V13: Away from thematic roles

Course in Semantics · Ling 531 / 731
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Dowty (1991) : No one really mapped out the meanings of the vague roles, and they are problematic, because they are hard to generalize. What is an Agent, after all?

What kind of logical object is a thematic role? Dowty: "A set of entailments of a group of predicates with respect to one of the arguments of each." (552). (in all caps, actually) . a TR is a property of predicates.

To even investigate what thematic roles mean, we can use entailments.

(1) x murders y vs. x kills y : the former entails that the event was a volitional act by x

(2) x nominates y vs x convinces y : the former entails that x intends the event to be of the kind described (a nomination); you can convince by accident

"Agent" is definte semantically as whatver entailments of verbs about DP referents are shared by teh verbal argument positions that we label with the term "Agent"

Dowty finds problems:

1. unclear role boundaries : make falsifiability nearly impossible

2. symmetric verbs cannot distinguish roles : (x weighs as much as y, meet)

3. apparent thematic role generalizations can sometimes be derived from other factors

We can add that cross-linguistically the picture is less clear, not more. For instance, many languages don't allow Agents unless they are in complete control of the event.

Similar problems can be found for all the roles.

Dowty (1989), Marantz (1984): Maybe have precise roles (kill has a killer, walk has a walker, etc.)

OR maybe the roles "are simply not discrete categories at all, but rather are cluster concepts, like the prototypes of Rosch and her followers" (571).

Proto-Agents and Proto-Patients.

So, if thematic roles aren't anything. . . do we really need them?

Heim and Kratzer (1998): The Θ-Criterion makes faulty predictions.

(Theta-Criterion : Every argument is assigned one Θ-role, and no Θ-role is assigned to more than one argument of the same predicate.)

(3) *The barn burned down . the* takes *barn* as its argument, but does not assign a Θ-role.

(4) *Ann sings and dances* has two verbs, but only one DP argument.

Not to mention, the semantics alone explains faulty sentences.

(5) #*Ann laughed Jan* is bad because the semantics of *laugh* only allows one argument, so the other DP could not compose.

(6) #*Greeted Ann* will remain unsaturated without its subject.

But if we get rid of thematic roles, how do we account for linking arguments to their apparent roles? Why do transitive verbs have doers dominating the undergoers?

(7) *Jan loves Ann* can only mean that Jan loves Ann, not the other way around.

Baker (1988): UTAH : Structural relationships reflect thematic ones. Agents are subjects and Themes are objects.

Grimshaw: Argument structure simply reflects prominence relations among arguments

Dowty: The proto-roles are all we need. How does linking work? For Dowty, The argument that happens to have the most Proto-Agent properties is the highest argument. The one that happens to have the most Proto-Patient properties is the lowest argument.

This information is all in the semantics. That means that the syntax doesn't need to care one bit about thematic roles. **We do not actually need thematic roles**.

But wait! Remember that unaccusatives and unergatives are distinct structurally. The prominence account cannot handle this, because it only ranks arguments with respect to one another. Intransitives only have one (non-event) argument, so there is no ranking to be made.

(8) $[\![\, sink \,]\!] = \lambda x \in D_e. \lambda e \in D_s. \, sink(x)(e) : \langle e, st \rangle$

(9) $[\![\, leave \,]\!] = \lambda x \in D_e. \lambda e \in D_s. \, leave(x)(e) : \langle e, st \rangle$

It seems, then, that as long as agents and themes are both arguments of the verb, we would need the syntax to provide some thematic information.

But what if they weren't both arguments of the verb?