Instructor: Elizabeth Coppock, Assistant Professor of Linguistics

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

Contact: via Slack or email: ecoppock@bu.edu

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 corres-
pondingly 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 communi-
cate with Prof. Coppock about possible final project topics.

• By Tuesday, March 24, please identify a central question that your thesis state-
ment 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/undergraduateacademic-conduct-code-2/](https://www.bu.edu/cas/undergraduateacademic-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](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:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Component</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Attendance/Participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>In-class presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Short essays</td>
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<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Final paper (of which 10% for abstract)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Schedule (subject to change)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Due Prev. Tues.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/24</td>
<td>A world without degrees</td>
<td>Klein 1980, 45pp</td>
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<tr>
<td>1/31</td>
<td>Why degrees</td>
<td>Kennedy 1999, 9-86</td>
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<tr>
<td>2/7</td>
<td>Scale types</td>
<td>Kennedy &amp; McNally 2005, 36pp</td>
<td>Essay 1</td>
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<td>2/14</td>
<td>Comparatives</td>
<td>Heim 1985, 33pp</td>
<td>Essay 2</td>
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<td>2/28</td>
<td>Degree operators</td>
<td>Heim 2000, 25pp</td>
<td>Essay 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>3/6</td>
<td>Phrasal vs. clausal</td>
<td>Bhatt &amp; Takahashi 2011, 40pp</td>
<td>Essay 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>3/20</td>
<td>Superlatives</td>
<td>Heim 1999, 21pp</td>
<td>Possible topics</td>
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<tr>
<td>3/28</td>
<td>Quantity words</td>
<td>Solt 2015, 52pp</td>
<td>Central question</td>
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<tr>
<td>4/3</td>
<td>What are degrees?</td>
<td>von Stechow 2008</td>
<td>Initial data</td>
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<td>4/10</td>
<td>Verbal gradability</td>
<td>Wellwood 2015, 34pp</td>
<td>2-page abstract</td>
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<td>4/17</td>
<td>Degree semantics parameter</td>
<td>Bochnak 2015, 46pp</td>
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<td>4/24</td>
<td>Rethinking POS</td>
<td>Rett 2015, chs. 3 and 5</td>
<td>Draft</td>
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**Spring break**

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


