Seminar in Semantics: Gradation & Modality

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Time: Wednesday 2:15-5:05PM
Location: 110-114 (Classics Dept., interior of the main quad)

1 Overview and rationale

Modality and gradation are active areas of study in linguistics and in a number of related fields, including philosophy, psychology, and computer science. They have generally been pursued as separate areas of study, though recently a number of authors have suggested that it is enlightening to consider them together. There are at least two reasons for doing so. First, the models that have been proposed in the literature for the two phenomena are frequently closely related (though sometimes in less-than-obvious ways). Second, some languages (including English) contain gradable expressions which have modal semantics: likely, possible, certain, legal, good, necessary, permissible, want, need, and many more. The meanings that we assign to these expressions must make sense of logical connections between gradable modals and non-gradable modals. This means that theories of gradation will end up constraining theories of modality in general, and not only the semantics of modal expressions that happen to be gradable.

So we have good reason to go beyond the motley handful of modal auxiliaries, verbs, and adjectives that have traditionally been considered in the literature on modality. But familiarity with the traditional literature is crucial nonetheless. In this seminar we will survey (mostly linguistically-oriented) theories of modality and gradation, and then consider some of the arguments that have been for revising theories of modality on the basis of evidence from gradation, and vice versa.

2 Logistics

• Prerequisites: Linguist 230 A and B; Phil 150, 150E, 150X, or 154; or permission of instructor.

• We’ll have a 15-minute break for food/coffee at 3:30. You’ll be expected to be back promptly at the end of the break.

• Meetings: Attendees can book an appointment at http://danlassiter.youcanbook.me. If you can’t find an appointment slot there, send me an email. My office is MJH 102.

• Final paper: 12-15 pages, written up using \LaTeX, due March 21 at 5PM (end of Exam Week). You will be asked to submit a 2-page sketch of your final paper topic by email by 3/1. You should also schedule at least one meeting with me to discuss your topic.
3 Requirements

- Attendance & participation (40%)
  - You will be expected to have read and digested the assigned readings in advance. Failure to do so will negatively affect this portion of your grade — not to mention the value you get from the course!

- Final paper (40%)

- Present an assigned reading, lead discussion for 1/2 of a course meeting (20%; required of registered students, strongly recommended for auditors)

4 Schedule

Click readings in blue for links to papers. Others will be distributed by email.

- 1/8: Modal logic and the (linguist’s) standard theory of modality [Handout]
  - Portner 2009, *Modality*, pp. 1-72
  - Kratzer 1991, “Modality”

- 1/15: Degree-free theories of gradation, and measurement theory [Handout]
  - Klein 1980, “A semantics for positive and comparative adjectives”
  - Lassiter ’14, *Measurement and Modality*, ch. 2
  - Optional: Klein ’91, “Comparatives”

- 1/22: Degree semantics for gradation [Handout]
  - Schwarzschild ’08, “The Semantics of Comparatives and Other Degree Constructions”

- 1/29: Degree semantics for gradable epistemic modals
  [Prerna’s handout on Yalcin & Portner] [Dan’s SALT 20 slides]
  - **Prerna**: Yalcin ’07, “Epistemic modals” *(note: the entire paper will reward close study, but §7 is most important for this course)*
  - **Prerna too**: Portner ’09, *Modality*, pp. 73-78
  - Lassiter ’10, “Gradable epistemic modals, probability, and scale structure”

- 2/5: Gradable epistemics: more on their logic [Shane on Holliday/Icard]
  - **Tania**: Yalcin ’10, “Probability operators”
• Shane: Holliday & Icard ’13, “Measure Semantics and Qualitative Semantics for Epistemic Modals”

• 2/12: Non-epistemic modalities [Masoud on vF&I] [James on Villalta]
  – Masoud: von Fintel & Iatridou ’08, “How to say ought in Foreign’
  – James: Villalta ’08, “Mood and gradability: An investigation of the subjunctive mood in Spanish”

• 2/19: Bayesian semantics for deontics and desire verbs [Phil on Dan §5] [Dan on Dan §6]
  – Phil: Lassiter ’14, Measurement & Modality, ch.5
  – Lassiter ’14, Measurement & Modality, ch.6

• 2/26: Some conservative responses
  – Katz, Portner, & Rubinstein, “Ordering combination for modal comparison”
  – Lelia: von Fintel ’12, “The best we can (expect to) get? Challenges to the classic semantics for deontic modals”

• 3/5: Other revisionary efforts
  – Dasha: Cariani, Kaufmann, & Kaufmann, “Deliberative modality under epistemic uncertainty”

• 3/12: Awareness (guest: Michael Franke)
  – Chapter 1 of de Jager 2009, “Now that you mention it, I wonder…”: Awareness, Attention, Assumption
  – Recommended: read through p.70 of de Jager thesis

• 3/21: FINAL PAPER DUE, 5PM