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Roles and the compositional semantics of role-denoting relational adjectives

Abstract: In this talk I examine the semantics of denominal adjectives denoting roles, what I call role-denoting relational adjectives or presidential-adjectives. Presidential best exemplifies this semi-productive class of adjectives, but other examples include papal, senatorial, and mayoral. These adjectives motivate a linguistic distinction between roles and the individuals who instantiate that role at a particular time, demonstrated in (1a) and (1b). (1a) allows talk of visits both at an official role level (to Congress) and at a personal level (to his mother and to Disneyland), but the adjective in (1b) requires talk at the role level.

- (1) a. the president's visit (to Congress/to his mother/to Disneyland)
b. a presidential visit (to Congress/#to the president's mother/#to Disneyland)

These and other relational adjectives, I claim, have identical or nearly identical semantics to their "co-nouns," allowing a semantic parallel between compounds, modificational possessives (a children's book), and relational adjectives to be drawn. I criticize current accounts of relational adjectives, and argue that a frame-based approach offers a better approach to their analysis. I give an account of presidential-adjectives using frames, and extend the frame approach to other examples of relational adjectives.