

Pair semantics

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Understanding a use of a possessive DP depends on identifying a relation that holds between the possessor and the possessed object. Often this possessive relation coincides with the denotation of the head nominal, as in the most salient interpretation of "John's son", "John's favorite color", and so on. Other times, the possessive relation must be contributed by pragmatic context, especially when the head nominal does not denote an appropriately relational concept, as in "John's brick", or "John's phoneme". Normally, possessive relations are invisible to the semantics external to the DP in which they occur. But they reveal themselves in concealed questions: if "John knows Mary's age" is true, John does not merely know a number (24), he knows a correspondence between a person and a number (Mary, 24). The literature on concealed questions proposes shifting the denotations of nominals and DPs into question meanings, individual concepts, and other types of intensional objects. In this talk, I will explore a simpler possibility: that possessives denote pairs, plain and simple. Most predicates ignore the possessor part of the pair ("leave", "hit"), but some predicates do not ("know", "reveal").