

PHIL 65: Language and Power

Winter 2025, Tues/Thurs 2-3:20 PM, RWAC 0426

Instructor Contact

Dr. Rachel Rudolph

Email: rrudolph@ucsd.edu

Office hours: Wednesday 12:30-1:45, or by appointment

Office hours location: RWAC 0443, or Zoom by request

You can reach me by email, Canvas message or by coming to office hours. Don't expect email responses after 6 PM or on weekends and holidays. While I will often reply more quickly, please allow one working day for email responses.

Course Description

Language is something we are constantly surrounded by and intimately familiar with. We learn it almost effortlessly at a young age, and use it in complex ways, usually without thinking much about it. In this class, we'll explore how language and power intersect — critically examining some of the often unnoticed ways that our language *reflects*, *reinforces*, and *reshapes* the power structures that surround us.

Questions we'll discuss include: How does power influence our ideas about what is the “right” way to speak? Should our language change in order to promote social or moral aims? What's wrong with using slurs against members of other groups, and why is that different from using a slur that applies to your own group? What are the potential harms and benefits of communicating generalizations about groups? We will address these questions through the study of classic texts from analytic philosophy of language, as well as social and political philosophy, linguistics, and psychology.

Course Objectives

Our two overarching objectives for this course are *understanding* and *exploration* of philosophical ideas about language, and its interaction with power dynamics. More specifically, in this course, students will:

- learn about a variety of theories of language and communication, mainly from 20th–21st century analytic philosophy
- apply those theories to questions about how language interacts with power dynamics
- sharpen critical thinking skills, through writing as well as constructive discussion contributions
- strengthen reading and oral presentation skills

There are some things that I specifically do *not* include as objectives in our class. We will not be aiming to resolve all disagreements that may arise about the topics that we'll be

discussing. We should approach our discussions with the objective not of winning debates, but rather of working together to better understand and explore some extremely challenging questions that face us as human beings.

Course Materials

There is no textbook for our class. All readings will be made available on Canvas. Lecture slides will be posted on Canvas after class meetings.

Evaluation

In-class quizzes	20%
Discussion leading assignment	25%
In-class midterm (Thursday, February 6)	20%
Final writing assignment (due Thursday, March 20, 6 PM)	20%
Classroom engagement and attendance	15%

- **Quizzes:** Every 1–2 weeks, there will be a short in-class quiz. It will usually contain 3–5 multiple choice questions and will take at most 10 minutes to complete. Quizzes will be announced at least one week in advance on Canvas. In-class quizzes may sometimes be given at the start of a class meeting and cover the reading that was assigned for that day. *One quiz will be dropped from your final grade.*

- **Discussion leading:** Once during the semester, each student will act as a discussion leader. As a discussion leader, you will be responsible for formulating and presenting an open-ended discussion question about the current class material. Completion of your discussion leading assignment involves:

- (1) posting your discussion question on a Canvas discussion board and submitting a presentation slide by 5 PM the day before the class meeting (7 percent)
- (2) presenting your question during the class meeting with the aid of your slide (8 percent)
- (3) submitting a 1.5–2 page write-up, due one week after your presentation (10 percent)

Parts (1) and (2) of the discussion leading assignment will be graded based on completion and evidence of good faith effort to engage with the material. The write-up, part (3), will be evaluated based on the clarity, accuracy, organization and originality of your ideas (rubric will be posted on Canvas).

The schedule for discussion leading will be made during the first two weeks of the quarter. If anything comes up that makes you unable to present your question on your assigned day, let me know right away so we can reschedule.

- **Midterm:** The in-class midterm (Thursday, February 6th) will consist of some short answer and paragraph response questions. The paragraph response questions will be circulated at least one week ahead of time.

- **Final writing assignment:** A 3–4 page essay will be due at the end of the quarter (Thursday, March 20, 6PM). You may choose from a selection of prompts that I will circulate, or you may write about a different topic of your choosing with my permission.
- **Classroom engagement and attendance:** This assignment is an extra incentive to be present and engaged in class. You will have one “free” unexcused absence, no questions asked (but cannot be used on February 6th, the day of the midterm!). Beyond that, you will be docked 5% for each unexcused absence. For an excused absence, you should email me as soon as you know you have to miss class, and no later than a week after the class was missed. It is always your responsibility to figure out what work you missed when you are absent (excused or unexcused), though I am happy to help if you email me or stop by office hours.

Note that a class may count as an “absence” if you are present, but otherwise disengaged, e.g., by being on your phone or sleeping. Other forms of negative participation, which can also affect your grade, include: arriving late or leaving early without justification, using electronic devices for anything unrelated to the class, and being disruptive.

Disagreement about topics we discuss is to be expected, but all comments should be made with respect towards our fellow class members, and with a constructive attitude. Additional guidelines for discussion will be clarified throughout the semester as needed — with input from all participants welcome!

Recording lectures and class discussions is not allowed without consent of the instructor.

Due dates and times for all assignments will be posted on Canvas. It is your responsibility to keep track of them, and to read all Canvas messages and announcements.

Policy on Late or Missed Work

If you miss an in-class quiz, either through your free absence or for an approved excuse, and you do not want to use your drop, you should email me as soon as possible and no later than a week after the missed quiz. As long as the absence is free or excused, you will be eligible for a make-up quiz that will be scheduled for a later date. The make-up quiz will likely be different from the quiz you missed. Missed quizzes for unapproved absences beyond your free absence will receive a grade of 0.

All students must be in attendance on Thursday, February 6th for the in-class midterm. A make-up will only be offered in the case of an unavoidable documented absence.

For the discussion leading write-up, you may request an extension of up to one week (no questions asked) as long as you ask over email before the due date. Late work without an extension will result in -0.5 points (out of 10) per day late and will not be accepted more than one week late.

For the final writing assignment, a grace period will be given up to 6 PM on Friday of exam week. Assignments will not be accepted any later than that, given the constraints of

submitting final grades.

If something comes up that is preventing you from participating in class and completing your work for an extended period of time, you should get in touch with me as soon as possible. *I want everyone to succeed in our class, and it's much easier to address issues the earlier they are brought to my attention!*

Technology in the Classroom

During our class meetings, phones should be on silent and put away. This helps everyone focus and improves the quality of discussion. If I see you on your phone, I will issue one warning. After that, being on your phone in class will count against your attendance grade. If there are special circumstances that make this difficult, please talk to me about it.

Laptop and tablet use in class is discouraged and must be only for consulting the class readings or taking notes. Taking notes by hand is much better for learning and helps prevent distraction to yourself and others. Lecture slides will be posted on Canvas, so you shouldn't feel the need to copy down all the material they contain. Using electronic devices in class for non-class purposes will count against your attendance grade.

Academic Honesty and AI

The UC San Diego Academic Integrity Policy (senate.ucsd.edu/Operating-Procedures/Senate-Manual/Appendices/2) applies to this class. Violations will be reported to the Academic Integrity Office.

In completing your work for our class, you may consult sources, use artificial intelligence tools (see below for details), and discuss your ideas with others. However, the work you submit must be your own and you must acknowledge your use of outside sources. In class, I will review how you should cite your sources in your submitted work. The writing assignments for our class will be designed so that you can successfully complete them using only the material assigned in our class.

AI Policy: Allowed Within Limits You may use ChatGPT or other artificial intelligence tools as *aides* in your work for our class. While AI tools can help with your writing process, it cannot replace the insight and unique perspective you bring to your assignments. AI should be seen as a writing assistant rather than primary author. It can be fruitfully employed for brainstorming, refining language, or structuring content. However, *the core substance of your written work should be your own*. Always use your own independent judgment when considering AI outputs. AI-generated text can sound compelling and authoritative, but that doesn't guarantee its correctness. AI is notorious for "hallucinating" (i.e., making stuff up), so it's crucial to check any information it provides. You should also always avoid sharing sensitive or private information when using these tools.

The purpose of assignments in our class is to help you deepen your understanding of and

explore the material assigned in our class. Thus, written work that fails to engage adequately with our assigned reading will receive a lower grade. Additionally, any submitted work that includes the phrase “as a large language model” (or anything similar that shows that you have simply copied AI-generated text directly without giving your own input) will automatically receive no credit and will be reported to the Academic Integrity Office.

If you have any questions about academic honesty, don’t hesitate to ask me. I would *much* rather answer any questions about this ahead of time, than have to go through academic honesty violations proceedings — and, trust me, so would you!

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Students requesting accommodations for this course due to a disability should provide a current Authorization for Accommodation (AFA) letter (paper or electronic) issued by the Office for Students with Disabilities (<https://osd.ucsd.edu/>). Students are required to discuss accommodation arrangements with instructors and OSD liaisons in the department *in advance* of any exams or assignments.

Resources

- Food Support for Students: If you are skipping and stretching meals, or having difficulties affording or accessing food, you may be eligible for CalFresh, California’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, that can provide up to \$292 a month in free money on a debit card to buy food. Students can apply at benefitscal.com/r/ucsandiegocalfresh
- The Hub Basic Needs Center empowers all students by connecting them to resources for food, stable housing and financial literacy: basicneeds.ucsd.edu
- Counseling and Psychological Services: <https://caps.ucsd.edu/> or (858) 534-3755
- CARE at the Sexual Assault Resource Center offers free and confidential services for students, staff and faculty impacted by sexual assault, relationship violence and stalking. <https://care.ucsd.edu/> or (858) 534-5793.
- Office for the Prevention of Harassment & Discrimination (OPHD) is the Title IX office at UC San Diego. They are responsible for receiving and conducting the administrative investigation of all reports of sex offenses, sexual harassment, discrimination and retaliation filed on campus. <https://ophd.ucsd.edu/> or (858) 534-8298.
- Office of Academic Support & Instructional Services (OASIS) provides free tutoring, workshops, mentoring, and other resources: <https://oasis.ucsd.edu/>
- Teaching + Learning Commons provides free tutoring, writing support, and supplemental instruction: <https://commons.ucsd.edu/>

If you are facing difficulties and are unsure where to look, you can always get in touch with me and I’ll help connect you with resources.

Reading Schedule

Subject to change. Any changes will be announced on Canvas.

Week 1 Introduction; Semantics and pragmatics

- Course syllabus
- H. P. Grice, “Logic and conversation”

Week 2 Pragmatics case studies

- Taylor Jones, “The linguistics of #BLM: Scalar implicature and social controversy”
- Judith Degan, et al, “A linguistic perspective: The harmful effects of responding ‘All lives matter’ to ‘Black lives matter’”
- Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Words Matter*, selection from chapter 2

Week 3 Social semantics and slurs

- Hilary Putnam, “Meaning and Reference” (skip last section)
- Christopher Hom, “The semantics of racial epithets” (selection)

Week 4 Slurs and pragmatics

- Renée Jorgensen Bolinger, “The pragmatics of slurs”

Week 5 Recap and Midterm

Week 6 Descriptivism, prescriptivism and power dynamics

- Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, ch. 12, “The Language Mavens” (370–77; 400)
- Sharese King and John Rickford, “Language on Trial”

Week 7 Changing meaning? The case of gender and race

- Sally Haslanger, “Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?”

Week 8 Changing meaning, continued

- Jennifer Saul, “Gender and Race” (can skip section III)
- Katharine Jenkins, “Amelioration and Inclusion” (selection)

Week 9 Gender in language

- Robin Dembroff and Daniel Wodak, “How much gender is too much gender?”
- Elisabeth Camp and Carolina Flores, “Playing with labels” (selection)

Week 10 Generalizing about groups

- Matthew McKeever and Rachel Sterken, “Social and Political Aspects of Generic Language and Speech”