

# PHILOSOPHY COLLOQUIUM

**Douglas Patterson**  
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**"Meaning, Communication & Knowledge by Testimony"**  
**Thursday, October 23, 2008**

Paper: 3:30 P.M.; Learning Center, Room 160  
Refreshments: 5:30 P.M.; Ashe Building, Room 735

## **Abstract**

Here is a common argument in favor of the idea that idiolects, rather than common, public or natural languages, are the basic units of analysis in the study of language: when a speaker utters a sentence assertorically and a hearer takes the speaker to have spoken truly, what the hearer comes to believe depends not on what the sentence the speaker uttered means, but rather on what the hearer takes it to mean. Successful communication, then, depends on coordination between speaker and hearer on the meaning of the sentence, and not on what the sentence "really" means. Examined more closely, the argument shows more than just that meaning in the speaker/hearer's idiolect, rather than in some more encompassing language, is what we should be interested in if we want to understand communication. Rather, I suggest, what it shows is that it simply doesn't matter whether the uttered sentence means anything at all as long as speaker and hearer share the relevant beliefs about its meaning. Furthermore, it shows that the semantic beliefs in question need not even be true—that they can, indeed, be logically false. Seeing this, I claim requires mostly seeing what is wrong in the idea that knowledge gained by testimony is justified in part by claims about what the speaker's words meant. I close by advertising one significant payoff: a resolution to the semantic paradoxes that is entirely compatible with classical logic.

Douglas Patterson (Ph.D., University of Pittsburgh) is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Kansas State University. He is the author of numerous articles in the philosophy of language and philosophical logic and is editor of *Inquiry 50:6 on Inconsistency Theories of Understanding* and of *New Essays on Tarski and Philosophy*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press.