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, $[\text{ADJ} \cap \text{N}] = [\text{ADJ}] \cap [\text{N}]$

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

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

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

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{[ADJ]} \\
\text{∩} \\
\text{[N]}
\end{array}
\]

(3) If ADJ is not intersective:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{[ADJ]} \\
\text{[N]}
\end{array}
\]

(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.)