

Language and Power
Spring, 2021
Jack Balkin and Jason Stanley

The theory of meaning in the Anglo-American tradition has centered the use of speech as a mechanism to convey information. But is this the primary purpose of speech? What about the use of speech to create social groups, to bond people emotionally with identities, to contrast the in-group with the out-group? What would a theory of meaning look like that centered these functions of speech? This semester in Language and Power we will explore this question.

A central kind of power involves the capacity to make your wishes into what others regard as their obligations. Language is one mechanism by which that power is wielded. There are straightforward ways in which language enacts this power – think, for example, of commands. In Language and Power, we look at the non-obvious ways in which language can be wielded as a tool to exercise power. We are interested in developing a realistic theory of speech that centers this aspect of language use.

We are not simply investigating in a vacuum the issue of how language is used as a method to maintain or strengthen hierarchies of value and power. Rather, we set the issue up with the backdrop of the topic of free speech and democracy. We begin by considering the various arguments for free speech, to see whether they depend upon idealizing away from the way language can be used as a tool to reinforce power. Insofar as arguments for free speech depend upon an idealized set of assumptions about communication, which do not reflect the actual reality of communication, they are less than persuasive.

Language is used to convey knowledge. But language is also used to obscure reality, to strengthen ignorance – in the maintenance or strengthening, for example, of ideologies that problematically distort reality. Communication is, in short, *ideological*. What would a theory of communication look like that centered these phenomena? What would a theory of communication look like that centered the power of speech to form social groups?

We will begin with an introduction to classical arguments for free speech. The bulk of the class will be taken up with an investigation into the ideological nature of communication. In the conclusion of the class we will return to the question: to what extent are arguments for free speech compromised by reliance on idealizations about rationality and communication?

Along the way, we will look at a range of specific topics – strategic presupposition, dog whistles, code words, and problematic speech practices. To what extent is human communication enmeshed in the project of reinforcing hierarchies of value between groups? Does the fact that speech is invariably embedded in a social practice make liberal notions of autonomy impossibly idealistic? Can we construct norms, perhaps with the help of institutions such as universities, within which human communication can function mainly as a source of evaluating evidence rationally? How do narratives function in communication?

This semester, this class will function as a book seminar. We will closely study the manuscript of a forthcoming book, [The Politics of Language: An Essay in Non-Ideal Theory](#) (co-authored by David Beaver and Jason Stanley). This work rethinks fundamental concepts in philosophy of

language and semantics to center the use of speech in creating social groups. Each week, will be based on one chapter, and the issues it raises. Students will be asked to study the chapter carefully, and submit weekly questions or comments about the material. Each chapter will be accompanied by other readings.

Here are the chapters:

1. Free Speech and Democracy
2. Language and Power
3. Neutrality
4. Hustle
5. The Standard Model
6. Resonance
7. Attunement
8. Presupposition
9. Presupposing Practices
10. From Slurs to Dog whistles
11. Friend/Enemy

Since the book is a novel theory, it will be possible to learn a good deal about the topics without significant background in philosophy of language, semantics, or pragmatics. But preference will be given to students with background in these areas.

Each class will begin with student presentations, which will focus on the issues raised by the chapter being read, and/or the other readings. Class discussion will be devoted to a discussion of the issues raised in the presentations. Everyone will be expected to participate.

Each student is expected to write two 500-1000 word essays, which will be that student's two presentations. In addition to these two essays, the coursework will involve a final essay of 12-20 pages on a topic chosen by the student in consultation with both Balkin and Stanley, due at the end of the seminar.

The readings will all be available as PDFs.

Week 1 Introduction

Chapter 1, The Politics of Language

John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, Chapter 2 and part of chapter 3

Week 2 The autonomy defense of free speech

Holmes, J., dissenting in *Abrams v. United States*, 250 U.S. 616 (1919), and

Gitlow v. New York 268 U.S. 652 (1925) (excerpts)

[Alexander Meiklejohn, "Free Speech and Its Relation to Self-Government," \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

Brandeis, concurring in *Whitney v. California*, 274 U.S. 357 (1927)(excerpts).

Susan Brison, "The Autonomy Defense of Free Speech"

Jack Balkin, "Cultural Democracy and the First Amendment"

Week 3 Neutrality

Chapter 3, The Politics of Language
Alice Crary, “The Methodological is Political”
Jack Balkin, Chapter 6, Cultural Software

Week 4 Manipulative speech

[“Propaganda”, Anne Quaranto and Jason Stanley](#)

Chapter 4, The Politics of Language
Rae Langton, “The Authority of Hate Speech” (see especially “Accommodation as a source of Authority”)

Week 5 Ideal Theory vs. Non-Ideal Theory

Charles Mills, “Ideal Theory as Ideology”
[Elizabeth Anderson, “Feminist Epistemology and Feminist Philosophy of Science”](#)
Chapter 5, The Politics of Language
Selections from Anthony Appiah As If: Idealizations and Ideals

Week 6 Resonance

Chapter 6, The Politics of Language

Week 7 Attunement

Chapter 7, The Politics of Language
Robert Stalnaker, “Pragmatic Presupposition”

Week 8 Presupposition

Chapter 8, The Politics of Language
Marina Sbisa, “Ideology and the Persuasive Use of Presupposition”

Weeks 9 and 10 Speech Practices

Sally Haslanger, “What is a Social Practice?”
Chapter 9, The Politics of Language
Jack Balkin, [“Bricolage and the Construction of Cultural Software” \(Links to an external site.\)](#),
Chapter 2 of Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology
Victor Klemperer, The Language of the Third Reich, “Heroism (instead of an introduction)”,
“Prelude”, “Distinguishing Feature: Poverty”, and “Fanatical” (chapters 1-3 & 9 of The Language of the Third Reich)
“Ingrouping, Outgrouping, and the Pragmatics of Peripheral Speech”, Cassie Herbert and
Rebecca Kukla, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* (2016)
Patricia Hill Collins, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and other Controlling Images”, Chapter 4 of Black Feminist Thought
Jack Balkin, [“Narrative Expectations \(Links to an external site.\)”](#), Chapter 9 of Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology

Olufemi Taiwo, “The Empire has no clothes”

Weeks 11 & 12 Slurs and Dog Whistles

Chapter 10, The Politics of Language

Josh Hawley, [Speech to the National Conservatism Convention \(Links to an external site.\)](#), July 18, 2019

[“Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st century: Reform Plan and Reorganization Recommendations \(Links to an external site.\)”](#), Report of Mick Mulvaney, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, 2017

Elizabeth Camp, “Slurring Perspectives”

Jennifer Saul, [“Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language \(Links to an external site.\)”](#)

Jason Stanley, “Language as a Mechanism of Control”, Chapter 4 of [How Propaganda Works](#)

Justin Khoo, “Code Words in Political Discourse”, *Philosophical Topics* **45.2**

Samuel Moyn, [“The Alt-Right’s Favorite Meme is 100 years”](#), [\(Links to an external site.\)](#) NY Times, November 13, 2018

Adolf Hitler, “My Home” and “My Studies and Struggles in Vienna”, Chapters 1 and 2 of [My Battle](#)

James Kirchik, [“The Truth about George Soros” \(Links to an external site.\)](#), *Tablet*, November 18, 2018

[Several other papers on slurs and dog whistles from the philosophy and semantics literature]

Weeks 13 and 14 Hate Speech and War Propaganda

Brandenburg v. Ohio, 395 U.S. 444 (1969)

Susan Benesch, [“Vile Crime or Inalienable Right: Defining Incitement to Genocide” \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

[\(Links to an external site.\)](#) Lynne Tirrell, “Genocidal Language Games”

Sylvia Wynter, [“No Humans Involved: On Open Letter to my colleagues” \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

New York Times, [The Super-Predator \(Links to an external site.\)](#) Scare

Jason Stanley and David Beaver, [“Beware of ‘Snakes’, ‘Invaders’, and other dangerous words” \(Links to an external site.\)](#)