

Midterm  
Semantics I, Fall 2009, JHU  
Assigned: 10/21, Due: (Friday) 10/30

## I Expletives

This problem asks you to explore the meanings of adjectival epithets such as “damn”, “fucking”, “stupid”, and so on, in examples like the following:

- (1) Alfonso broke the damn/fucking/stupid computer.

[a] Characterize as best as you can (in English) the contribution of one of these epithets to sentences that it appears in. Feel free to explore other sentences besides the one I have given above, but do stick to this kind of epithet. (For instance, we are not interested in racial epithets here.) If these epithets appear to make different contributions under different conditions, describe the conditions (but if you come up with a common one, that is fine).

[b] Is this contribution a conversational implicature, an at-issue entailment, a presupposition, or something else? (Give arguments and data that support your conclusion, and in particular, do try to characterize the projection behavior of the contribution.)

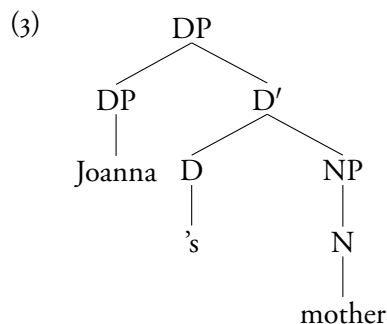
[c] What are the semantic type(s) of these epithets (and what type of modifier are they)? Give a sample lexical entry for one of them, making clear any context-dependence. Compute (showing steps) the denotation of one version of (1) using this denotation.

## 2 Possessives and more

[a] In this problem, you will explore the structure of a possessive DP, as in:

- (2) Alfonso talked to Joanna’s mother.

Let us assume as a baseline that this DP has the following surface structure:



What kind of meaning should the whole DP have, most intuitively? What denotation (& semantic type) do you need to give to “s” and “mother” to get the right meaning? Don’t forget that possessive structures are a presupposition trigger.

**Grads:** Can you see any other syntactic or LF (Logical Form) assumptions that would make your analysis simpler?

[b] Use your account of possessives to give a compositional account of the meaning of the following sentence (showing your steps). Grads do (5), undergrads do the simpler (4).

(4) Joanna met the linguist who likes his therapist. (undergrads)

(5) Joanna met the linguist such that the therapist that his mother sees is Scandinavian. (grads)

Assume that “his” is an irregular form of “him’s”, i.e. put “him” in the same position as “Joanna” in the earlier tree.

### 3 Causatives

Often, we find apparent ambiguities that seem systematic. To the extent that an ambiguity is systematic, we want to find an explanation for it. The “causative/inchoative” alternation refers to pairs of sentences like the following:

(6) a. Alfonso broke the vase.

b. The vase broke.

(7) a. The fire raised the temperature.

b. The temperature rose.

A few other alternating verbs (chosen at random from a very long list) are: “age”, “balance”, “capsize”, “char”, “crumple”, “dissolve”, “short-circuit”, “soften”, “solidify”, “twirl”, “vaporize”, “westernize”.

[a] How would you describe this alternation in terms of generalized thematic roles? Does Dowty’s theory predict this alternation? Is it compatible with this alternation? (Justify.)

[b] Give lexical entries for each version of “break” (assuming ambiguity).

[c] Verbs that participate in this alternation do seem to behave systematically, so we might not want to take pure ambiguity for granted. Assume that the transitive version is basic. How could you derive the intransitive alternant from the transitive? In other words, give a function (which in our type theory would be type  $\langle\langle e\langle et \rangle \rangle \langle et \rangle \rangle$ ) that turns one into the other. Are there any problems with the kind of function you have to give?

[d] Now take the intransitive version to be basic, and try to derive the transitive version from it. Report any difficulties. Even if you can’t do this formally, try to express informally the intuition that is involved in such a derivation.