The Cambridge Handbook of Formal Semantics

Formal semantics – the scientific study of meaning in natural language – is one of the most fundamental and longest-established areas of linguistics. This handbook offers a comprehensive yet compact guide to the field, bringing together research from a wide range of world-leading experts. Chapters include coverage of the historical context and foundation of contemporary formal semantics, a survey of the variety of formal/logical approaches to linguistic meaning, and an overview of the major areas of research within current semantic theory, broadly conceived. The handbook also explores the interfaces between semantics and neighbouring disciplines, including research in cognition and computation.

This work will be essential reading for students and researchers working in linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and computer science.

Maria Aloni and Paul Dekker are Assistant Professors at the Institute for Logic, Language and Computation (ILLC) of the University of Amsterdam. Both are leading scholars and researchers in the area of logical semantics, the philosophy of language, and empirical linguistics. Their general interests include the formal semantics and pragmatics of natural language, and more specific subjects such as reference, quantification, indefiniteness, modality, and information structure, and general issues on the syntax–semantics and the semantics–pragmatics interface.
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The Cambridge Handbook of Formal Semantics

Edited by

Maria Aloni and Paul Dekker

University of Amsterdam
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Contributors

Maria Aloni, Assistant Professor of Logic and Language, University of Amsterdam
Nicholas Asher, Professor of Linguistics and Philosophy, Université Paul Sabatier
Giosuè Baggio, Associate Professor, Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Adrian Brasoveanu, Associate Professor of Linguistics, University of California at Santa Cruz
Lucas Champollion, Assistant Professor of Linguistics, New York University
Ariel Cohen, Associate Professor of Linguistics, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
Mikaël Cozic, Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Science, Université Paris-Est and Institut Universitaire de France
Paul Dekker, Assistant Professor of Logic and Language, University of Amsterdam
Paul Egré, CNRS Research Fellow, Institut Jean-Nicod; Associate Professor of Logic and Philosophy, Ecole Normale Supérieure
Donka Farkas, Professor of Linguistics, University of California at Santa Cruz
Jonathan Ginzburg, Professor of Linguistics, Université Paris-Diderot
Jeroen Groenendijk, Professor of Logic and Language, University of Amsterdam
Atle Gronn, Professor of Russian Linguistics, University of Oslo
Hans Kamp, Professor of Formal Logics and Philosophy of Language, Universität Stuttgart
Manfred Krifka, Professor of General Linguistics, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Michiel van Lambalgen, Professor of Logic and Cognition, University of Amsterdam
Lisa Matthewson, Professor of Linguistics, University of British Columbia
Louise McNally, Professor of Linguistics, Universitat Pompeu Fabra
Rick Nouwen, Associate Professor of Linguistics, Utrecht University
Peter Pagin, Professor of Theoretical Philosophy, Stockholm University
Barbara Partee, Distinguished University Professor Emerita of Linguistics and Philosophy, University of Massachusetts, Amherst
Paul Portner, Professor of Linguistics, Georgetown University
James Pustejovsky, Professor of Computer Science, Brandeis University
Susan Rothstein, Professor of Linguistics, Bar-Ilan University
Manfred Sailer, Professor of Linguistics, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt
Galit W. Sassoon, Senior Lecturer in Language and Cognition, Bar-Ilan University
Philippe Schlenker, Director Research, Institut Jean-Nicod, CNRS; Global Distinguished Professor of Linguistics, New York University
Arnim von Stechow, Professor of General and Theoretical Linguistics, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen
Keith Stenning, Professor of Informatics, University of Edinburgh
Matthew Stone, Professor of Computer Science, Rutgers University
Henriëtte de Swart, Professor of French Linguistics and Semantics, Utrecht University
Enric Vallduví, Associate Professor in Translation and Language Science, Universitat Pompeu Fabra
Dag Westerståhl, Professor of Theoretical Philosophy and Logic, Stockholm University
Thomas Ede Zimmermann, Professor of Formal Semantics, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt
Preface

Humans characteristically use language, and a characteristic feature of the use of language is that it is meaningful. Semantics is the study of meaning, of the structural ways in which it is realized in natural language, and of the formal logical properties of these structures. The area of formal semantics finds its roots in logic and the philosophy of language and mind, but it has also become deeply entrenched in linguistics and the cognitive sciences.

This *Cambridge Handbook of Formal Semantics* constitutes a comprehensive guide to contemporary formal semantics, and it provides, among other things, a historical context and foundation of the field, a survey of the variety of formal/logical approaches to linguistic meaning, an overview of the major areas of research within current semantic theory, and a presentation of the interfaces between semantics and other domains of linguistic inquiry, broadly conceived.

This handbook is intended for everyone interested in the understanding of meaning. It presents a broad view of the semantics and logic of natural language and, as a helpful tool, of the logical languages employed.

The twenty-five chapters constituting this handbook have been grouped together into five major parts, and we hope the handbook can thus be seen to cover, in a systematic and transparent way, both the broad and the varied scope of the domain as well as the width and variety of the perspectives adopted. The contributions are subsumed under the following headings:

1. The landscape of formal semantics.
2. Theory of reference and quantification.
3. Temporal and aspectual ontology and other semantic structures.
4. Intensionality and force.
5. The interfaces.

The first and the last parts are more of a methodological or programmatic nature. The first part gives a general sketch of the frameworks in and perspectives from which semantic research is conducted. The last part focuses
on the intimate and intrinsic relationships with bordering academic disciplines. The three middle parts are concerned with more or less established major domains of linguistic research: the nominal domain (Part II) and the verbal or predicative domain (Part III). Both domains are studied with logical and (natural language) ontological interests. Part IV gives an overview of the various moods and modalities in language, ranging from negation, to modals, questions and other moods.

All contributors to the handbook are senior researchers working in logic and linguistics who are widely recognised as experts on the topics assigned to them. All contributions have been thoroughly reviewed by expert colleagues.

This handbook is aimed at graduate and PhD students, but it is also meant for a wider audience, and hopes to serve as a manual and sourcebook for senior lecturers and researchers alike. All five parts center around formal semantic issues but are intended to be of interest to linguists in general, descriptive semanticists, philosophers of language, and those who work on dialogue systems, cognitive grammar, and computation.


A handbook like this would of course not have been possible without the help of the publisher, and we would like to thank especially Helen Barton for her continuous support during the lengthy process. Peter van Ormondt has proven extremely valuable as the technical editor, who, it must be emphasized, also contributed his valuable expertise on substantial matters. All of this is greatly appreciated. We are also very grateful to the reviewers of the individual chapters, whom we would have liked to list if the reviews had not been done anonymously. Their acute and timely comments have surely increased the value of the various contributions even more. Lastly, we would like to thank the individual and collective authors, for enabling us to make this broad subject, with the help of their expertise, views, and findings, accessible to a wide audience.

Maria Aloni
Paul Dekker
Amsterdam