grammar of Politics* (recommended)
Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*
John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth*
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty; Philosophical Investigations*

Material marked “*” on blackboard under “course documents.”

WEEK 1 (January 25):

Theodor Adorno, “Morality and Style”*
George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language” *

WEEK 2 (February 1): Language and Power: Hobbes

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Hobbes’ translation)*

WEEK 3 (February 8): Language and Knowledge: Locke

WEEK 4 (February 15): Language and Passion: Rousseau


Brian Garsten, “Persuading without Convincing: Rousseau”*

WEEKS 5 (February 22): Language and Becoming: Nietzsche


WEEKS 6-8 (March 1, March 8, March 15): Wittgenstein

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty; Philosophical Investigations*

1. Simples, naming, acquiring language, meaning as use.
   *Investigations* I (paras. 1-65).
2. Family resemblances.
3. Private language.
   *Investigations* I (paras. 243-315, 348-415, 580); II (xi, pp220-29).
4. Rules and rule following.
5. Language games and forms of life.
6. Conception of philosophy.

WEEK 9 (March 22): Spring Break

WEEK 10 (March 29): Wittgenstein and Political Theory: Contemporary Views

Gail Pohlhaus and John R. Wright, “Using Wittgenstein Critically”*
James Tully, “Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy”*
Linda Zerilli, “Feminism’s Flight from the Ordinary”*
WEEK 11 (April 5): Cavell and the Politics of the Ordinary

Stanley Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” *
Stanley Cavell, “The Argument of the Ordinary: Scenes of Instruction in Wittgenstein and in Kripke,” “The Conversation of Justice: Rawls and the Drama of Consent” in Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome, 64-126*
Stanley Cavell, “Criteria and Judgment,” “Criteria and Skepticism”*
Stanley Cavell, “Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture”*
Stanley Cavell, “The Investigations’ Everyday Aesthetics of Itself”*

WEEK 12 (April 12): Austin and Performative Speech

J.L. Austin, How to do things with words
Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence”*

WEEK 13 (April 19): Authority and Context

Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context”*
John Searle, “Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida” *
Stanley Cavell, “Performative and Passionate Utterance”*

WEEK 14 (April 26): Language, Power, and ‘Body Hexis’

Pierre Bourdieu, Language & Symbolic Power, 37-65, 103-59*
Judith Butler, “Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency”*

WEEK 15 (May 3): Student Presentations

Final paper due Wednesday, May 12th at 12:00 in 307 White Hall.