

SEMANTIC CLASSIFICATION: ROLES OF ACTANTS AND PREDICATES

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Abstract. This paper explores the semantic classification of actants and predicates in bivalent syntactic structures, highlighting their roles in sentence meaning and construction. By analyzing thematic roles such as Agent and Patient, Experiencer and Stimulus, Beneficiary and Recipient, and Instrument and Theme, we examine how predicates determine valency and how actants fulfill specific functions within event schemas. Through examples from both constructed sentences and literary texts, this study demonstrates how actant-predicate relationships shape linguistic expression. The findings have implications for syntax, semantics, discourse analysis, and computational linguistics, offering insights into cross-linguistic variation and the cognitive mechanisms underlying sentence processing.

Keywords:Semantic classification, actants, predicates, bivalent structures, thematic roles, Agent and Patient, Experiencer and Stimulus, Beneficiary and Recipient, Instrument and Theme, valency theory, argument structure, sentence semantics, linguistic analysis, syntax, discourse analysis, computational linguistics.

The relationship between predicates and their actants lies at the core of linguistic analysis, forming the foundation of sentence meaning and structure. Language serves as a means of representing events, states, and processes, and this representation is largely shaped by the interplay between the predicate—the element that expresses an action, event, or state—and its actants, the entities participating in the situation described. Understanding how predicates and actants interact is crucial for exploring the mechanisms by which meaning is constructed and conveyed across different languages.

Semantic classification in linguistics seeks to categorize predicates and their actants based on their functional roles in sentence structure. Predicates define the valency of a sentence, determining how many and what kinds of actants are necessary to complete their meaning. Actants, on the other hand, fulfill specific roles within the event schema, such as agent, patient, experiencer, theme, recipient, and instrument. These roles are not arbitrary; they emerge from the intrinsic meaning of predicates and are subject to cross-linguistic variation and typological constraints.

A thorough understanding of actant-predicate relations has significant implications for various linguistic fields, including syntax, semantics, morphology, and discourse analysis. In syntactic theory, the way actants are encoded—through case marking, agreement, and word order—reflects deep-seated principles of grammatical structure. In semantic theory, argument structure and event semantics provide insight into how meaning is constructed and interpreted. The study of actants and predicates is also crucial in applied domains such as computational linguistics, natural language processing, language acquisition, and translation studies, where precise semantic classification enhances machine understanding and linguistic modeling.

This section aims to explore the roles of actants and predicates from a semantic perspective, highlighting major classification frameworks such as valency theory, theta theory, and frame semantics. By examining the ways in which different linguistic models approach actant-predicate relationships, we can gain a deeper understanding of how meaning is structured in language and how these structures influence linguistic variation and processing.

Literary works provide numerous examples that illustrate these classifications in natural discourse, demonstrating how meaning is constructed through actant-predicate relationships.

Major Thematic Roles in Bivalent Structures

Agent and Patient

The most fundamental thematic roles in bivalent structures are Agent (the initiator of an action) and Patient (the entity affected by the action). These roles are typical in transitive constructions where the verb conveys an external action.

Example:

She closed the door.

Agent: She

Predicate: closed

Patient: the door

"He struck the match and watched it burn." (The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde)

Agent: He

Predicate: struck

Patient: the match

In both examples, the verb conveys an external, dynamic action where the Patient undergoes a transformation. The thematic structure remains constant: an external initiator acts upon a passive entity.

Experiencer and Stimulus

When the subject does not perform a deliberate action but instead undergoes an emotional, sensory, or cognitive experience, it is termed an Experiencer. The entity causing the experience is the Stimulus.

Example:

She feared the storm.

Experiencer: She

Predicate: feared

Stimulus: the storm

"Elizabeth admired Mr. Darcy's generosity." (Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen)

Experiencer: Elizabeth

Predicate: admired

Stimulus: Mr. Darcy's generosity

Unlike Agent-Patient structures, Experiencer-Stimulus relationships involve perception, emotion, or cognition rather than a direct external action. The subject does not act upon the object but instead reacts to it, making the interaction more abstract.

Beneficiary and Recipient

Some bivalent structures include a Beneficiary, who benefits from the action, or a Recipient, who receives something.

Example:

He gave his friend a book.

Agent: He

Predicate: gave

Recipient: his friend

Theme: a book

"Dumbledore handed Harry an envelope." (Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, J.K. Rowling)

Agent: Dumbledore

Predicate: handed

Recipient: Harry

Theme: an envelope

These examples showcase a transactional relationship where a concrete object moves from one party to another. The distinction between Beneficiary and Recipient depends on whether the act is

for someone's benefit (Beneficiary) or involves direct reception (Recipient). In these cases, the second noun phrase (his friend / Harry) functions as the Recipient, not just a passive Patient.

Instrument and Theme

In some constructions, an Instrument is the means by which an action is performed, while the Theme is the entity undergoing change or movement.

Example:

She cut the paper with scissors.

Agent: She

Predicate: cut

Theme: the paper

Instrument: scissors

"Gatsby lifted the glass with a trembling hand." (The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald)

Agent: Gatsby

Predicate: lifted

Theme: the glass

Instrument: a trembling hand

These structures introduce an additional element (Instrument) to highlight how the action occurs. The use of an Instrument often implies an indirect action where the Agent utilizes an external tool to achieve the desired effect.

The classification of actants and predicates reveals the intricate semantic relationships within bivalent syntactic units. The interaction between thematic roles—such as Agent and Patient, Experiencer and Stimulus, Beneficiary and Recipient, and Instrument and Theme—determines how meaning is constructed in sentences. These roles help distinguish between different verb types and their argument structures, enriching our understanding of sentence semantics.

Literary texts provide abundant examples of these relationships, demonstrating how authors use bivalent structures to enhance narrative depth and expressiveness. The exploration of actant-predicate relationships not only advances syntactic theory but also has implications for language acquisition, discourse analysis, and natural language processing. Future research may investigate how these semantic roles vary across different linguistic contexts and genres, further contributing to our comprehension of language structure and meaning.

The study of semantic classification, particularly the roles of actants and predicates, is essential for understanding the structure and meaning of sentences. The interaction between predicates and their actants forms the foundation of linguistic representation, shaping how events, states, and actions are conveyed across different languages. By examining bivalent syntactic units, we gain insight into the ways thematic roles—such as Agent and Patient, Experiencer and Stimulus, Beneficiary and Recipient, and Instrument and Theme—contribute to sentence meaning.

The classification of actants not only enriches syntactic and semantic theory but also holds practical significance in applied fields such as computational linguistics, language acquisition, translation studies, and discourse analysis. The presence of these relationships in literary texts further highlights their role in shaping expressive and nuanced communication.

Future research could explore the cross-linguistic variations of these semantic roles, investigating how different languages encode and interpret actant-predicate relationships. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of linguistic typology, cognitive processing, and the evolution of meaning in human language.

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