

## 5. Event-Dependent and Perspective-Dependent Thematic Roles

As a consequence of adopting this last methodological principle (ii), we will now see how one class of thematic roles found in the literature should be eliminated from our discussion. Certain kinds of thematic roles that can be involved in an event seem to be quite invariable across different perspectives or ways of viewing an event. Among these are Agent, Patient, Experiencer, and (with a very few possible exceptions) Theme (in the sense of "thing which moves or changes"), Source, and Goal, as well as the "adjunct" roles Instrumental, Locative, Temporal, and Benefactive. That is, if Helen carries the rock from John to the porch, then no matter whether one in some way "views" that kind of event from the point of view of Helen, the rock, John, or the porch, or whether one passivizes the sentence or otherwise alters it syntactically (by Topicalizing a NP, etc), by substituting a synonym of "carry", or by putting it in various discourse context, Helen still remains the Agent, the rock still the Patient (Theme), John the Source and the porch the Goal. That is, any truth-conditionally equivalent sentence has the same role assignments. The nature of the carrying event itself, it seems, fixes these roles.

Other proposed roles in the literature are different. An early example is Jackendoff and Gruber's use of Theme with stative predicates. As already mentioned, the grammatical subject (alone) is Theme in both *The rock is to the left of the tree* and *The tree is to the right of the rock*, according to Jackendoff (1976:94-96). These describe exactly the same state of affairs (assuming we don't change the deictic orientation for "left" and "right" between sentences), yet the rock is held to the Theme according to one but not the other (and the tree vice versa). Talmy (1978, 1985a, 1985b) has used the terms *Figure* and *Ground* for the same contrast, at least once explicitly raising the question whether these categories should be regarded as thematic roles:

- (13) a. The lamp (Figure) is over the table (Ground)
- b. The table (Figure) is under the lamp (Ground)
  
- c. The bicycle (Figure) is near the tree (Ground)
- d. The tree (Figure) is near the bicycle (Ground)

This kind of distinction has of course been noted by many writers under many terms (cf. e.g. Fillmore 1977), though not always under the rubric of thematic roles or semantic case. Should it be? Writers seem to agree that the meaning difference is (as the names Figure and Ground imply) a matter of asserting the location of the Figure/Theme NP with respect to the Ground/Location, putting the first NP "in perspective", making it more salient, etc. (though syntactic arguments have sometimes also been given for this kind of role assignment, e.g. by Jackendoff (1976:96-98)). Note incidentally that if this semantic contrast is a matter of

thematic role, it permits us to escape all counterexamples to thematic uniqueness mentioned earlier. That is, *x is similar to y* could differ from *y is similar to x* in which NP is the Figure or Theme, and (though now contrary to Jackendoff but with Fillmore), *buy* could differ from *sell* in that the first has the buyer as Figure and the second the seller. (Would admitting this contrast as a thematic role difference, we might also wonder, be tantamount to reducing the hypothesis of thematic uniqueness to a non-empirical question?)

I want to suggest that we rule out such perspective-dependent notions as Figure/Ground or Gruber's stative Theme as candidates for thematic roles. This is not to deny the existence of these distinctions nor their importance, but to propose only that thematic role is the wrong rubric for them.

The argument for this position is outlined as follows. Natural languages make use of a variety of grammatical means for indicating how the NP referents and other information in a sentence are related to the immediately-preceding and the not-so-immediately-preceding discourse and to the common ground of information shared by the discourse participants. It is widely agreed that in English and languages of similar typology, the grammatical relation *subject* is a weak indicator of "Topic" (LI, 1976), but in place of that much-disputed notion here, I will say simply that I assume the NP referent of a subject is weakly indicated to be "more directly connected" to the preceding discourse and common ground than those of other NPs in the same sentence, e.g. the subject referent may have been mentioned relatively recently. (By "weak indicator" I mean that it is a default that can be overridden by other indicators of givenness, e.g. presence of an anaphoric form elsewhere in the sentence, topicalization or clefting.) "Newness" vs. "Givenness" is a matter of degree, not an absolute contrast (Prince 1981), and note that I say "more connected" relative to other NPs, not that it meets any absolute criterion of topic-hood. (One consequence of this conventional association, presumably, is that existential constructions in many languages have a grammatical form that removes the NP from normal grammatical subject status, possibly displacing it with a dummy NP or locative (Clark 1978), thereby signifying that its referent is NOT connected to previous discourse in the way that subject status would otherwise indicate.) Note that we now speak of perspective-dependent notions: whether a referent is new or given varies with the discourse even for the same factually described situation. The argument for eliminating Figure/Ground from the inventory of thematic roles is thus in outline:

- (i) In an adequate linguistic description, greater relative connectedness to previous discourse, givenness, etc. must be explicitly specified as a semantic correlate of grammatical subject denotations (in English-like languages).
- (ii) All putative instances of perspective-dependent thematic roles and other "perspective-indicating" lexical entailments of words can be shown to be instances of (i) when properly analyzed.
- (iii) Therefore by Ockham's Razor, perspective-dependent thematic roles are unnecessary, and all roles are event-dependent in meaning.

Establishing (ii) would be a major undertaking far beyond the scope of this article and will have to wait for another context, but here are two sample arguments. The difficulty in distinguishing a semantic discourse correlate of lexical verbs with respect to their subject argument (which is where "Figure"-type roles always seem to be found) from that of a discourse semantic correlate of the grammatical relation subject is, of course, that these almost always involve one and the same argument. The one case where they diverge is the passive; consider (14):

- (14) a. The truck hit the tree.
- b. The truck hit it.
- c. The tree was hit by the truck.
- d. It was hit by the truck.

One of the simplest and strongest ways an NP in sentence can be "connected to previous discourse" is as a direct answer to a WH-question. Imagine the examples in (14) as answers to the question *What happened to the tree?*: The most preferred answers, I believe, are (b) and (d). Example (c) is somewhat less preferred (because the normal case is to use anaphoric reference to the tree in this situation), but (a) is most clearly deviant in this context. It was already suggested that an (discourse-anchored) anaphoric NP (in contrast to non-anaphoric ones) is an indicator of connection-to-context that overrides subject as indicator, which would explain why (b) is as natural as (d) to "connect" the answer to the question (and (d) has the Gricean disadvantage of being a LONGER sentence than (b)). But without an anaphoric asymmetry in the two NPs, it is clearly better to put the answering NP in subject position, (c), than non-subject, (a). In (15), to be taken as answers to the question *What happened to the truck?*,

- (15) a. The truck hit the tree.
- b. It hit the tree.
- c. The tree was hit by the truck.
- d. The tree was hit by it.

only (b) is fully natural, with (a) slightly less preferred, and both (c) and (d) deviant. As before, putting the answering NP in subject position is normal: (a) or (b). Because both (c) and (d) involve a passive (a longer and "marked" form) where the active would have had the "right" NP as subject, even the "correct" asymmetry in anaphoric forms in (d) does not override the wrong subject choice (contrast with (14b)). Attributing the source of prominence to the lexical subject-argument of *hit* could not have explained this pattern, as it corresponds in meaning to a non-subject in the passives. This paradigm of voice-shift X anaphora-shift can be repeated with other kinds of connections to prior discourse besides WH question and answer, I believe.

Another argument, which brings out more intuitively the "perspective" associated with the subject position, is to use the verb which is most certainly a true symmetric predicate: the verb *be* with two proper names or other definite referring expressions. I avoid cases like *Mary is a doctor*, where the second is indefinite, because of the now common proposal that this "predicative" NP is in some sense a predicate (Partee 1986), in contrast to the subject NP, which entails of course that this *be* is not symmetric. But though "identity statements" like *Tully is Cicero* have been subjected to much scrutiny in the philosophical literature, one aspect of the meaning of *be* here which has not been questioned, as far as I know, is that its meaning is symmetrical with two flanking names or definite descriptions. I assume the burden of proof here is on anyone who would want to claim *be* is NOT symmetrical in meaning in these cases. Now in ordinary discourse, one often finds advice given and questions asked in the following counterfactual forms:

- (16) a. If I were you, I wouldn't buy that used car.  
 b. If you were me, would you ask him for a date?

The semantics of these sentences presents many mysteries, but here I am only interested in the fact that while the two examples in (16) are common, none of the statements in (17) are completely normal, nor the questions in (18):

- (17) a. #If I were you, you wouldn't buy that used car.  
 b.?#If you were me, you wouldn't buy that used car.  
 c. #If you were me, I wouldn't buy that used car.
- (18) a. #If you were me, would I ask him for a date?  
 b.?#If I were you, would I ask him for a date?  
 c. #If I were you, would you ask him for a date?

(Parallel comments would hold for *If I were Bill, I would take the job.* vs. *#If I were Bill, he would take the job.*) A full discussion would take us too far afield, but note: (i) In the advising statement, the subject pronoun must be first-person, but in

the question it must be second person: (17b), (18b)<sup>1</sup>. This is probably because, in some sense, (16a) offers the speaker's thoughts and judgments applied to the hearer's personal situation, "the speaker's mind in the hearer's body", while the question asks for the reverse (though why identification by thoughts takes precedence over physical identity may ultimately be obscure). (ii) The subject pronoun of the antecedent clause must be the same as that of the consequent clause: (17a,c), (18a,c). Some might dismiss this as a preference for grammatical parallelism, but I think it is not. The offending (a) and (c) sentences are not bad style nor uninterpretable but are, with work, meaningful and differ from (16) in tending to suggest a bizarre "mind control" of one person over another of the science-fiction sort. The relevance to our present concerns, however, is simply that there are clear asymmetries in meaning brought about by interchanging arguments of *be*---involving a difference in "perspective"---which we otherwise have no need to attribute to *be*'s lexical meaning but may need independently to characterize the subject vs. non-subject NPs in discourse.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sentences of the (17b)-form are not advice like (16a) is, though they can be retorts to counterfactual advice, e.g. as a response to your advice in (16a), I might say *If you were me, you couldn't AFFORD that car.* That is, they continue to talk about the same kind of non-actual possible world one's interlocutor has set up. Similarly, (18b) is not a request for information like (16a) but can be a rhetorical question (i.e. expecting a negative answer.)

<sup>2</sup> That is, I am assuming that at least in a counterfactual sentence, but maybe in other intensional contexts as well, the subject NP referent by itself, in addition to contributing compositionally to the proposition expressed by the antecedent clause as a whole, somehow also plays a role in determining the precise connection between that counterfactual antecedent proposition and the actual world, i.e. via how the persons in the counterfactual worlds are anchored to their real-world counterparts. Whether it does this through literal meaning or only implicature I do not know; this question is well beyond the scope of this paper and relates to much recent work, e.g. (Stalnaker 1984).