

## Thematic roles

1. Are thematic roles related to the verb's semantics? F.e. motion verbs, psychological verbs, stative verbs, activity verbs, atelic/telic verbs?
2. How many thematic roles can a verb take?
3. What are the labels for the thematic roles?
4. What is the syntactic mapping of thematic roles?
5. Can we classify verbs on the basis of argument selection? How?
6. Which thematic roles have the grammatical function of 'subject' and which ones of 'object', e.g. what is the relation between grammatical function and thematic role?

## Some answers to the questions above...

Let's start from the "easy" questions, 2 and 3:

- How many arguments can a verb take and what are their names?

give <1, 2, 3> 1-External argument

read <1,2>

break <1>; <1,2>

Thematic grids are listed in the lexicon

I gave the book to Mary.

\*I gave the book.

I read the book (in the library).

## Thematic roles/theta-roles/θ – roles

Traditional lists include generalizations such as

AGENT(ACTOR),  
PATIENT, THEME, EXPERIENCER,  
BENEFICIARY,  
INSTRUMENT, LOCATION,  
GOAL, SOURCE

### Agent

- Initiator, capable of acting with volition, in control of the action, animate, in presence of adverbs such as *deliberately*, and *on purpose*. It can be followed by the phrase 'in order to'.

**D.** run to the store.

**D.** smoked a cigarette.

**D.** met Sue.

**D.** gave Mary a book.

but

Kevin received a book from Sue. (recipient/beneficiary) **\*in order to**

Note: He gave Kevin (beneficiary/recipient) a book.

**Kevin** felt sick. (**experiencer**)

**\*Kevin** felt **deliberately** sick.

**Kevin** saw **everything**. (**\*on purpose**.)

## Actor (more general than agent)

*The sun melted the ice.*

Agent?

- ✓ Actor - cannot have “wishes”, not animate, but in some intuitive way performs, effects or controls the situation.

Every Agent is an Actor but not vice versa.

- ✓ Other tests for actors/agents:

What did X do...? What about X...?

What

## Patient/theme

- The entity undergoing the effect of the action, often changing its shape/state etc. usually the term ‘theme’ is reserved for the entity being moved by an action, related term is ‘incremental theme’.
- Note: different types of affectedness are found across verbs (from ‘minimal contact’ to ‘lost of integrity’: Dixon 1991)

John cut **some wood** (patient)

John saw **Mary**. (patient).

John gave **Mary** (patient/beneficiary?) **a book** (theme).

I passed **the ball**. (theme)

- Promoted to subject position
  - Passives
  - With some one-argument verbs:

The house burned.

## Some more...

- INSTRUMENT

I write the letter with a pen.

I opened the door with the key.

They saw the star with a telescope.

??The pen wrote the letter.

The key opened the door.

- SOURCE

I took the pen from the drawer.

I returned from Russia.

The world will benefit from the talks.

Fred received a letter from his uncle.

The talks will benefit the whole world.

- GOAL      He run **to the store.**

Jackendoff 1990

Theory of thematic tiers

1st tier: Thematic tier roles: theme, goal, source, location.

2nd tier: Action tier roles: actor (agent),  
experiencer, patient, beneficiary etc.

According to this theory, entities may have more than a  
single label.

## How are semantic roles mapped into syntactic structure?

‘Thematic role omission’ (textbook)

*break, open.*

She opened the box with a knife. (3) Agent subject

The knife opened the box. (2) Instrument subject

The box opened. (1) Theme subject

### **Subject hierarchy scales:**

Agent-Beneficiary/Recipient-Theme/Patient-Instrument-Location

Agent-Instrument/Experiencer-Patient-Source/Goal (Dowty)

Dowty proposes that theta-roles have two basic prototypes with distinct properties (=cluster of entailments).

**Actual arguments vary as to how close they stay to the prototype and how many of its entailments they will use.**

Proto-Agent:

- a. Volitional involvement in the event or state
- b. Sentience (and/or perception)
- c. Causing an event or change of state in another participant
- d. Movement (relative to the position of another participant)

Proto-Patient:

- a. Undergoes change of state.
- b. Incremental theme
- c. Causally affected by another participant
1. Stationary relative to movement of another participant.

Linking (mapping) between semantics and syntax

Theta-roles ----->arguments of the verb (object, subject, indirect ob  
Argument and constituent selection (NP, CP)

Verbal linking rules

How do theta-roles help us define semantic/syntactic verb classes?

Some types identified in the literature:

**Actions and States** - V <1>

Events **a)** Atelic V <1> **I b)** Telic V <1, 2>

(achievements and accomplishments)

**Psychological verbs**

V <experiencer, theme(stimulus)>

Like, love, enjoy, admire *I like this answer.*

V<theme(stimulus), experiencer>

please, frighten, entertain, amuse *This answer pleased me.*

## Voice

- Passive Voice (change of perspective)  
Belgium was beaten (by Italy).
  - USUALLY Location, beneficiary and instrument cannot occupy subject positions in passive constructions
- \* She was built a house by him.  
Pseudo-cleft 'passivization'  
What Joan bought was a Ferrari. Object-focus  
Cleft construction  
It was Joan who bought the Ferrari. Subject-focus

## Middle voice

Also involves ‘change in perspective’. The sentence’s subject (semantic patient/theme) is affected by the action described but the agent is **not** known. Usually an adverb such as “well’ or ‘easily’ is needed.

Typical examples for English:

*The gate opens easily/smoothly.*

*These clothes wash well.*

*That book sells really well.*

French:

Constructions with Reflexives but not all reflexives in French are middles.

## Unaccusatives and unergatives

There is a hypothesis which claims that there are two semantic classes of intransitives: Perlmutter 1978, Burzio 1986. It relies on a simple linking (mapping) generalization between syntax and semantics, namely, that **agents are d-structure subjects** and **themes/patients are d-structure objects**.

1. Unaccusatives [<sub>VP</sub> V NP-Patient] *arrive*
2. Unergatives NP-Agent [<sub>VP</sub> V] *sit, stand*

## What is an unaccusative verb?

- Its subject shares some properties with the direct object of transitive verbs.

### **Test 1. (locative inversion)**

Example: X. arrives/comes/goes/spins/rolls/whirls.

-locative inversion

*Out of the house came a man.*

*On the table spun a dozen colorful tops.*

*Before him whirled quakers and Oriental ladies.*

## Unaccusatives (cont)

### **Test 2 (resultative construction)**

Resultative phrases are predicated only of direct objects:

*Terry wiped the table clean.*

*\*Terry wiped the table exhausted.*

Unaccusatives:

*Terry arrived exhausted.*

*The door slid open.*