EL4203 Semantics

National University of Singapore
2025–2026 Semester 1
Meetings: Wednesdays at ~~9am~~ 10am, AS6 02-12

Instructor

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Office: AS5 06-09
Office hours: Thursdays noon – 2pm

Also join us for the **syntax/semantics reading group** (completely optional)
Thursdays at 4pm in the graduate reading room (AS5 05-09) and over Zoom
Ask to join the mailing list

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.

Canvas

All course materials will be on Canvas. Please make sure you have access to the course.

Textbooks

IFS Coppock, Elizabeth and Lucas Champollion. *Invitation to Formal Semantics*. Draft of 2024.
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 Canvas > Files > Readings. You should make sure you have (access to) a copy of H&K, which we will use from week 5.

Format and schedule

This course is organized in a flipped classroom format, combining individual learning activities throughout the week, which we then review, synthesize, and practice together in person. Each unit has two parts:

1. **At-home activities:** (new unit starts after every class)
   - Lecture video (or two) and handout: Canvas
     My advice: Have your own copy of the handout open or printed, so you can take notes.
   - Readings: Canvas > Files > Readings
   - Practice problems: Canvas
     Practice problems are an opportunity to apply techniques developed in class and in the readings to original data.
2. **In-person class meeting:** (the next Wednesday)
   - Five minute mini-quiz:
     Weekly mini-quizzes test comprehension of the video lectures and readings.
   - Presentation of practice problems:
     Each week, one group presents the practice problems and their answers, emphasizing their thinking process and the unit's key ideas.
   - Additional practice problems and activities

   In two classes, there will be tests instead of the regular activities above.

A draft schedule is on Canvas 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 the following:

1. **Attendance and participation (15%):** You will receive a grade based on a combination of your attendance and participation in in-person meetings (in discussions, group exercises, etc.). Participation in Canvas Discussions will also be considered.
2. **Mini-quizzes (10%)**
3. **Group presentation (15%):** Every week, one group of students will present the practice problems related to the previous weeks lecture. Assessment will emphasize effective communication of the thought process, as well as the validity of answers.
4. **Group presentation notes (5%):** The presenting group also submits a document covering the practice problems, revised if necessary, to be shared. Due Friday (2.5 days after presenting).
5. **Two tests (25% $\times$ 2):** The tests involve application of the concepts of the class to new data and puzzles. At least one problem on each test will be a lightly modified version of a recent practice problem. Tests are open-book / open-paper-notes, but without electronic devices.
6. **Talk report (5%):** Watch a semantics research talk from a recent conference (20 min to 1 hour) and write a short report (approximately 200 words) about the talk. Additional details and suggested talks will be supplied later. Submit by the end of Week 13.

- **Consultation (1% bonus):** Come meet me during my office hours, or by appointment, to receive one point.
- **Evaluation (1% bonus):** You receive one point for submitting your module evaluation.

Rules of note

- **Cooperation:** All graded components (except the group presentation) are individual assessments. However, I strongly encourage you to work together to study for this module!
- **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

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.