EL4203 Semantics

National University of Singapore

2017–2018 Semester 1, Fridays 12:00–15:00, AS5 room 03-09

Instructor

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Office: AS5 06-09

Office hours: Thursdays 2–4pm, Fridays 3–4pm

> Also join us for the **syntax/semantics reading group** (completely optional) Thursdays at 11am, AS5 fifth floor
> https://mitcho.com/nus/synsem/

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/sem2017/
- IVLE will be used for submitting assignments and posting additional readings. Please make sure you have access to the module on IVLE.

Textbooks

- Heim, Irene and Angelika Kratzer. 1998. *Semantics in Generative Grammar*. Blackwell. We will use almost all of this book. You should purchase a copy.
- Winter, Yoad. 2016. *Elements of Formal Semantics: An Introduction to the Mathematical Theory of Meaning in Natural Language*. Edinburgh. We will use the first half of this book.

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 ($8 \times 6\% = 48\%$):** 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 Saturday, November 11.

4. **Final exam (20%):** The final exam (**TBD**) will involve application of the concepts of the class to new data and puzzles. Problems will be modeled after those in the problem sets. The final exam will be a 24 hour take-home exam.

5. **Consultation (1%):** Come meet me during my office hours, or by appointment, to receive one point.

6. **Evaluation (1%):** You receive one point for submitting your module evaluation.

Schedule

The schedule is subject to change. Consult the website.

Date	Topic
Aug 18	Introduction: studying meaning
	Reading: Winter (2016) chapter 2
	Submit: Survey on IVLE
Aug 25	Sets, quantifiers, entailment
	Reading: Partee et al. (1993) chapter 1; Ladusaw (1979) pp. 1–2, 101–119
	Submit: Problem Set 1
Sep 1	**Hari Raya Haji: No class**

Sep 8	Basic composition
	Reading: Winter chapter 3 pp. 44–72
	Submit: Problem Set 2
Sep 15	Modification and definite descriptions
	Reading: Winter chapter 3 pp. 72–87; Heim and Kratzer (1998) chapter 4
	Submit: Problem Set 3
Sep 22	Quantifiers
	Reading: H&K chapter 6 pp. 131–154
	Submit: Problem Set 4
Sep 29	**Recess Week: No class**
Oct 6	Relative clauses and movement
	Reading: Winter chapter 5 pp. 139–159; H&K chapter 7 pp. 178–198
	Submit: Problem Set 5
Oct 13	Interlude: Degree semantics
	Reading: Kennedy and McNally (2005); optional: Kennedy (2011)
Oct 20	Scope, variables, pronouns
	Reading: H&K chapter 5
	Submit: Problem Set 6
Oct 27	Ellipsis
	Reading: H&K chapter 9
Oct 27	Tense and aspect
	Reading: TBD
	Submit: Problem Set 7
Nov 10	Worlds, modals, and conditionals
	Reading: Winter chapter 6 pp. 190–198; von Fintel and Heim (2011) pp. 1–15, 29–38
Saturday, November 11: **final paper due**	
Nov 17	TBD
	Reading: TBD
	Submit: Problem Set 8
TBD: **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:** <u>The use of others' ideas or expressions without citation is plagiarism.</u> 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

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

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

Kennedy, Christopher. 2011. Vagueness and grammar: The semantics of relative and absolute gradable adjectives. In *Vagueness and language use*, ed. Paul Egre and Nathan Klinedinst. Palgrave Macmillan.

Kennedy, Christopher, and Louise McNally. 2005. Scale structure, degree modification, and the semantics of gradable predicates. *Language* 81.

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

Partee, Barbara Hall, Alice ter Meulen, and Robert E. Wall. 1993. *Mathematical methods in linguistics*.

Winter, Yoad. 2016. *Elements of formal semantics: An introduction to the mathematical theory of meaning in natural language*. Edinburgh University Press.