BEYOND THE LEXICON: A CONTEXT-DRIVEN APPROACH TO MEANING THROUGH SEMANTIC ROLES

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ABSTRACT:
While the centrality of meaning in human communication is universally acknowledged, the field of semantics remains a contested area within linguistics, lacking a cohesive definition. This study addresses this gap by adopting the Principle of Extensionality as its theoretical framework to investigate the semantic roles of words in context. The research operates on the premise that language is a structured system of words facilitating communication among speakers. By applying technical role labels such as agent, theme, and instrument for analysis, this paper examines how words function within specific communicative contexts. The analysis confirms that while all lexical words possess inherent meaning, their social usage profoundly shapes and influences the efficacy of communication. The study concludes that a context-driven, extensional approach provides a valuable framework for understanding semantic functionality and its critical role in successful human interaction.
Keywords: *Semantics, Semantic Roles, Meaning, Context, Lexeme, Lexical Meaning, Syntactic Relations, Thematic Roles.*

Introduction

The ontological status of meaning has constituted a perennial focus of scholarly inquiry, particularly within the domain of semantics. Despite centuries of philosophical and linguistic investigation, a consensus on the fundamental nature of linguistic meaning remains elusive. This conceptual ambiguity was notably emphasized by Lord (1966), who characterized meaning as a phenomenon fraught with "ambiguity, controversy, and contradiction." The persistent challenge of formulating a singular, universally accepted definition has consequently precipitated repeated and ongoing theoretical refinements.

To provide a foundational framework for the present inquiry, it is necessary to delineate the scope of semantics. Etymologically derived from the Greek semantikos ("significant"), semantics is principally concerned with the systematic study of meaning as it is encoded in language and interpreted by its users (Agbedo, 2015). This field examines the relationships between signifiers such as words, phrases, and symbols—and their denotative and connotative interpretations. More specifically, semantics analyzes how fluent speakers of a language comprehend and deploy lexical items and syntactic structures, and it further investigates sense relations including hyponymy, meronymy, synonymy, and antonymy within a given linguistic system.

The central problematic of semantics is thus intrinsically tied to the complex nature of meaning itself. In response to this enduring theoretical impasse, this study adopts an analytical focus on semantic roles. These roles serve as fundamental constructs for explicating and disambiguating the function of words within communicative acts. The investigation proceeds from the premise that language is inherently functional and that lexical meaning is not inherent but is principally determined by contextual parameters. Consequently, this research aims to critically

examine, articulate, and substantiate the proposition that semantic roles, such as Agent, Theme, and Instrument are indispensable for interpreting how meaning is functionally realized in context.

What does meaning mean?

Every definition is only an attempt and is inadequate because there is always a gap that has to be filled. However, meaning is defined by Palmer (1981) as ideas or concepts that can be communicated from the speaker's mind to the listener's mind through language or other means. This definition has been rejected by detractors who contend that it is too ambiguous or too broad to support its position as the cornerstone of conventional conceptualist theory of meaning. According to Katz (1972), many attempts have failed to offer a clear solution to the meaning question. Furthermore, an abundance of theories complicates the understanding of meaning, such as referential theory, stimulus-response theory, and use theory. Each theory seeks to define or ascribe meaning to a sentence component in relation to some highly observable object, event, or action.

In the recent past, linguists focused more on lexical meaning than on the sentence itself. *Bienwisch (1969)* notes that the study of 'meaning' encompasses the relationship between words and sentences with objects and processes in the world, as well as the interrelations among words and sentences through concepts such as synonyms, entailments, and contradictions. Clearly, lexemes and sentences serve complementary roles. The meaning of a clause or sentence depends on its constituent lexemes, and vice versa, within the context in which they appear. Renowned philosopher Weitingenstien claims that a word's or utterance's meaning is frequently equated with how it is used. According to Lyons (1969), semantic analysis of any language should explain how sentences are understood, interpreted, and related to states, processes, and objects in the context rather than offering a definition. In the field of education, he contends that one must comprehend the meanings of lexical items and how these words relate to one another in order to understand the meaning of a sentence and its semantic relationships with other expressions. Consequently, since the fundamental components of meaning in any language are functional, it is essential to assert that words should not be viewed merely as 'containers' (Yule, 1996) of meaning; rather, their roles within a describable context in a sentence should be considered. Semantic analysis of natural language assumes that the meanings of lexical items are not indefinable whole.

Carnap (1956) proposes two methods for conducting word meaning analysis:

1. Meaning postulates
2. Semantic components into which lexical meanings are analyzed.

The meaning of a lexical item is, in broad terms, defined by the collection of all meaning postulates in which it appears. Semantic components are used by componential analysts like Bienwish (1969) and Katz and Fodor (1963) to explicitly express the meaning of a lexical element. To clarify, these elements are theoretical constructs put forth to clarify the semantic relationships among the lexical items or elements within any language (logical constraints), rather than being a part of the vocabulary. This study's main goal is to support the broad analytical approach to language by examining how words work in context. It emphasizes that language is functional and that a lexeme's meaning is best understood in its context

Semantic Roles:

The basic concept or information that an encoder conveys in accordance with the functions of words in a particular context is represented by a semantic role. Different from the linguistic encoding of those situations, it relates to the actual actions that participants take in real or imagined scenarios. It is also known as the fundamental connection a patient has with the primary verb in a sentence. Additionally, it is referred to as the underlying relationship that a patient maintains with

the main verb in a clause. According to Gawron (2013), semantic roles are the functions that participants fulfill in events and situations. They constitute a part of the content of linguistic communication; thus, they are defined in terms of prototypes, and the labels assigned to them serve as convenient approximations of the semantic roles. In their perspective, Jurafsky and Martin (2015) characterize these roles as representations that convey the abstract functions that arguments of a predicate can assume in an event, which can be quite specific.

Semantic Roles and Their Classifications

According to Jurafsky and Martin (2015), semantic roles describe the different ways in which participants are involved in the meaning of an event or action. Each role represents a specific relationship between a verb and its associated noun phrases. The major types include:

Agent – the intentional or volitional initiator of an action.

Example: Maria baked a cake. (Maria = Agent)

Experiencer – the entity that perceives or feels an event or state.

Example: The child heard the music. (The child = Experiencer)

Force – a non-volitional cause that brings about an event.

Example: The wind knocked over the sign. (The wind = Force)

Theme – the participant that is directly involved in or affected by the action.

Example: The teacher opened the window. (The window = Theme)

Result – the outcome or product created by an action.

Example: The artist painted a portrait. (The portrait = Result)

Beneficiary – the entity that benefits from an event or action.

Example: They prepared a meal for their guest. (Their guest = Beneficiary)

Source – the starting point or origin in a transfer event.

Example: The message came from the director. (The director = Source)

Goal – the destination or endpoint of an object or action.

Example: She sent the report to the manager. (The manager = Goal)

Accompaniment – an entity participating alongside the agent or affected participant.

Example: Liam went to the concert with his sister. (His sister = Accompaniment)

Locative – identifies the place or spatial position where an event occurs.

Example: The meeting took place in the library. (In the library = Locative)

According to Larson (1984), another important role is the Affected Role, which refers to the participant that undergoes a process, experiences change, or is influenced by an event. For instance:

The vase broke during the storm. **(The vase = Affected)**

Emma grew tired after the race. **(Emma = Affected)**

In situations involving change of state or location, the affected participant experiences transformation or movement, as shown below:

The leaves turned yellow in autumn. – **Change of state**

The package moved to a new warehouse. – **Change of location**

Liam received a promotion. – **Change through acquisition or status**

Understanding how meaning is organized in sentences, who starts an action, who experiences it, and how the various components of a clause interact to express entire events are all made possible by semantic role.

Semantic Roles and Their Functions in Sentence Meaning

Semantic roles explain the roles that participants play in a verb's or event's meaning. These roles aid in the explanation of who engages in an action, who is affected by it, and who experiences it. One.

1. Affected Role

This role is often linked to verbs that imply transformation or impact. An entity or participant that experiences a change, process, or is impacted by an event is referred to as the Affected Role. Verbs that imply impact or transformation are frequently associated with this role.

Examples:

The child broke the glass. (The glass = Affected)

The storm destroyed the crops. (The crops = Affected)

The metal rusted after the rain. (The metal = Affected)

The water boiled under high heat. (The water = Affected)

Lena became anxious during the exam. (Lena = Affected)

In each case, the affected participant experiences a change of state or condition as a result of the event.

2. Experiencer Role

The Experiencer is the participant that perceives, feels, or senses an event. This role typically occurs with verbs of perception, emotion, or cognition.

Examples:

James heard the thunder. (James = Experiencer)

Ruth saw the rainbow. (Ruth = Experiencer)

They enjoyed the performance. (They = Experiencer)

Amira remembered the song. (Amira = Experiencer)

Daniel feared the darkness. (Daniel = Experiencer)

The experiencer does not actively cause the event but is psychologically or perceptually involved in it.

3. Inner Role

In describing semantic roles, inner roles refer to those participants that are closely tied to the meaning of the verb itself. In contrast, outer roles are less directly connected. To classify verbs correctly, it is important to distinguish between these two categories.

For any given verb, only one noun phrase can typically occupy a specific inner role. When more than one participant shares the same role, they must be connected by a conjunction.

Examples:

Amina and Kofi walked to the market. ✅ (Valid — connected by conjunction)

Amina, Kofi walked to the market. ❌ (Invalid — missing conjunction)

In this case, both *Amina* and *Kofi* share the Agent role (inner role), as they both initiate the action of walking.

If a participant's relationship to the verb is binding—that is, essential to the verb's meaning—it can be considered an inner role. For example:

The students discussed the topic. (The students and the topic are inner participants in the event of "discussing.")

4. Participant Roles and Thematic Relations

Thematic relations (also called participant roles) describe the semantic relationships between the meanings of noun phrases and the action expressed by the verb in a clause. Each participant in an event contributes differently to the overall meaning of the sentence.

Examples:

Tunde wrote a letter. → Tunde = Agent, *a letter* = Theme

The cat chased the mouse. → The cat = Agent, *the mouse* = Patient

The teacher gave a book to Ada. → The teacher = Agent, *a book* = Theme, *Ada* = Goal/Recipient

The rain flooded the village. → The rain = Cause, *the village* = Affected

Thematic relations concentrate on the semantic relationships between the entities that noun phrases describe and the event that the verb expresses. They provide a purely semantic account of the connections between participants and the activities they engage in. Understanding how meaning is organized within sentences requires an understanding of semantic roles like Agent, Experiencer, Affected, Goal, and Source. While thematic relations explain how various participants contribute to the overall interpretation of an event, inner roles are directly related to the meaning of the verb. These functions collectively serve as the basis for examining how language depicts perception, action, and change.

Characteristics of Semantic Roles (SR)

The goal of semantic roles, also referred to as thematic roles (TR), is to recognize the parallels and discrepancies in verb meanings as they manifest in the way arguments are expressed within a sentence. Through new generalizations, these roles make it easier to comprehend how semantics maps onto syntax. The following are the main features of semantic roles:

Completeness: Each argument of a verb needs to be given a semantic role, either a thematic role or another kind of role.

Uniqueness: Only one semantic role is connected to each argument.

Distinctiveness: The roles that various arguments of the same verb are given help to differentiate them.

Independence: Every role upholds a standard semantic definition that is applicable to various verbs and situations (Jackendoff, 1983; Dowty, 1991).

Theoretical Perspectives on Semantic Roles:

Whether semantic roles should be viewed as syntactic entities, lexical items, semantic concepts, or as essential components of linguistic knowledge has been a topic of discussion among linguists throughout the field's history. Whether these roles are derived from other linguistic elements or are primitive components of language has been the main question (Chomsky, 1968; Williams, 1981). There is general agreement that semantic roles are best understood as semantic or conceptual components that aid in explaining the relationships between participants and actions in a sentence, despite continuous disagreements (Jacquemin, 1990). Linguistic theories that concentrate on lexical semantics—meaning in context—are especially pertinent because the study of word meaning entails looking at words in context. Cruse (1986) highlights that a word's contextual relationships have a significant impact on its meaning. He makes a distinction between the codes of participation, which outline how various components contribute to meaning, and degrees of participation. Cruse goes on to categorize as a sentence constituent any portion of a sentence that has meaning and interacts with other constituents. According to Cruse (1986), minimal semantic constituents are those semantic components that cannot be further divided into simpler parts.

Discussion

Sentences and words clearly play complementary roles in language. Words are important because of how they relate to other words in a particular context, not just because they are stores of meaning. The fundamental connections between participants and the verb in a clause are represented by semantic roles. They go beyond simple language encoding and represent the roles that participants actually play in real-world scenarios. The functional relationship a participant has with the action the verb describes is essentially captured by a semantic role (Fillmore, 1968; Pustejovsky, 1991).

Consider the sentence:

"Jane reads the book aloud"

This is a sentence that contains both lexical and grammatical elements. The noun phrases describe the roles played by the participants, while the verb "read" denotes an action. The sentence can be analyzed using semantic roles as follows:

Jane is the **agent**, the one who performs **the action.**

The entity impacted or engaged in the action is the book, which serves as the **Theme.**

The animate entity (like a person) carrying out the action—typically the verb's subject—is referred to as the agent in this analysis. The object or entity that is engaged in or impacted by the action is the theme.

The majority of sentence constituents frequently have multiple functions at once, making it difficult to interpret and assign these roles. According to Halliday (1985), items in linguistic analysis are typically multifunctional, performing different grammatical and semantic roles based on the context.

For example:

"The farmer harvested the crops"

For instance, in the sentence "The farmer harvested the crops,"

"The farmer" is the **Agent** or Subject, performing the action,

"The crops" are the **Theme** or Object, receiving the action. "The crops" describes what is being impacted, while "the farmer" identifies who is carrying out the task.

It is necessary to give noun phrases in a sentence the proper semantic roles in order to recognize the performer of an action, whether it is an agent or a theme. Typically, the agent is a human or other living thing with the ability to act on purpose. Inanimate objects, however, can also function as agents in certain situations.

"The heavy storm damaged the roof."

Agent: the heavy storm

Theme: the roof

"The servant assembled the furniture."

Agent: the servant (considered as a man capable of performing tasks)

Theme: the furniture

According to *Yule (1996),* the semantic role of Agent involves an entity actively performing an action, while the Instrument refers to an entity used to carry out the action:

"She cut the banana with knife."

Instrument: knife

In this case, the scissors are the tools used to perform the action, illustrating how instruments function in semantic roles.

Moreover, objects or entities can sometimes have multifunctional roles. For example:

"Jane painted her friend portrait with a new brush."
Jane is the **Agent,** actively creating, while her portrait is the **Theme**—the object being created. The brush acts as the **Instrument,** the means used to accomplish the task. This demonstrates how physical objects can fulfill multiple semantic roles depending on the context.

Another instance:
"The wind carried the trash away."
The wind is the **Agent** performing the action.
The trash is the **Theme,** the entities being moved or affected.

Semantic roles such as Agent, Theme, and Instrument help clarify the functional relationships among participants in an event. While humans are typically associated with the Agent role, inanimate objects, parts of the body, or natural phenomena can also serve as agents depending on the situation.

Assigning semantic roles to participants in a situation can often be based on feelings, perceptions, or states of an entity. When an entity does not perform an action or undergo a direct experience, it is typically labeled as an Experiencer.

For instance, consider the sentence:
"Jane listened to the melody."
In this case, "Jane" is the **Experiencer,** as she perceives the sound, while "the melody" functions as the **Theme**—the entity being heard.

Another example:
"Ali observed the hummingbird in the garden."
"Ali" is the **Experiencer,** the one perceiving, while "the hummingbird" is the **Theme**—the object of the perception. The phrase "in the garden" indicates the **location**, providing spatial context that clarifies where the hummingbird was observed. Such locational details help eliminate potential ambiguity, ensuring the listener understands the setting.

Consider this sentence:
"Jane retrieved the book from her sister."
In this case, "Jane" serves as **the Agent**, the doer of the action, and "the book" is the **Theme**—the object involved in the action. The phrase "from her sister" indicates the **Source or origin** of the book, specifying where the action took place and providing clarity for the listener.

Similarly, in another example:
"Qasim polished the bike with a sponge."
"Qasim" is **the Agent** performing the action, "the bike" is the **Theme**—the object being polished, and "with a sponge" functions as the **Instrument**, the means used to carry out the action. Recognizing the Instrument role clarifies how the action was performed.

Goal-oriented actions are fundamental in communication.
For example:
"Jane handed the thesis to her mentor."
　　　In this sentence, "Jane" is **the Agent**, "the thesis" is the **Theme**—the object being transferred—and "to her mentor" specifies the **Goal**—the recipient of the object. Understanding the goal provides complete context and helps avoid misunderstandings about the direction or purpose of the action.

Findings
　　　In order to investigate semantic roles, this study mainly consults George Yule's The Study of Language (1986). Using an extensionalist theoretical framework, the focus is on comprehending how words operate within a particular context. This viewpoint holds that language is made up of

words arranged in particular contexts to enable successful communication between people who are in the same linguistic environment. According to this perspective, a lexeme's meaning is derived from its contextual usage rather than being seen as an isolated entity or a static item stored in the lexicon. Unless they are used in a context that gives them particular meaning, words have only basic meanings on their own. A single word like "come," for instance, implies the presence of a second party being addressed, creating a communicative situation that makes the message clear and impactful. This study highlights that what is deemed meaningful primarily depends on the information conveyed and interpreted by the listener or reader within a particular interaction, rather than focusing on defining meaning in a strict sense. The concept of meaning itself has been a topic of debate over the years. Essentially, meaningful communication is accomplished through the appropriate manipulation of words based on the context.

The meaning of a sentence is not always guaranteed by its grammatical correctness. For example, the sentence "Grass eats goat" is semantically nonsensical even though it complies with the grammatical rule of subject-verb-object structure because, in actuality, grass cannot eat goats. On the other hand, "Goat eats grass" is both meaningful and grammatically correct. Many academics, including eminent philosophers, contend that the best way to comprehend the meaning of words and utterances is to use them. For instance, Lyon (1969) proposed that understanding lexical items and their relationships is necessary to interpret syntactic elements and their semantic relationships. This implies that before taking into account a word's connotative or contextual implications, it is crucial to comprehend its basic, literal meaning.

The results show that meanings are intimately related to how words and sentences relate to real-world objects and processes. This bolsters the idea that knowledge of how lexical items interact within language is necessary for understanding syntactic structures and semantic relationships. According to the study, lexical items' meanings are not totally fixed or indefinable; rather, they are subject to interpretation until they are given roles within an utterance, whether it be written or spoken. This is due to the multipurpose nature of linguistic objects, which allow a single physical form to fulfill several semantic functions.

Conclusion

This analysis substantiates the premise that words function not as passive vessels of static meaning, but as dynamic agents whose semantic value is co-constructed within the interactive matrix of discourse. Their true significance is contingent upon and activated by the assignment of precise functional roles within a governing contextual framework. This process of role assignment is a critical cognitive and linguistic operation, requiring interlocutors to navigate the inherent multifunctionality and polysemy of lexical items. Consequently, mastering this process extends beyond a mere technical linguistic skill; it constitutes a fundamental discursive competence. It is the very mechanism that disambiguates potential misunderstandings and calibrates shared understanding between participants in a communicative event. Therefore, the deliberate attribution of semantic roles emerges as the cornerstone of transactional clarity, ensuring that encoded messages are not merely transmitted but are accurately decoded, thereby fulfilling the primary objective of all communication: the successful and unambiguous exchange of intended meaning.

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