

SEMANTIC ROLES

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ABSTRACT

The paper highlights the semantic roles of subject, predicate, verbs in semantic analysis. It talks about sentence rearrangement and effects on the meaning of the sentence in various roles as agent, patient, experience, location, or locative and highlights the importance of some phrases in the sentences as to whether or not the sentences can be meaningful in sentence rearrangement excluding the phrases as well as the uniqueness of meaning, all these are explored in view of finding generalized roles to guild the practice in semantic analysis.

Keywords: Semantic roles, Characteristics, Criticism, Concepts

INTRODUCTION

The concept of semantics is one that is complex in the sense that it is not easy to define. In an attempt to account for the meaning of meaning, Ogden and Richards in their book titled "The meaning of meaning" published in 1923 presented twenty-two different definition of meaning. Meaning is a phenomenon that can be influenced by different variables. The concept of semantics is one that is complex in the sense that it is not easy to define. For example, C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards enumerate twenty-two definitions of meaning in their work (186-187). And many scholars have given their own definitions. Semantics is the scientific study of meaning. However, our concern here is not on semantics, but on semantic roles.

DEFINITIONN OF TERM

A semantic role is the underlying relationship that a participant has with the main verb in a clause. They provide further information about the semantic relationship existing between lexical items in the language.

Thematic roles are assigned to arguments. Arguments according to Traugott and Pratt (191) as quoted by Meekwi "are NPS functioning in a variety of ways, including agent, instrument, experience, source, and so forth".

The function of case roles is to give information about the state of affairs, events and processes in which participant are involved.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Semantic roles constitute one of the most common and simplest forms of lexical semantic representation adopted. They are also referred to as cases frame, thematic roles, that is a role and participant role. They have acquired a prominent role in linguistic theory as quote by Mekuri through the work Gruber (1965), Fillmore (1968, 1977) and Jackendoff (1972, 1976).

Semantic roles attempt to capture similarities, roles and differences in verb meaning that are reflected in argument expression, with emergent generalization that will contribute to the mapping from semantics to syntax.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SEMANTIC ROLES

The characteristics that theories of thematic roles portray in order to fulfill their function are as follows:

- i. **Completeness:** Every argument of every verb is assigned some thematic role or other.
- ii. **Uniqueness:** Every argument of every verb is assigned only one thematic role.
- iii. **Distinctness:** Every argument of every verb is distinguished from the other argument by the role it is assigned. Two levels of distinctness are noted here, they are strong distinctness if uniqueness also holds and weak distinctness if it does not have uniqueness.

iv. Independence: Each role is given a consistent semantic definition that applies to all verbs and all situations. This role definition do not depend on the meaning of the particular verb or in the other thematic roles it assigns.

CRITICISMS OF SEMANTIC ROLES

However there exist some criticisms against some of the characteristics. It was noted that uniqueness does not seem to hold with animate subject of verbs of motion in sentences such as the following:

David ran into the house linguists claimed that David is both agent, since it initiates and sustains the movement and theme since it is the object that moves. Another states that it is very difficult to maintain distinctness if example like the ones below are considered.

David met with Mary.

David resembles his mother.

Both participants seem to be playing the same role in these sentences.

Nonetheless, the goal of semantic roles theories is too obtain a set of roles that can apply to any argument of any verb. Their function is to make possible the unique identification of the arguments of the verb. This is called the argument indexing function of thematic roles.

THE CONCEPT OF SEMANTICS ROLES

A semantic role is the underlying relationship that a participant has with the main verb in a clause. It is also known as semantic case, thematic role, (generative grammar), and deep case. Semantic role is the actual role participant plays in some real or imagined situation, apart from the linguistic encoding of these situations.

For example, if in some real imagined situation, someone named purposely hits someone named Bill, then John is the agent and Bill is the patient of patient of the hitting event. Therefore, the semantic role of Bill is the same (patient) in both of the following sentence:

John hit Bill.

Bill was hit by John.

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

Furthermore, semantic roles most often embodied by the grammatical relations of subject, object, and indirect object in natural language are: agent, force, instrument, experiencer, recipient, accompaniment, causer, counter agent, genetic, dative, factitive, manner, measure, beneficiary and patient. Other semantic are more likely to be embodied in oblique (positional) phrases or adverbials. Now, to the full explanations. But note that the semantic roles are underlined.

AGENT: This refers to the initiator of some action, capable of acting with volition. According to Ozo-mekuriNdimele, "the agent is usually an animate entity" (90). Examples include:

1. Dan prepared the meal.
2. The cat jumped over the fence.
3. Anne kicked the ball.
4. Ken slapped his son.
5. Joseph killed the rat.

Note that the underline words (subjects) are examples of 'agents'.

FORCE: This is the situation where inanimate objects perform actions as if they are animate.

Examples are the follows:

1. Wind blew the roof away
2. Thunder struck the boy dead
3. Ken was knocked down by the lorry
4. The flood carried the building afar off
5. Pride blindfolded Satan

It is important to note that "the difference between 'agent' and 'force' is that whereas the former may involve some form of volition on the part of the initiator of the action, the latter cannot (Ndimele 90-91).

PATIENT: This refers to the entity that is being affected by the action performed by the agent or force. It is comparable to the object of the verb in a typical sentence. 'The patient' is the reverse of 'the force' or 'the agent'. Examples:

1. Edna cut the bushes
2. The sun melted the ice
3. The care hit the cat
4. The monkey slapped the owner
5. The bucket was melted by the sun

EXPERIENCER: Ndimele defines it as "an entity that undergoes some psychological state and is affected by an event or state" (91). Examples:

1. John is angry with his students
2. Martha loves Kingsley
3. Mary hates liars
4. Evelyn likes Gabriel
5. Benson is affectionate to his wife

INTRUMENT: Ndimele provides an explanation as "the thing or entity by which an action is carried out and the action affects a patient" (91). Examples are as follows:

1. Ken wrote the letter with a pencil
2. Mark destroyed the building with a sledge hammer
3. His mother beat him with a stick
4. My lecturer answered me with abusive words
5. Pastor Okafor chased him away with a pestle

POSSESSORORBENEFICIARY: This simply refers to an entity that benefits from either a positive or negative action (Ndimele 92). It can be likened to the indirect object in elements in elements of a sentence in grammar. Some examples include:

1. Ann bought Mabel a car
2. I own a house
3. He gave me a present
4. Gertrude dashed John money
5. Samson owns a lot of property

LOCATION/LOCATIVE: This means the place where something is situated. As Ndimele asserts, "the resting place of a thing or an entity". (92).A

A locative semantic role does not imply motion to, from across the location. Consider the following examples:

1. The food is on the dining table
2. I saw the phone inside her bag
3. She put the money at the corner of the room
4. He has deposited the money in the bank
5. She inserted the memory card in the phone

SOURCE: This refers to the place from which something originates or the point of origin of something. Source is the semantic role of the following reagents.

1. The place of origin with verbs of motion, locomotion and propulsion

Example are:

- a. John fell off the chair (motion verb)
 - b. The baby crawled from the kitchen to the door (locomotion verb)
 - c. John threw the knife into the box (propulsion verb)
2. The entity from which a physical sensation emanates with verbs of sensation, attention, and speech.

Examples are:

- a. John smelled the odour of onions (sensation verb)
 - b. The people watched the performance of the dancer (attention verb)
 - c. The mother told her child a story (speech verb)
3. The original owner in a transfer with verbs of acquisition, transfer and grab.

Examples are:

- a. John obtained an application from the office (acquisition verb)
- b. John bought the book from Tom (transfer verb)
- c. John grabbed the book from Tom (grab verb)

GOAL: This is the destination of an entity. It is the direct opposite of the source. Examples of some the semantic role of goal include:

1. The man played the ball into the net
2. The man drove the truck to the park
3. The robber snatched the money and ran into the bush
4. Adams came into the church
5. The ball hit the post, bounced back and was played into the net

PATH: This refers to the point through which an entity moves. Some examples are:

1. I went to school through the road
2. The man came to the venue through the back door
3. Ann went to the village through the bush to see the king
4. He went to the market square through the forest
5. Anne walked to the cemetery through the lonely road

ACCOMPANIMENT: We have some examples to include:

1. I ate rice with my wife
2. I went to school with Kenneth
3. The man came alongside the secretary
4. She travelled to London with her family
5. The choristers sing with passion

CAUSER: This refers to the semantic role of referent which instigates or causes an event rather than doing it. The causer in this sense is usually the surface subject for the verb in a sentence. Some of the example are:

1. Ken tripped Anne
2. Peter pushed Lovelyn
3. Kenneth tingled me
4. Love pinched Happiness

FACTITIVE: According to John Lyons, "factitive is the semantic role of a referent that results from the action or state identified by a verb" (491_ verbs such as 'make', 'choose', 'judge', 'elect', 'select' and 'name' are called factitive verbs. Examples include:

1. They judged Anne's way of talking
2. The house elected Kenneth the new president
3. The academic Union of Universities named our school the best technologically
4. The committee selected three Nigerian for the award
5. The bona fide members of the organization chose Mr. Okey Ola as the chairman.

MANNER: "Manner is a semantic role that notes how the action, experience, or process of an event is carried out" (Lawson 213). He gave one example which is: "the girl walked to school slowly. "Slowly", expressing the semantic role of manner. Other examples include:

1. Adamu walks sluggishly

2. The choir sings melodiously
3. Joseph eats quickly
4. The boys talks gently

MEASURE: This refers to the semantic role which notes the qualification of an event.

Examples:

1. The new coast costs N7,000.00
2. The building was bought at N2,000,000.00
3. The goods were purchased at N30,000.00
4. He sold the clothes for N8,000.00

GRAMMATICAL RELATIONS AND SEMANTIC ROLES

In English subjects assume the position of agents, direct objects are patients and themes, and instruments occur as prepositional phrases. This is not always the case. There are two basic situations to show this. The first is where roles are omitted and the grammatical relations shift to react to this. The second is where the speaker chooses to alter the usually matching between roles and grammatical relations

For example:

1. Prisca broke the ice with a pickaxe
2. The pickaxe broke the ice
3. The ice broke

In the first sentence, Prisca is the agent and the subject, the ice is the patient and direct object and the pick axe, which is the instrument, is in a prepositional phrase.

In the second sentence, the AGENT is omitted and the instrument is subject and finally no AGENT or INSTRUMENT expressed, the PATIENT becomes subject.

This process of different roles occupying the subject position is known as hierarchical process other example are:

Location as subject

1. This cottage sleeps five adults
2. The table seats eight

Agent subjects

1. The thief stole the wallet
2. Fred jumped out of the plane

Experiencer subjects

1. I forgot the address
2. Your cal is hungry

Recipient **subject**

1. She received a demand for unpaid tax
2. The building suffered a direct hit

Patient subject

1. The bowl creaked
2. Tobi died

Instrument subjects

1. The key opened the lock
2. The scalpel made a very clean cut

VERBS AND SEMANTIC ROLE GRIDS

It has been claimed that as part of its inherent lexical specification a verb requires its arguments to be in specific semantic roles. Therefore we need to know how many arguments a verb

requires (whether it is intransitive, transitive etc) as well as what thematic roles the argument may hold,

For example, 'put' is three argument verb in this statement and spells out the thematic roles arguments may carry.

Put (verb) <AGENT, THEME, LOCATION

In the generative grammar literature the listing of thematic roles is called a thematic role and or theta grid. The thematic grids for 'put' as shown above predict that this verb when saturated with the correct argument might form a sentence like the following

1. John (agent) put (verb) the book (theme) on the shelf (location)
2. Roland read the book in the room
3. Bartiam cut the tree at the bottom
4. She eat the food under the tree

We should note that not all nominals in a sentence are argument of a verb. For example: To distinguish between the role of argument played by the prepositional phrase used in the expression below and its status as a non-argument, we have this prove.

1. Roland put the book in the bathroom
2. Roland read the book in the bathroom

It is ungrammatical to write or say Roland put the book. This reflect the fact that "the prepositional phrase in the bathroom" cannot be omitted its makes it an argument of the verb 'put'. But in the second sentence it is possible to write or say Roland read the book. This means the prep phrase is not an argument of the verb 'read' since it can form a sentence without it.

MERITS AND DEMERITS

Semantic roles are labels for certain recurring predicate argument relations. They have proved attractive because they provide a way of representing commonalities across different uses of the same predicate or across uses of distinct but semantically related predicts that may be obscured because arguments with certain semantic roles may have various semantic realizations. They provide a level of abstraction for the statement of generalizations concerning a variety of linguistic phenomena. In particular argument realization generalization are often stated over a thematic hierarchy, a ranking of semantic role.

Semantic roles are useful in natural language processing. They continue to be useful in stating linguistic generalization in a descriptive if not theoretical way. The uses of semantic role labels persist across subfields, including language acquisition, psycholinguistics and neurolinguistic.

However, semantic roles have not lived up to their initial promise. It has prove impossible to find a small set of roles that can be applied across languages. This desideratum issue must be met if semantic roles are to figure effectively in accounts of linguistic phenomena.

Furthermore, some generalizations involving semantic roles seem to require reference to coarse-grained roles, whereas others require reference to fine-grained roles.

Moreover, reliable diagnostics are difficult to identify even for the roles cited most often. Although these difficulties led some researchers to reject semantic roles, others have taken alternative approaches, including the use of generalized semantic roles, which are inspired by the notion of prototype.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I outlined the definition of the term semantic role, looked the historical perspective features where also looked at, after which a comprehensive analysis of the list was attempted. The grammatical, and verbal with semantic role where also looked at and the merit and demerits were also treated.

We have seen that semantic roles play important part in semantic analysis.

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