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SEMANTIC ROLES

Instead of thinking of words as containers of meaning, we can look at the "roles" they fulfill within the situation described by a sentence. If the situation is a simple event, as in The boy kicked the ball, then the verb describes an action (kick). The noun phrases in the sentence describe the roles of entities, such as people and things, involved in the action. We can identify a small number of semantic roles (also called "thematic roles") for these noun phrases. Agent and theme In our example sentence, one role is taken by the noun phrase The boy as "the entity that performs the action," technically known as the agent. Another role is taken by the ball as "the entity that is involved in or affected by the action," which is called the theme (or sometimes the "patient"). The theme can also be an entity (The ball) that is simply being described (i.e. not performing an action), as in The ball was red. Agents and themes are the most common semantic roles. Although agents are typically human (The boy), as in (1) below, they can also be non-human entities that cause actions, as in noun phrases denoting a natural force (The wind), a machine (A car), or a creature (The dog), all of which affect the ball as theme in examples (2)–(4). The theme is typically non-human, but can be human (the boy), as in the last sentence (5). (1) The boy kicked the ball. (2) The wind blew the ball away. (3) A car ran over the ball. (4) The dog caught the ball. (5) The dog chased the boy.

Instrument and experiencer

If an agent uses another entity in order to perform an action, that other entity fills the role of instrument. In the sentences The boy cut the rope with an old razor and He drew the picture with a crayon, the noun phrases an old razor and a crayon are being used in the semantic role of

instrument. When a noun phrase is used to designate an entity as the person who has a feeling, perception or state, it fills the semantic role of experiencer. If we see, know or enjoy something, we're not really performing an action (hence we are not agents). We are in the role of experiencer. In the sentence The boy feels sad, the experiencer (The boy) is the only semantic role. In the question, Did you hear that noise?, the experiencer is you and the theme is that noise. 112 The Study of Language Location, source and goal A number of other semantic roles designate where an entity is in the description of an event. Where an entity is (on the table, in the room) fills the role of location. Where the entity moves from is the source (from Chicago) and where it moves to is the goal(to New Orleans), as in We drove from Chicago to New Orleans. When we talk about transferring money from savings to checking, the source is savings and the goal is checking. All these semantic roles are illustrated in the following scenario. Note that a single entity (e.g. George) can appear in several different semantic roles. Lexical relations Not only can words be treated as containers of meaning, or as fulfilling roles in events, they can also have "relationships" with each other. In everyday talk, we often explain the meanings of words in terms of their relationships. If we're asked the meaning of the word conceal, for example, we might simply say, "It's the same as hide," or give the meaning of shallow as "the opposite of deep," or the meaning of pine as "a kind of tree." In doing so, we are characterizing the meaning of each word, not in terms of its component features, but in terms of its relationship to other words. This approach is used in the semantic description of language and treated as the analysis of lexical relations. The lexical relations we have just exemplified are synonymy (conceal/hide), antonymy (shallow/deep) and hyponymy

(pine/tree). Synonymy Two or more words with very closely related meanings are called synonyms. They can often, though not always, be substituted for each other in sentences. In the appropriate circumstances, we can say, What was his answer? or What was his reply? with much the same meaning. Other common examples of synonyms are the pairs:

Mary   saw   a fly   on the wall.

Experiencer   theme   location

She   borrowed   a magazine   from George.

Agent   theme   source

She   squashed   the bug   with the magazine.

Agent   theme   instrument.

She   handed   the magazine   back to George.

Agent   theme   goal

"Gee thanks," said George.

                Agent

Agent

"Agent" is the entity (somebody/ something) that performs an action. (the doer of the action).

Example:

The boy kicked the ball.

"The boy" is the agent.

Agents are can be human (The boy), as in (1) below. Also, they can be non-human entities that **cause actions**, as a natural force as in (2) (The wind), a machine as in (3) (A car), or an animal as in (4) (The dog).

1. **The boy** kicked **the ball**.
2. **The wind** blew **the ball** away.
3. **A car** ran over **the ball.**
4. **The dog** caught **the ball.**