Ball State Philosophy Outreach Project
Lesson Plan
Title: What Do You Meme?
Topic: Philosophy of Language
Time: ~60 minutes

Materials: PowerPoint Presentation

Learning Objectives:
1. Students understand the basics of the philosophy of language and meaning.
2. Students explore the connections between philosophy of language and the way they use language in their lives.

Intro (10-15 min):
Ask students to define what a meme is (i.e; what makes something a meme? What is something that's not a meme? How do you know what a meme is when you look at it? How do you know what it means?)

Discussion/Presentation (15-20 min):

(5-10 min) Show students each of the general memes on slides **2-5** of the presentation and ask them to explain what the meme means and how they understand where that meaning comes from. If discussion stalls, prompt them towards these general lines of inquiry:

- Do you understand this meme because you have seen others like it before?
- Do you understand this meme because we have agreed collectively on how the image is used relative to the text?
- Do you understand this meme because it or things like it are shared extensively between people?
- Do you understand this meme because there is some inherent connection between this caption and this image?
- Can you be sure that you understand what this meme means at all?
- How would you explain this meme to someone who has never seen a meme before?

Show students one of the linguistics memes on slides 6 and 7 of the presentation and ask them to explain what they mean. Discuss why these means likely do not make sense to them, even if they understand the format and memes in general.

(10-15 min) Introduce the philosophy of language with PowerPoint presentation.

Slide 8 – Philosophy of Language
- Philosophy of language seeks to understand how and why language works through exploring, among other things, the questions listed.

Slide 9 – Parts of Meaning
- Philosophy of language breaks down the parts of meaning into, broadly, four categories.
- An <u>utterance</u> is actual words said or written. It is also sometimes known as a speech act. An utterance can be anything, regardless of the conditions of the world or whether or not it holds any truth.
  - For example – "Barack Obama was the 44th President of the United States."
- A <u>referent</u> is the thing an utterance "points to." That is to say, a referent is the thing in the real world that an utterance refers to. Think of it as literal pointing. I can point at a chair and say, "Chair." The physical chair to which I am referring is the referent of my utterance.
  - For example – "That is a chair."
- <u>Propositional meaning</u> is what philosophers call the relationship between the utterance and the referent. This can be true or false.
  - Saying "A bachelor is an unmarried man" has a true propositional meaning because the thing I am saying, my utterance, has a real referent; it accurately identifies the thing in the world about which I am trying to talk.
  - If I were to say that "A bachelor is a married man" that has a false propositional meaning because my utterance does not accurately identify the thing in the world that we are calling a bachelor. A bachelor is not married.
- <u>Expressive meaning</u> is the agreed upon underlying meaning of the things we say.
  - In English, the word "famous" refers to a state of being, and describes a person, but the false cognate in French, "fameux," connotatively implies that a person is well known for not so great reasons. This part of the meaning, famous for something bad, even

when it is possible to use "fameux" without this meaning, is the expressive meaning of the word.

Slide 10 – Truth-Values

- Truth-value is the way philosophers of language refer to whether or not an utterance is true. The truth of a statement is determined by the relationship between an utterance and a referent. If an utterance accurately refers to the way a thing is in the world, it is true.
  - Saying "John McCain was the 44th President of the United States," has a negative truth-value (it is not true) because that phrase does not pick out how things in the world are.
- Only propositional meaning can be found false. There cannot be false expressive meaning.
- Truth-values help us to understand language and each other because we agree upon what words can and cannot mean and refer to.
- How do philosophers of language explain how we come to those agreements and how we can interpret what all of this language stuff means anyway? We have three prominent linguists' views on the subject.

Slide 11 – W.V.O. Quine – Who Knows Anyway?

- W.V.O. Quine was a 20th-century philosopher who came up with what he called the Indeterminacy Thesis of Radical Translation. Essentially, the ITRT says that we really can't ever know what anyone else is saying or what they mean on a deep level.
- In the process of learning a new language, there is a process called radical translation, which is the first part of learning in which you're essentially just guessing the relationship between utterance and referent.
- This radical translation means that the process of learning a new language is full of indeterminacy. For Quine, there are two kinds of indeterminacy.
  - Indeterminacy of reference is not being able to know a propositional meaning. Over time, this can be overcome. If I say in Spanish, "Es una silla," there's initial confusion, but eventually, if I point to a chair enough when I'm saying it, you understand that it means "It's a chair." You can point to the part of the world you're talking about.
  - Holophrastic indeterminacy, on the other hand, is much deeper. It relates to expressive meaning and things that don't have a physical referent in the world. If I say in Spanish, "Te quiero," that "means" "I love you." Maybe you get it, but I can't point to love in the world. I could point to a parent and child, a couple, but then maybe you

- think "Te quiero" means "family" or "dating." It's equally right to translate it as "I want you," but that's obviously a bit weird in English semantics. Here, we simply have indeterminacy -- an ability to translate something in equally correct and simultaneously incorrect ways while never being fully either. I can't point to love in the world, just like I can't point to peace, anger, happiness. I can only point to examples of these concepts, so these kinds of statements are doomed to always be indeterminate. Expressive meaning ends up in the same pile because it relies on further interpretation of these concepts. While Quine is talking specifically about translation, other philosophers have interpreted any use of language as a kind of translation and used his arguments to describe meaning at large.

Slide 12 – David Chalmers – Just Go Somewhere Else
- David Chalmers is a contemporary philosopher who has his own answer, part of which is called in linguistics two-dimensional semantics. For Chalmers, the search for meaning relates to his larger project dealing with what's called necessary truth and consciousness.
- Two-dimensional semantics is a way philosophers of language use to determine whether something is not just true, but necessarily true.
  - A good way to understand necessity and two-dimensional semantics is with a thought experiment from another philosopher named Hilary Putnam called "Twin Earths." In this experiment, Putnam asks us to imagine another Earth that is exactly like the one we live in in every single way. The only difference between the two Earths is that here on Earth 1, water is made up of the chemical structure H2O. On Twin Earth, however, the chemical structure of water is XYZ. Both are clear, tasteless liquids. Both will freeze and evaporate in the same way. Both make up lakes and rivers and oceans. But, when I say "water" here on Earth 1, I am referring to the thing that has the chemical structure H2O. Someone on Twin Earth saying "water" is referring to the thing that has the chemical structure XYZ.
  - This means that it is true that water is H2O, but it means that it is not necessarily true that water is H2O because we can imagine another world, a second dimension, in this case Twin Earth, in which my intension, Chalmers' word for what I intend a thing to

- refer to, has a different extension, his word for referent. It is <u>true</u> that Barack Obama was the 44th President of the United States, but I can also imagine a world in which John McCain won the election, so it is not <u>necessarily true</u> that Obama was the 44th President.
- This means that we can start to find truth values for expressive meanings. If they are the same in all possible worlds, then perhaps they can be necessarily true.
- Are there any things that are necessarily true that we know of? Yes!
  - These utterances are known as <u>indexicals</u>. An indexical is a thing that is true no matter the situation in which it is said, so long as there is such a thing as space, speech, and existence. One key example is the phrase "I am here." No matter where it is said, it is necessarily true that someone saying "I am here," in any language anywhere, will be true so long as there is space for them to exist in and such a thing as language.

Slide 13 – Ludwig Wittgenstein – Let's Play a Game
- This is all pretty complicated. Another renowned philosopher of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein, agreed. Maybe there is no one core meaning of a word that we can point to. Maybe our whole concept of language is wrong.
- Why should we bother talking about things like this at all? After all, I can understand you, you can understand me, and we can learn new languages and even invent new words that people can understand. For Wittgenstein, meaning is use, which is to say, the meaning of a word is determined by the way that we use it.
- Wittgenstein is most well-known for his concept of language games. In specific circumstances, you can have a language without all the fancy things that seem to make up languages and can actually be composed of maybe as few as six or seven words. For example, a group of construction workers may only use just a few words that can convey a remarkable number of meanings.
- Wittgenstein thinks we should talk about language in terms of <u>family resemblance</u>, which language games can help us understand. A word's meaning is found in the overlaps between its uses and the uses of other words is understood in the way meaning and language resemble one another in form and function.

- This also helps to understand things like expressive meaning, as the connotation of a word will show up in the way its use overlaps overtime.

Conclusion (5-10 min):
- Ask students which of these ways of understanding meaning most closely align with how they understand memes and how they defined the meaning of memes at the beginning of the lesson.
- What are any particular strengths and weaknesses of these methods of understanding meaning from their point of view?

Resources:

For further reading or supplemental materials, see the following links:

Simon W. Blackburn, "Philosophy of Language," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 15, 2017, https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy-of-language.

Michael P. Wolf, "Philosophy of Language," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2020, https://www.iep.utm.edu/lang-phi/.

"Philosophy of Language," *The Basics of Philosophy*, January 2009, https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_philosophy_of_language.html.