

Formal Semantics (LING620): Syllabus



A donkey.



A possible world

Linguistics 620
Tuesday, Thursday 11:15 – 12:30
Room: TBA
Course Instructor: Seth Cable

Course Website:
<http://people.umass.edu/scable/LING620-SP09/>
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1. General Overview

This course is a continuation of LING 610. We will seek a deeper understanding of the tools of linguistic semantics and the ways that they can yield insights into natural language meanings.

We will explore primary literature in the field of semantics, literature which will both (a) introduce students to a more expansive set of formal and analytic tools, as well as (b) introduce students to certain fundamental results and debates in the field.

The selection of both topics and literature will in part be guided by the interests and concerns of the students. To start us off, however, we will lightly explore the basics of two deep and far-reaching areas of study:

- Interpretation in ‘intensional’ contexts (intensional semantics)
- The semantics of indefinites (quantificational force and scope)

2. Course Requirements

2.1 Weekly Problem Sets

In keeping with the schedule set during LING 610, every Thursday you will receive a problem set, which will be due the following Thursday. In addition, every Thursday a portion of the class will be devoted to a discussion of the problem set.

2.2 Snippets: Questions, Criticisms, ‘Hunches’, etc.

In order to fully absorb the course material, it is critical that you continually be critically engaged with it. For this reason, every Tuesday you will be required to submit some ‘snippet’ demonstrating engagement with the course material. This ‘snippet’ can take one of many forms:

- A question on the material
- A criticism of some argument or point made during class
- A ‘hunch’ on how something from class might apply to a new domain

This ‘snippet’ can be as little as a sentence; however, it must show some kind of engagement with the course material.

2.3 Final Project

The final project for this course will have two components:

2.3.1 In Class Presentation

Students will give an in-class presentation. The nature of the presentation will be left rather open, but could include any of the following:

- Presentation of a reading, or set of readings, related to topics discussed in class.
- Presentation of original research, related to topics discussed in class.
- Critical discussion of a particular ‘puzzle’, related to topics discussed in class, and proposed solutions.

2.3.2 Final Paper

In addition to their class presentations, students will submit a final paper for the course. The final paper may be a ‘write-up’ of the in-class presentation, particularly if the presentation includes original research or analyses.

3. Textbook

No textbooks are required for this course. However, the initial ‘review’ lectures will be extensively based upon material in the following work:

- Heim, Irene & Angelika Kratzer (1998) *Semantics in Generative Grammar*. Blackwell.

You won’t be required to read anything from ‘Heim & Kratzer’ (since these initial lectures will all be review), but if you don’t already have a copy of this book you are strongly encouraged to purchase one!

In addition, our study of ‘intensional semantics’ will all be based upon the following work:

- von Fintel, Kai (2007) *Intensional Semantics*. Manuscript. MIT.
Available at: <http://kaivonfintel.org/teaching/> under ‘Teaching Materials’

You will be assigned readings from this manuscript, so please download it sometime soon.

In addition to von Fintel (2007), you will be assigned various papers, handbook chapters, and excerpts of longer works. These will be posted to the class website as they are needed.

4. Schedule

4.1 Review of Extensional Semantics

We’ll begin, in the first week or so, with some review lectures covering the ‘essentials of extensional semantics’. These will cover:

- Foundational Issues:
Why we’re interested in truth conditions, and how extensions get us there
- Semantics of Quantifiers
- Quantifier Raising and its Semantics
- Pronominal Binding

4.2 Intensionality

With the essentials of extensional semantics fresh in our minds, we then turn our attention to areas where extensions are *not* enough for a semantic theory of natural language. We’ll follow von Fintel (2007) in his tour of such phenomena as:

- Propositional attitude verbs and clausal complementation
- Modals
- Conditionals
- *De re* vs. *de dicto* ambiguities.

4.3 Plurals DPs, Distributivity, Collectivity and Mass Nouns

As a segue into our longer discussion concerning indefinites, we'll take a quick tour of the semantics of plural DPs. This material will be especially useful when the time comes to discuss the 'scopal properties' of indefinites. We'll get a good first look at:

- The basics of plural DP interpretation (what do plurals mean?)
- How to capture the difference between so-called 'collective' and 'distributive' readings
- The basics of the semantics of mass nouns, and how they relate to plurality

4.4 Semantics of Indefinites, Part 1: Quantificational Variability and Donkey Anaphora

Over the past thirty years, one major area of semantic research has been the semantics of indefinites. In this section of the course, we'll begin to see why indefinites present so many puzzles to linguistic analysis. We start here with the inter-related phenomena of (a) the so-called 'quantificational variability' of indefinites, and (b) so-called 'donkey anaphora'. Our story will have the following plotline:

- The basic puzzles: quantificational variability and donkey anaphora
- Analysis in terms of 'unselective binding'
- Analysis in terms of 'E-type pronouns'
- Issues in deciding 'which is right' (if either, or if not *both*)

4.5 Semantics of Indefinites, Part 2: Exceptional Scope-Taking

In addition to the preceding phenomena, another puzzle associated with indefinites is their exceptional ability to 'scope out of' structures that are typically 'islands' for scope. We'll briefly explore the nature of this puzzle, and one of its (several) leading analyses.

- The basic puzzle; indefinites scoping out of islands
- Some initial proposals, and their problems
- The 'choice function' analysis
- Some further issues and areas of research

4.6 Further Topics

The material above will probably take us well into late March / early April. What we do after that is up to you! Some initial suggestions to consider are the following:

- (a) Semantics of questions
- (b) Semantics of focus
- (c) The 'nexus' of focus, questions and indefinites (Kratzer & Shimoyama 2002; Beck 2006)
- (d) Tense and Aspect
- (e) Bare plurals, generics and reference to 'kinds'
- (f) The 'Diesing' framework for indefinites [presupposes topic (e)]
- (g) Semantic approaches to Binding Theory
- (h) Cross-linguistic semantic variation

5. Specific Dates of Interest or Importance

- March 16 - 20:** No Class (Spring Break)
- April 21:** No Class (Monday Schedule)
- May 5:** Class Presentations Begin
- May 12:** Last day of class
- May 19:** Final papers due
- May 26:** Grades due