Comparative Literature 360: Non-Representationalist Theories of Language

Winter Quarter, 2000
Mr. Rorty
Th 3:15-6:05
Building 20, Room 21B

This seminar will discuss the work of three philosophers of language: the later Donald Davidson, the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the early Jacques Derrida. As has often been noted, these three philosophers have a lot in common—mainly their rejection of the idea that true sentences are representations of reality. This non-representationalist (sometimes called “postmodernist”) position has been thought to have many consequences for practices of literary interpretation, and more generally for the nature and role of the humanities. The seminar will discuss these purported consequences as well as the texts of the three philosophers.

We shall spend a week or two on Davidson, two or three weeks on Wittgenstein, and two or three on Derrida. The last few sessions will consist of presentations by members of the seminar based on reading in the secondary literature (in particular, of books and articles comparing one of these three philosophers with one of the others.)

This course is intended for graduate students. Undergraduates interested in taking it should consult with the instructor before signing up.

Required books: Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation; Wittgenstein, Tractatus and Philosophical Investigations; Derrida, Of Grammatology; Course reader

Recommended Secondary Literature: Dasenbrock, ed. Redrawing the Lines: Analytic Philosophy, Deconstruction, and Literary Theory; Staten, Wittgenstein and Derrida; Bennington & Derrida, Jacques Derrida; Dasenbrock, ed., Davidson and Literary Theory