EL4203 Semantics

National University of Singapore

2015–2016 Semester 2, Mondays 14:00–17:00

Instructor

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Office: AS5 06-09

Office hours: Wednesday 10:00–12:00 and by appointment

Description

Semantics is the study of *meaning* in natural language. How can we formalize the meaning of a linguistic utterance? How does the meaning of a sentence relate to its structure? How do we understand sentences which we have never heard before? How is the interpretation of an utterance related to the conversational context? These are basic questions which this course will attempt to answer, using primarily examples from English as data.

We will develop a concrete proposal for the mapping between linguistic expressions and their interpreted meaning for a fragment of English, based on the Principle of Compositionality. Particular emphasis will be placed on precise descriptions and computations of meanings, using notation from mathematical logic which will be covered in the class. Students will complete the class with both the technical expertise and theoretical foundation to comfortably approach a range of work in contemporary semantic literature.

Website

- Lecture notes will be posted on the public website, `https://mitcho.com/nus/sem2016/`
- IVLE will be used for submitting assignments and posting additional readings. Please make sure you have access to the module on IVLE.

Textbook

- Heim, Irene and Angelika Kratzer. 1998. *Semantics in Generative Grammar*. Blackwell. We will use almost all of this book. You should purchase a copy. A copy is on reserve at the Central Library. A PDF of the first two chapters is on IVLE. Additional readings will be on IVLE.

Requirements

In this class we will take a hands-on approach to semantics, with equal emphasis on practical tools and theory. The course requirements are therefore designed to incentivize active practice and engagement with the material. Your grade will be determined by your performance on the following:

1. **Attendance and participation (10%):** Active attendance, participation in class, and preparation (doing the readings) are crucial for success in the class.
2. **Problem sets ($8 \times 5\% = 40\%$):** Problem sets are an opportunity to use the tools and ideas from class and the readings, in order to better understand them.
3. **Final paper (20%):** Should be approximately 10 pages. The paper should identify an original puzzle, in a language you speak or in another language by working with a native speaker consultant. Use the skills developed in class to carefully diagnose and describe the issue, and sketch a possible solution. Due Friday, April 15th.
4. **Final exam (30%):** The final exam (the morning of Tuesday, May 3rd) will involve application of the concepts of the class to new data and puzzles. Problems will be modeled after those in the problem sets.

Schedule

The schedule is subject to change. Consult the website.

Date	Topic
11/1	Introduction: meaning as truth-conditions, how to study meaning
18/1	Formal foundations: sets and functions; generalized quantifiers
	Reading: H&K chapter 1–2 pp. 1–26
	Submit: Problem Set 1
25/1	Basic composition, the typed λ-calculus
	Reading: H&K chapter 2–3 pp. 26–49 (optional 49–60)
	Submit: Problem Set 2
01/2	Modification and definite descriptions
	Reading: H&K chapter 4 pp. 61–75
	Submit: Problem Set 3
08/2	**Lunar New Year: No class**

15/1	Variables, pronouns, relative clauses, movement
	Reading: H&K chapter 5
	Submit: Problem Set 4
22/2	**Recess Week: No class**
29/2	Quantification and scope
	Reading: H&K chapter 6 pp. 131–151 and chapter 7
	Submit: Problem Set 5
07/3	Ellipsis
	Reading: H&K chapter 9
	Submit: Problem Set 6
14/3	Focus
	Reading: Kadmon (2001) pp. 250–263
21/3	Intensional semantics
	Reading: von Fintel and Heim (2011) pp. 1–15, 29–38
	Submit: Problem Set 7
28/3	Polarity items
	Reading: Ladusaw (1979) pp. 1–2, 101–119
04/4	Questions
	Reading: Kotek (to appear); Erlewine (2014)
	Submit: Problem Set 8
11/4	Binding
	Reading: H&K chapter 10
Friday April 15: **final paper due**	
Tuesday May 3rd, morning: **final exam**	

Rules of note

- **Cooperation:** You may discuss homework assignments with other students. However, you must always submit your own write-up, and you should list the students who you worked with on your assignment.
- **Integrity:** The use of others' ideas or expressions without citation is plagiarism. You must declare all sources in submitted work. Citations don't need to be in any particular format, but they have to be there.
- **Talk to me:** I want you to succeed in this class. If any material or requirement is unclear, let me know. In extreme cases, alternative arrangements can be made for some of the course requirements, but only by talking to me first.

References

Erlewine, Michael Yoshitaka. 2014. Alternative questions through focus alternatives in Mandarin Chinese. In *Proceedings of the 48th Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society (CLS 48)*, ed. Andrea Beltrama, Tasos Chatzikonstantinou, Jackson L. Lee, Mike Pham, and Diane Rak, 221–234.

von Fintel, Kai, and Irene Heim. 2011. Intensional semantics. Manuscript, MIT.

Heim, Irene, and Angelika Kratzer. 1998. *Semantics in generative grammar*. Blackwell.

Kadmon, Nirit. 2001. *Formal pragmatics*. Blackwell.

Kotek, Hadas. to appear. On the semantics of *wh*-questions. In *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung 20*.

Ladusaw, William A. 1979. Polarity sensitivity as inherent scope relations. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.