EL4203 Semantics

National University of Singapore
2020–2021 Semester 1
Meetings Wednesdays at high noon, online

Instructor

Michael Yoshitaka ERLEWINE (mitcho)
mitcho@nus.edu.sg
Office hours: TBD

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/sem2020/`
- Luminus will be used for submitting assignments and posting additional readings. Please make sure you have access to the module on Luminus.

Textbooks

IFS Coppock, Elizabeth and Lucas Champollion. *Invitation to Formal Semantics*.

H&K Heim, Irene and Angelika Kratzer. 1998. *Semantics in Generative Grammar*. Blackwell.

EFS Winter, Yoad. 2016. *Elements of Formal Semantics: An Introduction to the Mathematical Theory of Meaning in Natural Language*. Edinburgh.

A draft copy of *IFS* and relevant portions of *EFS* will be posted on Luminus > Files > Readings. You should purchase a copy of H&K.

Format and schedule

This year (2020), this module will be held in a fully online format. Each week has two parts:

1. **At-home activities:**
   - Lecture video (or two): Luminus > Module Details > Weblinks
     My advice: Have your own copy of the handout (on the public website) open or printed, so you can take notes on it as you watch.
   - Readings: Luminus > Files > Readings
   - Forum: Luminus > Forum
     The forum is available for discussing and asking questions about the material. While forum posts are not required, they will be considered as a form of participation.
   - Mini-quiz: Luminus > Quiz
     Weekly mini-quizzes test comprehension of the video lectures and readings. Each quiz should take less than five minutes. Complete by Tuesday night, midnight.
   - Problem set: public; submit to Luminus > Files > Student Submission
     Problem sets are an opportunity to apply techniques developed in class and in the readings to original data. Submit as PDFs with your name *in* the text, before class.
2. **In-person meeting:** Luminus > Conferencing

   Wednesdays at noon; probably an hour or so. I will review material and answer questions, and we will solve practice problems in groups.

The draft schedule is on the public website and is subject to change.

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%):** You will receive a grade based on a combination of (a) your attendance and participation in in-person meetings (in group exercises, in discussions, etc.), and (b) participation in the Luminus Forum.

2. **Mini-quizzes (10%)**

3. **Problem sets ($8 \times 6\% = 48\%$)**

4. **Take-home exam (25%):** The exam 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 exam will be a 24 hour take-home format, scheduled no later than Week 10.

5. **Talk report (5%):** Watch a semantics research talk from a recent conference (normally 20–30 minutes) and write a short report (one paragraph/half a page) about the talk. Additional details and suggested talks will be supplied later. Submit by the end of Week 13.

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

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

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.
- **Late submissions:** Late submissions are not accepted except with prior permission.
- **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.
- **2020 is an experiment for everyone:** I intend to solicit feedback on the format of the class around Recess Week and adjust accordingly.

References

Coppock, Elizabeth, and Lucas Champollion. 2019. Invitation to formal semantics. Manuscript.

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

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