

# Metasemantics

Humboldt University, Berlin  
Summer 2023

Annina Loets & Richard Woodward

TUE 4:00-6:00 pm, DOR 24 1.406 & FRI 12:00-2:00 pm, DOR 24 1.608

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## Course Description

Whereas in semantics we study what words mean and how the meaning of complex expressions is determined by the meaning of simpler ones, metasemantics is concerned with the question of how expressions come to have meaning in the first place. For instance, metasemantics aims to tell us what factors determine why “cats” picks out furry creatures which purr rather than scaly creatures which hiss, and why a given name refers to a particular person or place. The goal of this class is to introduce and examine contemporary work in metasemantics, set against the background of a series of influential and powerful arguments which threaten to show that meaning is radically underdetermined in the sense that (e.g.) there is no fact of the matter whether “cats” picks out cats rather than snakes and indeterminate whether “Berlin” refers to the capital of Germany rather than the capital of France. We will focus in particular on one popular approach, associated with the work of David Lewis, which aims to undercut these arguments by appealing to the idea that certain kinds of things are easier to refer to than other things. This focus further allows us to examine how our views in metaphysics influence our views in metasemantics, i.e. how our views about what the world is like influence our views about how we represent the world in language and thought.

## Administrative Matters

### Contact Details

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richard.woodward@hu-berlin.de

Office Hours: Fr 2:30-3:30!

### Readings & Moodle course

- We'll condense the 14 teaching weeks of the semester into the first eight weeks of the semester.
- During that time we'll meet twice a week, Tuesdays 4-6 pm and Fridays 12-2 pm.
- We expect attendance! If you can't commit to regular attendance, you can't take this class.
- The password for the moodle course is “quaddition”.

### Assignments

*Reading notes:*

Over the course of the semester you'll have to submit at least six short reading notes (~ 1 page) commenting on the week's readings. These should:

- briefly state the project and main theses of the relevant chapter;
- take note of clarificatory questions you may have;
- sketch one argument from the chapter you found particularly compelling;
- formulate one objection to one of the arguments in the chapter.

The point of the reading notes is to facilitate your and our preparation. They will not be graded.

You must submit your readings notes **at least 24h prior to each session via Moodle.**

### Assessment

*Final paper:*

To do the “Modulabschlussprüfung” in this seminar, you'll have to write a final paper at the length stated in the examination guidelines of your course.

- The topic must be discussed with us in advance; meetings will take place in the week from 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> of June.
- A brief proposal sketching a research question and the main ideas of the paper must be submitted by the 4th of June via Moodle.
- The **deadline for all final papers is the 30th of July 2023.** No late submissions will be accepted.

## Syllabus

### week 1: *Introduction*

- 18.04.23 Introduction
- 21.04.23 Jeff Speaks (2021): 'Theories of Meaning', §1 + §3

### week 2: *Charity*

- 25.04.23 David Lewis (1974): 'Radical Interpretation'
- 28.04.23 Timothy Williamson (2007): 'Knowledge Maximization'

### week 3: *Inscrutability*

- 02.05.23 Christopher Hookway (1988): *Quine: Language, Experience, and Reality*, ch.8
- 05.05.23 Saul Kripke (1982): *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, ch.2

### week 4: *Lewisian metasemantics*

- 09.05.23 David Lewis (1975): 'Language and Languages'
- 12.05.23 David Lewis (1984): 'Putnam's Paradox'  
+ extracts David Lewis (1983): 'New Work for a theory of universals'

### week 5: *Lewisian metasemantics*

- 16.05.23 Robert Williams (2007): 'Eligibility and Inscrutability'
- 19.05.23 no class (Ascension Day weekend)

### week 6: *Lewisian metasemantics*

- 23.05.23 Hawthorne (2007): 'Craziness and Metasemantics'
- 26.05.23 Wolfgang Schwarz (2012): 'Against Magnetism'

### week 7: *new work in metasemantics*

- 30.05.23 Review Session
- 02.06.23 Kearns & Magidor (2012): 'Semantic Sovereignty'

### week 8: *applications*

- 06.06.23 Robert Williams (2018): 'Normative Reference Magnets'
- 09.06.23 Final Session