

The Semantics of Degree

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Course Description

This seminar will investigate the expression of gradability, comparison and degree in natural language. The course will address the following major issues, though we may also include other topics according to the interests and direction of the class:

- The underlying semantic representation of expressions of degree
- The linguistic significance of scalar representations
- The syntax and semantics of comparative constructions, and the implications of comparatives for other aspects of the grammar
- The semantics of degree and the role of scalar representations in grammatical categories other than gradable adjectives

Course requirements

Students are expected to do the assigned readings and to participate fully in the classroom discussion. Students will also be required to write a research paper for the course. The topic should be selected in consultation with the instructors no later than the tenth week of the course. During the final week of classes, we will have a research seminar in which students will present the results of their research.

Preliminary Schedule

The following is a tentative schedule for the semester, which we will adjust as we go along depending on the interests of the participants. Additional readings may be added, and some of the readings listed may be deleted. An up-to-date listing of the topics and readings for upcoming classes will be made available on the course website at:

<http://norbert.mit.edu/24/24.979/f02/index.html>

Hardcopies of the readings for the course will be made available outside Irene's office, and electronic versions (when available) will be put on the web. Optional background readings are listed in parentheses.

Week 1: Capturing gradability

Grading in natural language (Sapir 1944)
 Vague predicates Klein 1980; (Kamp 1975)

Week 2: Introducing degrees

Degrees and degree relations Cresswell 1977; (Bierwisch 1989, pp. 73-139)

Week 3: A semantic typology of gradable predicates

Scale structure and degree modification
Relative vs. absolute gradable adjectives

Kennedy and McNally 2002
(Unger 1975, ch. 2)

Week 4: The grammar of vagueness

Fixing the standard of comparison

Graff 2000; Kennedy 2002; (Barker 2002)

Week 5: Comparison and logical form 1

Degree quantifiers vs. degree relations

Kennedy 1999, ch. 1; Heim 2000; (von Stechow 1984; Heim 1985)

Week 6: Comparison and logical form 2

Superlatives
Comparative conditionals

Sharvit and Stateva 2000; (Farkas and Kiss 2000)
Beck 1997

Week 7: Comparison and logical form 3

Quantifier scope in comparatives

Schwarzschild and Wilkinson 2002

Week 8: Polarity

Comparison and polar opposition
Comparison and negative polarity

Kennedy 2001; (Bierwisch 1989, pp. 139-175;)
Rullmann 1995, ch. 2

Week 9: Comparative NPs

Comparative quantifiers

Hackl 2000

Week 10: The grammar of measurement

Partitives and related matters

Schwarzschild 2002

Week 11: Reference and degree

Amount relatives

Grosu and Landman 1998; (Carlson 1977; Heim 1987)

Week 12: Aspect and degree

Telicity corresponds to degree of change

Kennedy and Levin 2002

References

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- Kennedy, Christopher. 2002. The grammar of vagueness. Ms., Northwestern University.
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- Klein, Ewan. 1980. A semantics for positive and comparative adjectives. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 4:1–45.
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