

CHAPTER

8

THE SEMANTICS OF SENTENCE ELEMENTS

**Q: HOW DO GRAMMARIANS DESCRIBE
THE STRUCTURE OF A SENTENCE?**

**A: IN TERMS OF GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES
LIKE: SUBJECT, VERB, DIRECT OBJECT, INDIRECT
OBJECT, SUBJECT COMPLEMENT, OBJECT
COMPLEMENT AND ADVERBIAL**

**Q: HOW DO SEMANTICISTS DESCRIBE
THE STRUCTURE OF A SENTENCE?**

**A: IN TERMS OF SEMANTIC NOTIONS LIKE:
AGENT, EXTERNAL CAUSER, INSTRUMENT,
AFFECTED, RECIPIENT AND LOCATIVE.**

**Q: WHY ARE THESE SEMANTIC NOTIONS
KNOWN AS PARTICIPANT ROLES?**

**A: THESE SEMANTIC NOTIONS ARE BASED ON THE
ASSUMPTION THAT THE MEANING OF A SENTENCE
CAN BE UNDERSTOOD IN TERMS OF HOW PEOPLE
AND THINGS PARTICIPATE IN REAL – LIFE
SITUATIONS.**

Semantic Roles

- Instead of thinking of words as 'containers' of meaning, we can look at the 'roles' they fulfil within the situation described by a sentence.
- If the situation is a simple event, as in *The boy kicked the ball*, then the verb describes an action (*kick*). The noun phrases in the sentence describe the roles of entities, such as people and things, involved in the action.



THERE IS NO FINAL UNANIMITY AMONG SEMANTICISTS ABOUT THE TOTAL NUMBER OF THE PARTICIPANT ROLES IN TERMS OF WHICH THE STRUCTURE OF A SENTENCE CAN BE DESCRIBED.

1. AGENT

The AGENT of a sentence is the person deliberately carrying out the action described, e.g. **John** in (**John** opened the door)

Mary washed the dishes.

An agent need not always be a human being. It may be an animal or a lower form of life:

The tiger killed a deer.

The cat chased a rat.

The locusts destroyed the harvest.

He was chased by the dog.

2. Experiencer

It is the subject of:

(A) A copular verb:

John is very happy.

The teacher was very angry yesterday.

(B) A transitive verb of perception, cognition or emotion:

His wife heard a terrible sound.

The old man felt a pain in his right knee.

EXPERIENCER

- ☺ When a noun phrase designates an entity as a person who has a feeling, a perception or a state, it fills the role of experienter.
- ☺ If we see, know or enjoy something, we do not perform any action. In this way we are in the role of experienter.
- ☺ For example:
Did you hear that noise?
The experienter is "you" and theme is "that noise".

3. EXTERNAL CAUSER

The inanimate entity that causes the action described by the verb:

The flood destroyed the harvest.

The tornado destroyed the houses near the seacoast.

4. POSITIONER

An animate being in a stationary situation or stance in such a way that no change takes place in its position during that situation:

John is lying in bed.

His wife is sitting in a chair in her drawing room.

My father lived in London for ten years.



Important!

A positioner is a living being. If we replace it by a non – living being, its semantic role is changed:

His wife is lying in bed. (positioner)

His books are lying on the table. (affected)

Important



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Whether a living being is functioning as a positioner or as an agent depends on the meaning of the verb used in the sentence:

A nurse was holding the patient's arm during the operation.
(positioner)

The security guards held the terrorists against their will.
(agent)

The police cannot hold back this violent crowd. (agent)

5. ATTRIBUTE

It is the semantic role of the subject complement or the object complement of a sentence:

This book is interesting.

The leaves turned yellow in autumn.

She is a nurse.

We made him chairman.

6. AFFECTED

The semantic role of an entity (animate or inanimate) that is directly involved in or affected by the happening denoted by the verb in the clause

He opened the door.

He threw the ball across the yard.

John bought a new book.

The dog ate the meat.

The tree fell on the house.

We criticized that leader yesterday.

7. RESULTANT

The semantic role of the noun phrase whose referent exists only by virtue of the activity denoted by the verb in the clause:

The carpenter made a table.

She painted a picture.

My mother made an omelette for me.

important

Barbara painted the wall. (affected)

Barbara painted a picture. (resultant)

His mother is frying an egg. (affected)

His mother is frying an omelette. (resultant)

8. EVENTIVE

Man –made events as opposed to external causers
which are forces of nature usually beyond human
control:

Their quarrels have upset me.

We liked her dance.

The explosion killed ten people.

The final match will be held next week.

The concert is on Tuesday.

9. RECIPIENT

The referent of the indirect object:

I sent John the letter.

He gave the book to her.

We wrote the manager of that company a long letter.

Will you please lend me some money?

10. BENEFICIARY

The entity for whose benefit the action occurs:

I baked Reggie a cake.

He built a house for me.

I fight for the king.

My sister cooked me a delicious meal.

Her father bought her a new car.

She knitted a pair of socks for her husband.

11. INSTRUMENT

What is instrument as a semantic role?



- **Definition** Instrument is the **semantic role** of an inanimate thing that an **agent** uses to implement an event. It is the stimulus or immediate physical cause of an event. Instrument words are usually nouns occurring in the **noun phrase** of a clause:
- Someone cut the bread with *a knife*.

OTHER EXAMPLES:

Jamie cut the ribbon with a pair of scissors.

That window was broken by a hammer.

John opened the door with a key.

The policeman killed the robber with a
pistol.

12. LOCATIVE

What is locative as a semantic role?

- **Definition** Locative is a **semantic role** which identifies the location or spatial orientation of a state or action. A locative semantic role does not imply motion to, from, or across the location.
- **Examples (English)**
- The paper is in *the folder*.
- The ship sank at *sea*.



OTHER EXAMPLES:

I met your father in Rome

She is studying in France

The accident took place on the highway to London

He heard a terrible noise outside his house

My sister is very happy in India

It is windy in Madrid today

13. GOAL

What is goal as a semantic role?

- **Definition:** Goal is the **semantic role** of the
- place to which something moves, or
- thing toward which an action is directed.
- **Examples (English)**
- John swam to *the raft*.
- He studied for *the test*.



GOAL

- The place towards which a living or a non – living entity moves:
- The army is advancing towards the capital
- They are leaving for London next week
- We have sent that message to our office in Moscow

14. SOURCE

The starting point of a movement. The place from which a living or a non – living entity starts moving:

She has come from London

The leaves fell from the tree

The rabbit jumped out of the cage

Location, Source and Goal

*The keys are **next to the vase**.*

*She brought some souvenirs **from France**.*

*Marco travels **to Merida** tomorrow.*

- In the first sentence the text in pink marks the semantic role of **Location**
- In the second, the semantic role of **Source**
- In the third one, the semantic role of **Goal**

15. TEMPORAL

What is time as a semantic role?

- **Definition** Time is the semantic role of the temporal placement of an event.
- **Example (English)**
- The whistle will sound at *noon*.



OTHER EXAMPLES:

Kristina hit Scott with a baseball yesterday

Bill sits under the tree on Wednesdays

Angela was reading stories to the children
this morning.

There is no one – to – one relation between sentence elements and the participant roles.

The subject of a sentence, for example, can be an agent, an instrument or an affected participant:

John opened the door with the key (agent**)**

The key opened the door (instrument**)**

The door opened (affected**)**

The subject can also be an experiencer, an external causer or locative:

John saw a poisonous serpent on the way (experiencer**)**

The hurricane destroyed all the buildings in that area (external causer**)**

Liverpool is very windy today (locative**)**

The subject can also be a recipient, temporal or eventive:

John was given a present yesterday (recipient)

9 o'clock is a good time for such meetings (temporal)

My arguments pleased everybody (eventive)

Just as the subject can have any of the participant roles, the object of a transitive verb can have more than one participant roles:

Who can ever control a hurricane? (external causer)

Mary has written a good poem (resultant)

We are studying literature (affected)

1. Mary saw a fly on the wall
experiencer affected location
2. She borrowed a book from Cathy.
agent affected source
3. He wrote a letter with a pen.
agent resultant instrument
4. She returned the book to Jane
agent affected goal
5. Danny left at 5:00 p.m.
agent temporal
6. I made tea for my mother.
agent affected beneficiary



Thanks

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your

attention