A structural source for intersective ambiguity
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Introduction: Accounts of the (non-)intersective ambiguity in e.g., *beautiful dancer* or *good thief* as in (1), traditionally fall into two camps: 'Blame the Adjective' stories (Siegel 1976, Despić & Sharvit (DS) 2011) posit underlying ambiguity in the adjective, and 'Blame the Noun' stories (Larson 1998, Winter & Zwarts 2012) argue for internally complex nominals.

(1)   Virgil is a good thief. → Int: good_person(V) ∧ thief(V), Non-Int: skilled_thief(V)

Maienborn (2020) recently argued convincingly against Larson's approach of allowing the adjective to compositionally access an event argument of the nominal, and proposed a 'Blame the Adjective' account where the ambiguity is resolved noncompositionally via pragmatic specification of a trope variable in the adjective. Here, I argue that Maienborn was correct on two counts: the ambiguity is not in the noun, and there is only one, underspecified denotation for the adjective (*contra* Siegel and DS, who assume separate Int and Non-Int root semantics). However, against Maienborn, I argue that the disambiguation occurs **compositionally and in the syntax**: intersective readings arise from the adjective taking a structurally represented null argument, which contributes a broad domain of comparison, before composing with the noun. Purely pragmatic specification of a trope cannot account for patterns where the availability of the intersective reading is sensitive to the syntax of the adjective. The proposal is thus **a novel 'Blame Structure' approach to ambiguity.**

Proposal: Adjectives like *good* uniformly have the semantics DS propose for Non-Int readings.

(2) $[\![good]\!]^{w,C} = \lambda P \in D_{<s,<e,t>>}$. $\lambda x \in D_e$: the context C supplies a degree d and a scale $S_{P,w}$ ranking individuals by P-skill in w . the ranking of x on $S_{P,w}$ is at least d

Non-Int readings are simple; the noun saturates λP. Intersective readings are derived by the insertion of a semantically minimal null argument between the adjective and noun, defining a broad domain, e.g., (3); the resulting $\langle e, t \rangle$ predicate intersects with the noun. We interpret 'skill' as a person (or other relevant domain, perhaps just D_e) as some basic notion of goodness; for humans, morality. Context determines the availability of this insertion - the key distinction from Maienborn is that it is syntactically represented, as (4).

(3) $[\![\text{PERSON}]\!] = \lambda x \in D_e. \text{person}(x)$

(4)
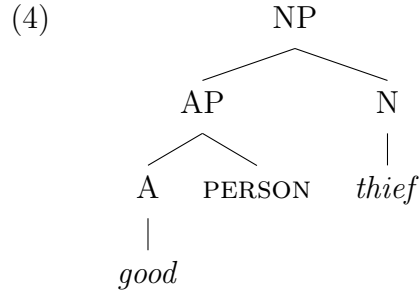
This account **predicts the unavailability of the intersective reading** in structures that either **(i)** need locality between the adjective and another projection, which the null argument disrupts, **(ii)** require the adjective first merge with an overt noun, or **(iii)** would create a type clash when additional structure is present. All three predictions are borne out.

Data: **(i) Suppletion.** DS show that suppletive comparatives in Serbian lose the Int reading:

(5)   a.   *dobar lopov*
            good thief
            Int or Non-Int
        b.   *bolji   lopov*
            better thief
            only Non-Int

DS posit two roots, Int and Non-Int, and a vocabulary insertion rule for the suppletive form *bol* which (by stipulation) only applies to the Non-Int root. But this isn't explanatory for the general case: in fact, **the pattern (5) holds cross-linguistically, and in a sample survey (16 languages) all suppletive *better* forms are only Non-Int**, and all regular '*gooder*'-forms allow Int. Some illustrative examples: German *besserer* 'better' is suppletive and allows only Non-Int, while *schlechterer* 'worse' is regular and allows both. Persian *khub* 'good' has both suppletive *behtar* 'better', with only Non-Int, and regular *khubtar* 'better', with only Int; while Persian *bad* 'bad' has only regular

badtar 'worse' allowing both. Fully regular Lithuanian, with *geras* 'better', allows both. Stipulating that the Non-Int root suppletes in Serbian, as DS do, doesn't predict the pattern to generalize. This account does: **the Int reading has intervening structure blocking the locality (between root and -CMPR) needed for suppletion** (Bobaljik 2012).
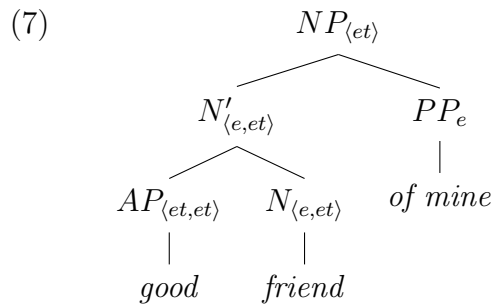
(ii) Short/long forms. Russian adjectives appear in short and long forms, e.g., SF *xorosh*, LF *xoroshij* 'good'. A survey of 45 Russian speakers reveals that **form and syntactic position interact to determine available readings** (with % of speakers giving judgment):

(6)   a.   *Vasyok xoroshij vor*
Vasyok good.LF thief
'Vasyok is a good thief'
100% only Non-Int

b.   *Etot vor xoroshij*
This thief good.LF
'This thief is good'
85% only Int, 15% both

c.   *Etot vor xorosh*
This thief good.SF
'This thief is good'
100% only Non-Int

Maienborn's account predicts neither any sensitivity to morphosyntax nor that the attributive-LF (6a) and predicate-SF (6c) pattern together. But **argument structure does**: Borik (2014) argues on independent grounds that predicate-LFs don't syntactically select for their argument, while predicate-SFs and attributive-LFs both do. So the syntax of (6a)/(6c) require that *xorosh(ij)* takes *vor* as its first argument, which results in it being the first semantic argument and saturating λP in (2), forcing the Non-Int reading. The null argument (3), not syntactically nominal, lacks the relevant features. But (6b) has no such requirement, so the Int reading is available.

The dispreference, but not impossibility, for the Non-Int reading of (6b) can be explained via competition: (6c) unambiguously expresses it more economically. The fully pragmatic story would need to say that syntactic arguments are pragmatically preferred to specify the trope, but a noncompositional story where syntax happens to line up exactly with pragmatics, without any explicit mechanism as to why, would be too coincidental to be explanatory.

(iii) Relational nouns. The Int reading disappears with relational nouns which have an overt argument. Phrases like *good friend/teacher* show the ambiguity, but *good friend/teacher of mine* lose the Int reading. Maienborn's account doesn't predict this: the additional argument affects the noun type, but this can't compositionally interact with the trope variable (nothing does). The only thing guiding which interpretation the trope gets is a general parsimony principle that 'linguistically introduced material' should be used to specify the meaning of free variables; this (correctly) causes a general preference for the Non-Int reading, identifying the variable with the noun itself, but can't differentiate between any of the cases presented here, where the same noun is 'linguistically introduced' either way.

By contrast, the structural account, with different adjective types when it encounters the noun, predicts composition is only possible if *good* hasn't taken the null argument. The non-relational, $\langle e, t \rangle$ *friend* composes simply with *good* through either method. But the relational $\langle e, et \rangle$ form can't combine with the intersective $\langle e, t \rangle$ $[\![good]\!]([\![\text{PERSON}]\!])$, assuming the syntax in (7). The $\langle et, et \rangle$ Non-Int *good*, however, can undergo Function Composition with relational *friend*, as in (8). The structure (7) is motivated by semantic constituency: *good N of mine* isn't *good for my Ns*, but *good for Ns + mine*. No other structure disallows the Int with the PP.

(7)

$NP_{\langle et \rangle}$
$N'_{\langle e, et \rangle}$ PP_e
$AP_{\langle et, et \rangle}$ $N_{\langle e, et \rangle}$ *of mine*
good   *friend*

(8) $[\![N']\!] = [[\![AP]\!] \circ [\![N]\!]]([\![PP]\!])$

Conclusion: A pragmatic, noncompositional account of the intersective ambiguity can't capture sensitivity to syntax. The assumption that the intersective meaning is associated with additional structure allows us to deflect 'blame' from both the adjective and noun, assuming uniform denotations for each, and correctly predicts the unavailability of the intersective reading when that structure would interrupt operations at the syntax-semantics interface. This account preserves pragmatic flexibility, while being compositional all the way down.

References:

Bobaljik (2012) *Universals in Comparative Morphology*

Borik (2014) *The argument structure of long and short form adjectives and participles in Russian*

Despić & Sharvit (2011) *Some 'non-intersective' adjectives are genuinely noun-taking*

Larson (1998) *Events and modification in nominals*

Maienborn (2020) *Revisiting Olga, the beautiful dancer*

Siegel (1976) *Capturing the Adjective*

Winter & Zwarts (2012) *Event orientated adnominals and compositionality*