

CAS LX 736

Advanced Topics in Semantics & Pragmatics: Degree Semantics

Boston University · Spring 2020

Instructor: Elizabeth Coppock, Assistant Professor of Linguistics

Time and place: Fridays 2:30pm–5:15pm (break at 4!) in PRB 150

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Office: 621 Commonwealth Ave., Room 110

Office hours: Tues. 11am–12:15pm and Thurs. 2:00pm–3:45pm

Course Description & Learning Objectives

This course gives students an opportunity to study and build on the scholarly literature on so-called ‘degree semantics’: the semantics of phenomena whose interpretation relates to degrees, or at least appears to. The empirical domain of degree semantics includes:

- gradable predicates like *tall*, *beautiful*, *clean*, *open*, *much*, and *little*, and their different types;
- degree constructions (e.g. comparative, superlative, and equative) that gradable predicates participate in;
- the interaction of degree constructions with scope-taking operators; and
- gradability in the nominal and verbal domains

The main questions the course will address are:

- What empirical arguments have been made for treating gradable predicates in terms of the ontological category of ‘degree’?
- What uses has the notion of ‘degree’ have been put to, in order to capture the facts in the empirical domain of degree semantics?
- What is a ‘degree’, anyway?
- What is the role of pragmatics in the interpretation of degree constructions?

Students who complete this course will:

1. become familiar with some of the main phenomena, questions, concepts, theories, and scholarly contributions in this area
2. summarize and critically evaluate published work in the area
3. write a research article or literature review on some topic in the area

Furthermore, although this is not a ‘Hub’ course; it is *writing-intensive*. Students will have many opportunities to strengthen their writing skills, and to receive feedback on their written work.

Prerequisite

The prerequisite for this course is CAS LX 432 / GRS LX 732 Intermediate Semantics.

Literature

This is a seminar-style course, in which we read articles closely and discuss them. See the schedule below for the list of readings.

Course Requirements & Policies

Short essays. This course emphasizes writing, a crucial skill that scholars rarely get enough instruction in. You will be asked to write five short essays during the first half of the course. (You can skip one without penalty.) These must be turned in on the Tuesday following the class during which we discuss the associated reading.

Each essay should be 4-5 pages, double-spaced, with 11 point font. You will receive a list of prompts to choose from at least one week before the deadline. If you prefer to address a different question, then that is wonderful; just run it by me.

The essay must have a clear, overarching point (a **thesis**), which is made clear in the introductory paragraph, which should also introduce the reader to the issue. Each additional paragraph should make one single point that helps you convince the reader of your thesis. The point of the paragraph should be stated in the first sentence of the paragraph. The essay should end with a concluding paragraph.

You will be graded with a letter grade (A+, A, A-, B+, . . .), and receive detailed feedback on punctuation, wording, clarity, etc. if you request it. You can improve your grade by incorporating feedback, by up to two grade levels (e.g. B to A-).

- A+ publication-grade, and remarkably good writing that really sings
- A publication-grade writing
- A- would be publication-grade if one non-minor issue
(or an equivalent bunch of minor issues) were fixed
- B+ would be publication-grade if two non-minor issues
(or equivalent) were fixed
- ... etc.

Revisions should be made within one week of receiving feedback, and must be made within two weeks of receiving feedback.

Presentation. Each student will make one 30-45 minute presentation on a correspondingly substantial section of one of the readings, using a handout. Presentations will be graded on clarity, coherence, mastery of the material, the handout, and timing.

Final paper. For the final paper, you are asked to write an original paper on any topic in degree semantics, or carry out a literature review. Your choice of topic should be made in consultation with Prof. Coppock, and the final paper should be 20-30 pages, double spaced, with 11 point font.

As indicated in the syllabus, you will be asked to start making progress on your paper starting immediately after spring break, meeting the following milestones:

- By Tuesday, March 17 (the first Tuesday after spring break), please communicate with Prof. Coppock about possible final project topics.
- By Tuesday, March 24, please identify a central question that your thesis statement in your final paper will answer.
- By Tuesday, March 31, you should have initial data (or selected source material, if you are doing a literature review)
- By Tuesday, April 7, please turn in a 2-page abstract about your paper
- By Tuesday, April 21, you should have a draft of the paper

Attendance/participation. This is a seminar. Regular attendance and active participation is required to pass the class. For full credit, post one question about the required reading to the #questions channel on Slack before midnight the day before class at the latest. Responding to others' questions is encouraged but not required.

If you are unable to attend class because of religious observance, you should submit email notification to Prof. Coppock at least a week in advance. Please look over the syllabus. If you anticipate a conflict, please bring this to her attention via email ASAP. If a religious conflict prevents you from submitting an assignment on the due date, you are invited to submit the relevant assignment in advance. In case of illness or other serious issues that may prevent your attending a class, please

contact Prof. Coppock by email in advance (or as promptly after the class as possible, depending on circumstances). In case of extended illness or other extraordinary long-term circumstance, contact Prof. Coppock ASAP to make appropriate arrangements.

Academic Conduct. You are expected to abide by Boston University’s Academic Conduct Code, which is accessible at <https://www.bu.edu/cas/current-students/undergraduate/academic-conduct-code-2/>. Graduate students are additionally expected to abide by the GRS Academic Conduct Code, <https://www.bu.edu/cas/files/2017/02/GRS-Academic-Conduct-Code-Final.pdf>. Plagiarism in any form (including from online sources) and other academic misconduct will not be tolerated. If you are unsure of any aspect of these policies, please ask!

Late Policy. Late assignments will not be accepted without prior permission.

Final Course Grade: Your overall course grade will be determined as follows:

10%	Attendance/Participation
10%	In-class presentation
40%	Short essays
40%	Final paper (of which 10% for abstract)

Schedule (subject to change)

DATE	TOPIC	READING	DUE PREV. TUES.
1/24	A world without degrees	Klein 1980, 45pp	
1/31	Why degrees	Kennedy 1999, 9–86	
2/7	Scale types	Kennedy & McNally 2005, 36pp	Essay 1
2/14	Comparatives	Heim 1985, 33pp	Essay 2
2/21	Polar opposition	Kennedy 2001, 47pp	Essay 3
2/28	Degree operators	Heim 2000, 25pp	Essay 4
3/6	Phrasal vs. clausal	Bhatt & Takahashi 2011, 40pp	Essay 5
Spring break			
3/20	Superlatives	Heim 1999, 21pp	Possible topics
3/28	Quantity words	Solt 2015, 52pp	Central question
4/3	What are degrees?	von Stechow 2008	Initial data
4/10	Verbal gradability	Wellwood 2015, 34pp	2-page abstract
4/17	Degree semantics parameter	Bochnak 2015, 46pp	
4/24	Rethinking POS	Rett 2015, chs. 3 and 5	Draft

The last day of classes is Thursday, April 30. I will be available for individual meetings on Friday, May 1st during our regular class time.

The final paper is due Friday, May 8th.

References

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- Klein, Ewan. 1980. A semantics for positive and comparative adjectives. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 4. 1–45.
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