

Course Assignments

If you are taking this course for credit, then you must complete **one** of the questions below. This question is due at the beginning of the last class; that is, on Thursday, July 14. Absolutely **no** late assignments will be accepted. Please give me a hard-copy of your assignment. If you absolutely must give me an electronic copy, it **must** be a .pdf file. I will **not** accept any .doc or .rtf files.

Your answers to the question you choose should be one to two pages long. Please give full, well-argued, self-contained answers. In supporting your conclusions, be sure to include the relevant theoretical background, to explain what kind of data is relevant to reaching your conclusion, and to present and explicate this data. I am not looking for a research paper, but I am looking for independent thinking! You may handwrite your answers as long as your writing is clear and legible.

If you are not a native speaker of English, you may want to consult native speakers and dictionaries, particularly corpus-based ESL dictionaries such as Collins COBUILD or LDOCE, in order to get a sense of the uses and meanings of the English verbs in the questions.

1. Transitive/Intransitive Verb Pairs and Proto-roles

(Requires a knowledge of Dowty 1991)

The subject and object selection rules of Dowty's paper "Thematic Proto-roles and Argument Selection" (1991) are intended to determine which argument of a verb with two or more arguments will be the subject and which the object, assuming that it is known that the verb is transitive. This approach, then, presupposes that there is a way to determine whether or not a two-argument verb is transitive. There are, however, two-argument verbs that are not transitive; these verbs express their arguments as a subject and a PP complement, as in *Parents depend on their children*. One might expect that if there were a pair of semantically close two-argument verbs, one transitive and one intransitive, they might differ systematically in the number of proto-role properties associated with their arguments. Three plausible hypotheses regarding the nature of such a difference follow:

HYPOTHESIS 1: The subject of the transitive verb has more proto-agent properties than the subject of the intransitive verb; the non-subject arguments of both verbs have the same number of proto-patient properties.

HYPOTHESIS 2: The non-subject argument of the transitive verb has more proto-patient properties than the non-subject argument of the intransitive verb; the subjects of both verbs have the same number of proto-agent properties.

HYPOTHESIS 3: The subject of the transitive verb has more proto-agent properties than the subject of the intransitive verb and the non-subject argument of the transitive verb has more proto-patient properties than the non-subject argument of the intransitive verb.

Evaluate these three hypotheses with respect to **three** of the **five** data sets below. On the basis of your analysis of these data sets discuss whether Dowty's proto-role approach to argument selection can be profitably extended to non-transitive two-argument verbs.

- (1) a. Sally admired the carving's detail.
b. Sally marveled at the carving's detail.
- (2) a. Tracy saw the gallery's newest painting.
b. Tracy looked at the gallery's newest painting.
- (3) a. The teacher read the book.
b. The teacher read from the book.
- (4) a. Martha climbed the mountain.
b. Martha climbed up the mountain.
- (5) a. The horse kicked the rider.
b. The horse kicked at the rider.

2. Are Effected Objects Direct Objects?

Some researchers have proposed that different semantic roles should be assigned to the direct objects of the verbs *build* and *damage*, in their basic senses illustrated in (6).

- (6) a. Toby built a lovely house.
b. Penelope damaged the loom.

Specifically, they claim that the object of the verb *damage* is a Patient in the strongest sense—that is, an affected entity. However, the object of *build* has been opposed to the object of *damage* in traditional grammar, via what is known as the “effected” versus “affected” object distinction: an effected object is an object whose existence is brought about by the action denoted by the verb, while an affected object is an object that is in some way affected by the action denoted by the verb.

The question is whether it is linguistically justified to distinguish these two types of objects; that is, should a lexical semantic representation treat each differently? Your answer should support your conclusion by citing ways in which language distinguishes (or does not distinguish) among these types of objects.

3. Body-Part Objects

In English descriptions of the natural movements of body parts, as in *She raised a hand* or *She tossed her head*, use a transitive verb, taking the body part as object. In some languages, however, the body parts are expressed as obliques in such descriptions. In Russian, for instance, they are expressed as instrumental NPs, as in (7). This possibility suggests that these (uses of) verbs should be distinguished from prototypical agent-patient verbs. Is there semantic and/or syntactic evidence from English or another language you know for NOT treating these verbs as prototypical transitive verbs?

- (7) Moved body parts are objects in English, but instrumental NPs in Russian:
vskinut' golovoj ‘toss head-INST’, *dvigat' kryl'jami* ‘move wings-INST’, *ševelit' pal'-cami* ‘move fingers-INST’

4. Subclasses of “Interaction” Verbs

Blume (1998) identifies a set of verbs which are transitive in English, but which are realized with a nominative and dative argument (or nominative and some other oblique) in many other languages. She calls these “interaction” verbs because they typically involve two animate arguments and identifies several subsets. One subset of these verbs involves motion, and McFadden (2004) has recently argued for German that the members of this subset should be distinguished from other nominative-dative verbs. Specifically, he argues that in German the dative NP does not pattern like the dative NP of other interaction verbs or of verbs of giving. The question is whether you can find evidence for distinguishing these verbs from other interaction verbs in English (where they are all transitive) or in some other language you know (where they may be transitive or may be nominative-dative/oblique).

(8) Subclasses of interaction verbs:

- a. Verbs of communication/social gesture (rather than transmission of a proposition that changes knowledge): listen to, answer, greet, call for, wave to, congratulate, thank, read to, threaten, give notice to, ...
- b. Motion verbs: follow, dodge, meet
Both participants show autonomous activity, performing actions independently of each other.
- c. ‘Obey’ verbs: obey, work for, serve
“Nominative participant that has to conform to particular standards and/or purposes presupposed on the part of the dative participant”

(Blume 1998:274)

5. Crosslinguistic Differences in Transitivity

Tsunoda has proposed a transitivity hierarchy that he claims can be used to characterize differences in the inventory of transitive verbs across languages. Can you identify one or more systematic differences in the set of transitive verbs in English and a second language you are familiar with? The differences could involve verbs that are transitive in English and not in the second language or vice versa. If these differences involve verbs that figure in Tsunoda’s hierarchy, are they consistent with it? Can these instances of crosslinguistic variation in argument expression be explained in the context of a theory of the lexical semantic underpinnings of transitivity and argument realization? Explain.

6. The Ranking of Instruments

In most of the thematic hierarchies cited in Lecture Notes II, instruments are ranked above patients, but in Dik’s and Givón’s thematic hierarchies instruments are ranked below patients. Which ranking do you think would be preferable? Explain your answer, citing appropriate evidence.