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# SEMANTIC ROLES OF THE PREDICATE IN THE ENGLISH SENTENCES

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## ABSTRACT

We often take for granted the power of language. We use it for communication, expression, for understanding, but rarely do we pause to consider the semantic roles of the predicates in English sentences. In this paper, there is an exploration of what predicate-argument structures are and how they play a role in English sentences. The predicate is typically the structure that follows the subject. If the subject is an agent, causer, or instrument, the predicate will express the action carried out by that subject; if the subject is something that is being described, the predicate will provide the description; if the subject is a patient, the predicate will indicate what happened to the subject. For most speakers, the notion of a predicate that is separate from the subject is fairly intuitive. The English predicate must contain a verb; it can contain other structures - a direct object, an indirect object, various complement structures, and adverbs - but it must contain a verb. It will be also discussed how these structures can be used as a tool to better understand semantic roles within sentences, and how they affect our comprehension of language. By the end of this article, there is a greater understanding of what goes into forming a sentence and how each part contributes to its meaning.

*Key words:* English language, subject, sentences, linguistics

## INTRODUCTION

The predicate is typically the structure that follows the subject. If the subject is an agent, causer, or instrument, the predicate will express the action carried out by that subject; if the subject is something that is being described, the predicate will provide the description; if the subject is a patient, the predicate will indicate what happened to the subject. For most speakers, the notion of a predicate that is separate from the subject is fairly intuitive. The English predicate must contain a verb; it can contain other structures - a direct object, an indirect object, various complement structures, and adverbs - but it must contain a verb. While most imperative utterances omit the subject (Sit down; Drink your milk), there are no English sentences in which the verb is omitted. In many ways, the verb controls what happens grammatically in a sentence. Certain verbs require or at least allow a direct object; other verbs require two objects, a direct objects plus an indirect object; some verbs can be followed by adjectives; others must be followed by adverbs.

For example, the verb like must be followed by a direct object

*Luka likes the woods.*

The verb put must be followed by both a direct object and an adverb of location:

*She put the book on the shelf;*

\**She put the book* and \**She put on the shelf* are both ungrammatical sentences. On the other hand, the verb laugh can stand alone in the predicate - *Eva laughed*. Verbs also constrain the semantic roles of subjects; some verbs require agentive or causer subjects - *She punched a hole in the door; The flood damaged the golf course*; others require experiencer subjects – *She heard e the siren; Tom smelled smoke*. A discussion of verbs cannot be separated from a discussion of what can be found in the rest of the sentence.

### Transitive Verbs and Direct Objects

The direct object is a structure contained within the predicate. It is typically the noun phrase that follows the verb, although indirect objects and subject complements can also occupy this position, as you will see shortly.

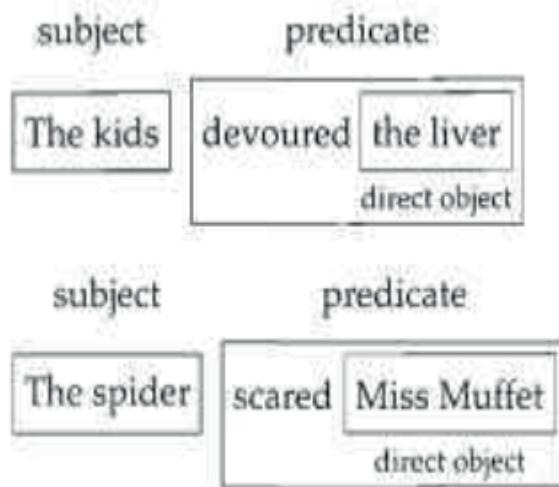


Figure 1.1. Subject and prdicate (Brek, 1999, p.26)

Most speakers would probably regard a subject + verb + direct object sentence as the prototypical English sentence. Verbs that can be followed by direct objects are considered transitive because, in most cases, an action taken by the subject is transmitted to the object. (The Latin prefix trans - means “across.”) As a rule, only transitive verbs can be followed by direct objects. As you saw above, a direct object is a noun phrase that follows a verb and is often (but not always) affected by the action of verb.

*Lisa wrecked her bike.*

*The fire damaged the bedroom.*

*Bob washed the dishes.*

*Eva read a novel.*

*The baby likes those cookies.*

The direct object has a special role in the construction of passive sentences. Without even knowing what a passive sentence is, any relatively fluent English speaker can readily return an active sentence into a passive sentence after hearing just a few illustrative examples.

(a)

*Bruce ate the pizza.*

*The snails destroyed my garden.*

*Flossie slugged Bert.*

*Gloria sang the anthem.*

(b)

*The pizza was eaten by Bruce.*

*My garden was destroyed by the snails.*

*Bert was slugged by Flossie.*

*The anthem was sung by Gloria.*

Figure 1.2. (Brek, 1999, p.26)

Successful completion of this exercise depends on an individual's ability to identify the direct object of each of the sentences in column (a). That direct object then becomes the subject of the corresponding sentence in column (b). Of course, fluent speakers do all of this unconsciously.

Like subjects, direct objects reflect various semantic roles. Traditional school grammars often describe the direct object as the "receiver of the action," and, loosely speaking, that is one of its primary roles. But the direct object reflects a variety of other semantic relationships as well. In each of the following sentences the direct object the monster has a different relationship with the verb, *Dr. Frankenstein slapped the monster; Dr. Frankenstein created the monster; Dr. Frankenstein scared the monster.* The semantic roles of direct objects are less varied than those of subjects and lines between semantic types are often muddier. Nevertheless, the semantic distinctions among direct objects are important in understanding the overall semantics of the sentence.

## PATIENT DIRECT OBJECTS

Patients are always affected by the action of the verb (to a greater or lesser degree). In fact, direct objects are so named because they are in a sense the direct target or object of the verb's action.

*Jill smashed my car.*

*Dorothy threw her coat on the floor.*

*Timothy folded the clothes.*

*The plaintiff destroyed the evidence.*

*Maezel lifted the box.*

As you saw earlier, subjects can also take the semantic role of patient. Remember that in a given simple sentence, there can be only one patient role. If the sentence contains a direct object, it, not the

subject, will be the patient. The patient will also be our default (garbage can) category. We will consider any direct object that cannot be comfortably placed in another semantic category a patient. This means that even relatively unaffected direct objects as in *Kim read the novel* will be considered patients.

## EXPERIENCER DIRECT OBJECTS

You've already seen that the subjects of psych-verbs (mental state verbs) are experiencers - *I like pizza; Stephanie wants a new computer*. Direct objects can be experiencers as well if the verb causes the direct object to achieve a new psychological state. It doesn't matter whether the subject is an agent (volitional and animate) or a causer (nonvolitional and animate or inanimate). In a sense, experience is a subcategory of patient in that the direct object is affected by the action of the verb in a very particular way. *Annie annoyed her siblings*. [It doesn't matter whether she did it deliberately or not.] *Dad calmed the baby*. *Lester frightened me*. *That novel bothered my students*. *The vandalism saddened everyone*. A direct object can be an experiencer only when the subject is not. There can be only one experiencer in a simple sentence. When the subject of a verb is an experiencer, the direct object is relatively unaffected by the action of the verb. *I love movies*. *Libby believed their lies*. *Captain Ahab fears that whale*. *We abhor violence*. *Carmen craves chocolate*. *I smell smoke*.

The movies are indifferent to the fact that I like them and lies are unaffected by the fact that Libby believes them. The whale may be affected in some way by the fact that Ahab fears him, but there is nothing in the sentence that indicates this. In a sentence like Captain Ahab harpooned the whale, the affectedness is communicated directly. Created Direct Objects Occasionally a transitive verb actually creates a direct object, rather than affecting an already existing entity. In a sentence like Bell invented the telephone or My daughter built a tree house, the direct object is actually brought into existence by the action of the verb. Such direct objects are created direct objects. The difference between a patient direct object and a created direct object explains the ambiguity in a sentence like Maria paints barns. If Maria paints pictures of barns, the direct object is created; if she paints barn walls, the direct object is a patient.

Patient direct object	Created direct object
Agatha lost <b>my novel</b> .	Agatha has written <b>a novel</b> .
Margaret tore <b>her blouse</b> .	Margaret made <b>a blouse</b> .
Lynn is painting <b>the ceiling</b> .	Lynn is painting <b>a landscape</b> .
The kids broke <b>the statue</b> .	The kids are carving <b>a statue</b> .
Teddy fixed <b>the bike</b> .	Teddy fixed <b>lunch</b> .

Figure 1.3. (Brek, 1999, p.29)

One can of course quibble about the status of some direct objects. If Martha sang a Jimmy Buffet song, did she create something or affect something already in existence? If Ali baked a cake, did he create something or merely cook a preexisting entity? These are clearly gray areas. But the fact that not all direct objects can be neatly categorized doesn't diminish the value of these semantic distinctions.

## LOCATIVE DIRECT OBJECTS

Sometimes noun phrases expressing location are used as direct objects. *Sir Edmund climbed Mt. Everest. Diana swam the English Channel. I have hiked the Grand Canyon.* Location expressions are usually prepositional phrases functioning as adverbs - *Sir Edmund climbed up Mt. Everest; I have hiked in the Grand Canyon.* What makes locative direct objects interesting is that they express a quality of completeness that is lacking in the prepositional phrases. Sir Edmund climbed Mt. Everest suggests that Sir Edmund climbed all the way up to the top and I have hiked the Grand Canyon suggests that I have walked its entire length.

## SOME OTHER SEMANTIC ROLES

In some highly idiomatic expressions, empty it occurs as a direct object. In utterances like *Let's call it a day, Sue has it made, and They are living it up,* it has no anaphoric or cataphoric referent. Such expressions are rare, however. Occasionally a normally intransitive weather verb will take an object - *It was hailing golf balls; It was raining buckets.* These constructions, too, are very idiomatic.

### Summary of Direct Object Semantic Roles

Patient direct object	The kids are smashing <b>the furniture</b> .
Experiencer direct object	Becky fixed <b>my car</b> .
Created direct object	Isabella scared <b>me</b> .
Locative direct object	That movie disgusted <b>my parents</b> .
Empty <i>it</i> direct object	That firm manufactures <b>computers</b> .
	My aunt made <b>a pie</b> .
	Michelle swam <b>Lake Powell</b> .
	He walks <b>the streets</b> [when he is depressed].
	Maggie is living <b>it up</b> .

Figure 1.4. (Brek, 1999, p.30)

## HOW TO IDENTIFY THE SEMANTIC ROLE OF THE PREDICATE IN A SENTENCE

The semantic role of the predicate in a sentence can be identified by its position in the sentence. The subject is typically the first noun or pronoun in the sentence, and the object is typically the second noun or pronoun. The other semantic roles are typically marked by prepositions, such as "in" (indicating location), "on" (indicating time), and "with" (indicating accompaniment).

## THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING SEMANTIC ROLES

In order to understand the meaning of a sentence, it is necessary to know the semantic roles of the predicate. The semantic role of the predicate can be defined as the function that the predicate plays in the sentence. There are three main types of semantic roles: agent, experiencer, and patient.

The agent is the subject of the sentence and is typically the one who performs the action. For example, in the sentence “John hit the ball,” John is the agent. The experiencer is the subject of the sentence who experiences an emotion or sensation. For example, in the sentence “John felt happy,” John is the experiencer. The patient is usually the object of a sentence and is affected by the action. For example, in “The ball was hit by John,” the ball is the patient.

It is important to be able to identify these different types of semantic roles because they can help you to understand how a sentence should be interpreted. If you are having trouble understanding a particular sentence, try to identify which type of role each word plays in order to gain a better understanding of its meaning.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, understanding the semantic roles of the predicate in English sentences is essential for proper communication. By furthering our knowledge on this topic, we can create a more comprehensive and efficient way of communicating with one another. As it has been proven in this paper, the various functions that a predicate can have played an important role when constructing English sentences and understanding them correctly. With this being said, it's safe to say that semantic roles are a crucial component of language comprehension so let's continue to strive towards perfecting it.

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