



A University Grammar of English

Lecture No. 4

Semantic Roles of Clause Elements

In terms of meaning, every clause describes a situation in which a number of participants are involved. By ***PARTICIPANTS*** we understand entities realized by noun phrases, whether such entities are concrete or abstract. Thus, we have three participants in:

John found a ***good spot*** for ***the magnolia tree***.

Semantic Roles of Clause Elements

The sentence "*Unfortunately, their child broke my window yesterday.*" contains a verb describing the nature of the action, a subject denoting an agentive participant (the agent or doer of the action), and a direct object denoting an affected participant. In addition, it contains an adverbial evaluating the situation (unfortunately) and an adverbial locating the situation in time (yesterday).

What is a semantic role?



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.

Semantic Roles of the Subject

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.


Semantic Roles of the Subject

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 assignment of the affected role to the subject of an intransitive verb seems clearest when there is a corresponding transitive verb with which the same noun phrase is a direct object in the affected role:

- I am frying *the fish*. [O, as affected]
- *The fish* is frying. [S as affected]

Relationship Between Transitive Verbs and Intransitive Verbs or Adjectives

There is sometimes a regular relation, in terms of clause function, between transitive verbs expressing **CAUSATIVE** meaning and corresponding intransitive verbs or adjectives.

- (i) SVO SV
- Tom is cooking *the dinner*. *The dinner* is cooking.
- Geoffrey opened *the door*. *The door* opened.

Relationship Between Transitive Verbs and Intransitive Verbs or Adjectives

- (ii) SVO

- Someone raised *an arm*.
- The frost has killed *the flowers*.

SV

- *An arm* rose.
- *The flowers* have died.

- (iii) SVO

- They have dimmed *the lights*.
- The sun (almost) blinded *him*.
- His manner angered *me*.

SVC

- *The lights* became dim.
- *He* (almost) went blind.
- *I* got angry.

Semantic Roles of the Subject

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.*]

Semantic Roles of the Subject

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*:

- / 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.

Semantic Roles of the Subject

- 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.']

Semantic Roles of the Subject

- 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.
 - -*Seven pounds are held by the bag.
 - -*The bag is holding seven pounds.

Semantic Roles of the Subject

- 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.

Prop (empty) it subject

- 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 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.

Prop (empty) it subject

- (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.

- It's only a hundred miles from here to Qurna.