
Understanding, Meaning, Interpretation: Three Seminars

Martin Stokhof
Department of Philosophy
School of Humanities
Tsinghua University

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Introduction

The teaching component of the Weilun professorship at the Department of Philosophy of Tsinghua University will consist of three intensive seminars. The common theme is that of understanding: how does understanding of language and action come about? What kinds of understanding are at stake here? What role does linguistic meaning play? What should a proper theory of natural semantics look like? How does the historical and cultural background shape our understanding and evaluation of language and action? What is needed for radical interpretation to succeed?

The three seminars explore different aspects of this common theme: the first seminar focusses on the type of practical understanding that is explored in Wittgenstein's later work, in particular in connection with ethics and religious belief, rituals, and aesthetic experience. The second seminar investigates some of the basic philosophical and methodological assumptions of modern formal semantics, in order to give a critical appraisal of what formal semantics can and cannot contribute to an overall theory of understanding. The third and last seminar explores the central philosophical thought-experiment of radical interpretation, and brings together insights from both the analytic as well as the continental traditions in modern Western philosophy.

In what follows the contents of the three seminars are described in more detail, and an overview is given of the various sessions and the literature that is going to be discussed.

1 Seminar 1: Practical Understanding in Wittgenstein's Later Work

1.1 Goals and contents

The central topic of the first seminar is the epistemological status of ethical values, religious beliefs and aesthetic experience in Wittgenstein's later work.

This has a double meaning. First of all, there is the question of the *contents* of these values and beliefs. In his early work (*Tractatus*; *Notebooks*) Wittgenstein proposed a concise, but relatively accessible picture of what ethical values are. In the main works of the later period, the *Philosophical Investigations*, *On Certainty*; the topic of ethical values and religious beliefs does not occur, at least not explicitly. There are, however, a number of minor texts which do treat of these subjects, and they allow us to investigate to what extent Wittgenstein changed his views on the contents of ethics and religion over the years.

Secondly, there is the question of the *place* occupied by religious beliefs and ethical convictions in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Again, in the *Tractatus* period Wittgenstein gave a clear picture of how ordinary beliefs about the world relate to religious beliefs. As Wittgenstein's views on epistemology and ontology and on the role of logic and philosophical analysis changed over the years, the question is whether and if so how this also affects the place attributed to religious beliefs and ethical convictions.

1.2 Approach

Since Wittgenstein's thought of the *Tractatus* period in many ways serves as a reference point for understanding his later views, we will start with an overview of Wittgenstein's early views on ethics, drawing on the *Tractatus*; various passages in the *Notebooks* and the 'Lecture on Ethics'.

After that we turn to Wittgenstein's last work, *On Certainty*; in which he discusses extensively various epistemological issues, concerning knowledge and belief, doubt and scepticism, proof and certainty, form of life and 'Weltanschauung', and their relation with action, our biological nature and the external world. From this work, we will derive something which we call the 'three tiers picture', which provides a framework in which we can then try to position Wittgenstein's views on religious beliefs, ethical values, and aesthetic experience.

The contents of Wittgenstein's views on religious beliefs and ethical values form the central topic of the seminar. Here we will look in detail at the 'Lectures on Religious Belief', the 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', and the notes collected in *Culture and Value*. We will also look at Wittgenstein's views on the work of Freud, which are highly relevant for the present topic, since according to

Wittgenstein the Freudian approach to the human psyche is much more akin to ethics and religion than it is to science. Finally, we also look at the ‘Lectures on Aesthetics’, which will give us a clearer perspective on the kind of understanding that Wittgenstein thinks is at stake in this realm.

1.3 Course material

Students are assumed to have access to a copy of *On Certainty* and of the *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. All other reading materials will be made available electronically.

1.4 Schedule

The seminar runs for two weeks, with four sessions of three hours per week, Monday to Thursday (but cf., below).

Each session will consist of a two hour lecture, followed by one hour of questions and discussions. Students are asked to prepare questions for each session and email them to the lecturer the evening before.

For the last session, all students are requested to prepare a short (approx. 2 pages) position statement. In order to give students enough time to prepare their statements the last session will be held not on Thursday, but on Friday.

Session 1: Introduction: ethics in the early work

Wittgenstein: Tractatus 5.54–5.641; 6.37–7; Notebooks, entries dd. 14/07/1916–10/01/1917; ‘A Lecture on Ethics’.

Sessions 2–3: The background of certainty

Wittgenstein: *On Certainty* (selections); *Philosophical Investigations* (selections).

Session 4: Ethics and religious belief in the later work

Wittgenstein: *Lectures on Religious Belief*; *Culture and Value* (selections).

Session 5: Ritual: practical and scientific understanding

Wittgenstein: *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*; *Conversations on Freud*.

Session 6: Aesthetic experience

Wittgenstein: *Lectures on Aesthetics*.

Session 7: Practical understanding in the framework of certainties

Kober (1997, 2007); Cioffi (1998, chapter 3); Crary (2007).

Session 8: Discussion, and further directions

Short position statements by the participants.

2 Seminar 2: Philosophy of Semantics

2.1 Goals and contents

Although formal semantics is a thriving and successful discipline, with a rich and varied literature that deals with numerous descriptive and theoretical issues, its methodology is a subject that has received relatively little attention. Yet, also in view of the increasing importance of new methodological paradigms (e.g., corpus-based and stochastic approaches, computer modelling techniques), and new theoretical and descriptive challenges (such as the use of brain-imaging technologies) it seems opportune to inquire into the assumptions behind the methodology of formal semantics.

The starting point of this seminar is that formal semantics (in its various incarnations such as intensional semantics, dynamic semantics, game theoretic semantics) embodies a number of philosophical assumptions and conceptions that help shape both its object and its methodology. These assumptions often work in complicated ways that makes it difficult to recognise them and even harder to assess their actual effects. But they are there, and they need to be recognised for what they are.

Identification of these philosophical elements and recognition of the way in which they are assimilated minimally contributes to a better understanding of what formal semantics is and does. It also might help to gauge the possible relevance of philosophical debates concerning issues that involve the same assumptions and conceptions, and to get a better grip on the strengths and weaknesses of formal semantics vis à vis current methodological developments and challenges.

2.2 Approach

We start with an outline of what we call ‘classical descriptivism’: In order to gain a proper understanding of the methodology of present day formal semantics, a closer look at its philosophical and logical roots in the history of twentieth century analytic philosophy is needed. Some core conceptions (truth, reference, meaning), principles (compositionality), and distinctions (grammatical form vs. logical form) that have shaped formal semantics from its formative days in the late sixties, early seventies of the last century until today go back to work in early analytic philosophy that is not necessarily concerned with empirical issues in natural language semantics. The next topic is the venerable Principle of Compositionality: A key concept in Frege’s logic and his analyses of natural languages, and in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*; compositionality is also one of the most prominent features of descriptions and analyses in formal semantics. Nevertheless, its methodological status (is it an empirical fact? or rather a methodological principle?) is under continuous discussion, as are its motivations and consequences. Then we look at another core element, the distinction

between grammatical form and logical form: The distinction served as one of the key motivations for the use of formal languages in modern logic, and as a constant theme in philosophical conceptions of natural language; in modern linguistics it resurfaces as a distinction between key components in the grammar of natural languages. A more recent debate is that between contextualism and minimalism: One of the key features of formal semantics is that non-truth-conditional aspects of meaning (such as implicatures, presuppositions, etc.) are treated in a separate, pragmatic component; as a corollary, we obtain a strict and principled distinction between literal and non-literal meaning; however, the task of determining the boundaries between these two notions is notoriously difficult, and currently one that is hotly debated between (radical and moderate) contextualists and semantic minimalists. Finally, we look at issues concerning normativity, methodological individualism and naturalism: Like the dominant tradition in modern linguistics, generative grammar, formal semantics seems committed to an individualistic reconstruction of one of its core concept, viz., that of competence. Semantic normativity is one of a number of phenomena that questions this individualistic assumption.

2.3 Course material

All reading materials will be made available electronically.

2.4 Schedule

The seminar runs for two weeks, with four sessions of three hours per week, running Monday to Thursday (but cf., below).

Each session will consist of a two hour lecture, followed by one hour of questions and discussions. Students are asked to prepare questions for each session and email them to the lecturer the evening before.

For the last session, all students are requested to prepare a short (approx. 2 pages) position statement. In order to give students enough time to prepare their statements the last session will be held not on Thursday, but on Friday.

Session 1: Classical descriptivism

Frege (1980); Kamp & Stokhof (2008, sections 1–2); Stokhof (2011b).

Session 2: Compositionality

Partee (1984); Janssen (1997); Groenendijk & Stokhof (2005); Pagin & Westerstähl (2011).

Session 3: Grammatical form, logical form, and the role of formal languages

Higginbotham (1993); Pietroski (2009); Stokhof (2007, 2012).

Session 4: Contextualism and minimalism

Stanley (2005); Cappelen & Lepore (2005); Recanati (2005); Travis (2006).

Session 5: Compositionality revisited

Pagin & Pelletier (2007); Dekker (to appear).

Session 6: Meaning and normativity

Whiting (2007); Glüer (2010); Peregrin (2012).

Session 7: Methodological individualism and naturalism

Hintikka (1999); Stokhof (2011a); Stokhof & van Lambalgen (2011); Stokhof & van Lambalgen (to appear).

Session 8: Discussion and further directions

Short position statements by the participants.

3 Seminar 3: Radical Interpretation, Hermeneutics, and Practice Theory

3.1 Goals and Contents

The problem of radical interpretation is simple, but profound: how are we able to come to understand the utterances of speakers of a language that is fully foreign to us? Some reflection reveals that the problem also arises with respect to our own language: what exactly is it that guarantees that we understand the meanings conveyed by utterances made in a familiar tongue? An appeal to the notion of a ‘shared language’ is obviously of no help here: we need recourse to factors outside language proper to be able to define the notion of a shared language as such. The solution to the problem of radical interpretation points toward the existence of an intrinsic relation between the linguistic meaning of utterances on the one hand and the non-linguistic context in which such utterances are made on the other hand: interpretation is always and necessarily connected with the ways and views of speaker and hearer, writer and reader.

3.2 Approach

Within modern analytical philosophy this aspect of interpretation has been questioned and investigated by, among others, Quine and Davidson. Central to their concerns is the so-called ‘principle of charity’, that, roughly, states that the utterances of others are interpretable only against a background of maximised agreement between their beliefs about the world and ours.

In Wittgenstein’s later work ideas can be found that at first sight are in line with this. His notions of a ‘practice’ within which meaning functions and that of a ‘form of life’ that we must share for interpretation to be possible, seem consonant with the principle of charity. But unlike the latter Wittgenstein’s practices and ‘form of life’ are not confined to doxastic attitudes only: they have a clear social and practical flavour. This leads to a different notion of the subject and its relation to meaning and language.

Within the continental tradition in philosophy the intrinsic relation between interpretation and context constitutes a hallmark of the hermeneutic approach: interpretation does not take place ‘in vacuo’, but against a background of views and opinions that in their turn are extended and modified by the results of the interpretation process. Traditionally, hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of historical texts. But in Heidegger’s transformation of the hermeneutic tradition, as worked out into a theory of interpretation by Gadamer, this perspective is given a distinct ‘practical’ twist, that at certain points seems congenial to some of the ideas of Wittgenstein.

3.3 Material

All reading materials will be made available electronically.

3.4 Schedule

The seminar runs for three weeks, with four sessions of three hours per week.

Each session will consist of a two hour lecture, followed by one hour of questions and discussions. Students are asked to prepare questions for each session and email them to the lecturer the evening before.

In the one but last session groups of participants prepare presentations on various comparative topics (cf., below). For the last session, all participants are requested to prepare a short (approx. 2 pages) position statement. In order to give students enough time to prepare their statements the last two sessions will be held not on Wednesday and Thursday, but on Thursday and Friday.

Session 1: Davidson on radical interpretation and the principle of charity

Davidson (1973, 1974a)

Session 2: Conceptual schemes as the third dogma. The relation between belief and meaning

Davidson (1974b, 1986a).

Session 3: Prior and passing theories: a farewell to literal meaning and language

Davidson (1986b, 1992).

Session 4: Heidegger on the threefold structure of interpretation

Heidegger (1962, chapter V, §§ 31–34).

Session 5: Gadamer on the hermeneutic circle and the historicity of interpretation

Gadamer (1989, Part 2: II.1 & II.3.C).

Session 6: Language as hermeneutic experience. Hermeneutics and semantics

Gadamer (1989, Part 3: 1 & 3.A); Gadamer (1976a,b).

Session 7: Wittgenstein on meaning and rules; the constitutive and social nature of practices

Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 138–55, 179–243; *On Certainty* (selections).

Session 8: The social construction of the subject. The body as a picture of the soul.

Schatzki (1996, chapters 2, 3).

Session 10: Practice and interpretation

Schatzki (1996, chapter 4).

Session 11: Comparing traditions.

Participants prepare the following topics in three groups:

- Wittgenstein and hermeneutics: Arnsward (2002); Lawn (2003)
- Davidson and hermeneutics: Malpas (2002); Ramberg (2003)
- Davidson and Wittgenstein: Glock (1996); Williams (2000)

Session 12: Discussion and further directions

Reading: Short position statements by the participants

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