

# Summary of Semantic Roles and Grammatical Relations

*Eng 595G, 19 October 2007*

**Semantic roles** (SRs) are roles that participants play in events and situations. They are part of the content of linguistic communication, therefore they are defined in terms of prototypes, and the labels we give them are convenient approximations. The semantic roles that we will be concerned with in this class are taken largely from Berk (1999), with some modification and extension. We will use the convention of indicating semantic roles in capital letters, and grammatical relations in lower case letters. Here is the list of semantic roles with examples:

**AGENT:** The typically animate perceived instigator of an action (Berk, p.15). The noun "Percival" expresses the AGENT in the following examples:

Percival ate all the kimchi. All the kimchi was eaten by Percival. It was Percival who ate the kimchi. Why did Percival eat the kimchi?

**INVOLUNTARY CAUSER** (Berk, p.16, simply calls this the "CAUSER"). Also "FORCE": The participant that causes an event without doing so with intention (on purpose). "Water" refers to an INVOLUNTARY CAUSER in the following examples:

The water destroyed my computer. The city was inundated by water.

**INSTRUMENT** (Berk, p. 17): An "intermediate cause." Usually an AGENT acts upon an INSTRUMENT, and the INSTRUMENT affects the event or situation. "The hammer" refers to an INSTRUMENT in the following examples:

Percival broke the window with the hammer. This hammer will break the window. The window was broken by the hammer.

**EXPERIENCER** (Berk, p. 17): Animate, but unintentional locus of a sensory impression or psychological state. "Percival" is the EXPERIENCER in the following examples:

Percival heard a train coming. Percival felt sad when he heard the news. The answer seemed wrong to Percival.

**PATIENT** (Berk, p. 19): A participant that is affected by the action of a verb. The more obviously and concretely a participant is affected by the action of the verb, the better example of a PATIENT it is. "Percival" refers to a PATIENT in the following examples:

Percival fell off the ladder. Lucretia slapped Percival. Percival died. She dropped the flowerpot on Percival.

**THEME** (Berk, p. 20, calls this "described or located" but THEME is more standard): a participant whose properties, location or involuntary movement is predicated. "Ball" refers to the THEME in the following examples:

The ball rolled into the kitchen. Percival saw the ball. The ball is in the kitchen. There is a ball in the suitcase. The ball is red.

**RECIPIENT** (not explicitly mentioned by Berk): The typically animate endpoint of a transferred item. "Percival" expresses a RECIPIENT in the following examples:

Percival received the letter. Lucretia sent the letter to Percival. Lucretia sent Percival the letter.

**BENEFACTEE** (also **BENEFACTIVE**, Berk p. 291): The typically animate participant that benefits from an action or situation. "Percival" refers to the **BENEFACTEE** in the following examples:

This book is for Percival. I mowed the lawn for Percival. I made Percival a sandwich.

**LOCATION** or **LOCATIVE** participant (not explicitly described as a semantic role by Berk. Not to be confused with "locative subject"): Any participant that describes the location of an action or situation, or the source, path or goal of a moving object. "Table" refers to a **LOCATIVE** participant in the following examples:

Your sandwich is on the table. He put the book under the table. He had to walk around the table. The pen fell off the table.

**NOTE:** In a sentence like "The table is in the bedroom," the semantic role of "table" is **THEME** (described or located subject according to Berk). "The bedroom" is the **LOCATION**.

**POSSESSOR** (not explicitly mentioned by Berk): The typically animate participant that owns or is temporarily in control of some other participant. "Percival" refers to the **POSSESSOR** in the following examples:

Percival has three cats. Percival's cats are annoying. Those cats are Percival's.

Counter to what Berk (pp. 21-23) says, we will NOT be considering *empty it* and *cataphoric it* to be semantic roles. These are *grammatical devices* used to fulfill a *grammatical* requirement in English that all sentences must have a *grammatical* subject.

**Grammatical Relations** (GRs) are relations between words in sentences. These are much more clearly defined than semantic roles, since they involve human interaction with communicated content. Because our minds are finite, we must always "carve out" (i.e., create) bounded categories from inherently unbounded semantic space. For this reason, grammatical relations are identified on a language-specific basis. Because they are *grammatical* categories, they must have *grammatical* definitions. These vary from one language to the next. Therefore there are no *universal* definitions of grammatical relations, though there are some tendencies. The definitions we give here will apply only to English.

**Subject.** The subject is the nominal element (noun, noun phrase or pronoun) that the verb agrees with. It comes right before the verb in unmarked, declarative clauses, and when pronominalized, employs subjective pronouns (I, she, we, they, etc.). "Percival" is the subject in the following examples:

Percival ate all the kimchi. Percival heard a train coming. Percival is tall.

**(Direct) object:** A nominal element that comes right after the verb in unmarked, declarative sentences, and is not preceded by a preposition. Percival is the direct object in the following examples.

Lucretia saw Percival. Mary kicked Percival. Lucretia sent Percival a letter.

**Indirect object:** A nominal element preceded by "to" or "for" that can be paraphrased as a direct object. Percival is the indirect object in the following examples:

Lucretia sent a letter to Percival. Lucretia made a sandwich for Percival.

NOTE: This is *different* from the way Berk describes the indirect object relation. In this respect Berk takes a traditional approach. We are taking a more linguistic approach. Therefore we recognize that "Percival" in the following two examples has the same *semantic role* (recipient), but different *grammatical relations*:

- a. Lucretia sent a letter to Percival.
- b. Lucretia sent Percival a letter.

The scene referred to is the same for both sentences, therefore the semantic roles do not change. However, there is a *grammatical* difference between them – in (a) Percival appears at the end of the clause, and is preceded by "to." In (b) Percival appears right after the verb, and does not follow a preposition. Therefore it is grammatically defined as a direct object (see above). *Grammatical* relations are distinguished by *grammatical* properties. *Semantic roles* are distinguished by differences in *meaning*.

Oblique (not specifically mentioned by Berk): Oblique is the grammatical relation possessed by all "objects of prepositions" in English. Percival is an oblique in the following examples.

She donated her millions to Percival. We mowed the lawn for Percival. The ladder fell on Percival.

NOTE: "Percival" is not an indirect object in "She donated her millions to Percival." This is because Percival cannot appear in the direct object position for this verb: "\*She donated Percival her millions."

Genitive: English has two genitives, the "of" genitive (sometimes called the Latin genitive), and the "-s" genitive (sometimes called the Saxon genitive). This is the only grammatical relation that holds between two nominal elements, rather than between a noun and a verb. "Percival" is a genitive in the following examples:

Percival's cats, a picture of Percival, Percival's favorite color

**Examples:** The following are examples similar to the ones that appear on Study Questions #3. These should help you understand what is being asked for in question #1:

Lucretia left the room.  
SR AGENT      SR LOCATION  
GR Subject      GR Object

Percival                  heard the airplane.  
SR EXPERIENCER      SR THEME  
GR Subject                  GR Object

Mother      bought Sarah                  a new dress.  
SR AGENT      SR RECIPIENT SR THEME  
GR Subject      GR Object      GR None

Percival opened the door with this key.  
SR AGENT      SR PATIENT      SR INSTRUMENT  
GR Subject      GR Object      GR Oblique