

The semantics of degrees

Jessica Rett, Spring 2016
rett@ucla.edu

when: Wednesdays, 2 – 5pm

where: Bunche 2150

what: There are a number of phenomena that have been used to motivate the introduction of degrees into semantic ontology: gradable adjectives like *tall* and quantity adjectives like *many*; numerals and measure phrases; comparatives and equatives. In this class, we'll explore degree semantic theories, focusing first on theories based in these foundational phenomena, then branching out to recent extensions (modified numerals, exclamatives, verbs and event structures), as the class prefers.

how: In this course, we will try to reinvent the degree semantics wheel as a pedagogical exercise. So we will discuss each topic in class *before* we do the reading. All attending students will be expected to participate in these class discussions, do the reading afterwards, and participate in a post-hoc comparison between the class discussion and existing literature.

Students enrolled in the course for full credit will be asked to write a term paper for the course, due **Friday June 10**. They should schedule a meeting with me to discuss their topic by **Friday May 13**, and briefly present their project to the course on **June 1st**.

schedule:

wk	date	topic	readings (<i>optional readings italicized</i>)
1	March 30	introduction	Bartsch and Vennemann 1972, <i>Cresswell 1976</i>
2	April 6	degree alternatives	Klein 1980; Neeleman et al. 2004, <i>Burnett 2012</i>
3	April 13	scale structure	<i>Yoon 1996</i> , Rotstein and Winter 2004; Kennedy and McNally 2005
4	April 20	quantity adjectives	Rett 2006; Solt 2014, <i>Rett 2014b</i>
5	April 27	<i>class cancelled</i>	
6	May 4	measure phrases	Schwarzschild 2005, <i>Sassoon 2008</i> , Doetjes 2012
7	May 11	the comparative	Seuren 1984, <i>von Stechow 1984</i> , Heim 2000
8	May 18	evaluativity	Rett 2015 Chapters 3 & 5
9	May 25	students' choice	
10	June 1	student presentations	

Additional topics

- acquisition (Barner and Snedeker, 2008; Syrett et al., 2009)
- degrees and nouns (Morzycki, 2009)
- degrees and verbs (Bochnak, 2011; Rett, 2013)
- event structure (Hay, 1998; Kennedy and Levin, 2008)
- exclamatives (Rett, 2011; Nouwen and Chernilovskaya, 2015)
- experimental degree semantics (McNabb, 2012; Solt and Gotzner, 2012; Brasoveanu and Rett, 2016)
- extreme adjectives (Paradis, 2001; Morzycki, 2012)
- metalinguistic comparison (Bale, 2008; Morzycki, 2011)
- modified numerals (Nouwen, 2010; Rett, 2014a)
- vagueness (Barker, 2002; Kennedy, 2007; Burnett, 2012)

readings

- Bale, A. (2008). A universal scale of comparison. *Linguistics and Philosophy*.
- Barker, C. (2002). The dynamics of vagueness. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 25:1–36.
- Barner, D. and Snedeker, J. (2008). Compositionality and statistics in adjective acquisition: 4-year-olds interpret *tall* and *short* based on the size distributions of novel noun referents. *Child Development*, 79:594–608.
- Bartsch, R. and Vennemann, T. (1972). The grammar of relative adjectives and comparison. *Linguistische Berichte*, 20:19–32.
- Bochnak, M. R. (2011). Quantity and gradability across categories. In Li, N. and Lutz, D., editors, *Proceedings of SALT 20*, pages 251–268. CLC Publications.
- Brasoveanu, A. and Rett, J. (2016). Evaluativity across adjective and construction types: an experimental study. Ms., UCSC and UCLA.
- Burnett, H. (2012). *The Grammar of Tolerance: On Vagueness, Context-Sensitivity, and the Origin of Scale Structure*. PhD Thesis, UCLA.
- Cresswell, M. (1976). The semantics of degree. In Partee, B., editor, *Montague Grammar*, pages 261–292. Academic Press.
- Doetjes, J. (2012). On the (in)compatibility of non neutral adjectives and measure phrases. In Guevara, A., Chernilovskaya, A., and Nouwen, R., editors, *Proceedings of SuB 16*. MITWPL.
- Hay, J. (1998). The non-uniformity of degree achievements. Presented at the 72nd Annual Meeting of the LSA, NY, NY.
- Heim, I. (2000). Degree operators and scope. In Jackson, B. and Matthews, T., editors, *Proceedings of SALT X*, pages 40–64. CLC Publications.
- Kennedy, C. (2007). Vagueness and grammar: The semantics of relative and absolute gradable predicates. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 30:1–45.
- Kennedy, C. and Levin, B. (2008). Measure of change: the adjectival core of degree achievements. In McNally, L. and Kennedy, C., editors, *Adjectives and Adverbs: Syntax, Semantics and Discourse*. Oxford University Press.
- Kennedy, C. and McNally, L. (2005). Scale structure, degree modification and the semantic typology of gradable predicates. *Language*, 81(2):345–381.
- Klein, E. (1980). A semantics for positive and comparative adjectives. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 4:1–45.
- McNabb, J. (2012). Standard fixing and context manipulation: an experimental investigation of degree modification. In Aguilar-Guevara, A., Chernilovskaya, A., and Nouwen, R., editors, *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung*, volume 16. MITWPL.
- Morzycki, M. (2009). Degree modification of gradable nouns: size adjectives and adnominal degree morphemes. *Natural Language Semantics*, 17:175–203.
- Morzycki, M. (2011). Metalinguistic comparison in an alternative semantics for imprecision. *Natural Language Semantics*, 19:39–86.
- Morzycki, M. (2012). Adjectival extremeness: degree modification and contextually restricted scales. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, 30:567–609.
- Neeleman, A., van de Koot, H., and Doetjes, J. (2004). Degree expressions. *The Linguistic Review*, 21:1–66.
- Nouwen, R. (2010). Two kinds of modified numerals. *Semantics & Pragmatics*, 3.
- Nouwen, R. and Chernilovskaya, A. (2015). Two types of wh-exclamatives. *Linguistic Variation*, 15:201–224.
- Paradis, C. (2001). Adjectives and boundedness. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 12(1):47–65.
- Rett, J. (2006). How *many* maximizes in the Balkan Sprachbund. In Gibson, M. and Howell, J., editors, *Proceedings of SALT XVI*, pages 190–207. CLC Publications.
- Rett, J. (2011). Exclamatives, degrees, and speech acts. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 34:411–442.
- Rett, J. (2013). Similitives and the degree argument of verbs. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, 31:1101–1137.
- Rett, J. (2014a). Modified numerals and measure phrase equatives. *Journal of Semantics*, 32:425–475.
- Rett, J. (2014b). The polysemy of measurement. *Lingua*, 143:242–266.
- Rett, J. (2015). *The Semantics of Evaluativity*. Oxford University Press.
- Rotstein, C. and Winter, Y. (2004). Total adjectives vs. partial adjectives: Scale structure and higher-order modifiers. *Natural Language Semantics*, 12:259–288.
- Sassoon, G. (2008). Negative adjectives and transformation values. In Friedman, T. and Ito, S., editors, *Proceedings of SALT XVIII*, pages 637–654. CLC Publications.
- Schwarzschild, R. (2005). Measure phrases as modifiers of adjectives. *Recherches Linguistiques de Vincennes*, 34:207–228.
- Seuren, P. (1984). The comparative revisited. *Journal of Semantics*, 3:109–141.
- Solt, S. (2014). Q-adjectives and the semantics of quantity. *Journal of Semantics*, 31:1–53.
- Solt, S. and Gotzner, N. (2012). Experimenting with degree. In Chereches, A., editor, *Proceedings of SALT 22*.
- von Stechow, A. (1984). Comparing semantic theories of comparison. *Journal of Semantics*, 3:1–77.
- Syrett, K., Kennedy, C., and Lidz, J. (2009). Meaning and context in children: understanding gradable adjectives. *Journal of semantics*, 27:1–35.
- Yoon, Y. (1996). Total and partial predicates and the weak and strong interpretations. *Natural Language Semantics*, 4:217–236.