

# Semantics and Pragmatics

## Lecture No.13

### Study Material

#### Sentence Semantics – II : Participants

##### Introduction: Classifying Participants

- Classifying participants show a set of semantic choices which face a speaker seeking to describe a situation concerns how to portray the roles of any entities involved.
- Example: 'Hina raised the car with a jack'.
- This sentence identifies three entities, 'Hina', 'the car' and 'a jack' related by the action verb 'raise'.
- The sentence portrays these entities in specific roles: Hina is the entity responsible for initiating and carrying out the action, the car is acted upon and has its position changed by the action, and the jack is the means by which Hina is able to cause the action.
- Such roles have a number of labels in semantics such as:
- Participant roles (Allan, 1986), deep semantic cases (Fillmore, 1968), semantic roles (Givon, 1990), and thematic roles (Dowty, 1991 ; Jackendoff, 1990).
- Thematic roles were introduced in generative grammar during the mid-1960s and early 1970s.
- In thematic roles, entities are described by the action of the verb.
- Thematic roles can be defined as:
- The roles that referents of the arguments of a verb play in the event or as the state that the verb denotes.
- Arguments are the constituents that are required for a sentence to be grammatical (subject ,object ,etc.) (Nakano and Oya).
- A semantic role is the underlying relationship that a participant has with the main verb in a clause.
- Grammatical relations (subject, object, etc.) are morphosyntactic, whereas semantic roles (agent, patient, instrument...) are conceptual notions.
- Semantic roles do not correspond directly to grammatical relations.

- For example:
- Bob opened the door with the key.
- Grammatical relation of 'Bob' = Subject
- Semantic role of 'Bob' Agent. (End)

### **Thematic Roles – I (Agent, Patient, Theme, Experiencer)**

- **Widely accepted thematic roles:**

- Agent
- Patient
- Theme
- Experiencer
- Beneficiary
- Instrument
- Location
- Goal
- Source
- Stimulus

- **Agent –**

- The initiator of some action, capable of acting with volition.

- For example:

- **Rashid** cooked the meat.
- **The fox** jumped out of the bridge.
- **Ahmad** raised the car with a jack.

- **Patient –**

- The entity / person undergoing the effect of main action of a verb or undergoing some change in state

- For example:
- John cut down **these bushes**.
- The sun melted **the ice**.
- Aslam shattered **the rock**.
- **Theme**
- The entity (person or thing) which is changed or moved by an action of a verb, or whose location is described by verb.
- For example :
- **The book** is in the library.
- Ali passed **the ball** wide.
- **The cup** is in the shelf.
- **Experiencer** –
- The entity which is aware of the action or state described by the predicate but which is not in control of the action or state.
- For example:
- **Kamran** heard the door shut.
- **Naeem** saw the smoke.
- **Seema** felt ill. (End)

### **Thematic Roles – II (Beneficiary, Instrument, Location, Goal, Source, Stimulus)**

- **Beneficiary** –
- The entity for whose benefit the action was performed.
- For example:
- They baked **me** a cake.
- The clerk filled in form for **his grandmother**.
- The manager signed a cheque **for him**.
- **Instrument**

- The means by which an action is performed or something comes about.
- For example:
- I write a letter with **the pen**.
- Ali opened the lock with **the key**.
- They saw the Eid moon with **a telescope**.
- **Location**
- The place where something is situated or has taken place.
- For example:
- The baby was hiding **behind the curtain**.
- We offered prayers **in the Mosque**.
- Rashid is teaching **in a school**.
- **Goal**
- The entity towards which something is moved, either literally or metaphorically.
- For example:
- The driver handed his license **to the policeman**.
- He ran **towards the store**.
- Zahid told the joke to **his friend**.
- **Source**
- The entity from which something moves , either literally or metaphorically.
- For example:
- I took the pen **from the drawer**.
- He returned **from Russia**.
- Sakeena received a letter **from her uncle**.
- **Stimulus**
- The entity causing an effect (usually psychological ) during an experience.

- For example:
- The **noise of the horn** frightened the passengers.
- The **performer** entertained the guests.
- The **juggler** amused the audience. (End)

### Identifying Thematic Roles

- There is some variation in the use of the terms used for semantic roles: for example Radford (1988) treats ‘patient’ and ‘theme’ as different names for the same role.
- A number of tests for identifying thematic roles have been suggested.
- Jackendoff (1972), for example, provides a test such as:
- **Agent / Actor**
- The contrast between the following examples 1 & 2 shows Aslam as an ‘agent’ in 1 but not in 2:
- 1. **Aslam** took the book from Hafeez.
- 2. **Aslam** received the book from Hafeez.
- Every agent is an actor but every actor is not an agent.
- Some writers suggested that an ‘agent’ displays volition and is a particular type of a more general thematic role ‘actor’, where actor expresses the participants which perform, effect or control the situation denoted by predicate.
- Actor is not an animate entity.
- **Patient vs. Theme**
- Patient is reserved for an entity acted upon and changed by the verb’s action.
- Theme is an entity moved in literal and figurative sense by the action of the verb but constitutionally unchanged. E.g.
- Awais shattered the rock.
- Awais throw the rock.
- **Instrument vs. Force**

- Sometimes a role of force is used instead of instrument for an inanimate entity which causes something.
- For example:
- The wind flattened the crops.
- The sea wall was weakened by the waves.
- While these roles may intuitively clear, however, in practice, it is sometimes difficult to know which role to assign to a particular noun phrase.
- These issues are still under investigation in various theoretical approaches. (End)

### **Problems with Thematic Roles**

- The list of roles discussed above have varied from author to author.
- They disagree about what, if any, distinctions are to be made between ‘patient’ and ‘theme’ or ‘agent’ and related roles like ‘actor’, ‘experiencer’ etc.
- We can see these debates as reflections of two general problems.
- The first problem is really about delimiting particular roles.
- The extreme case would be to identify individual thematic roles for each verb: thus we would say that a verb like ‘beat’ gives two theta-roles - a ‘beater’ role and a ‘beaten’ role.
- Second problem: how do we define theta-roles in general?
- That is, what semantic basis do we have for characterizing roles?
- Facing both these problems, Dowty (1991) proposes a solution where theta-roles are not semantic primitives but are defined in terms of entailment of the predicate.
- In this view, a theta-role is a cluster of entailments about an argument position which are shared by some verbs.
- Dowty (1991) gives an example:
- x murders y,
- x nominates y,
- x interrogates y, where:
- “Entailments they all share include that x does a volition act, that x moreover intends this to be the kind of act named by verb, that x causes some event to take place involving y (y

dies, y acquires a nomination, y answers questions – or at least hears them), and x moves or changes externally (i.e. not just mentally)” (Dowty, 1991:552).

- Such a set of shared entailments about x will serve to define the nominal which denotes x as ‘agent’.
- Thus theta-roles are defined in terms of shared verbal entailments about nominal referents.