Assignment 1

Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2025

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`

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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. The goal of the current question is to assemble some additional interesting examples to inform our understanding of those phenomena.

Your task: find a naturally occurring example manifesting one of the following:

  i. An utterance that presupposes something that is either clearly false or clearly not accepted as part of the common ground. (For example, (15) on the handout presupposes that the addressee has an eBay transaction, which is either false or not part of the common ground between the speaker and addressee.)

  ii. An instance where someone's utterance is extremely indirect about the speech act that person wants to perform, specifically so that the person can remain "off the record" for that speech act. (Example (17) is an extreme case. Cases like it are fine to provide; it's a movie trope.)

  iii. An instance of framing.

Please provide (A) the example and its source, (B) its associated topic (as i, ii, or iii from the above list), and (C) a couple of sentences explaining why the example is relevant to the topic. It is fine for examples to blend more than one of the above themes and/or include other themes from the handout. Your example can come from anywhere – printed material, television, the Web, radio, fiction, 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   Intensional identity and Cresswell's Principle   [4 points]

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.)

3   Entailment   [3 points]

The following passage offers an analysis of an entailment relation. The argument is incorrect: exactly three of the sentences describe incorrect reasoning or make incorrect statements. Your task is to function as a skilled editor: to rewrite those three sentences so that the argument is correct. The edits can be minor or significant, and there are certainly multiple good ways to correct the argument – please pick one. The sentences are numbered so that you can identify them by number and rewrite them separately. No other changes to the passage need to be made.

[1] We say that sentence *A* entails sentence *B* if, and only if, every situation that makes sentence *B* true is one that makes sentence *A* true. [2] For this, we consider not just actual situations, but also all hypothetical ones. [3] In other words, if the circumstances make *A* true, then *B* is also true, for any and all circumstances, no matter how far-fetched. [4] Given this definition, it is clear that sentence (A) entails sentence (B).

(A)   At most nine Swedish students danced.
(B)   At most nine students danced.

[5] The set of Swedish students is a subset of the set of students. [6] Thus, if at most nine Swedish students danced, then the number of students who danced (of any nationality) is also at most nine.

4   Adjective classifications   [2 points]

The Partee adjectival typology has four classifications. Your task is assign each one as a label to one of the following diagrams. Two of the diagrams do not represent any of the classifications and should be left unlabeled. You do not need to provide any justification for the labels – the required task is simply to provide the label. You can use the format '(A) classification' or something similar to that. In all diagrams, the set of things denoted by the modified noun is given in gray.
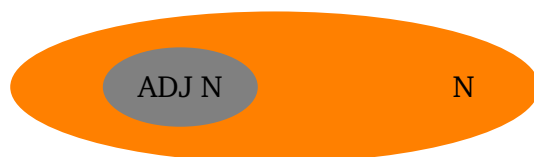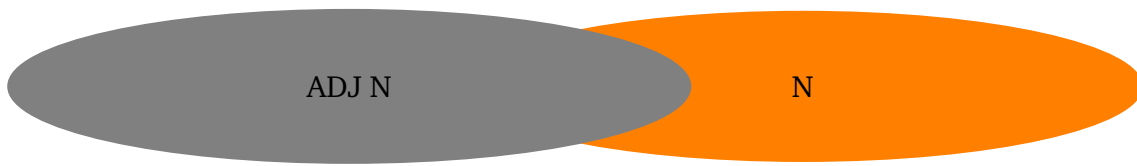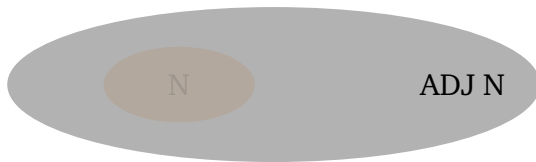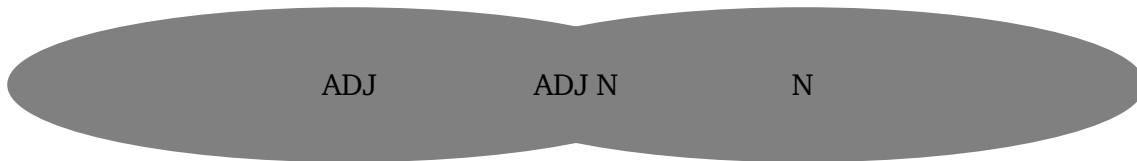
A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

F.

5   Language models and proper names   [3 points]

Consider the theory of proper names we developed in class. If we adopt this theory, do language models (or any artificial agents) actually refer when they use proper names? Why or why not, and what is your view of the correctness of this theoretical prediction? We are open-minded about these issues. We are looking for answers that make robust and accurate use of the theory as we developed it in class. You are free to bring in other considerations, but make sure to connect with the theory as we developed it. (8–10 sentence answer.)