Thematic roles, arguments, syntactic position, linking

Textbook pages: 90-137

Syntactic positions

- Also known as **syntactic relations**
  - Actually, there is a difference between these two concepts, but we will treat them as if they were the same thing
  - Subject
  - Direct Object
  - Indirect Object
  - Prepositional object
  - Adjunct

Syntactic positions

- Subject: a sister to VP, a specifier of TP
- Direct object: a sister to V
- Indirect object: a sister to V
- Prepositional object: a sister to P
- Adjunct: a sister to XP

Semantic roles: **agent**

- *Peter* visited *Susan*
- *Mary* showed the picture to *Bill*
- *The horse* kicked the owner
- *Jim* smoked a cigarette
- *The boss* introduced *Mary* to *Sue*

Defining properties of agenthood:
- initiator, capable of acting with volition

Semantic roles: **Instrument /cause**

- *The sun* melted the ice cream
- *The key* opened the safe
- *The fire* destroyed 1500 houses

Defining properties of instrument/cause:
- instrument or cause not capable of acting with volition

Semantic roles: **theme/patient**

- *John ate an apple*
- *Mary looked at Bill*
- *I passed the ball*

Defining properties of themehood:
- entity undergoing change of state
- entity less involved in the event than some other entity
### Semantic roles: experiencer

- **Most people** fear snakes
- **Sue** feels cold

Defining properties of experiencer: Animate receiver of a stimulus/experience

### Semantic roles: goal

- **Milo gave Mary** a book
- **Milo** gave a book **to Mary**
- **John reached Rome**
- **Bill ran to the store**

Defining properties of goal: Ending point

### Major semantic roles

- **Agent**: John kissed Mary
- **Experiencer**: Sue feels cold
- **Possessor**: Sam’s book was stolen
- **Theme/Patient**: Mary ate an apple
- **Theme**: Sue pleased her mother
- **Goal**: Sue gave a book to Bill
- **Instrument**: John opened the door with a key
- **Beneficiary**: John opened the door for Mary
- **Location**: Kim is in London
- **Path**: Kim drove across the field
- **Source**: Mary took the money from a drawer

### Linking of thematic roles and syntactic positions

- **Agent** – theta role is mapped onto **subject** position
- **Patient/theme** – theta role is mapped onto **direct object** position
- **Goal** – theta role is mapped onto the **indirect object** position
- **Possessor** – theta role is mapped onto the **specifier** position or to an **adjunct position** or to a **subject position**

### Grammatical Voice and linking of thematic roles

1. John gave a book to Mary
2. A book was given to Mary by John
3. John gave Mary a book
4. Mary was given a book by John

### Case marking, Syntactic positions, Thematic roles

- Nominative – subject – agent
- Accusative – direct object – theme/patient
- Dative – indirect object – goal
- Genitive – prepositional object – possessor
- Instrumental – oblique – instrument/agent
- Locative – oblique – location/possessor
- ....
Argument structure

- Verb's meaning is in part specified through the number of participants involved in the event/state that the verb denotes
- Verb = predicate
- Participant = argument
- Adicity (valence) of a predicate = number of arguments it takes
- Verbs are categorized into 3 classes depending on the number of arguments they take:
  - Intransitive (1 argument)
  - Transitive (2 arguments)
  - Ditransitive (3 arguments)

Other syntactic categories that have argument structure (i.e., have a theta role to assign to a participant):
- Adjectives (angry)
- Nouns (anger)
- prepositions (at)

Kim is angry at Peter
Kim's anger at Peter was visible
Kim came home angry

Lexical entries

give \([\text{[giv]}], \ V, \ [\text{NP}, \ \text{NP}, \ \text{PP}]\]
\(<\text{agent}, \text{theme}, \text{goal}>\)

 Theta Criterion

- Each theta role must be assigned to a referential expression (i.e., DP)
- Each referential expression must have a theta role assigned to it

Predictions:
A sentence will be ungrammatical if it has fewer arguments than the verb’s subcategorization frame
A sentence will be ungrammatical if it has more arguments than the verbs subcategorization frame.

John put the car in the garage
*John put in the garage
*John put the car
*Put the car in the garage

The lion ate a zebra
The lion ate
*The lion ate a zebra an antelope

The lion devoured a zebra
*The lion devoured
John put the car in the garage
*John put in the garage
*John put the car
*Put the car in the garage

The lion ate a zebra
The lion ate
*The lion ate a zebra an antelope

The lion devoured a zebra
*The lion devoured

Italian, Spanish, Serbo-Croatian, Greek and many other languages allow sentences without an overt subject:

Italian:  
E partito
aux left.3p.sg
‘he/she left’

Serbo-Croatian:  
Otišao je
left.3p.sg aux
‘he/she left’

“Null-subjects”

Expletive subjects

It is raining.
It seems that Mary will be coming
There is a balloon at my window.

English does not allow missing subjects. Every sentence in English must have an overt subject.

“Null-objects”

Chinese, Chickasaw, Japanese, and some other languages allow sentences without an overt object:

Chinese:  
Zhangsan shuo Lisi bu rensi
Z. say Lisi not know
‘Zhangsan said Lisi does not know him’

Implicit arguments

• John gave at the office
• Mary ate
• Bill confessed

arguments

• arguments:
  – semantically obligatory, syntactically obligatory
    • Null subject pronouns
    • Null object pronouns
• Implicit arguments:
  – semantically obligatory, syntactically optional
• Expletive subjects:
  – Syntactically obligatory, semantically empty
• Cognate objects:
  – Direct object arguments of intransitive verbs. Semantically related to the event described by the verb, syntactically optional