I will discuss two theories about adjectives. The first theory dates from the late 1960s. It is stated in Montague (1970a) and Parsons (1968). According to this theory the meaning of an adjective is a function which maps the meanings of noun phrases onto other such meanings; e.g. the meaning of clever is a function which maps the meaning of man onto that of clever man, that of poodle onto that of clever poodle, etc. Predicative uses of adjectives are explained as elliptic attributive uses. Thus, This dog is clever is analysed as This dog is a clever dog—or as This dog is a clever animal, or perhaps as This dog is a clever being. Which noun phrase ought to be supplied in this reduction of predicative to attributive use is in general not completely determined by the sentence itself, and to the extent that it is not, the sentence must be regarded as ambiguous.

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* Since I presented the outline of this paper at the Cambridge conference I—and, I hope, this paper—have profited from discussions with and comments by Michael Bennett, Richard Grandy, Hidé Ishiguro, David Lewis, Richmond Thomason and, in particular, George Lakoff. I was equally fortunate to hear Sally Ginet’s paper on comparatives at the summer meeting of the Linguistic Society of America in Ann Arbor, which proposed an approach similar to that taken here. Only after the present paper had already been given its final form did I become acquainted with Kit Fine’s article ‘Vagueness, truth and logic’ which expresses on the topic of vagueness, which is the central theme of the second part of my paper, views very similar to those which can be found here. I know that I would have been able to offer a better contribution to this volume if I had known about Fine’s work earlier.

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Editors’ note: This article was originally published in E. Keenan (ed.), *Formal Semantics of Natural Languages*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975, 123–155. We would like to thank Cambridge University Press for its kind permission to reprint the article. We carefully edited the article, corrected some typos, added full bibliographical references and brought some formulas in line with now more common usage. We would like to thank Galit Sasso for careful proofreading and extremely helpful comments. Hans Kamp provided some additional footnotes, indicated by Roman letters, which clarify some of the arguments in the original text. We consecutively renumbered the original footnotes.
The main virtue of this doctrine is that it enables us to treat, within a precise semantic theory for a natural language—as e.g. that of Montague—adjectives in such a way that certain sentences which are, or might well be, false are not branded by the semantics as logically true. Examples of such sentences are:

(1) Every alleged thief is a thief
(2) Every small elephant is small
(3) If every flea is an animal, then every big flea is a big animal

Each of these sentences would come out logically true in Montague’s model theory if it were to treat adjectives as ordinary predicates, so that the logical form of (1), for example, would be $(\forall x)(A(x) \land T(x) \rightarrow T(x))$.

Moreover, the theory allows us to express in very simple mathematical terms some important semantic features which some, though not all, adjectives possess. In order to give precise formulations of such features, it is necessary to make some assumptions about the comprehensive semantic theory in which this particular doctrine about adjectives is to be embedded. These assumptions can all be found in Montague (1970a). I regard them as basically sound, but would like to point out to those who have strong qualms about possible world semantics that the distinctions drawn by the definitions below do not depend on these assumptions as such.

The assumptions are the following:

(a) Each possible interpretation (for the language in question) is based upon (i) a certain non-empty set $W$ of possible worlds (or possible situations, or possible contexts) and (ii) a set $U$ of individuals.

(b) A property relative to such an interpretation is a function which assigns to each $w \in W$ a subset of $U$ (intuitively the collection of those individuals which satisfy the property in that particular world (or context) $w$).

(c) The meaning of a noun phrase in such an interpretation is always a property.

Thus, the meanings of adjectives in an interpretation of this kind will be functions from properties to properties.

We may call an adjective **predicative in** a given interpretation if its meaning $F$ in that interpretation satisfies the following condition:

(4) there is a property $Q$ such that for each property $P$ and each $w \in W$, $(F(P))(w) = P(w) \cap Q(w)$.

Once we have singled out a given class $\mathcal{K}$ of admissible interpretations, we can also introduce the notion of being **predicative simpliciter**: an adjective is **predicative** (with respect to the given class $\mathcal{K}$) if and only if it is predicative in each interpretation (belonging to $\mathcal{K}$).