

Homework 1
11-721: Grammars and Lexicons
Fall term, 2003

Due Monday, September 8

1 Diagnostic Tests for Parts of Speech

1.1 Educational Goals of the Exercise (What you are supposed to learn)

- In this exercise you will continue our in-class discussion on using tests to distinguish parts of speech. The exercise focuses on distinguishing adjectives from prepositions.
- The goal of the exercise is for you to learn to apply tests and interpret the results.
- A secondary goal of the exercise is for you to think about linguistic methodology. Is it always possible to formulate reliable tests? Are parts of speech really well-defined? Or are they "squishy" categories?

1.2 Formulation of the Tests

1. **Comparative Test:** Adjectives can be made into comparatives. Monosyllabic adjectives typically take *-er* and *-est*. Multi-syllabic adjectives take *more* and *most*.

Non-controversial examples: Adjectives in comparative forms:

- (1)
 - a. He is taller.
 - b. You have to be 48 inches tall to ride this roller coaster. Shorter kids can't ride.
 - c. He is more interesting.
 - d. We should avoid more problematic theories.

Other parts of speech (nouns, verbs, prepositions) don't form comparatives.

2. **Very Test:** Adjectives (and adverbs) can be modified by *very*. Other parts of speech cannot be modified by *very*.

- (2)
 - a. He is very tall.

- b. The book is very interesting.
- c. I read the very interesting book.

3. **Right Test:** Prepositions can be modified by the intensifier *right*.

- (3) a. The book is right on the table.
- b. Look right behind the couch.
- c. The school is right across the street.

Now consider the following two sentences:

- (4) a. This is worth a dollar.
- b. Sam is near the fence.

- **Task 1:** Apply the comparative test to *worth* and *near*.
- **Task 2:** Apply the *very* test to *worth* and *near*.
- **Task 3:** Apply the *right* test to *worth* and *near*.
- **Task 4:** Can you conclude whether *worth* is an adjective or preposition? Why or why not? (Results may vary according to your grammaticality judgements and creativity in applying and altering tests.)
- **Task 5:** Can you conclude whether *near* is an adjective or preposition? Why or why not? (Results may vary according to your grammaticality judgements and creativity in applying and altering tests.)