Adjectives and semantic composition
Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2023
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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 [ ]. 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] ∩ [N]

Subsective An adjective ADJ is subsective iff, for all N, [ADJ N] ⊆ [N]

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

Privative An adjective ADJ is privative iff, for all N, [ADJ N] ∩ [N] = ∅
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 [ADJ] is, but there is still an incredible amount of room for variation in meaning.)

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