Adjectives and semantic composition
Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2024
Jan 18

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 \(N\), \([ADJ \, N] = [ADJ] \cap [N]\)

Subsective  An adjective \(ADJ\) is subsective iff, for all \(N\), \([ADJ \, N] \subseteq [N]\)

Nonsubsective  An adjective \(ADJ\) is nonsubsective iff \(ADJ\) is not subsective, i.e., there is at least one \(N\) such that \([ADJ \, N] \not\subseteq [N]\)

Privative  An adjective \(ADJ\) is privative iff, for all \(N\), \([ADJ \, N] \cap [N] = \emptyset\)
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:

\[
[\text{ADJ}] \cap [\text{N}]
\]

(3)  If ADJ is not intersective:

\[
[\text{ADJ}][[\text{N}]])
\]

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