

Grammar, schemas, and thematic relation assignment

Mário PERINI

It is generally assumed that semantic roles are assigned to all eligible complements on the basis of the thematic grid of the main verb – that is, its valency. This conception is present, and predominant, in the literature, but it can be shown to be too simple to describe the great complexity of the assignment system. Among other situations, there are cases where the thematic relation of a complement is left blank by lexicogrammatical rules; the relation is assigned by default, that is, by direct reference to the schema evoked by the main verb in the clause, without the intermediation of a semantic role, or of any grammatical device. This assignment mechanism provides an answer to a problem of analysis thus expressed by Langacker: “[...] at the extreme, every verb defines a distinct set of participant roles that reflect its own unique semantic properties (e.g. the subject of bite is a slightly different kind of agent from the subject of chew).” [Langacker, 1991, p. 284-285]. The root of the problem is in the lack of distinction between two kinds of thematic relations: elaborate thematic relations (ETRs), which are cognitive relations present in the schema, and semantic roles, abstract relations that are made up of sets of ETRs, and participate in the statement of grammatical rules. Semantic roles are part of the structure of the language, but ETRs are not. For instance, there are rules that mention the Agent, but none that mention the “drinking person”, or the “writer”, or the “cooking person”; the latter are ETRs, and are understood, in the grammar of Portuguese or English, as elaborations of the semantic role Agent. Consequently, some complements lack semantic roles, but all must have ETRs – in some cases as elaborations of semantic roles, in others as thematic relations directly taken from the schema and integrated in the cognitive representation. This helps solve several problems of analysis, as for instance the difficulty in defining the Patient, which as traditionally defined does not occur in the sentence the Incas worshipped the sun, where the object does not undergo a change of state, and in fact does not directly interfere in the event: it cannot be a Patient in the sense that these walls is in the Incas built these walls. This assignment mechanism satisfies the basic objective of linguistic expression, which is to relate morphosyntactic (ultimately phonetic) forms and cognitive representations. This paper presents examples of the assignment of thematic relations to complements of sentences in Portuguese, showing that in some cases semantic roles are needed, but in others they can be dispensed with, because the relation is expressible by ETRs only. The data

come from the Valency dictionary of Brazilian Portuguese verbs, currently under construction.

Keywords: valency, semantic roles, thematic relations, grammar schemas

Reference:

Langacker, Ronald W. 1991. Foundations of Cognitive Grammar - vol. II, Descriptive Application. Stanford: Stanford University Press.