

TOPIC 4:

Semantic representation of clauses

1 The semantic representation of clauses.

The previous module has described the syntactic structure of clauses: how a clause is made up of phrases, which are in turn made up of words.

In this section, we look briefly at the semantic structure of the clause. There are different models of clause semantics. In this class, we will use the system from Sydney Functional Linguistics, which analyses the clause in terms of participants (Actor, Goal, Sensor, Sayer, etc.), processes (material, mental, verbal, etc.) and circumstances of the processes (location, manner, means, etc.)

A clause represents a pattern of experience, conceptualised as a semantic configuration. A semantic configuration consists of: processes, participants and circumstances.

<i>The dog</i>	<i>bit</i>	<i>the postman</i>	<i>yesterday.</i>
participant	process	participant	circumstance

Processes (actions, events, states, types of behaviour): types.

- material: processes of 'doing' (kick, run, paint, construct, dig, write, repair, send, give)
- mental: processes of 'experiencing' or 'sensing' (*see, hear, know, feel, believe, think, like*)
- relational: processes of 'being' or 'becoming' in which a participant is characterised, or identified, or situated circumstantially (*be, seem, stand, lie, become, turn, get*)
- verbal (*say, tell*), existential (*there is a problem*), behavioural (*laugh, cry*).

Participants (entities such as persons, objects or abstractions): the types depend on the type of process.

Circumstances: are not "participants" in the process (not Subject, Object Complement) but rather define how, when, where, why, what with, etc. the process occurs.

Do it gently. He watered the garden with a hose.

2 Material Processes

Actor: the Actor of a process can be either:

- the Agent of the process (must be an animate entity capable of conscious action):

<i>The Prime Minister</i>	<i>resigned</i>
Actor: agent	Process: material

- Inanimate Agent or Force (where the Actor is not animate):

<i>Lightning</i>	<i>struck</i>	<i>the oak tree</i>
Actor: force	Process: material	Goal

Goal: The goal can be either:

- Affected (if the Goal exists before the process but is affected by it):

<i>The avalanche</i>	<i>buried</i>	<i>the climbers</i>
Actor: force	Process: material	Goal: affected

- Effected (if the Goal is created by the process):

<i>Mary</i>	<i>made</i>	<i>an omelette</i>
Actor: agent	Process: material	Goal: effected

Recipient and Beneficiary:

- **Recipient:** participant to whom the action is directed and who receives the goods:

<i>I</i>	<i>gave</i>	<i>the kids</i>	<i>some money</i>
Actor: agent	Process: material	Recipient	Goal: affected

- **Beneficiary:** participant for whom some service is done: *I'll make you an omelette.*

<i>I</i>	<i>will make</i>	<i>you</i>	<i>an omelette</i>
Actor: agent	Process: material	Beneficiary	Goal: effected

Actor and Goal with Ergative verbs: the Subject of an intransitive clause with an ergative should be seen as the Goal, not the Actor:

<i>The glass</i>	<i>broke</i>
Goal: affected	Process: material

<i>I</i>	<i>broke</i>	<i>the glass</i>
Actor: agent	Process: material	Goal: affected

Actor and Goal in passive sentences: in a passive sentence, what was Object in the active sentence becomes the Subject, and keeps the same semantic role:

<i>You</i>	<i>will be made</i>	<i>an omelette</i>
Beneficiary	Process: material	Goal: effected

3 Mental Processes

Senser: the one who sees, feels, likes, etc.

Phenomenon: the participant which is perceived, known, liked, etc.

<i>The rider</i>	<i>heard</i>	<i>a noise</i>
Senser	Process: mental	Phenomenon

<i>I</i>	<i>thought</i>	<i>that she was coming</i>
Senser	Process: mental	Phenomenon

<i>That you like ice-cream</i>	<i>pleases</i>	<i>me</i>
Phenomenon	Process: mental	Senser

4 Verbal Processes

Sayer: the one who speaks the message.

Verbiage: what is said.

Addressee (if present): the one who is spoken to.

<i>John</i>	<i>said</i>	<i>something</i>
Sayer	Process: verbal	Verbiage

<i>John</i>	<i>told</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>to go</i>
Sayer	Process: verbal	Addressee	Verbiage

<i>"Get out of here!"</i>	<i>she</i>	<i>screamed</i>
Verbiage	Sayer	Process: verbal

5 Relational Processes

These processes are mostly those with 'be' and 'have' as the main verb (also 'seem', 'appear', and also words of sensing when the Complement is an adjectival phrase (*I felt sad*). These verbs do not in general passivise. We will identify 2 main types here:

- **Possession:** some Possessor has possession of some Possession.

<i>John</i>	<i>has</i>	<i>my cat.</i>
Possessor	Process:relational	Possession

- **Attribution:** one entity (the Carrier) is assigned some attribute.

<i>John</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>very sick.</i>
Carrier	Process:relational	Attribute

<i>John</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>the president</i>
Carrier	Process:relational	Attribute

<i>That book</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>mine</i>
Carrier	Process:relational	Attribute

6 RECOMMENDED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Downing, A & P. Locke (2002) *A University Course in English Grammar* (2nd edition). London: Routledge. [Chapter 4]

Thompson, Geoff (2004) *Introducing Functional Grammar*. 2nd edition, London: Edward Arnold. [Chapter 5]

7 Exercise

1. Specify the type of process involved in the following examples;

- We carried our luggage.
- The spectators cheered enthusiastically.
- The gardener dug a hole in the garden.
- She gave me a bracelet for my daughter.
- A stone broke the window.
- The water boiled.
- The window broke.
- The dog died.
- I can smell the gas.
- He slipped on the ice.
- I can't understand their objections.
- We believe that he is right.
- Phil knows the answer.
- Tom is generous.
- That car is mine.
- He remained the leader.
- The water feels cold

2. What are the semantic roles/functions involved in each of the examples above?

3. For each of the following clauses say whether a participant or a circumstance has been chosen as Theme:

1. Main Street is usually crowded on late shopping nights.
2. The girls armed with hockey-sticks chased the burglar.
3. Quite by accident I came across a very rare postage-stamp.
4. Away in the distance you can see Mount Kilimanjaro.
5. What I am going to tell you must not be repeated.