

Subjective Adjectives

LING 553

September 29, 2008

1. DECIDING BETWEEN I AND II, CONTINUED

1.1. *Evidence from beautiful dancers?*

As a kind of aside:

- (1) Olga is a beautiful dancer.
= “Olga is beautiful, and Olga is a dancer.”
= “Olga dances beautifully (though she herself is not beautiful)”

We won't really be able to account for the latter meaning. Larson suggests that the noun “dancer” has, built into it, an event of dancing (or perhaps several recurring events, or...), and that the sentence means “Olga is the agent of the dancing event, and the dancing event is beautiful”.

Note that there are other weirdly adverbial uses of adjectives, e.g. Stump's

- (2) An occasional sailor walked by.
= “Occasionally, a sailor walked by”
≠ “Someone walked by, who was both a sailor and occasional”

which happens with infrequency adverbs, but not even frequency ones—^{??} *A frequent sailor walked by*. There's also the interaction with definiteness: *The occasional sailor walked by*. Once again, there's something going on here with events (“occasional” is modifying “walk”, perhaps, in some way?). And there are similar, if not identical, cases:

- (3) The occasional cup of coffee will keep John awake all night.

There again seems to be an implicit event—“Occasionally drinking a cup of coffee....” (Though it need not be a drinking event: “Occasionally pouring a cup of coffee over John's head....”)

At any rate, these things all fall under the “something else is going on” umbrella.

1.2. Evidence from subjective adjectives?

What about words like **tall** and **good**? Syllogism (a) seems valid, as in (b); the fact that (c) works is a result of writing the “and” meaning into either PM or the $\langle\langle e, t \rangle, \langle e, t \rangle\rangle$ meaning.

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|----|------------|----|---------------------------------|----|------------------------------|
| a. | A and B. | b. | It is raining and it is Monday. | c. | Tony is a male syntactician. |
| | <u>C.</u> | | <u>It is 5pm.</u> | | <u>Tony is a golfer.</u> |
| | ∴ A and C. | | ∴ It is raining and it is 5pm. | | ∴ Tony is a male golfer. |

And yet:

- (4) Tony is a good syntactician.
Tony is a golfer.
 ∴ Tony is a good golfer.

this doesn't seem valid. Why is that?

There are a few interlocking intuitions at work here. Adjectives like **tall** and **good** apparently get part of their meaning from the noun that follows. Gradable adjectives—that is, adjectives where individuals fall at some point on a scale, rather than simply being “in” or “out” of a set—seem not to work by simple intersection. Relative to the latter: we have a different inference pattern than we did with other adjectives:

- privative:** X is Adj N \nVdash X is a N
intersective: X is Adj N \vdash X is a N X is Adj N \vdash X is Adj
subjective: X is Adj N \vdash X is a N X is Adj N \nVdash X is Adj

That means that:

- $\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket = [\lambda x_e . x \text{ is tall}] + \text{PM}$: won't work
 - How can you tell whether x is “tall”?
 - x may be “tall” in one context but not another.
- $\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket = [\lambda P_{\langle e, t \rangle} . [\lambda x_e . x \text{ is tall and } P(x) = 1]]$: won't work
 - Same reasons!

We need a more nuanced meaning. With the latter, we stand a better chance of that:

- $\llbracket \text{tall} \rrbracket = [\lambda P_{\langle e, t \rangle} . [\lambda x_e . x \text{ is taller than the average } y \text{ such that } P(y) = \text{TRUE}, \text{ and } P(x) = \text{TRUE}]]$

Notes:

- Don't forget the $P(x) = 1!$ That's part of what distinguishes these from privative adjectives. And otherwise, **Caitlin is a tall kindergartener** comes out true, since it's true that she's taller than the average kindergartener.
- “the average y such that $P(y) = \text{TRUE}$ ” may not quite be what we want. We might want to compare x to “most y such that $P(y)$ ”, or “3/4 of the y such that $P(y)$ ”, or the like. The key fact here is that there's some comparison to those individuals of which P is true; someone isn't just “tall”, but is tall in comparison to other {golfers/kindergarteners/etc.}

On Approach I, it's not clear at the moment what we could add to the meaning of **tall** that would as a result incorporate the noun meaning. But hold that thought....

1.3. Problems: the $\langle e, t \rangle$ sense

But now, what can we make of **Caitlin is short**?

- Predicted meaning of PM: “TRUE iff Caitlin is short” – except of course that in light of the above discussion, maybe we don't even want to be able to evaluate the truth of “Caitlin is short” without some context.
- Predicted meaning of $\langle \langle e, t \rangle, \langle e, t \rangle$ adjective: actually, **[[short]]** can't take **[[Caitlin]]** as an argument at all! We need ambiguity, or a meaning for **is**, or...there could be an invisible noun that's a sister to **short**, that contributes, say, $[\lambda x : x \in D_e . \text{TRUE}]$.

Aside: what we *do not* want to say is that “the pragmatics saturates the function”. Arguments saturate functions. Or else rules of semantic combination like PM tell us how to get around saturating the function. Having the pragmatics step in and actually do the semantic work of saturation is dangerous territory.

With that said, what we *can* say is “the pragmatics supplies the $\langle e, t \rangle$ predicate that saturates the function”. So perhaps...

[[Caitlin is short]]

- $\equiv [\lambda P_{\langle e, t \rangle} . [\lambda x_e . x \text{ is taller than the avg } y \text{ s.t. } P(y) = \text{TRUE, and } P(x) = \text{TRUE}}](Q)(\text{Caitlin})$
- $\equiv [\lambda x_e . x \text{ is taller than the average } y \text{ such that } Q(y) = \text{TRUE, and } Q(x) = \text{TRUE}}](\text{Caitlin})$
- $\equiv \text{Caitlin is taller than the average } y \text{ such that } Q(y) = \text{TRUE, and } Q(\text{Caitlin}) = \text{TRUE}$
- ...where Q is an $\langle e, t \rangle$ function supplied by the pragmatics.

Of course, we'd want to know what values of Q can be supplied. (“ $\lambda x_e . x$ is a woman” seems likely, or perhaps “ $\lambda x_e . x$ is a person”; “ $\lambda x_e . x$ is a linguist” seems less likely out of the blue.) But that's the kind of thing we can rely on the pragmatics to be able to do—supply the right implicit meaning—without too much handwaving.

But wait! If we can use the pragmatics to supply a predicate *here*, then what about:

- $[[\text{tall}]] = [\lambda x_e . x \text{ is taller than the average } y \text{ such that } P(y) = 1]$

where once again we get P from context? Now we're back to the point where the $\langle e, t \rangle$ and $\langle\langle e, t \rangle, \langle e, t \rangle\rangle$ meanings seem equally able to get the right meanings. Some possibly useful data:

- **Caitlin is a tall woman**, in a context where Caitlin is standing among kindergarteners.
 - Predicted meaning of PM: “Caitlin is a woman, and Caitlin is tall among some relevant set, e.g. the people standing in that room, consisting of Caitlin and thirty two-foot-high people” – TRUE.
 - Predicted meaning of $\langle\langle e, t \rangle, \langle e, t \rangle\rangle$ adjective: “Caitlin is a woman, and Caitlin is tall among woman” – FALSE, even when she's short in the context.

Empirical fact: perhaps not entirely clear? Various sentences/contexts suggest that the head noun can be ignored; or maybe that it can't...

- (5) We've almost got our all-linguist checkers team ready to send to the LSA tournament. Per the regulations, we've got a phonologist—we have Gene, and he's a good checkers player. And we've got a syntactician, since Tony's excellent at checkers. Now all we need is a **good semanticist** and we're all set.
=“good at checkers; not necessarily good at semantics”

[Example due to Michel DeGraff]

- (6) Poor Jumbo! What chance does a **small elephant** have against those monsters?
=“large as elephants go, but small compared to the monsters destroying the city”

[Example from H&K, p. 71]

2. CONCLUSIONS

Inconclusive. We'll use PM in general, for the sake of having chosen, but it's not clear that one theory works and the other doesn't.