

Assignment 1

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

Distributed Jan 9; due Jan 23

Submission information (for this and all other assignments)

As described on the syllabus, all work for this class must be submitted electronically via our course's Canvas site. Work submitted in any other way will not be accepted. Work is always due by 10:30 am on the due date. At 10:31 am, it counts as 1 day late. For more on the policies: <http://www.stanford.edu/class/linguist130a/syllabus.html>

1 A bit of fieldwork

[3 points]

The class 1 handout called 'Overview of topics' briefly reviews some of the phenomena we will address in this course. The goal of the current question is to assemble some additional interesting examples to inform our understanding of those phenomena.

Your task: find a naturally occurring example manifesting one of the following:

- i. An utterance that presupposes something that is either clearly false or clearly not accepted as part of the common ground. (For example, (15) on the handout presupposes that the addressee has an eBay transaction, which is either false or not part of the common ground between the speaker and addressee.)
- ii. An instance where someone's utterance is extremely indirect about the speech act that person wants to perform, specifically so that the person can remain "off the record" for that speech act. (Example (17) is an extreme case. Cases like it are fine to provide; it's a movie trope.)
- iii. An instance of framing.

Please provide (A) the example and its source, (B) its associated topic (as i, ii, or iii from the above list), and (C) a couple of sentences explaining why the example is relevant to the topic. It is fine for examples to blend more than one of the above themes and/or include other themes from the handout.

Your example can come from anywhere – printed material, television, the Web, radio, fiction, overheard conversations ... anywhere humans use language. If you get it from somewhere private (e.g., text messages, a conversation), please change any identifying information.

2 Is this perjury?

[3 points]

The 'Bronston' example from the 'Overview of topics' handout involves a fascinating interaction between pragmatics and perjury law. U.S. v. DeZarn is another important case in this area. DeZarn attended a "Preakness party" at Billy Wellman's house in 1990. This was a political fundraising event. DeZarn attended a separate dinner party in 1991 at the same location, which was not a fundraiser. When asked under oath whether a "1991" "Preakness Party" was a political fundraising event, DeZarn answered "No". He was subsequently charged with perjury on the basis of this

response, and he appealed on the grounds that “he gave literally truthful answers with respect to Wellman’s 1991 dinner party”.¹ His appeal was denied on the grounds that “the defendant knew what the question meant and gave knowingly untruthful and materially misleading answers in response”.²

Your task: Provide one argument for the claim that DeZarn perjured himself, and one argument against the claim that he perjured himself.

You can rely entirely on the information provided above when it comes to the DeZarn case, and you can rely on the ‘Overview of topics’ handout for the definition of perjury. 3–4 sentences per argument should suffice, though this is merely guidance. Arguments will be judged on their merits regardless of length. Strong arguments will include tight connections between the facts of the case and the definition of perjury.

3 Entailment

[3 points]

The following passage offers an analysis of an entailment relation. The argument is incorrect: exactly two of the sentences describe incorrect reasoning. Your task is to function as a skilled editor: to rewrite those two sentences so that the argument is correct. The edits can be minor or significant, and there are certainly multiple good ways to correct the argument – please pick one. The sentences are numbered so that you can identify them by number and rewrite them separately. No other changes to the passage need to be made.

[1] We say that sentence *A* entails sentence *B* if, and only if, every situation that makes sentence *A* true is one that makes sentence *B* true. [2] For this, we consider not just actual situations, but also all hypothetical ones. [3] In other words, if the circumstances make *A* true, then *B* is also true, for any and all circumstances, no matter how far-fetched. [4] Given this definition, it is clear that sentence (A) entails sentence (B).

- (A) At most nine Swedish students danced.
- (B) At most nine students danced.

[5] The set of Swedish students is a subset of the set of students. [6] Thus, if at most nine Swedish students danced, then the number of students who danced (of any nationality) is also at most nine.

4 Intensional identity and Cresswell’s Principle

[3 points]

This question assumes you have studied the handout/reading ‘Perspectives on meaning and interpretation’.

For truth-conditional theories, intensions are crucial to capturing intuitive meaning distinctions.

¹<https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/us-6th-circuit/1281551.html>

²<https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F3/157/1042/578206/>

Consider two sentences that are true in exactly the same situations in our particular reality but nonetheless differ intuitively in their meanings. Intensions save the day here: we can say that there are possible worlds where their truth conditions do differ. However, what about sentences that are true in *all* possible worlds, like *two is greater than one* and *two is a prime number*? Such sentences can intuitively differ from each other in meaning, and yet their intensions are identical.

Your task: assess whether these examples of intensional identity challenge Cresswell's "Most Certain" Principle. (3–5 sentence answer.)

5 Conventionalism and prescriptivism [3 points]

This question assumes you have studied the handout/reading 'Perspectives on meaning and interpretation', which provides a short reading on conventionalism (Lewis).

Conventionalism might seem like a form of *prescriptivist linguistics*, which seeks to dictate what counts as correct language use for a given language or community. Provide one argument that conventionalism is indeed a form of prescriptivism and one argument that it need not be a form of prescriptivism. (2–4 sentences per argument should suffice, though this is merely guidance)