

Argument Structure and the Role of Theme

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Argument structure defines what kinds of conceptually necessary elements a predicate takes and thus is projected from lexical conceptual/semantic structure. It is represented either by variables over arguments or by theta role labels. Here, we are concerned with the essential properties of the thematic role of Theme and how to characterize the process of Thematization and weaker Accusativization (or Transitivity in English).

The thematic role labelled Theme is so broadly defined that it covers several different categories depending on different sorts of predicates and indeed it is sometimes divided into different roles such as Patient (change of state), Theme (change of location) and Stimulus (Percept) or it gets different feature assignments such as [+Affected]. However, the typical notion of Theme is argued to be necessary as well as the features of affectedness and being holistic/partitive which are crucial to explaining related grammatical phenomena and semantic entailment. In particular, Theme is most prominent in forming derived nominals and compounds.

The Goal/Source-Theme alternation predicates like 'spray,' 'load,' 'clear' in English and 'chilha-ta(paint),' 'sit-ta(load),' 'chiu-ta(clear)' in Korean are considered in comparison and cross-linguistic generalizations and language-specificities will be discussed. Here, wholistic/partitive and affected as well as some aspectual features and definite/indefinite are relevant to explaining entailment distinction. Ambiguity arising from Thematization (from 'table' as Source=Ground) (or Theme=Figure) as shown below is accounted for (both Theme (from Ground) and Figure cannot be accusativized as in (1b)):

- (1) a. Mary-nun sikthak-ul chiu-oss-ta
Top table Acc clear-Past-Dec
'Mary cleared the table (of dishes).'

- b. *Mary-nun sikthak-ul cossi-rul chiu-oss-ta
Top table-Acc dish-Acc cleared

In derived nominals, (underlying, not secondary/derived) Theme is most prominent in argument inheritance. Thus:

- (2) a. Gift-giving to children
b. *Children-giving of gifts (cf. give children gifts)
- (3) a. a spray of paint
b. *a spray of the wall (cf. spray the wall with paint)

Thematization (with affectedness, as in (4)) and Transitivity (Accusativization) (as in (5)) account for the following grammatical difference:

- (4) This bed was slept in by Jackson.

- (5) *This room was entered/left by Jackson.

In Korean, the verb 'chacwu-ta' (fill) can have a Figure-object with an oblique Ground (e.g. pyong-e mul-ul chacwu-oss-ta 'filled water into the bottle'), which is impossible in adult English but possible in child English. There are underlying perceptual/conceptual/semantic commonalities across languages as well as variant realizations.

The Theme-related consequence is reached via the Goal-related process (or movement) and in child language acquisition we find the stage in which the latter is uttered, as follows:

- (6) nuna -ka na -hanthe ttaeri -o
sister Nom I Goal(to) hit SE
'Sister hit to me.' (Intended)

Children have a narrower scope of vision and less control and the target may be perceived to be a goal to reach in hitting, and there are languages where the Goal marker still remains (e.g. Spanish) for the role Theme for adults.

In conclusion, the role of Theme in argument structure, supplemented by the features involving affectedness, holistic/partitive, aspectual perfection (with delimited entities) is crucial to explain grammatical alternations and semantic entailment relations between alternants across languages.

References

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