

# Adjectives and semantic composition

Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2024

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

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

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

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

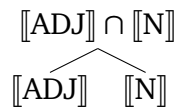
**Examples**

- (1) a. future
- b. so-called
- c. virtual
- d. foreign
- e. boring
- f. current
- g. actual
- h. non-
- i. simulated

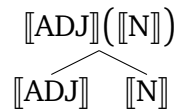
**Question** What problems do we face if we try to define  $\llbracket former \rrbracket$  and  $\llbracket skillful \rrbracket$  as sets?

**3 Compositional interpretation**

(2) If ADJ is intersective:



(3) If ADJ is not intersective:



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

