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Lecture No. 6

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?

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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]

[S as affected (The fish is frying)].