Jess Law is an Assistant Professor in the Linguistics department at UC Santa Cruz. She joined us this year, after completing her PhD at Rutgers University in Spring 2019. Since then, she has been busy teaching, advising, and conducting her own research in semantics, where she carefully examines the mapping of linguistic form to various components of meaning across languages.

We caught up with Jess earlier this month to learn more about her work, and how she’s found her first year at Santa Cruz. She also shared the details of her own journey to the discipline of linguistics.

● What kinds of questions do you focus on in your research? What has drawn you to them?

Broadly speaking, my research focuses on how various linguistic forms are mapped to their respective informational change potentials. Given the abundance of synonyms in a language and translation correlates across languages, one may think that expressions similar in form and meaning lead to similar changes in information. However, research on indefinites and quantifiers shows that truth-conditionally similar linguistic expressions within and across languages sometimes do not have the same information change potential. Investigating these expressions hence provides a window into the tight relation between linguistic form and their meaning dynamics. More narrowly, I take up the form-meaning mapping issue in quantification, indefinites, and speech acts. I was drawn to the research on information change potential because very little has been said about how it is related to language forms.
On an even wider scale, when and how did you first become interested in linguistics? Could you tell us a bit about your path from that moment to becoming a faculty member?

I first became interested in linguistics for its firm stance against language discrimination. As an immigrant who had to switch from one dominant language to another, the recognition that in a linguistic sense, no language was superior than any other language was a revelation.

After I got to know more about linguistics, I was impressed that the equity claim wasn’t just big words. It was based on empirically rigorous and scientifically innovative work of generations of linguists. It then became clear to me that I had to be a linguist to prove for myself that typologically distinct languages can in fact be equally intricate.

The branch of linguistics that usually deals with language, society, and equity is sociolinguistics. However, I didn’t end up being a sociolinguist. I found myself mesmerized by the structural and the mathematical beauty of language and couldn’t help but keep learning more about linguistic theories. Before I realized it, I got into a Master’s program at Chinese University of Hong Kong, graduated from it, got into a PhD program at Rutgers University, wrote a dissertation in semantics, and landed a job at UCSC. In each step, I received help from wonderful and inspiring mentors, who encouraged me to move forward with curiosity and a willingness to be proved wrong.

What has stood out to you in your time so far at UCSC? Any highlights? Any challenges?

Although I joined at a time of unprecedented uncertainty, I have really enjoyed my time at UCSC so far. I am especially proud of my own department, which has some of the greatest minds and the kindest people, and these two sets often overlap!

Like many, I have initially found it daunting to switch to remote teaching during the pandemic. However, with the many resources shared by the university as well as by our department, things have gone much more smoothly than I thought. I also want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the amazing students and TAs I have this quarter. My students are truly resilient. They have demonstrated a high degree of maturity and eagerness to learn, which have made a real difference. My TAs (Morwenna and Steven) have adapted swiftly to the course changes and came up with the innovative idea of making section podcasts, which were greatly appreciated by the students.

What has stood out to you in your time so far at UCSC? Any highlights? Any challenges?

As a semanticist, it’s hard not to see branching future possibilities, with some possibilities being brighter than others. In the best worlds, I look forward to teaching, learning, and researching without a pandemic. In the less optimal worlds, I look forward to teaching, learning, and researching despite the pandemic.