Ph.D. GENERAL EXAMINATION

Philosophy of Language

April 2008

<u>Instructions</u>
1. The exam will last four hours and you should answer a total of four questions, at least one from each of the three parts.
2. The questions are equal in weight so you should expect to spend about one hour on each question.
3. You are expected to mention arguments and views of philosophers whose work is pertinent to the question you are answering. You should not give a survey of all the published work you have read on the topic, but you should discuss the arguments or views you find most important.

I. Reference (Indexicals, Proper Names, and Definite Descriptions)

1. According to Gottlob Frege, when you utter a sentence like, 'I am tired', your utterance of 'I' is such that it expresses in that context a sense that, necessarily, only you can grasp, one that is distinct from the sense expressed by any other co-referential designation of you and that also determines you as the referent of 'I' (relative to that context of utterance). Present and explain what you take to be Gottlob Frege's strongest argument for these claims. What problems, if any, do you see with Frege's view of the first-person pronoun?

2. Consider theses (a)-(c):

(a) The meaning of a sentence is a function only of the meanings of its parts and its syntactic structure.
(b) The meaning of a genuine singular referring term is simply its referent.
(c) All definite descriptions are genuine singular referring terms.

First, explain why sentences like the following seem to pose a problem for anyone who holds all three theses: **'The largest prime number does not exist'**. Then, present Frege's and Bertrand Russell's respective solutions to this problem. Which of the two has the right solution if either one does? Defend you answer.

3. Present and explain Keith Donnellan's distinction between *referential* and *attributive* uses of definite descriptions. He thinks that his article, "Reference and Definite Descriptions" is a major contribution to the Russell-Strawson dispute about the status of definite descriptions. However, he does not say much in his article about the four puzzles that Russell discusses in "On Denoting" and that Strawson addresses in his "On Referring". Does Donnellan's theory, as you understand it, solve any or all of the four puzzles? Discuss.

4. Present and explain what you take to be Saul Kripke's best argument for his claim that proper names are rigid designators. (Be sure to explain what he means by a "rigid designator".) Is there a way that someone who holds that proper names are disguised definite descriptions (Russell) or shorthand for a weighted cluster of identifying descriptions (Searle) could explain away Kripke's intuitions or accommodate them? Defend your answer.

5. Assess the Kripke-Putnam view that natural kind terms rigidly designate scientifically characterized kinds.

6. What is the Millian View of proper names and how does it differ from the Direct Reference

View of names?   Select **just one** of the examples below and explain why it poses a problem for Millians.   Then, offer a possible solution on their behalf.

      <u>Example [1]</u>:   *Even though 'George Elliot' and 'Marianne Evans' refer to the famous British novelist, the sentences,* **'If George Elliot was a man, then George Elliot was a man'** *and* **'If George Elliot was   a man, then Marianne Evans was a man'**, *differ in meaning.   After all, a reflective and sincere English speaker who is ignorant of Elliot's identity but who understands both sentences, would be inclined to endorse the first sentence and deny the second.   Such a person couldn't be rightly convicted of irrationality or of linguistic incompetence.*

      <u>Example [2]</u>:   *The sentence,* **'Hamlet could not have been identical to King Lear'**, *is true since Hamlet and King Lear are distinct fictional characters.   And yet, the names 'Hamlet' and 'Jean Valjean' are vacuous names: they don't designate anything that actually exists.*

7.   Present Kripke's Puzzle about what Pierre believes about London/Londrés.   Is Kripke's Puzzle   a puzzle about belief-ascriptions or, as he contends, a puzzle about belief?   Give a Fregean   response to the Puzzle.   Or, if you think (as Kripke does) that no solution to the Puzzle is possible, then what are the larger lessons we should learn from this?   Does Kripke's Puzzle present an equally insoluble problem for his own preferred "theory" of proper names if it is a genuine puzzle?   Discuss.

8.   What is the *Qua* **Problem** and why is it a problem for any causal-historical theory of reference for proper nouns and common nouns?   Is there a way of solving the problem for causal theorists?   If not, why not?   Explain.

II. Truth and Meaning

1. Is there just one notion of analyticity or more than one? If there is more than one, what are they?   Is there a notion of analyticity that you think escapes Quine's arguments against the analytic-synthetic distinction?   If there is, what is it and why do you think it escapes his arguments?   If there isn't, then explain why any version of analyticity will succumb to his objections.

2. Present, explain, and critically evaluate Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation. Does Quine's doctrine, if true, provide any support for the stronger claim that there are no objective determinate facts of meaning?   Explain.

3. What is the Principle of Charity?   What role does the Principle play in Donald Davidson's account of Radical Interpretation?   Davidson thinks that the Principle allows for the kind of indeterminacy of translation that Quine speaks of, but argues that it blocks Quine's inference to Ontological Relativity and Meaning Nihilism.   Does it really block Quine's inference?   Explain.

4.   According to Davidson, a theory of meaning for a natural language should, at the very least, provide the kind of information that a competent speaker of the language has about her language – information that would suffice for understanding any sentence of the native speaker's language. He also contends that a finitely axiomatizable, Tarski-type, truth-theory would best serve that role.   Such a theory, if it is formally and materially adequate and interpretative of the language, would entail true theorems of the form, '<u>S</u> is true if and only if <u>P</u>' rather than theorems of the form, '<u>S</u> means that <u>P</u>' (where '<u>S</u>' is replaced by some structural description of an object-language sentence and '<u>P</u>' is replaced by a meta-language sentence that translates the described sentence).   Present, discuss, and critically evaluate Davidson's reasons for thinking

that a truth-theory could, in some sense, "give the meaning" of any sentence of the language in question without explicitly saying what any one sentence means.

5. If you believe in a truth-conditional semantic approach in dealing with issues about meaning, then should you be an **extensionalist** like Davidson or an **intensionalist** like David Lewis about semantics? Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. Then, state and defend your preference.

6. What, if anything, is the real connection between truth and meaning? Do you think that the two are conceptually related only if **the property of being true** is some kind of *epistemic* property (e.g., warranted assertability) that supervenes on cognizers, evidence, and sentences? Or, do you think the connection between truth and meaning is radically non-epistemic? Explain.

7. Critically evaluate the following argument: 'The meaning of a symbol (type) cannot be constituted by its functional conceptual role in a system of representations because meanings are compositional whereas conceptual functional roles are not." (Be sure to explain what is meant by a "functional conceptual role of a symbol in a system".)

8. Present Kripkenstein's argument for the startling claim that no one ever means anything whatsoever by any word. ("Kripkenstein" refers to the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*, as understood by Saul Kripke in his book, *Wittgenstein, Rules, and Private Language*.) Then, either give a new "straight solution" to the argument that Kripkenstein hasn't considered or defend one of "straight solutions" that he does consider (e.g., dispositionalism, a causal theory of reference, etc.) from one of his objections.

9. According to many philosophers (e.g., Boghossian, Brandom, Kripke, McDowell, Milliken, Peacocke, and Wright), **semantic meaning is normative**. Give what you think is the most charitable interpretation of that claim. Then, present, explain, and critically evaluate what you take to be the best argument for semantic normativity.

III. Potpourri

1 Discuss either 1a or 1b (but <u>not</u> both):

   1a. H.P. Grice distinguishes two kinds of contents in a given speech-situation: *what is said* and *what is implicated*. Explain his distinction by giving an example of a conversational implicature. (Provide some details concerning the context of this utterance.) Explain the conversational maxim(s) that your speaker flouts and how she is flouting it. Be sure to explain Grice's Cooperative Principle and why you think that the speaker in your example is respecting it. Finally, using your example, spell out any problems you see with Grice's idea that hearers "work out" the speaker's implicatures.

   1b. Relevance Theorists think that Grice's distinction between what is said and what is implicated is not jointly exhaustive. Sometimes speakers will say things that go beyond speaker meaning, and yet that "extra thing" isn't an implicature either. For instance, a speaker who says, 'Mary has two sons', will be heard as saying 'Mary has *no more than* two sons' (where, obviously, the speaker doesn't pronounce the italicized words). Or a speaker who utters, 'Lilly was denied tenure at Harvard, she left, and got tenured at Princeton', will be heard as saying, 'Lilly was denied tenure at Harvard, she *then* left *Harvard*, and she was *later* tenured at Princeton' (where, again, the speaker doesn't pronounce the italicized words). Neither example seems to be a case of syntactic ellipsis. Present, discuss, and critically evaluate the Relevance

Theorists' claim that these so-called "explicatures" are neither Gricean implicatures nor propositions that hearers decode directly from the meanings of the sentences used, but are instead pragmatically "enriched meanings" that hearers tacitly fill in or add to the logical form of the speaker's utterance.

2. State Grice's analysis of speaker meaning.   Is there a way of saving his analysis from well-known counterexamples by Searle, Schiffer, and Ziff.   If so, how?   If not, why not? Explain.

3.   Do assertions have norms?   If so, what are the norms of assertion?   Defend your answer.

4. Contemporary philosophers of language are fond of talking about propositions, either as real abstract entities or as fictions. Some philosophers conceive propositions as structured entities (e.g., ordered sequences of objects, properties, and relations), others conceive them as unstructured wholes (e.g., sets of possible worlds).   Regardless, do propositions really serve any explanatory role in an account of meaning-facts?   Explain.

5. The Ideational Theory of Meaning, as defended by John Locke, is often regarded as being a silly theory.   For instance, many point out that lots of meaningful words do not correspond to any ideas, e.g., 'of', 'a', 'not', 'or', 'infinite', 'communism', etc. Do you think that some of these objections are strawmen objections?   If so, then can there be a plausible version of The Ideational Theory of Meaning that avoids the standard objections to Locke's view?   If so, how might it go?   If not, why not?   Defend your answer.

6. Two paradigms have long dominated philosophical discussions about the nature of linguistic meaning.   The first is a **Referentialism** according to which meaning-facts are constituted by a reference relation from language to the world, independent of how language-users think about the world).   The second is a **Mentalism** according to which meaning-facts are constituted by some internal representation relation from language to the mind, independent of any external relation that language-users bear to the world.   Which of those two views do you accept, if any, and why? If you reject both, then what might a third position look like?   Explain.   (Be sure that you discuss the specific views of certain well-known Referentialists and Mentalists, respectively.)

7.   Frege, (the later) Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Dummett hold **The Context Principle**, which may be put this way: "Words don't have meaning in isolation but only in the context of a sentence".   Discuss The Context Principle and present what you regard as the best argument for it.   Frege and Davidson also hold **The Principle of Compositionality**, which may be stated thus: "the meaning of a complex expression supervenes only on the meanings of its parts and on the way those parts are arranged".   Can one consistently hold both principles?   Discuss.

8.   Present, explain, and critically discuss Noam Chomsky's "Poverty of Stimulus" Argument for his claim that much of what we know about language is innate.

9.   Scott Soames, Michael Devitt, and others have argued that a semantic theory for a language is not, and cannot be, a theory of semantic understanding.   On their view, semantics is one thing, semantic competence is another.   Davidson and Dummett disagree.   Who is right in this debate? Defend your answer.   (Be sure to discuss the main arguments of each side.)

10.   Present and discuss several extant theories of metaphor.   Defend the one that you think has the best chance of being correct.