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((Semantic Role Types))

Semantic Role Types

In certain theories of linguistics, thematic relations, also known as semantic roles, are the various roles that a noun phrase may play with respect to the action or state described by a governing verb, commonly the sentence's main verb. Thus, semantic roles denote different semantic relations that a noun phrase plays with respect to the action or state described by a predicate of a sentence.

▪ What is a semantic role?

A semantic role is the underlying relationship that a participant has with the main verb in a clause.

Clause elements denote semantic roles in the situation apart from the participants. Thus, the verb -or the copular verb in combination with a complement - is the primary device for distinguishing situation types as stative or dynamic and as subtypes of these two types. The subject complement and the object complement denote attributes of the subject and direct object respectively. Adverbials denote such circumstances of the situation as time, place, and manner of action, express the speaker's evaluation of the situation, or provide logical connections across clauses or sentences.

▪ Semantic Roles of the Subject

The subject has a number of semantic roles. The most typical semantic role of a subject in a clause that has a direct object is that of the **AGENTIVE** participant: That is, the animate being instigating or causing, the happening denoted by the verb:

- John hit Bill.

- Bill was hit by John.

In both of the above sentences, John has the semantic role of agent.

The subject sometimes has the role of EXTERNAL CAUSER; that is, it expresses the unwitting (generally inanimate) cause of an event:

- The electric shock killed him.
- The avalanche destroyed several houses.

It may also have the role of INSTRUMENT; that is, the entity (generally inanimate) which an agent uses to perform an action or instigate a process:

- A stone broke his glasses.
- A car knocked them down.

With intransitive verbs, the subject also frequently has the AFFECTED role elsewhere typical of the Direct Object.

- Jack fell down (accidentally).
- The pencil was lying on the table.

Some further distinctions can be made within the affected role for subjects according to whether the subject complement as attribute identifies or characterizes. Thus, the subject is IDENTIFIED in the first example below, and CHARACTERIZED in the second example below:

- Kevin is my brother.
- Martha was a good student.

The subject may have a RECIPIENT role with verbs such as have, own, possess, and benefit from), as is indicated by the following relation:

- Mr. Smith has given his son a radio. [So now, his son has a radio.]
- I bought my daughter a tablet computer. [So now, she has a tablet.]

The perceptual verbs (see and hear) require an experiencer subject, in contrast to look at and listen to, which are agentive. The other perceptual verbs (taste, smell, and feel) have both an agentive meaning corresponding to look at and an experiencer meaning corresponding to see:

- I can taste the pepper in my soup.

Verbs indicating cognition or emotion may also require an experiencer:

- I thought you were mistaken. [It seemed to me you were mistaken.]
- I liked the play. [The play pleased me/gave me pleasure.]

Normally, recipient and experiencer subjects go with verbs used statively.

The subject may have the LOCATIVE role of designating the place of the state or action, or the TEMPORAL role of designating its time:

- Los Angeles is foggy. ['It's foggy in Los Angeles.']
- Basrah is hot and humid. ['It's hot and humid in Basrah.']
- My tent sleeps four people. ['Four people can sleep in my tent.']
- Monday was a holiday. ['It was a holiday on Monday.']

Temporal subjects can usually be replaced by the empty it.

- The September of 2014 was exceptionally bloody in Iraq. ['It was exceptionally bloody in the September of 2014 in Iraq.']
- Verbs following locative subjects normally have no passive or progressive form:

- The bag holds seven pounds.

An important role of the subject is EVENTIVE. The noun at the head of the noun phrase is commonly deverbal or a nominalization:

- The Norman invasion took place in 1066.
- The explosion caused many casualties.

There are clauses in which no participant is required. In such cases, the subject function may be assumed by the 'prop' word *it*, which has little or no semantic content.

• **Prop It:** It mainly occurs in clauses signifying (a) time, (b) atmospheric conditions, and (c) distance:

(a) Time • It's ten o'clock precisely.

- It's already midnight.

(b) Atmospheric conditions

- It's too windy in Chicago. It's getting dark.
- It's very hot in here. It was sunny yesterday.
- It's freezing outside.

(c) Distance •

It's not very far to York.

It's a long way to Denver.

- It's just one more stop to Toronto.