

# Inquisitive Semantics

Linguistics 98a, Fall 2015

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**Office hours:** by appointment

**Class time:** Tuesdays 3-5 pm

**Class location:** Boylston 104

**Website:** <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/6720>

## Course description

This course aims to offer a brief introduction to a fairly recent but increasingly popular semantic framework - inquisitive semantics.

Traditional semantics defines meaning in terms of truth conditions - for declaratives - and answerhood conditions - for interrogatives. Formally, this translates into a bias towards declaratives as the more basic of the two. Since the linguistic use of declaratives is to provide information, one can say that traditional semantics is biased towards the informative use of language.

In response to this, inquisitive semantics points out that the inquisitive use of language is no less important. That is, people use language no more to provide than to request information. Communication is not about declaratives or interrogatives but rather about raising and resolving issues - formally defined as non-empty downward-closed sets of possibilities, where each possibility is in turn defined as a set of worlds (the classical definition of a proposition). The content of a declarative or an interrogative is now defined in terms of issues. That is, the relation of an issue with respect to a discourse context (construed as a set of worlds) determines whether it is informative (eliminates worlds from the common ground) whereas the internal structure of an issue in terms of possibilities determines whether it is inquisitive (has multiple alternatives for where the actual world could be).

But inquisitive semantics goes beyond a mere restatement of semantic objects. Rather, its new tools create new possibilities for semantic analysis. One example in this sense is disjunction. Semanticists have now for some time noticed the similarities between a declarative sentence containing a disjunction and an interrogative sentence. These similarities now fall out of a treatment of a declarative disjunction as an issue that is both informative (in that it eliminates all possibilities other than its disjuncts) and inquisitive (in that it leaves open the issue of which of the disjuncts is in fact true). Thus, propositions in natural language are not divided into informative and inquisitive but can also be hybrid. Likewise, if traditional semantics had to create extra rules to handle alternatives, in inquisitive semantics alternatives are built in, so there is no need for a separate compositional mechanism. Inquisitive semantics thus provides promising possibilities for semantic data involving alternatives such as questions, disjunction, numerals, etc.

With these in mind, the goal of this class is to familiarize students with the formal tools of inquisitive semantics. While a formal discussion is inevitable, the emphasis will be mainly on a practical understanding of the options that these tools open up for the study of natural language meaning.

## Prerequisites

This course has no specific prerequisites. While some familiarity with propositional and predicate logic and/or natural language semantics would be convenient, the pace of the course will be adjusted according to the needs of the students, and relevant background information will be supplied wherever necessary. If you are finding it difficult to decide whether this class is for you, feel free to drop me a line.

## Requirements

**1. Class participation.** Do the assigned readings. Engage in discussion. Ask questions. This is your time - use it. (Whether it is to acquire fluency in inquisitive semantics or to reflect on how natural language semantics uses formal tools or simply to find out where you stand in regard to all of this.)

**2. Individual project.** Find a topic of semantic interest and investigate it from the point of view of how it has been or how it could be treated in inquisitive semantics. (Students who already have some background in classical semantics could do a comparative study of how the topic has been handled in inquisitive and classical semantics.) Be prepared (a) to submit reports on the progress of your investigation at the beginning of class in weeks 2-5, (b) to present your findings in week 6, and finally (c) to submit a write-up of your research one week after the end of class. Projects will be evaluated based on the depth and clarity of the investigation.

For inspiration and a wealth of resources make sure to visit inquisitive semantics at its home online: <https://www.illc.uva.nl/inquisitivesemantics/Home>.

## Grading

- 20% Attendance and class participation
- 40% Weekly reports on your chosen project (due at the beginning of class in weeks 2-5)
- 20% Presentation of your work in progress (week 6)
- 20% Write-up of your project (approx. one week after the end of class; exact deadline TBD)

## Tentative schedule

Week	Date	Topic	Required	Optional
1	9/8	Motivation and basic notions	[3, §1], [5], [1, §1-5]	[6, chs. 1-2]
2	9/15	Inquisitive first-order logic	[7]	[6, chs. 3-4]
3	9/22	Question semantics	[8], [2]	[6, ch. 5], [10, §2]
4	9/29	Disjunction and intonation	[9]	[6, ch. 6]
5	10/6	Inquisitive pragmatics	[4]	
6	10/13	Student presentations		

## Resources

- [1] Ciardelli, I., Groenendijk, J., and Roelofsen, F. (2013). Inquisitive semantics: a new notion of meaning. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 7(9):459–476.
- [2] Ciardelli, I. and Roelofsen, F. (2014). Alternatives in Montague grammar. In *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung*.
- [3] Groenendijk, J. (1999). The logic of interrogation: Classical version. In *Semantics and linguistic theory*, pages 109–126.
- [4] Groenendijk, J. and Roelofsen, F. (2009). Inquisitive semantics and pragmatics. In *Proceedings of SPR*, volume 9, pages 41–72.
- [5] Groenendijk, J. and Roelofsen, F. (2013). Jeroen Groenendijk and Floris Roelofsen discuss Inquisitive Semantics. Interview by Matt Teichman. Audio blog post. *Elucidations*, 51. Web. Accessed Aug 12, 2015. <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/elucidations/2013/09/23/episode-51-jeroen-groenendijk-and-floris-roelofsen-discuss-inquisitive-semantics/>.
- [6] Ivano Ciardelli, J. G. and Roelofsen, F. (2015). ESSLLI 2015 Lecture notes. Unpublished manuscript.
- [7] Roelofsen, F. (2013a). Algebraic foundations for the semantic treatment of inquisitive content. *Synthese*, 190(1):79–102.
- [8] Roelofsen, F. (2013b). An inquisitive perspective on meaning: The case of disjunction. Presented at the *Questions in Discourse* workshop, Berlin, March 11, 2013.
- [9] Roelofsen, F. and Farkas, D. (2015). Polarity particle responses as a window onto the interpretation of questions and assertions. *Language*, 91(2).
- [10] Theiler, N. (2014). *A multitude of answers: Embedded questions in typed inquisitive semantics*. PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam.