Assignment 1

Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2022

Distributed Jan 4; due Jan 18

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 9:45 am on the due date. At 9:46 am, it counts as 1 day late. For more on the policies: `http://www.stanford.edu/class/linguist130a/syllabus.html`

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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.

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., text messages, a conversation), please change any identifying information.

2   Pragmatically enriching indirect answers   [2 points]

In the 'Bronston' example from the 'Overview of topics' handout, Bronston is asked the yes/no question "Have you ever [had a Swiss bank account]?", and he replies "The company had a bank account there for about six months, in Zurich". People generally infer that he means something like "No, but . . . ", even though he does not utter those words. This is presumably because some information about the context and world knowledge come into play.

In the following small dialogue, a yes/no question is also posed, but there is more uncertainty about the extent to which the answer is intended to resolve the question posed:

A: Is Deirdre in her office?

B: Deirdre is sick today.

Your task: Identify a piece of contextual information, shared between A and B, that would lead A to conclude that B intended a "yes" answer, and identify another piece of such contextual information that would lead A to conclude that B intended a "no" answer. I'm assuming these pieces of contextual information can be described in a sentence or two each.

3   Entailment   [2 points]

This question assumes you have watched the 'Entailment' screencast and/or participated in the in-class discussion of the topic.

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.   At most nine Swedish students danced.
       b.   At most nine students danced.
(2)   a.   At most nine students waltzed.
       b.   At most nine students danced.

4   Intensional identity and Cresswell's Principle   [2 points]

This question assumes you have studied the handout/reading 'Perspectives on meaning and interpretation'.

For truth-conditional theories, intensions are crucial to capturing intuitive meaning distinctions. Consider two sentences that are true in exactly the same situations in our particular reality but nonetheless differ intuitively in their meanings. Intensions save the day here: we can say that there are possible worlds where their truth conditions do differ. However, what about sentences that are true in *all* possible worlds, like *two is greater than one* and *two is a prime number*? Such sentences can intuitively differ from each other in meaning, and yet their intensions are identical.

Your task: assess whether these examples of intensional identity challenge Cresswell's "Most Certain" Principle. (3–5 sentence answer.)

5   The nature of semantic mistakes   [3 points]

This question assumes you have studied the handout/reading 'Perspectives on meaning and interpretation', which provides short readings on I-semantics (Jackendoff) and conventionalism (Lewis).

Language users have intuitions that it is possible to be mistaken about the meaning of a word. For example, if one believes that *restive* means 'relaxed', there is a clear sense in which one is mistaken, even though this is a coherent and understandable belief.

Your task: discuss how each of I-semantics and conventionalism might characterize such apparent mistakes, noting any challenges you see for those views. (5–10 sentence answer.)

6   Classifying *plastic*   [2 points]

Provide an argument that *plastic*, used as an adjective, is **not** subsective. (An argument in this context is just an example involving a modified noun and a brief statement of why the example is relevant to establishing this negative claim about the adjective's classification.)