

# Introduction to Degree Semantics

**Instructor:** Curt Anderson  
**Class time:** Monday 16:30–18:00  
**Classroom:** 24.21.03.82  
**Office hours:** by appointment  
**Office:** 23.32.02.22  
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**Course website:** <http://curtanderson.github.io/teaching/degrees.htm>

## 1 Course Outline

In this course, we will be investigating the linguistic phenomenon of gradability, the observation that the meaning of some phrases can hold to different amounts, such as *tall* and *happy* (*He is taller/happier than her*). In particular, we will look at gradability from the perspective of degree semantics, a family of formal semantic theories that attempt to explain the nature of gradability. Topics in the course will include the semantics of gradable adjectives, comparatives (*more/er*), measure phrases (*1.5m tall*), degree modification (*very tall, completely dry*), scale structure, the question of whether gradability is found in verbs and nouns, and cross-linguistic differences in the availability of degrees. From this course, you'll gain a broad picture of formal semantic research in gradability, get experience reading the formal semantics literature, and a better understanding of the tools of formal semantics and how to apply them to new problems. Some background in formal semantics and morphology is recommended (Einführung Semantik, Einführung Morphologie).

## 2 Readings and Textbook

There is no required textbook for this course. Our readings will come from chapters in the *Modification* textbook (Morzycki, 2016), as well as publications in the area of degree semantics. Readings will be sent as PDFs to your university email account, along with any notes about particular sections to read or areas to pay attention to.

When possible, I will also provide a link to the reading on the course website.

## 3 Requirements

BN: (i) Complete at least seven satisfactory reading responses during the course of the semester (more detail on these below), and (ii) participating thoughtfully in class discussions.

AP: All the requirements for a BN, in addition to writing a final paper on a topic in degree semantics. If you are interested in an AP, come talk to me, so we can talk about a topic suitable for the course.

## 4 Course Policies

**Reading responses:** An important aspect of this course is the reading responses, short responses where you can think critically about the paper you read for class. There are a number of ways of thinking critically about the paper, but a summary of the paper is not an acceptable reading response (although you may need to briefly summarize an aspect of the paper in order to write a response). Here's a few ideas you can use to get started:

- What new, interesting, cool, or provocative ideas are in the paper?
- Are there any theoretical or empirical drawbacks to the paper?
- Does it make the right predictions? Can you extend the theory to account for other examples?
- What happens if you don't make the same assumptions the author makes?
- Does the analysis extend to German or other languages you may know?

Reading responses should be roughly a page of text (1.5 spaced, 12pt Times New Roman). You should email your reading response to Curt by 14:00 on the day of the class (so that he will have a chance to read it before class and incorporate useful comments into the lecture).

**Language:** The language of the course is English, but I stress that you will **not** be evaluated in the course based on your knowledge of English grammar or ability to speak English.

**Outside of class:** You can and in fact are encouraged to discuss the course and your work with others. If you do discuss a reading assignment with a classmate, you should clearly cite your classmate for any ideas or data that come from them.

**Email:** Make sure you check your email regularly. Handouts, readings, and class announcements will be sent to your university email address.

**Academic misconduct:** Academic misconduct of all forms, including but not limited to cheating, plagiarism, misrepresentation, and fabrication, is strictly prohibited.

## 5 Schedule

This is a tentative overview of the topics we'll address, in roughly the order we'll address them. The specifics of this schedule will depend on our in-class discussions and how much time we devote to particular topics, so this schedule is likely to be overly ambitious. Any readings for the next week will be distributed via email and/or the course website, along with any additional instructions on which sections to read or pay particular attention to.

<b>7 October</b>	Introduction
<b>14 October</b>	Measure functions and degrees (+ semantics review?)
<b>21 October</b>	Comparatives and equatives
<b>28 October</b>	Comparison classes, evaluativity
<b>4 November</b>	Scale structure 1: Scale direction
<b>11 November</b>	Scale structure 2: Scale boundedness
<b>18 November</b>	Nature of standards, relative and absolute adjectives
<b>25 November</b>	Event structure and measure of change
<b>2 December</b>	Cross-linguistic variation 1: Comparatives, superlatives
<b>9 December</b>	Cross-linguistic variation 2: Availability of degrees
<b>16 December</b>	Ontology of degrees
<b>23 December</b>	No class (winter break)
<b>30 December</b>	No class (winter break)
<b>6 January</b>	No class (instructor traveling for conference)
<b>13 January</b>	to be determined
<b>20 January</b>	to be determined
<b>27 January</b>	to be determined

Possible additional topics: nominal gradability, exclamatives, quantity words, psycholinguistics of degree constructions, modified numerals, vagueness and imprecision, extreme adjectives, metalinguistic comparison, measure phrases (revisited), alternative views on scales, monotonicity in measurement, non-canonical comparatives

## References

Morzycki, Marcin. 2016. *Modification*. Cambridge University Press.