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Semantics I

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Midterm Assignment

Problems discussed with Stephanie Carr

PART 1

B's utterance implicates that she does not have a Siamese cat. This implicature is derived from the fact that the utterance violates the Gricean maxims of quantity and relevance. The Gricean maxim of quantity specifies that the speaker should provide enough information to answer the question, but not any more. In this example, the answer expected is simply "yes" or "no." Interestingly, B's response in one sense provides less information than is expected by the question (because it fails to specify a yes or no answer), while at the same time provides more information than is expected by the question (because it addresses a separate issue). Thus B's response provides either not enough or too much information, but definitely not the exact amount of information expected, which leads to the implicature. In the same vein, because A's question prompts either a "yes" or "no" answer, the only response that would be technically relevant would be "yes" or "no." This means that B's response violates the maxim of relevance, and thus A will attempt to rationalize why B's response is relevant.

do a cancellation test to show that this is an implicature

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0/3

When A hears B's response, because A can assume that B is a cooperative interlocutor, A will reason about how B's response is relevant to the matter at hand, and why B would have chosen to provide more information than is immediately necessary. B's answer is relevant and maximally informative not necessarily to the original question posed by A, but rather anticipates

a likely follow-up question from A. If B simply answered “no,” it is reasonable to assume that A would then ask something along the lines of, “Well do you have a cat at all?” Because of this, B would have chosen to respond using the implicature because she is predicting the next steps in the conversation and simply addressing them in her initial response, which simplifies the possible later exchange.

PART 2

a) See attached image. good 8/8

b) good **[[Mother]]** is type $\langle e, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$, while good **[[book]]** is type $\langle e, t \rangle$. A noun such as **[[mother]]** takes an entity (some x) and maps it to a function (i.e. the state of being a mother) where it can be evaluated for a truth value. My intuition is that a noun like **[[mother]]** seems to require some possessor because it inherently exists in relation to another entity. Basically, in order for someone to be a mother, there must be a person for whom they are a mother. good **[[Book]]**, on the other hand, is like the other common nouns we have seen in that it takes an object (an entity) and then returns whether or not the property (the state of being a book) holds true for that object. **[[Book]]** seems different than **[[mother]]** in the sense that it does not necessarily need to be good possessed to make sense. A book can exist without belonging to someone. Following this analysis, it would seem that the denotation for a noun like **[[mother]]** requires possession simply by virtue of its relational quality, while a noun like **[[book]]** does not require this possession, although it can obviously be modified to accept the state of being possessed. Thus in my denotation of **[[mother]]**, the function includes two entities (x and y), where x is the person (i.e.

the mother) being possessed and y is the person to whom the mother belongs. In this sense “mother’ (x,y)” can almost be read as “x, the mother of y.”

c) The whole DP ([[Joanna’s mother]] or [[Joanna’s book]]) should be type e.^{good} This makes sense because by adding the possessive marker, similarly to using a definite article, you’re picking out one specific entity.^{good} Also similarly to using a definite article, the possessive marker presupposes that the NP in question actually exists. For example, if the statement “Joanna’s mother” is uttered, this presupposes that the specific person (a mother belonging to Joanna) exists. This presupposition further supports the claim that the entire DP should be type e because since the possessive presupposes existence, the DP doesn’t need to be evaluated for a truth condition.

See attached image for denotations for [[mother]], [[book]], and [[’s]].

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In my compositional analysis, rather than argue that [[’s]] is ambiguous, it makes more sense to me that something has to change in [[book]] once it is included in a possessive construction. Somehow [[book]] must change from type $\langle e, t \rangle$ to a type of $\langle e, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$ (like [[mother]]) in order to account for the possession relationship. It is unclear what this mechanism might be technically, but this shift would be a result of the entailment of [[’s]] that the object is possessed by someone. Thus although there is a typical denotation of [[book]] that follows this $\langle e, t \rangle$ type, when included in a DP this noun changes denotations to account for some possessor. This seems more logical to me than to change the denotation of [[’s]] because in both situations the possessive is serving the same function.

also, the presupposition in your [[POSS]] is one of existence, but I think uniqueness
like the determiner [[the]] is more appropriate: Someone’s book and Someone’s mother
both seem to presuppose a single book to me

8/8

e) See attached image for lexicon and derivation.

This utterance (7) presupposes the existence of Joanna's mother. It also obviously presupposes the existence of at least one salient doctor as well as Joanna, but the interesting presupposition to consider is the mother belonging to Joanna. As discussed earlier, the possessive construction includes this presupposition of existence in the same way the definite article would (i.e. "A doctor met the teacher").

PART 3

a) An epithet conveys the speaker's attitude toward the DP it appears in. That is, although the meaning of the epithet is fairly consistent across different contexts/uses, its placement in the sentence can completely change the meaning, because it conveys a different opinion on the part of the speaker. For example, we can examine these two alternative versions of the same sentence:

- (1) Alfonso broke the fucking computer. good
- (2) Fucking Alfonso broke the computer.

Version (1) places the blame on the computer, and conveys a frustration on the part of the speaker directed at the machinery. Alternatively, if the speaker were to say (2), the interpretation good changes to express a certain frustration and anger towards Alfonso himself. In this sense, the intuition is that (1) may presuppose some past resentment toward and issues with the computer, whereas (2) could presuppose previous problems with Alfonso himself. These are not particularly strong presuppositions, because there are situations, for example, in which a speaker could utter (1) without any background of problems with the computer, simply as a result of frustration in that moment. In fact, the presuppositions here seem to arise more so from an good awareness of how humans function psychologically than from any literal linguistic clues.

Interestingly, epithets are to a certain extent context-independent. More specifically, I cannot envision any context in which, for example, the phrase “fucking computer” could convey a positive attitude towards the computer. In order to attempt to develop a situation in which the tone of the sentence was overall positive, we can imagine a world where a company’s warranty would provide an entirely new computer if the current version was somehow broken. If Alfonso broke the computer in such a world, a speaker may say something like (3):

good (3) Hooray! Alfonso broke the fucking computer!

Even though the speaker is excited about the outcome here (who wouldn’t want a new computer?), the attitude expressed towards the computer itself is still negative. Thus although the context in which epithets are used may change, the meaning of the epithets themselves are fairly consistent. *but didn't you just show they aren't? One's positive and one's negative*

It is interesting to note that adjectival epithets can also be used in an adverbial context where they describe other adjectives, and in this context they take on a different function. For example, we can look at a case like (4):

(4) It’s so fucking cold outside.

Here, the meaning of “fucking” seems to carry some degree of extremity. The intuition is that “fucking cold” is somehow colder than just “cold.” We see this same increase in magnitude in sentences like (5):

(5) I’m so fucking excited.

Again, the intuition is that “fucking excited” conveys a higher level of excitement than simply “excited.” (5) is also an interesting example because it associates “fucking” with something positive. It seems that this capacity of “fucking” to contribute to a positive DP exists only when it plays an adverbial role, which suggests that when expressive epithets describe nouns, they

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carry some sort of consistent meaning reflecting the speaker's opinion towards that noun, whereas when expressive epithets are used to describe other adjectives, they serve to increase the magnitude of that adjective, regardless of whether its connotation is positive or negative.

b) As discussed above, expressive adjectival epithets seem to establish some presupposition regarding the speaker's attitude toward a particular subject. In order to determine whether this intuition is correct, we can examine how the information conveyed by these epithets behave in embedded contexts. In order to do this, we need to first establish what exactly is being conveyed by an epithet (for example, "fucking"). In this case, it is sufficient to claim that the use of this epithet in a sentence like (1) conveys the speaker's negative attitude toward the noun in question.

We can then examine sentences where the epithet is contained in an embedded context:

(6) Alfonso didn't break the fucking computer.

(7) Did Alfonso break the fucking computer?

great

(8) If Alfonso broke the fucking computer, his mom will be quite angry.

In all of these contexts, it is still clear that the speaker's attitude towards the computer is negative, frustrated, etc. The fact that this understanding projects from embedded contexts lends support to the claim that it functions as a presupposition.

It could also be argued that adjectival epithets of this kind function as a type of implicature.

(8) Alfonso broke the fucking computer.

good, but should run a cancellation test to show that this is in fact an implicature

(9) Alfonso broke the computer.

(8) conveys the same entailed information as the more succinct (9), so the use of the epithet seems to violate Grice's maxim of quantity (i.e. be as brief as possible). As a result, the

interlocutor to whom this utterance is directed would then reason about why the speaker chose to violate this maxim and include an epithet rather than use the more straightforward, objective competitor (9). The conclusion would then be that the use of the epithet was intended to ensure that the listener understood the speaker's opinion to help establish a shared background knowledge or position. In this sense, the expressive adjectival epithet functions as a presupposition in the sense that it always conveys the same attitude on the part of the speaker—regardless of embedding— but the listener's understanding of this contribution could be achieved through a Gricean reasoning similar to that concerning implicatures.

c) The challenge in an analysis of adjectival epithets is that because they do not express some objective quality of the noun they are describing; they are neither intersective nor relative. Perhaps the best category to place adjectival epithets in would be subjective adjectives. For **interesting** example, in the phrase “fucking computer,” the fact that the object is a computer is entailed, while the fact that it is “fucking” is not. The obvious difficulty with this analysis is that there is no single definition to which we can turn of the word “fucking” in adjectival form. In this context of sentence (1) it could be assumed to mean something functionally equivalent to “stupid,” but it could also convey something more along the lines of “old, “dilapidated,” “inconsistent,” or “cheap.” In a sentence like (4) or (5), it could even function to mean something more similar to “very” or “incredibly.” The fact that there is no single definition for this epithet provides further support for the argument that rather than describe the noun itself in any objective manner, epithets actually just convey the speaker's attitude toward the noun.

These adjectival epithets seem to compose within the DP using something similar to attributive modification, where the comparison class is derived from the noun which is being **predicate modification?**

modified. For example, in (1), the specific “fucking computer” somehow disappoints the speaker’s expectations/standards in comparison to other computers. This analysis doesn’t necessarily hold obviously true in all situations, however. In a sentence like (2), it could be argued that the speaker’s negative opinion of Alfonso relies implicitly on a comparison with his opinion of all other people, but the intuition in a situation like this is not so much that the speaker is saying Alfonso is worse than other people, rather than more specifically that there is something wrong about Alfonso himself, as he exists in isolation.

good, but then you don't need PM, you get it through FA

9/11 My intuition is that adjectival epithets such as this should be type $\langle\langle e, t \rangle, \langle e, t \rangle\rangle$, so that

(using the type $\langle\langle e, t \rangle, \langle e, t \rangle, t \rangle$ denotation for $[[the]]$), the entire DP is then type $\langle\langle e, t \rangle, t \rangle$.

does that makes sense?

shouldn't it be e

since it would refer

to a specific computer

My denotation for $[[fucking]]$ attempts to address the role of the speaker in the meaning of the epithet itself by including both an x and a y in the function. A more accurate denotation would

theoretically be able to account for the subjective nature of the role of the speaker in this

definition, but we don’t have the tools to describe the speaker’s attitude in our formal semantics.

good

This denotation of $[[fucking]]$ as type $\langle\langle e, t \rangle, \langle e, t \rangle\rangle$ also makes sense because then it can

handle its role as an adverb, taking adjectives of type $\langle e, t \rangle$ and mapping them to another

function.

it also doesn't quite capture the way the meaning projects

See attached image for denotation and derivation of $[[the\ fucking\ computer]]$.

d) (EXTRA CREDIT)

Different expressive adjectives convey different attitudes on the part of the speaker. We can see that difference in sentences such as (10), (11), and (12):

(10) Alfonso broke the fucking computer.

(11) Alfonso broke the amazing computer.

(12) Alfonso broke the computer.

It is clear that more information is contained in sentences like (10) or (11) than in something more straightforward like (12).

In theory, in order to capture these differences, the denotations for these different epithets would need to contain information regarding the speaker's attitude. Because there is no formal way to capture this, however, we could attempt to use some sort of comparative scale, similar to gradable adjectives. This is of course still limited in the sense that it doesn't necessarily express as specific of an attitude as an adjectival epithet does, and also because it conveys the quality as being linked to the noun being described itself, rather than to the speaker. Despite this, however, it could still be productive to use a gradable scale where epithets like *nice* like **[[fucking]]** or **[[idiotic]]** convey something's inferiority in relation to some sort of average example of the noun (in this case, a computer). Following this logic, the denotation of, for example, **[[fucking]]**, would be something along the lines of $\lambda x_e . (-\text{QUALITY}(x))$. *interesting*

Another challenge to this approach is that it forces us to group all negative adjectives together and all positive adjectives *good* together and ignores any differences between them. This is clearly flawed in the face of evidence like (13) and (14):

(13) Alfonso broke the fucking computer.

what about brilliant?

(14) Alfonso broke the stupid computer.

+4

Intuition in this situation tells us that (13) presents a more extreme view than (14). So the speaker views the computer more negatively in (13) than (14) and yet in a gradable analysis, these two views would be forced to be equated. Thus this analysis of expressive adjectives on a gradable scale may provide a useful starting point, although it fails to account for every observed quality of expressive adjectives in different contexts.