

Ministry of higher Education and
Scientific Research
Qadisiyah University
College of Education
Department of English

Thematic Roles in English

Set by

Eman Hassan

Dhuha Kareem

Supervised by

Lec. Shaima Emad

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

﴿قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ﴾

صدق الله العلي العظيم

(الزمر/9)

Dedication

We would like to dedicate this work to our family, friends and everybody who helped us and made the study easier.

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Introduction

This study deals with thematic roles in English. Thematic roles are generalization among the arguments of a predicate in order to capture regularities between the semantic representation and the syntactic expression of that predicate.

The paper consists of six sections. Section one deals with definition of thematic roles. Section two deals with thematic roles and language. Section three shows a list of thematic roles. Section four tackles thematic roles and syntactic roles. Section five verbs and Thematic Roles. Section six deals with thematic roles assignment in context. Finally, the conclusion sums up the findings of the study.

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1. What Is a Thematic Role?

One general reality of the languages of the world is concerned with the function of a language to indicate meaning. Just like words, sentences must convey meaning for languages speakers in order to understand each other. However, the meaning of the sentence cannot be gained only by piling up the sense of each content word of the given sentence (Finegan, 1992: 160). O' Grady (1996: 284) emphasizes that the meaning of a sentence is determined by the meaning of all it's constituents and the way in which they are arranged in syntactic structure.

When looking at words in a sentence, one can simply track the meaning of them by different ways of analysis then attach the meaning altogether to form that understandable whole. One way is by doing lexical analysis which will categorise each and every word in a sentence into different lexical categories or one can do syntactic analysis in terms of structure of particular sentence, yet another way of analysing a sentence is by doing semantic analysis which is strongly connected with the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. However, words should not be thought of as containers of meaning. Rather, one should look at the role that is played within the situation described in a sentence by every and each word (Yule, 2010: 113).

Different ideas are formulated about how sentence meaning is determined by the meaning of any sentence's component words and their own arrangement in a syntactic structure. For instance, a question about whether these roles that give this meaning that forms the whole are syntactic or semantic in nature, also whether they should be regarded as grammatically significant entities or not (Carlson and Tanenhans, 1999: 124).

Speakers may choose to characterize situations and express various degrees of analysis to a single sentence. The set of semantics which face a speaker seeking to describe a situation while concerning on how to portray the roles of any of the entities involved have a number of labels in semantics, for example, for Allan (1986), they are "participant roles", for Fill more (1968), they are deep "semantic cases", for Givon (1990), they are "semantic roles", for Gruber (1976) and Jackendoff (1972), they are "thematic relations" and for Dowty (1986) and Jackendoff (1990), they are called "thematic roles". Due to its wide usage in recent work in the field of linguistics, thematic roles is set to be used that is (Saeed, 2009: 148).

When defining thematic roles, it is necessary to put in mind the branch of linguistics that is related to it, i.e., semantics. That's why the term of thematic role is employed as a synonym with the term semantic role. Generally, thematic roles are semantic roles in any system which takes location and movement through space in the interpretation of a natural language sentences, which is concerned with the assignment of thematic roles (Chomsky, 1993: 5).

Thematic roles are considered to be a generalization regarding one argument of a predicate in order to capture regularities between the semantic representation and the syntactic expression of that predicate. It is not possible to derive a precise definition due to this ongoing discussion about the number, content, and labeling of roles even the theoretical statuses of thematic roles (Butt, 2005: 48).

As far as the definition of thematic role, no fixed definition is stated due to the overlapping and interference of naming and origin. For instance, Yule (2010: 294) defines thematic roles as that part of a sentence that is played by a noun phrase in the event that is being described by any sentence. While a more specific definition is mentioned by Crystal (2003:405). According to him (ibid.), a thematic role is a term used for the role performed by each argument (i.e. subject or complement) of a predicate, defined with reference to a restricted universal set of thematic functions (or thematic relations) also known as thematic role.

Thematic roles are usually interpreted in the same way as semantic cases in case grammar, such as agent, patient, locative, source and goal (Crystal, 2003: 405).

A thematic role is one aspect of semantic interpretation which is concerned with the roles that are played by a noun phrase in the situation that is described by the sentences. The meaning of this can be shown in the following sentence:

(1) The wind blew the ball away.

The meaning of this sentence would have been impossible to be understood if one cannot identify each and every word, in other words each and every role that is played by those words. In this sentence, the wind can be identified as the agent who blew the entity or the item which is the ball. The ball can be identified as the item which is being blown away, and so on. By defining the thematic role of each and every element in the sentence, one can understand the meaning of the sentence and as well identify it (Yule, 2010: 115). This simple illustration conveys the idea that thematic roles play an essential role in language comprehension. The term thematic role thus, is employed to describe the part that is played by a particular entity in an event (O'Grady, 1996: 286).

2. Thematic Roles and Language

The concept of thematic roles has played an important part in linguistic theory over the past twenty years. Although it is as ancient as semantic, more over as old as language itself that one can track the origin of it even to the first attempt to write a grammar which can be traced back to the sixth century (Butt, 2005: 17).

Due to the importance of thematic roles in understanding the unspoken meaning of an utterance, it is very important to explore thematic roles as a central role in language comprehension. As if thematic roles provide a mechanism by which one can analyze the semantic commitments, since they provide a mechanism for interaction, (Carlson, 1988: 265).

Like any other aspect of semantic interpretation, thematic roles are also associated with the syntactic structure of the sentence. However, there are means of associating one particular thematic role with a specific argument of a verb. One particular mechanism for carrying out this association is the assumption of Bresnan:

- i. Every argument of a given verb is assigned a thematic role.
- ii. No argument is assigned more than one thematic role.
- iii. Every argument of a verb is assigned a unique thematic role.

It must be known that the set of syntactic arguments of a verb are the subject of the sentence, and the subcategorized phrases in the verb phrase, which are sister of and governed by the verb, however the verb assigns thematic roles to no other constituents except for these, many thematic roles may be associated with a given verb (ibid.: 268).

Although the arguments of a given verb are taken of that verb's thematic roles, there are some circumstances under which a thematic role may be assigned to no constituent. When this occurs, open thematic roles arise. As the following example of passive sentences:

(2) The fire was extinguished by the firemen.

(3) The fire was extinguished.

The 'fire' is assumed to play the role of theme and 'the fireman' is agent in (2). However in (3) 'the fire' should still be theme, but should there also be an agent role associated with this occurrence of the verb as well? If the assumption that there is an agent role present in (3), even if no constituent is actually assigned to that role. In part, this decision is based on the intuition that (3) is understood as having some unstated agentive participant. (This is reflected in the formerly common transformational analysis deriving (3) by agent deletion from a structure like (2)). In contrast (3) with 'the fire went out' in which there is no such understood agentive participant, though the meaning is quite similar in all other respects. But further substantiating these intuitions in the presence of an alternative sub categorization of the same verb, with intuitively the same core meaning, in which an agent is overtly expressed as in (2). This could be taken as an indication that an agent role is to be associated with the verb in (3) (Carlson, 1988: 5-6).

3- A List of Thematic Roles

Certain linguists that took a noticeable inference into thematic roles, for example Andrews (1985) and Radford (1988), have suggested various lists of

thematic roles. From all that extensive literature, it is possible to mention a list of thematic roles like the following:

1- Agent: the initiator of some action, who is capable of acting with volition (Saeed, 2009: 149).

(4) David cooked the rashers.

(5) The fox jumped out of the ditch.

2- Patient: the entity undergoing the effect of some action, often undergoing some change in state (ibid.)

(6) Enda cut back these bushes.

(7) The sun melted the ice.

3- Theme: the entity which is moved by an action, or whose location is described (Saeed, 2009: 149).

(8) Roberto passed the ball wide.

(9) The book is in the library.

4- 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 (ibid.)

(10) Kevin felt ill.

(11) Mary saw the snake.

(12) Lorcan heard the door shut.

5- Beneficiary: the entity for whose benefit the action was performed (ibid.)

(13) Robert filled in the form for his grandmother.

(14) They backed me a cake.

6- Instrument: the means by which an action is performed or something comes about (ibid.)

(15) She cleaned the wound with an antiseptic wipe.

(16) They signed the treaty with the same pen.

7- Location: the place in which something is situated or take place (ibid.).

(17) The monster was hiding under the bed.

(18) The band played in a marquee.

8- Goal: the entity towards which something moves, either literally or figuratively (ibid.).

(19) Sheila handed her licence to the policeman.

(20) Pat told the joke to his friends.

9- Source: the entity from which something moves, either literally or figuratively (ibid.)

(21) The plane came back from Kinshasa.

(22) We got the idea from a French magazine.

Thus, an obvious variation in terms use exists. For instance a single role can have more than one label like for Radford (1988) who considers the roles "patient" and "theme" as individual and different names for the same role while it is noticed that at the labeling of Saeed's an adaptation of the distinction that "patient" is used to mean any entity that is acted upon and has been changed by the verb's action. Also, the role of the theme is employed to describe any entity that moves in literal or in a metaphorical space, and that movement is caused by the action of the verb. These two different roles can be shown in the noun phrase "the rock" in two different examples, it could be both a patient, (Saeed, 2009: 150 – 151) as in:

(23) Fred shattered the rock.

And a theme as in:

(24) Fred threw the rock.

In fact, human beings have animate ability to determine whether or not a sentence or phrase is grammatical, acceptable or not. These judgments don't depend on prescribed knowledge of grammatical rules but rather on intuitions. Verbs are the central part of any given utterance. For instance, 'sleep' cannot be followed by a direct object. These syntactic requirements are referred to as sub-categorization frames that provide information about what types of phrases a verb requires. For instance, in order for the verbs 'love' and 'sleep' to be used grammatically, they must be followed by a noun phrase:

(25) We never sleep in class.

The verb 'give' requires a noun phrase and verb phrase,

(26) Our teacher gives A's to all her students.

Whereas verbs such as 'want' require a noun phrase and/ or a sentential complement (CS)

(27) we want more homework.

(Aronow and Banner, 2017: 178).

4. Thematic Roles and Syntactic Roles

It is seen that there is some sort of a "typical matching" between each thematic role and its grammatical relation to the participant role. Most of examples apply to the matching that the subject of the sentence often corresponds to the agent, and the direct object to the theme, while the instruments often occurs as adverbials, as in:

(28) Gina raised the car with a jack.

One can simply describe the thematic roles in this sentence. For example, Gina is called as the agent of the action. The car is the theme. The jack is considered to be the instrument. However, although this is often thought of as the typical situation, still it is not necessarily so, for instance:

(29) The jack raised the car.

Here, the agent is omitted. Accordingly, the instrument is what occupies the subject position. Of course, the omission was possible in the preceding example above but no further omission is possible, for instance, the following omission is not acceptable.

(*The car raised).

All this is due to the effect of the chosen verb. If the latter sentence was made correct, the verb itself must be changed to the following:

(The car rose).

The verb "raise" requires an actor, while the verb "rose" describes the change of a state without the need for any 'slot' as an actor. This example clearly shows the effect of the verb on thematic roles (Saeed, 2009: 154).

However, it is not only grammar and the choice of the verb that affects the choice of a thematic role but at the same time it is the thematic role itself that affects the grammaticality of a formulated sentence. In the example below, the grammatical syntactic structure alone cannot guarantee correct grammaticality. One can say:

(30) The child hit the ball.

But one cannot say:

(*The ball hit the child).

Since verbs impose both structural and semantic restrictions, which are expressed as thematic roles. The verb 'hit' requires an animate subject that intentionally carries out the 'hitting' on an object that is 'hittable'. That's why the child hit the ball is grammatical, while *The ball hit the child is not. (Aronow and Bannar, 2017: 177).

When the given formulated sentence is grammatically correct but is odd in meaning, this oddness that is being experienced is related to the chosen word itself. In order not to fall in the weird formations of sentences and incorrect choice of thematic roles. There are some features that need to be always remembered which are called semantic features as stated by Yule (2010: 113).

A sentence with a well formed structure, might suffer an ill-formed semantic features as in the following example:

(31) The hamburger ate the boy.

Syntactically and grammatically this is a correct sentence of noun phrase, verb and noun phrase, but semantically this is not an acceptable one, and the cause of this problem is the choice of the thematic role that should take the position of an agent, because looking at the verb "ate", the subject must be able of "eating", and not that which is being eaten. This observation suggests that since the noun "hamburger" is not capable of eating in contrast to the noun "the boy", the noun "hamburger" can not possibly be used as the subject of the verb "ate", simply because it is inanimate or as Yule (2010: 114) describes it as (-animate). On the other hand, the word "boy" is (+animate) which suggests that it is the correct choice of a subject for the verb "ate". (Yule, 2010:114).

This example illustrates the procedure of using semantic features for analyzing the meaning. It also shows the need of being able to identify the correct positioning of a chosen thematic role. These semantic features are four and they are marked with a plus mark (+) for having the stated features and a minus mark (-) for not having the stated features which are "animate", "human", "female", and "adult". If an important feature is not found regarding the selected noun like

animate, it would then be considered as an odd sentence, as the example above. However, one noun can have two or more of the features as in:

(32) The boy kicked the ball.

Here, the noun which is the "boy" has the following features: (+animate), (+human), and (+adult). (ibid.: 114-115)

5. Verbs and Thematic Roles

What really controls a thematic role in a sentence and suggests its correctness is the verb itself, and since each noun phrase has its own thematic roles, it must be known that there is a limited number of thematic roles that can apply for a specific position in regards to the verb itself (Saeed, 2009: 155-156).

By nature, verbs have "particular requirements for their thematic roles" and this is not something which is previously learned, in fact it is a part of the semantic knowledge of any language speaker, for instance verbs like 'break' allows three thematic roles to occupy the subject position which are: agent, instrument, patient. These different roles are considered as "arguments" and for one verb, however there must be a specific thematic role for the verb in a specific situation. A simple example is found in the verb "put" which undergoes three arguments: agent, theme, location (ibid. : 155-156).

What can be noticed in this entry is that the thematic role of an agent is underlined which shows William's (1981) suggestion that is to underline "the agent role to reflect the fact that it is this role that typically occurs as the subject of the verb" or as William's calls it in his own terminology the external argument. This is where one sees all obligatory arguments and how they are semantically related to the verb (Saeed, 2009: 156).

6. Thematic Roles Assignment in Context

The role of the elements that can be found in an English sentence affects the position of words and phrases in a given syntactic structure. In fact, it determines the roles played by every noun phrase in a situation described by a sentence and through applying the approach of thematic roles assignment the noun phrase would then to determine the thematic roles by itself. However, the assignment of

thematic roles for the elements of a sentence as for the noun phrase is in deep connection to the syntactic structure of that sentence (Maharsi, 2017: 9).

This overlapping nature of thematic roles often was a topic of attention, moreover to say it was a questionable debate whether thematic roles are syntactic, semantic, or even they should be regarded as grammatically significant entities at all (Carlson and Tanenhaus, 1999: 124).

Yet, since the meaning of a sentence is obtained through the meaning of its all its elements which are at the same time arranged in a specific syntactic structure. Thematic roles are thus to be regarded as one of the aspects of the semantic interpretation of the elements played by a given noun phrase in a situation described by a sentence; that is to say the meaning of a sentence is obtained through the meaning that is provided by the thematic roles in that sentence (Maharsi, 2017: 10).

Thematic roles are the key that help identifying the core meaning of all the elements in a given sentence due to each role they perform. For example,

(33) The professor is just giving his last lecture to his students.

(34) The vice president delivered her speech in the auditorium.

These examples work to illustrate the forgoing view regarding how it is due to the meaning of a single thematic role a whole meaning of a full sentence is obtained (Maharsi, 2017: 10-11).

It is thus clear how the sentences meaning is given through all the element's meanings, since thematic roles originate in word meaning. A sentence like "The headmaster read the notification" is clear to say that it contains an agent and a theme but because the given verb is "read" there is an implied meaning of having an entity that gets read which is a theme. So there is an association of syntactic and lexical structure of a sentence. In fact, this association of a particular thematic role with a given argument of a verb, which leads to a "satisfying explanation on the appropriate thematic roles, the role of each sentence element is assigned to noun phrase based on their position in syntactic structure, with each noun phrase receiving one and only role. This process or mechanism is what is called as thematic role assignment" (ibid. : 11).

Conclusion

Linguistics provides a clear cut definition for each and every branch of it. One of the definitions is the study of meaning that is semantics. One of its important topics that is divergent, in nature is semantic roles or thematic roles. This topic is an integral part of a linguist's knowledge, more over any language learner's knowledge. The importance lies in its main importance in targeting the comprehension of a sentence.

A sentence's appropriate formation can lead to a clear understanding, acceptance, and comprehension of that sentence. However, a sentence's inappropriate and ill formation would certainly lead to wide range of misconception, refusal, and misperception. One way to lead one to get the accurate meaning of a sentence is to be able to link each element of the sentence; that is each noun phrase to an appropriate role to play, These roles are thematic roles.

The knowledge of these roles would provide control over the formed sentence with all its elements. Due to this serious role of thematic roles in understanding not only the written but as well the unspoken meaning of utterance. It's very important to explore thematic roles as a central role in language comprehension. What they provide is a mechanism for interaction by which one can analyze the semantic commitments.

Thematic roles appear to be those elements that are related to the interpretation of a given verb in a given sentence to the various elements that play the different roles assigned to them by their semantic as well as syntactic need not to mention the speakers personal effect in their choice.

However, one main problematic era in regarding the topic of thematic roles is their ambiguity and the difficulty to define one role from the other as in the confusion between the roles of the actor and the patient or between an actor and an agent.

One should note that although the nature of a thematic role is confined by the out side effect like the surroundings, intentions and the choice of the verb, thematic roles must be taken for a higher regard that is for their importance for the context in which they would occur.

It is thus clear how thematic roles provide the linguists with a better understanding and a better mastering of it but any person who wishes to provide and communicate their ideas.

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