Assignment 1
Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2020
Distributed Jan 7; due Jan 21

Submission information (for this and all other assignments)
As described on the syllabus, all work for this class must be submitted electronically via our course’s Canvas site. Work submitted in any other way will not be accepted. Work is always due by 10:30 am on the due date. At 10:31 am, it counts as 1 day late. For more on the policies: http://www.stanford.edu/class/linguist130a/syllabus.html

1 A bit of fieldwork [3 points]

The class 1 handout called ‘Overview of topics’ briefly reviews some of the phenomena we will address in this course. First, look it over again, thinking in particular about the topics and the examples that are relevant to them. Second, find a naturally occurring example that is relevant to one of the topics, and provide (i) the example and its source, (ii) its associated topic, and (iii) a couple of sentences explaining why the example is relevant to the topic.

Note Your example can come from anywhere — printed material, television, the Web, radio, overheard conversations … anywhere humans use language. If you get it from somewhere private (e.g., Facebook, a conversation), please change any identifying information.

2 Entailment [2 points]

For the sentence pairs in (1) and (2), does the (a) sentence entails the (b) sentence? If it does, give an informal argument in favor of that judgment (1–2 sentences). If it doesn’t, describe a counter-exemplifying situation.

(1) a. Between five and ten Swedish students danced.
   b. Between five and ten students danced.

(2) a. Between five and ten students waltzed.
   b. Between five and ten students danced.

3 The pseudo-adjective pseudo- [2 points]

The prefix pseudo- is not genuinely an adjective syntactically, but it is a semantic modifier of nouns, so we can ask how it fits into Partee’s typology of adjective meanings. For each of the meaning classes intersective, subsective, non-subsective, and privative, consider whether pseudo- belongs in that class. If it doesn't, provide a brief (1–2 sentence) argument for that conclusion, with at least one example from English. If it does, summarize your evidence in support of that conclusion (1–2 sentences).
4 Compounds and compositionality [3 points]

Partee writes, “In compounds [...] there is no general rule for predicting the interpretation of the combination” (p. 341). First, articulate the challenge this poses for the principle of compositionality (2–3 sentences). Second, Levin et al. (2018) show that experimental subjects presented with novel English compounds show strong biases for particular interpretations. For example, where both the modifier and the head noun in the compound refer to artifacts (e.g., stew skillet), 93% of participants inferred that the entire compound described an artifact used in events related to creating the modifier (as in, “a stew skillet is a skillet used to make stew”). Levin et al. relate this to corpus evidence showing high frequency for compounds like bread knife, wedding band, and burger press, and low frequency for compounds like checkerboard cake, where the modifier refers to a visual quality of the referent. This evidence suggests systematicity in people’s construals of these phrases, but not 100% consistency. How might facts like these be used to inform our theory of compositionality? (4–5 sentences)

5 Scalar adjective experimental predictions [2 points]

On the theory developed by Syrett et al., what is the expected pattern of behavior (for children and adults) for the prompt ‘Hand me the long one’ in an experimental condition in which the subject is presented with two sticks, one longer than the other but neither long in any absolute sense? (2–3 sentence response.)

6 Closed-scale adjectives [3 points]

Background Adjectives like open are totally closed in the sense that they have two salient points of interpretation: we might interpret the door is open to mean that the door is totally open (say, we need to move a piece of furniture through it) or that it is slightly open (say, we want to heat the house efficiently). Other adjectives that have been claimed to be totally closed include closed, opaque, transparent, and invisible.

Your tasks First, pick a totally closed adjective to use throughout your answer. Second, describe how you would test the totally-closed hypothesis for your adjective using the methodology of Syrett et al. Include a description of your stimuli, a specification of what subjects would hear and do, and a prediction about how subjects will respond if your adjective is in fact totally closed, given the experimental assumptions of Syrett et al. Stay as close as you can to their design so that responses from your stimuli could be compared with theirs.

Levin, Beth; Lelia Glass; and Dan Jurafsky. 2018. Systematicity in the semantics of noun compounds: The role of artifacts vs. natural kinds. Linguistics 57(3): 429–471.