# Adjectives and semantic composition

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

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## 1 Reminders

**Lewis's advice**   "In order to say what a meaning is, we may first ask what a meaning does, and then find something that does that."

**Compositionality**   The meaning of a whole is a function of the meanings of the parts and of the way they are syntactically combined.

**Interpretation function**   The interpretation function is $[\![\ ]\!]$. It is our bridge from language to the world. We hope it captures the *conventional* aspects of meaning.

## 2 The adjective typology

**Intersective**   An adjective ADJ is intersective iff ('if and only if'), for all N, $[\![\text{ADJ N}]\!] = [\![\text{ADJ}]\!] \cap [\![\text{N}]\!]$

**Subsective**   An adjective ADJ is subsective iff, for all N, $[\![\text{ADJ N}]\!] \subseteq [\![\text{N}]\!]$

**Nonsubsective**   An adjective ADJ is nonsubsective iff ADJ is not subsective, i.e., there is at least one N such that $[\![\text{ADJ N}]\!] \not\subseteq [\![\text{N}]\!]$

**Privative**   An adjective ADJ is privative iff, for all N, $[\![\text{ADJ N}]\!] \cap [\![\text{N}]\!] = \emptyset$

**Examples**

(1)  a.  future

   b.  so-called

   c.  virtual

   d.  foreign

   e.  boring

   f.  current

   g.  actual

   h.  non-

   i.  simulated

**Question**  What problems do we face if we try to define $[\![former]\!]$ and $[\![skillful]\!]$ as sets?

# 3  Compositional interpretation

(2)  If ADJ is intersective:

$$[\![ADJ]\!] \cap [\![N]\!]$$
$$\overset{\displaystyle [\![ADJ]\!] \quad [\![N]\!]}{}$$

(3)  If ADJ is not intersective:

$$[\![ADJ]\!]([\![N]\!])$$
$$\overset{\displaystyle [\![ADJ]\!] \quad [\![N]\!]}{}$$

(The other nonintersective subtypes tell us something about what function $[\![ADJ]\!]$ is, but there is still an incredible amount of room for variation in meaning.)