

Adjectives and semantic composition

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

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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 $\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket$. 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, $\llbracket \text{ADJ } N \rrbracket = \llbracket \text{ADJ} \rrbracket \cap \llbracket N \rrbracket$

Subsective An adjective ADJ is subsective iff, for all N, $\llbracket \text{ADJ } N \rrbracket \subseteq \llbracket N \rrbracket$

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

Privative An adjective ADJ is privative iff, for all N, $\llbracket \text{ADJ } N \rrbracket \cap \llbracket N \rrbracket = \emptyset$

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 $\llbracket \text{former} \rrbracket$ and $\llbracket \text{skillful} \rrbracket$ as sets?

3 Compositional interpretation

(2) If ADJ is intersective:

$$\begin{array}{c} \llbracket \text{ADJ} \rrbracket \cap \llbracket \text{N} \rrbracket \\ \swarrow \qquad \searrow \\ \llbracket \text{ADJ} \rrbracket \qquad \llbracket \text{N} \rrbracket \end{array}$$

(3) If ADJ is not intersective:

$$\begin{array}{c} \llbracket \text{ADJ} \rrbracket (\llbracket \text{N} \rrbracket) \\ \swarrow \qquad \searrow \\ \llbracket \text{ADJ} \rrbracket \qquad \llbracket \text{N} \rrbracket \end{array}$$

(The other nonintersective subtypes tell us something about what function $\llbracket \text{ADJ} \rrbracket$ is, but there is still an incredible amount of room for variation in meaning.)

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