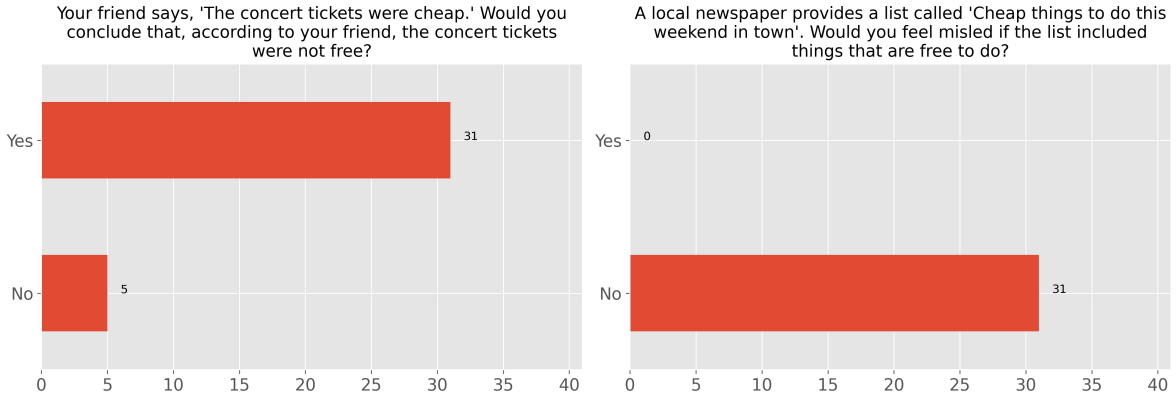
Assignment 5

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

Distributed Feb 18; due Feb 25

1 Cheap but not free [3 points]

There were two versions of our in-class exercise on January 21. Half the participants got the question on the left and half got the question on the right.



These results suggest that *cheap* does not entail *not free* but merely tends to implicate it. (An entailment analysis would do fine with the lefthand panel but struggle to explain the righthand one.)

Task 1 The following are attested examples (found with Google):

(1) a. "It is cheap - in fact , free - and available to anyone who has a mind."

b. "If you're looking for a cheap, in fact, free way to share big moosey digital files"

c. "One of the pearls of wisdom Sasha offers in today's episode is a cheap (in fact, free!) tool of social listening."

What implicature test have these writers in effect applied, and what does the existence of such examples in regular usage suggest about the status of the "not free" inference?

Task 2 For the lefthand context above: derive the conversational implicature that the tickets were not free. Assume that *cheap* means "costs $\$d$ for $0 \leqslant d \leqslant j$", where j is a small, contextually determined amount. Assume these contextual premises: (1) the friend is cooperative at least insofar as they are obeying Quantity and Quality, and (2) the friend knows the true price of the tickets in question.

Task 3 Why do so few people draw the conversational implicature that *cheap things to do* refers to "cheap but not free things to do" in the context of the righthand panel? Provide a 2–3 sentence explanation for this that makes use of Gricean concepts. (It seems to us that there are many plausible explanations, so we will judge explanations on their merits, paying particular attention to whether they make substantive connections to Grice.)

2 Missing direct objects [3 points]

Our in-class exercise on January 23 was focused on transitive verbs used without overt direct objects. Here are a few examples; in each pair, the (b) example is the one with the missing object (marked with '__'), and the (a) variant is the more common one:

(2) a. I lift weights on Thursdays.
b. I lift __ on Thursdays.

(3) a. They vacated the apartment at the end of their lease.
b. They vacated __ at the end of their lease.

(4) a. The grandson decided to scatter the ashes on his own.
b. The grandson decided to scatter __ on his own.

Glass (2021)[1] observes that we see the (b) examples primarily in situations where the events describe routine events, and it is common for them to become prominent in specific sub-communities – intransitive *lift* with weight lifters, intransitive *vacate* with real estate agents, intransitive *scatter* with funeral directors, etc.

Task 1 Use the Gricean maxims of Manner and Quantity to explain why these direct objects can be omitted when, and only when, they describe routines. (3–5 sentence response)

Note: It is okay to invoke other maxims if you choose, but be sure to incorporate Manner and Quantity into your explanation. You should not feel that you need to run through all the maxims, and indeed making irrelevant connections to other maxims could lower the quality of your answer.

Task 2 Eliding direct objects in many of these contexts can sound like jargon – technical or insiders-only language that conveys that the speaker is a member of a specific community. In other contexts, the missing object variants take on specialized senses, as with *drink* to mean *drink alcohol* and *use* to mean *use drugs*. This is not really present for verbs like *eat*, at least not with their usual senses (*I ate __ already*). Propose an explanation for these variable effects, building on your answer to Task 1. You should try to explain how your explanation covers at least *lift*, *drink*, and *eat*, and bringing in other data is fine. (5–10 sentence response)

3 The pragmatics of modification [4 points]

Note: this is not required for people doing a final project. Final projectors should answer the next question instead.

Consider the following pragmatic observations:

[1] Glass, Lelia. 2021. English verbs can omit their objects when they describe routines. *English Language and Linguistics*: 1–25.

- A speaker who uses the phrase *my biological father* is likely to invite the inference that they have multiple father figures in their life, or at least signal awareness that there are different notions of fatherhood.
- In Sedivy 2007,[2] experimental participants wearing eyetrackers were shown a visual scene containing only a tall cup, a short cup, and a tall pitcher. Participants who heard the phrase *Give me the tall* ... looked to the tall cup even before the utterance was complete. What assumption about modifiers seems to be behind this anticipatory looking?
- In a police procedural, a suspect is taken to have slipped up when she refers to her "first call" to the victim when she previously stated that she had called the victim only once. Why? If she made only one call to the victim, then surely that call is her first call to the victim. And yet the suspect was regarded as deceptive or dishonest somehow based on this modified noun.

First, state the generalization concerning attributive modifiers that unites all of these examples, and **connect this generalization with each of the examples** (5–7 sentences). Second, describe the role of the maxim of manner in explaining this generalization (2–3 sentences).

Final project task [4 points]

Note: this problem is required only for people doing a final project. Everyone else should answer question 3 instead.

The goal of this question is to begin laying the foundation for your final project. We're looking for two long paragraphs (say, a half a page each), and our hope is that this becomes the basis for a productive dialogue with your teaching team mentor about scope, goals, expectations, etc.

First paragraph The contents will depend somewhat on the kind of project that you're doing:

i. **If you're writing a standard essay**: Write a paragraph that describes the essay's empirical focus as you currently understand it, paying special attention to places where the topic connects with material from the course (the more specific the better).

ii. **If you're creating a pilot experimental design, original corpus, or computational implementation**: Write a paragraph that describes how your project relates to material from our course (the more specific the better) and then provide the motivation for your project. For example, if you're going to implement an extension of RSA, then you can discuss how this extension relates to Grice and to the basic version of RSA that we're covering, and this should move you naturally to the empirical motivation for the extension. Or, if you're creating a corpus of examples of a specific kind, then you should explain which phenomena from class the examples relate to and then articulate what research questions your corpus will enable us to answer.

[2] Sedivy, Julie. 2007. Implicatures in real-time conversation: A view from language processing research. *Philosophy Compass* 2/3: 475–496.

If your project idea doesn't fit into the above categories, please do a private post on the Ed forum with a description of what you want to do, so that we can give you feedback on its viability and help you figure out what to do for this assignment.

Second paragraph Give full citation information (at least full author name(s), year, title; a lonely hyperlink does not suffice) for the paper that is most central to your project, and write a brief summary of it, making sure that you explain how it relates to the content of your paragraph 1. We don't expect you to have mastered the paper at this stage, but you should be able to summarize it at a high-level and explain how it is relevant to your topic. (You're free to cite as many papers as you like in this paragraph, but please focus on one of them for now.)