

# Natural Language Processing with Language in Focus

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Abralin ao Vivo  
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ABRALIN AO VIVO

# Emily M. Bender

Natural Language  
Processing with  
Language in Focus

 25.11.2020, 19h \_ [abral.in/aovivo](https://abral.in/aovivo)





# A word on my imagined audience

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- Linguists, computational or otherwise
- NLP, ML, AI and other folks: You are also welcome!



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# Talk outline

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- Situating this talk; a bit about my trajectory
- Why build language technology?
- What linguistics has to contribute to language technology
  - Typology
  - Semantics & pragmatics
  - Child language acquisition
  - Sociolinguistics
  - Descriptive and documentary linguistics

*Not exhaustive!*



# My journey into computational linguistics

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- Discovered linguistics freshman year of university; AB (UC Berkeley), MA, PhD (Stanford) all in Linguistics
- First programming language: Logo (4th grade)
- First programming class: CS 60A @ Cal, in Scheme
  - Concurrently: Morphology with Prof. Sharon Hargus & TA David A. Peterson
  - First compiling project: Luganda morphological analyzer in Scheme





# My journey into computational linguistics

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- Grad school: Introduction to computational linguistics (Martin Kay), phenomenology (Terry Winograd)
  - RAship in grammar engineering, with Ivan Sag and Dan Flickinger
  - Dissertation (2001): *Syntactic Variation and Linguistic Competence: The Case of AAVE Copula Absence*
- No luck on the job market as syntactician or sociolinguist
- Short stint in industry (YY Technologies) as a grammar engineer for Japanese

# My journey into computational linguistics

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- While at YY, started the Grammar Matrix, in connection with Project Deep Thought
- After a couple more years of temporary positions, hired by UW Linguistics to start the CLMS program
- At the time: strong language group in EE working on MT & ASR (Mari Ostendorf, Jeff Bilmes, Katrin Kirchhoff)
- CSE had AI/IE folks, who worked with language data

Language *per se* vs.  
Information encoded in language





# Why build language technology?

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- Learn something about language
- Build something of direct practical use
- As part of a broader program of AI

# Learn something about language

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- Annotation tools for corpora, to support linguistic research (Davies 2009, Meurer et al 2013, Kouylekov and Oepen 2014, Bender et al 2012)
- Computer-assisted transcription (language documentation, sociolinguistics) (e.g. Wassink et al 2018)
- Precision models of grammar
  - Linguistic hypothesis testing (Bierwisch 1963, Friedman et al 1971, Müller 1999, Butt et al 2002, Bender 2008, Müller 2015)
  - Language documentation (Bender et al 2013, Howell 2020)



# Build something of direct practical use

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- Automatic speech recognition
- Text-to-speech
- Machine translation
- Virtual assistants
- Search engines
- Spelling & grammar checkers
- Writing assistants
- Computer-assisted language learning

<https://www.aclweb.org/anthology/venues/ws/>

# As part of a broader program of AI

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- If machines can “do” language, does that prove intelligence? (Turing 1950)
- If machines can “do” language, can they learn lots of “world knowledge” and “common sense” and otherwise do self-teaching through interaction and/or machine reading?
- If a given machine learning algorithm can “solve language”, does that prove that it's a general purpose learning algorithm?





Problem: language-as-a-proving-ground-for-AI papers, and some work on practical language technology that takes an end-to-end approach, looks right through the language.

Solution: Keep the language in focus, and apply the lessons of linguistics.

# Towards more multilingual NLP

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- Bender 2009 “Linguistically naïve != language independent”
- Bender 2011 Dos & don'ts for language independent NLP, including:

**Do** state the name of the language that is being studied, even if it's English. Acknowledging that we are working on a particular language foregrounds the possibility that the techniques may in fact be language-specific. Conversely, neglecting to state that the particular data used were in, say, English, gives false veneer of language-independence to the work.



# The #BenderRule

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- “Always state the name of the language you are working on, even if it is English”
- Coined by (at least) Nathan Schneider, Yuval Pinter, Rob Munro & Andrew Caines



**Emily M. Bender**

@emilymbender



Dear Computer Scientists,

"Natural Language" is *\*not\** a synonym for "English".

That is all.

-Emily

9:32 AM - 26 Nov 2018

255 Retweets 1,132 Likes



# The #BenderRule

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- Why does this matter, if we always know it's English unless otherwise specified?
- Status quo: Work on non-English is “language specific”, work on English is “NLP”
- But English is just one language, like any other and not representative of all!
  - A window with its own specific pattern of raindrops

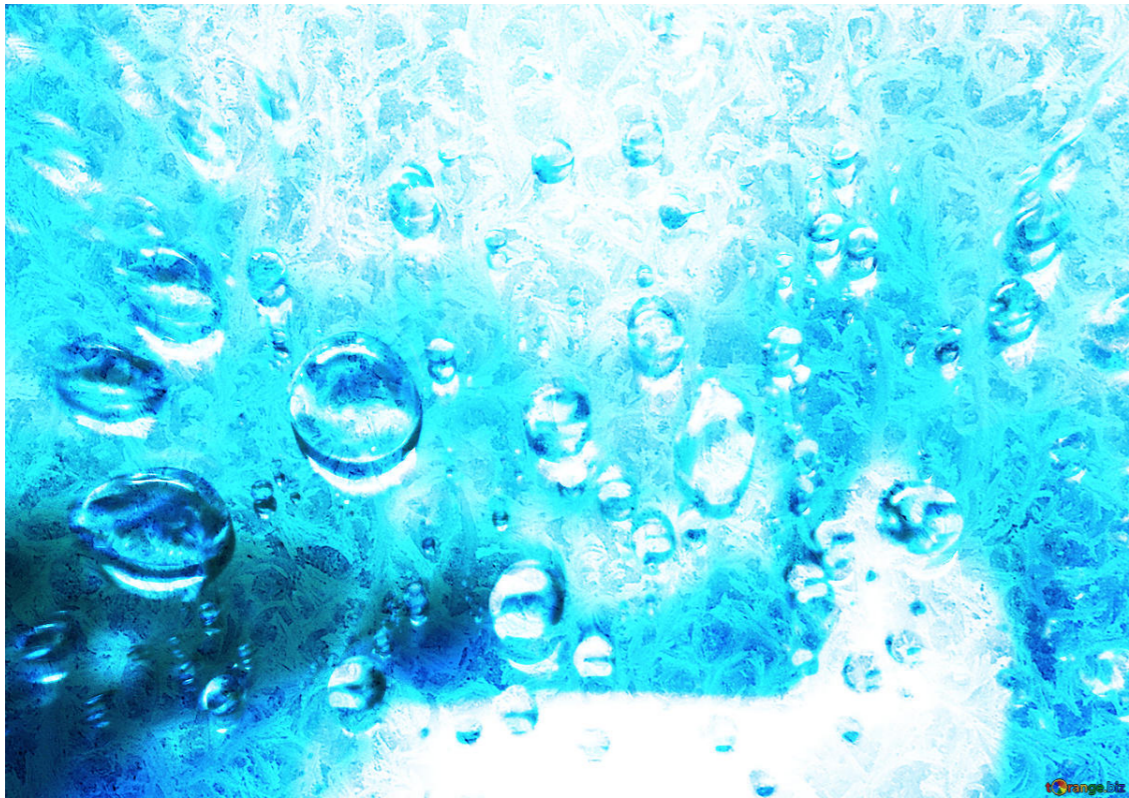


(Bender 2019)



# How is English non-representative?

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# Linguistic Typology

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- In what ways do languages vary, and what are the bounds on that variation? (Plank 2007)
- Linguistic interest:
  - What's where why? (Bickel 2007)
  - What is a possible human language and what does that tell us about human brains and human language development? (Slobin and Bowerman 2007)

# Linguistic Typology

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- In what ways do languages vary, and what are the bounds on that variation? (Plank 2007)
- Language technology interest:
  - Design NLP systems which are more portable across languages
  - Test NLP systems more thoroughly
- Promising developments:
  - ACL SIGTYP <https://sigtyp.github.io/>
  - <https://universaldependencies.org/> (Nivre et al 2020)

# Understanding the relationship between form & meaning

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- Form: text, speech, sign (+ paralinguistic information like gesture or tone)
- Conventional/standing meaning: logical form (or equivalent) that the linguistic system pairs with that form
- Communicative intent of the speaker: what they are publicly committed to by uttering that form (+ additional plausibly deniable inferences)
- Relationship between communicative intent & the world, e.g.:
  - True assertion, mistaken assertion, lie, accidentally true assertion, social act related to construction of social world, question about the interlocutor's beliefs, ...

# Form/meaning/intent/world get flattened in NLP

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- “Bag-of-words” approaches to NLP
- End-to-end approaches to meaning sensitive tasks: Mapping speech/text directly to machine actions
- Mistaking language modeling for understanding



Photo credit: NASA/NOAA

# Language modeling

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- Predicting linguistic form based on other linguistic form
  - Next word, given preceding sequence
  - Missing word, given surrounding context (“masked language models”)
  - Next sentence/sentence pair classification
- Can capture detailed information about word distribution and possibly also syntax
  - Super useful in many tasks, but not actually understanding



# BERT fanclub

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- “In order to train a model that understands sentence relationships, we pre-train for a binarized next sentence prediction task that can be trivially generated from any monolingual corpus.” (Devlin et al 2019)
- “Using BERT, a pretraining language model, has been successful for single-turn machine comprehension ...” (Ohsugi et al 2019)
- “The surprisingly strong ability of these models to recall factual knowledge without any fine-tuning demonstrates their potential as unsupervised open-domain QA systems.” (Petroni et al 2019)

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# GLUE & SuperGLUE (Wang et al 2019a, b)

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- Designed as tests for ‘natural language’ (actually English) understanding
- Key idea: A system that is really leveraging the linguistic system to understand should be able to apply that knowledge to different tasks
- Suites of multiple tasks
- ... including a ‘diagnostic’ task in GLUE designed to check for specific phenomena



# GLUE/SuperGLUE sample tasks

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## Multi-sentence Reading Comprehension

(Kashabhi et al 2018)

MultiRC

**Paragraph:** *Susan wanted to have a birthday party. She called all of her friends. She has five friends. Her mom said that Susan can invite them all to the party. Her first friend could not go to the party because she was sick. Her second friend was going out of town. Her third friend was not so sure if her parents would let her. The fourth friend said maybe. The fifth friend could go to the party for sure. Susan was a little sad. On the day of the party, all five friends showed up. Each friend had a present for Susan. Susan was happy and sent each friend a thank you card the next week*

**Question:** *Did Susan's sick friend recover?* **Candidate answers:** *Yes, she recovered (T), No (F), Yes (T), No, she didn't recover (F), Yes, she was at Susan's party (T)*

(Wang et al 2019b)



# GLUE/SuperGLUE sample tasks

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## Commitment Bank

(de Marneffe et al 2019)

- (6) **John:** Tess was our star in the marathon this year. She's always trained with all her heart and soul. After all that training, she was happy to cross the finish line.  
Prompt: Tell us how certain John is that Tess crossed the finish line.
- (7) **A:** Did you hear anything about Olivia's chemistry test?  
**B:** Well, she studied really hard. But even after putting in all that time and energy, she didn't manage to pass the test.  
Prompt: Tell us how certain speaker B is that Olivia passed the test.





# GLUE as proving ground for language models

	SuperGLUE Average	BoolQ Accuracy	CB Accuracy	CB F1	COPA Accuracy	RTE Accuracy
Fine-tuned SOTA	<b>89.0</b>	<b>91.0</b>	<b>96.9</b>	<b>93.9</b>	<b>94.8</b>	<b>92.5</b>
Fine-tuned BERT-Large	69.0	77.4	83.6	75.7	70.6	71.7
GPT-3 Few-Shot	71.8	76.4	75.6	52.0	92.0	69.0

	WiC Accuracy	WSC Accuracy	MultiRC Accuracy	MultiRC F1a	ReCoRD Accuracy	ReCoRD F1
Fine-tuned SOTA	<b>76.1</b>	<b>93.8</b>	<b>62.3</b>	<b>88.2</b>	<b>92.5</b>	<b>93.3</b>
Fine-tuned BERT-Large	69.6	64.6	24.1	70.0	71.3	72.0
GPT-3 Few-Shot	49.4	80.1	30.5	75.4	90.2	91.1

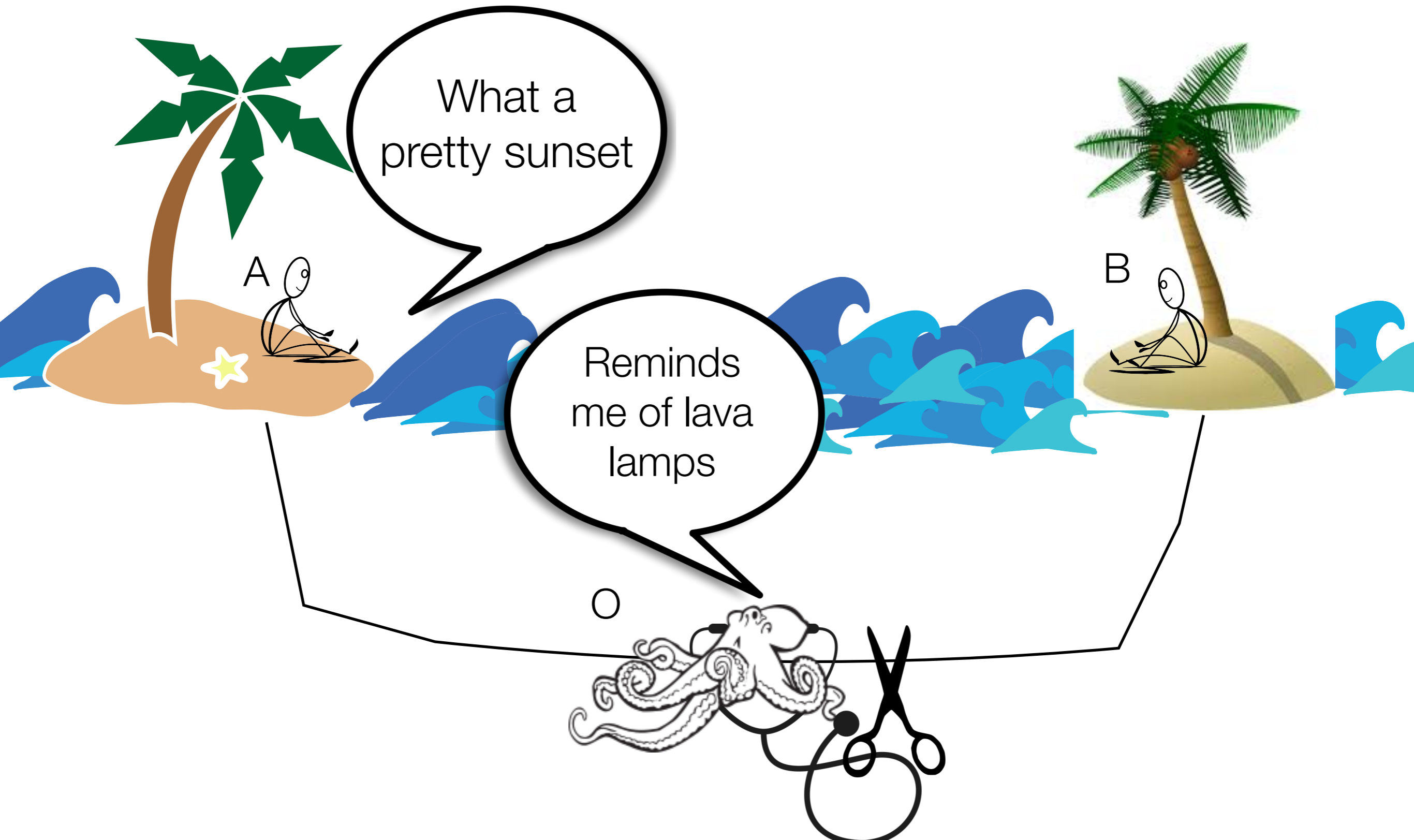
**Table 3.8:** Performance of GPT-3 on SuperGLUE compared to fine-tuned baselines and SOTA. All results are reported on the test set. GPT-3 few-shot is given a total of 32 examples within the context of each task and performs no gradient updates.

(Brown et al 2020)



# Thought experiment: Meaning from form alone

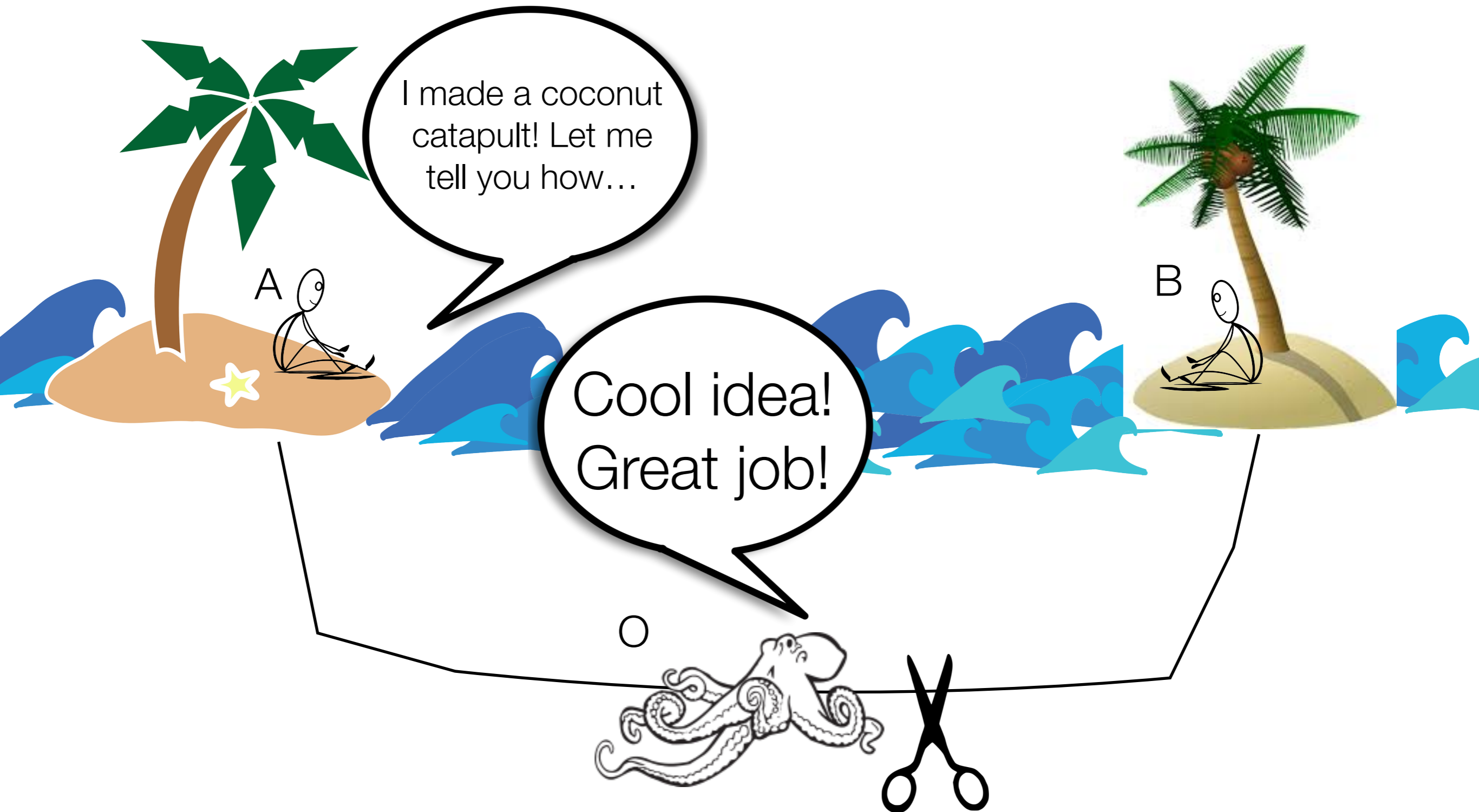
(Bender & Koller 2020)



# Thought experiment: Meaning from form alone

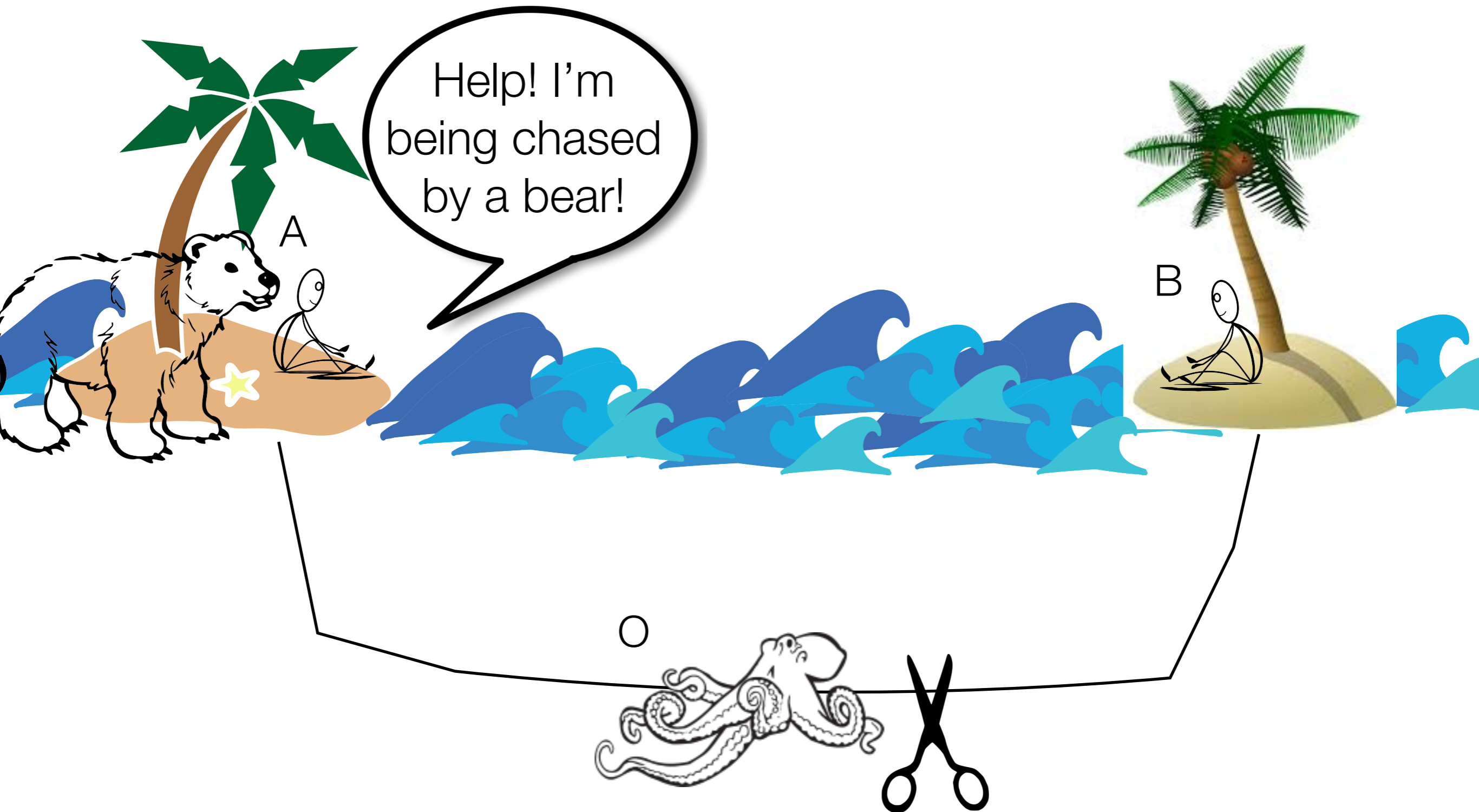
(Bender & Koller 2020)

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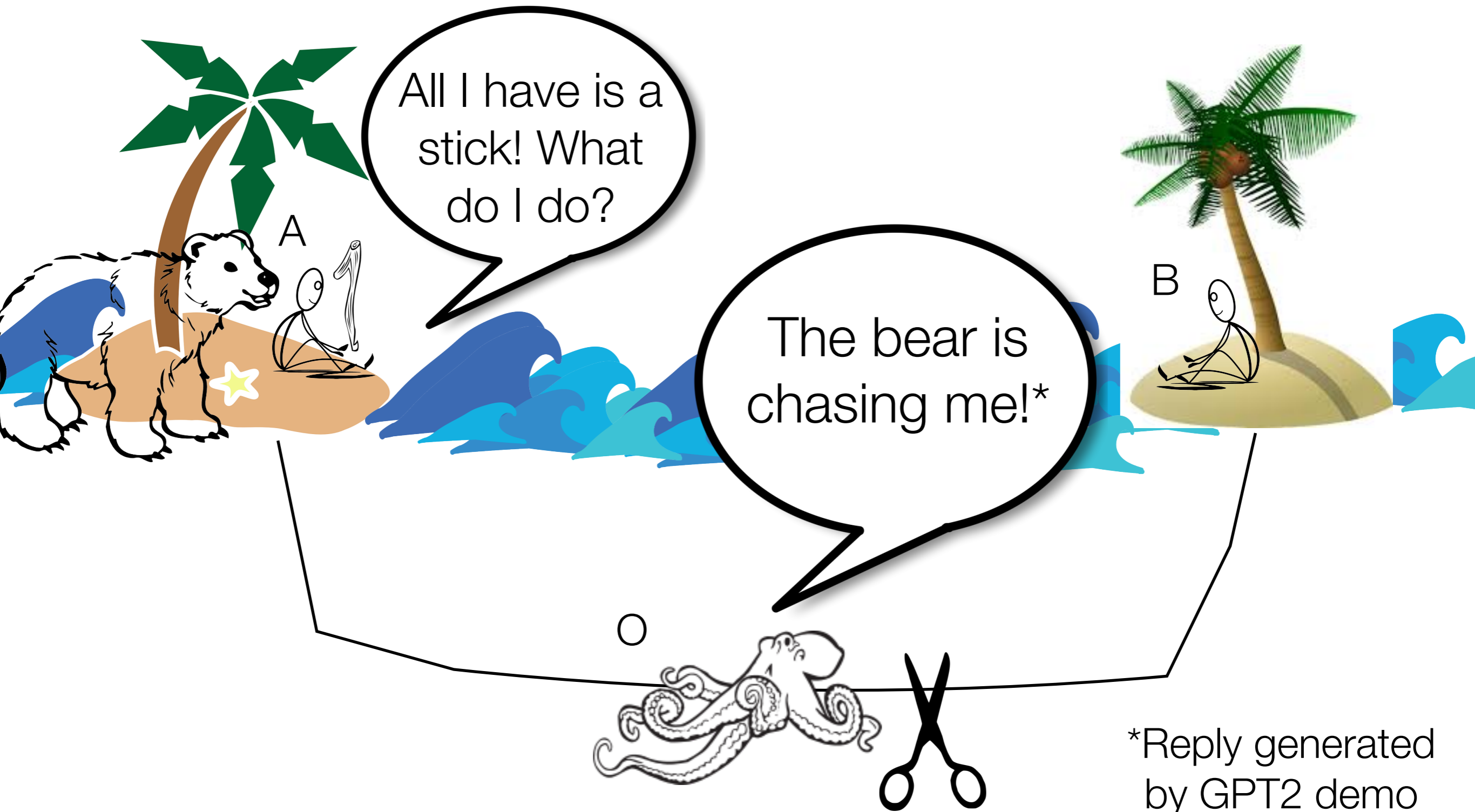
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(Bender & Koller 2020)



# Thought experiment: Meaning from form alone

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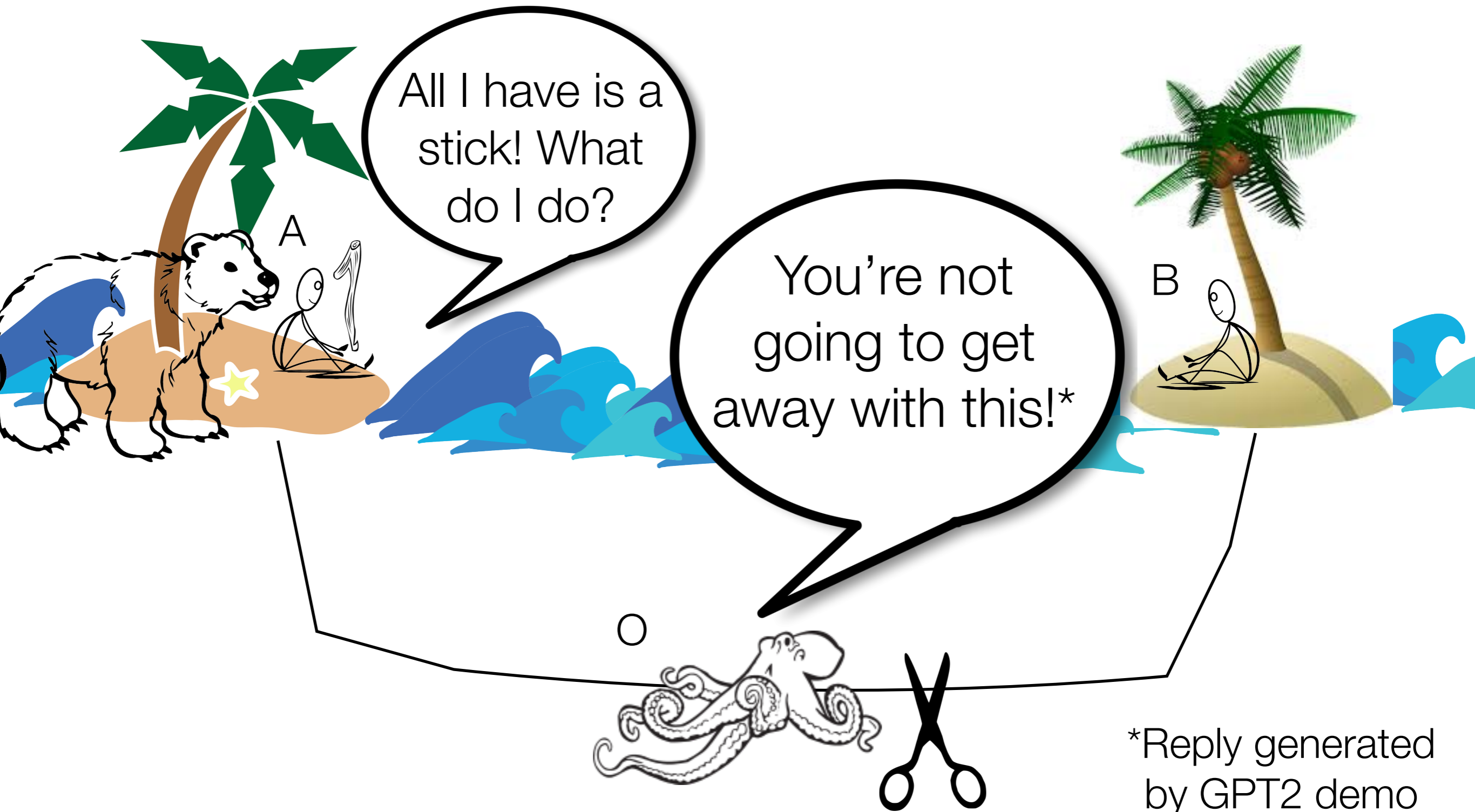


\*Reply generated by GPT2 demo



# Thought experiment: Meaning from form alone

(Bender & Koller 2020)



\*Reply generated by GPT2 demo

# Octopus Test: Analysis

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- O did not learn to communicate successfully, and the reason is that O did not learn meaning.
- This is because O could only observe forms, and meaning can't be learned from form alone.

Learning the meaning relation requires access to the outside world so communicative intents can be hypothesized and tested.

- To the extent that A finds O's utterances meaningful, it was not because O's utterances made sense; it is because A, as a human active listener, could make sense of them.

# Understanding the relationship between form & meaning

---

- Form: text, speech, sign (+ paralinguistic information like gesture or tone)
- Conventional/standing meaning: logical form (or equivalent) that the linguistic system pairs with that form
- Communicative intent of the speaker: what they are publicly committed to by uttering that form (+ additional plausibly deniable inferences)
- Relationship between communicative intent & the world, e.g.:
  - True assertion, mistaken assertion, lie, accidentally true assertion, social act related to construction of social world, question about the interlocutor's beliefs, ...

# So what are (large) language models learning?

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- Fine-grained representations of word similarity both syntactic (Lin et al 2015) and semantic (Rubenstein and Goodenough 1965, Mikolov et al 2013)
- Structural phenomena like English subject-verb agreement (Goldberg 2019, Jawahar et al 2019)
- Constituent types, dependency labels, named entities, (core) semantic role labels (all in English; Tenney et al 2019)
- Something like unlabeled dependency structures (Hewitt and Manning 2019)
- ... but not any kind of sophisticated composition (Yu and Ettinger 2020)
- ... and lots of ‘short-cuts’ to getting the answer right (e.g. Niven & Kao 2019)

# Language learning

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- Frequently seen in discussions of machine learning: appeals to learning “without supervision” like babies do (e.g. Manning quoted in Andrews 2020)
  - Surely babies aren’t presented with corpora annotated with syntactic structure or word sense labels!
- But what do we know about how babies actually learn language?



# So how do babies learn language?

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- Interaction is key: Exposure to a language via TV or radio alone is not sufficient (Snow et al 1976, Kuhl 2007)
- Interaction allows for joint attention: where child and caregiver are attending to the same thing and mutually aware of this fact (Baldwin 1995)
- Experimental evidence shows that more successful joint attention leads to faster vocabulary acquisition (Tomasello & Farrar 1986, Baldwin 1995, Brooks & Meltzoff 2005)
- Meaning isn't in form; rather, languages are rich, dense ways of providing cues to communicative intent (Reddy 1979). Once we learn the systems, we can use them in the absence of co-situatedness.



# Language learning

---

- Frequently seen in discussions of machine learning: appeals to learning “without supervision” like babies do (e.g. Manning quoted in Andrews 2020)
  - Surely babies aren’t presented with corpora annotated with syntactic structure or word sense labels!
- But what do we know about how babies actually learn language?
- Machines don’t have to learn the same way, but knowledge of how language acquisition works in humans can inject realism into task design





# Sociolinguistics

(e.g. Labov 1966, Eckert & Rickford 2001)

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- Variation is the natural state of language
  - Variation in pronunciation, word choice, grammatical structures
- Status as ‘standard’ language is a question of power, not anything inherent to the language variety itself
  - Language varieties & features associated with marginalized groups tend to be stigmatized
- Meaning, including social meaning, is negotiated in language use
- Our social world is largely constructed through linguistic behavior

# Sociolinguistics is critical to building equitable language technology

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- *I choose to use this voice assistant, dictation software, machine translation system...*
  - ... but it doesn't work for my language or language variety
    - Suggests that my language/language variety is inadequate
    - Makes the product unusable for me

# Sociolinguistics is critical to building equitable language technology

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- *My screening interview was conducted by a virtual agent*
- *I can only access my account information via a virtual agent*
- *Access to a emergency response system requires interaction with a virtual agent first*
  - ... but it doesn't work or doesn't work well for my language variety
    - I scored poorly on the interview, even though the content of my answers was good
    - I can't access my account information or emergency services

# Language use encodes stereotypes; ML can pick these up (to our peril)

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- McConnell-Ginet (1984): Divergent paths of lexical semantic change of once parallel pairs like *buddy/sissy*, *master/mistress*, due to contexts of use and conversational dynamics
- Speer (2017): Tried building sentiment analysis system for English language restaurant reviews
  - Input: review text; Output: number of stars
  - System component: Word vectors from general web garbage
  - Problem: Underestimating stars assigned to Mexican restaurants

# Language documentation, revitalization, learning and digital support

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- Some excitement in NLP around low-resource languages as a proving ground for certain kinds of learning techniques
- Endangered languages are frequently among the most low-resource
- But what is actually needed, wanted, helpful?



# What do communities need?

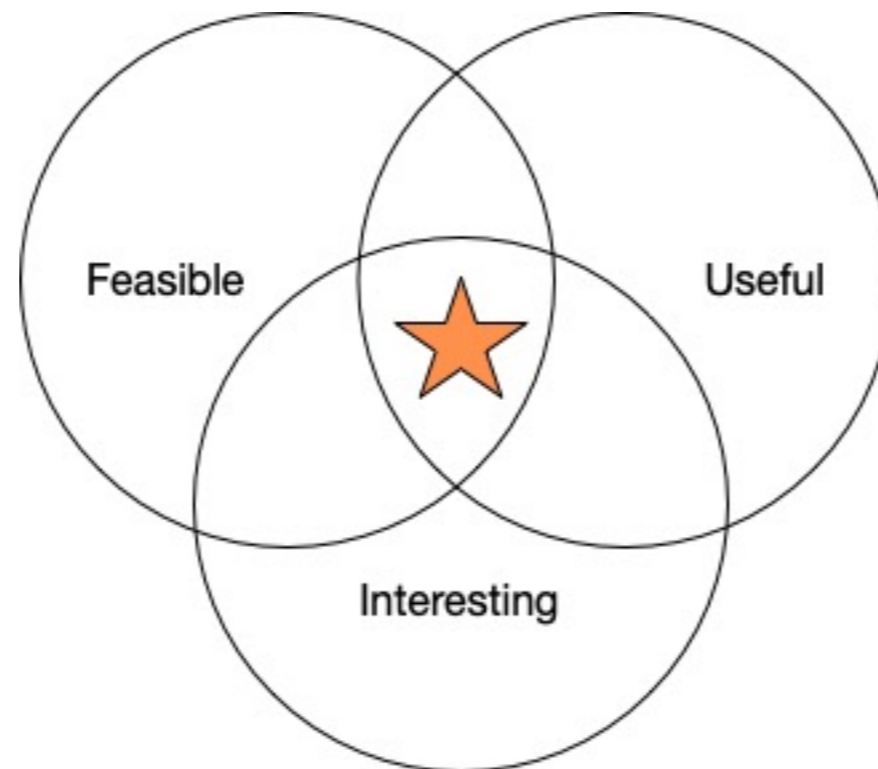
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- Look to community-led projects
  - The ASL app ([theaslapp.com](http://theaslapp.com)) v. perennial “sign language gloves” (Erard 2017, Hill 2020)
  - [firstvoices.com](http://firstvoices.com)
  - [lakotabears.com](http://lakotabears.com)
- ICLDC conference: a great meeting place for community members and others working on language documentation and conservation
  - <http://ling.ill.hawaii.edu/sites/icldc/>

# What helps with language documentation and description?

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- EL-STEC 2016 (NSF #1500157); STREAMLInED (NSF #1760475)
- Working meeting with field linguists and language technologists



# What helps with language documentation and description?

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- EL-STECC 2016 (NSF #1500157); STREAMLInED (NSF #1760475)
- Working meeting with field linguists and language technologists
- Planned tasks (Levow et al 2017, 2021):
  - “Grandma’s hatbox”: speaker diarization, speaker ID, [genre ID, language ID, metadata extraction, transcription alignment]
  - Orthographic regularization
  - Auto-glossing of interlinear glossed text

# Rule-based approaches: Case study of morphology

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- Finite-state technology is up to the task of modeling natural language morphology (morphophonology + morphotactics) (Karttunen and Beesley 2005)
- Linguist-friendly tools exist for designing finite-state transducers (Beesley and Karttunen 2003, Hulden 2009)
  - Map surface forms to underlying strings of morphs or lemmas + tags
  - Bidirectional
  - Very efficient (time and memory)

# Rule-based approaches: Case study of morphology

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- Use cases:
  - spell checkers
  - dictionaries for morphologically complex (especially prefixing) languages
  - preprocessing of corpora for further analysis
  - generation of training data for ML systems (Schwartz et al 2019)
- Doable for most languages in 1-2 years, with linguistic expertise (Butt 2020)
  - Recent example: Strunk 2020

# Talk outline

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- Situating this talk; a bit about my trajectory
- Why build language technology?
- What linguistics has to contribute to language technology
  - Typology
  - Semantics & Pragmatics
  - Child language acquisition
  - Sociolinguistics
  - Descriptive and documentary linguistics

*Not exhaustive!*



# Summary

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- Linguistics can (and should) inform:
  - The design of language technology
  - The evaluation of language technology
  - The prudent and liberatory deployment of language technology



Keep in touch: @emilymbender

Slides: [bit.ly/Abralin-25nov](https://bit.ly/Abralin-25nov)

Thank you!

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