BLACK TAI SENTENCE TYPES

A GENERATIVE SEMANTIC APPROACH[1]

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Introduction

One of the major developments in modern linguistics has been an increased awareness and study of the relationship between semantics and syntax. Syntactic structure is basically a form--a device specific to a given language--by which its speakers express underlying semantic concepts, many of which are common to human beings throughout the world.

In studying the syntax of a language, if we begin with these underlying concepts and work from the meaning down to the form, we are at a twofold advantage. First, the global nature of many broader semantic categories gives us a predictable starting point from which to investigate the diversified, less predictable syntactic patterns of individual languages. Second, the classifying of syntactic features according to the semantic categories they manifest is more relevant and satisfying than a classification based only on surface syntactic patterns. If we begin with broad semantic categories that divide conceptual experience in a meaningful fashion, it is highly probable that these divisions will be reflected in the syntax in one way or another to a large degree, and that these contrastive features will be among the ones of greatest interest. The syntactic 'feedback', in turn, can be used to cast further light on the semantic structure of the language.

For a number of years now, linguists have been wrestling with the problem of defining those semantic categories which adequately map out the range of human experience, and we are indebted to them for their labor. Charles Fillmore (1968), for example, focused on the case configurations associated with various verbs. Wallace Chafe (1970) gave more attention to the nature of the verb itself, showing a basic division between states, processes, and actions, and demonstrating the applicability of this verbal division to various noun configurations in a semantic analysis of English. Thus, meaningful semantic categories have been shown to exist along two parameters--the nature of the verb itself, and the nature of the noun case roles that surround the verb. In effect, verbs, and the sentences in which they occur, may be classified semantically according to these two criteria.

This paper uses these two parameters to develop a matrix whose members constitute semantic sentence types widely found in human speech. The matrix then provides us with a logical starting point for the investigation of the semantic and syntactic sentence structures of a specific language. Application of the matrix is made to a survey of sentence types in the Black Tai language of Vietnam.[2]

Predicate Categories

In examining the semantic structure of English, Chafe (1970:98ff) conceives of four fundamental verb types:

1. A verb, further specified as a state, describing the state of an associated patient:

(1) The elephant is dead.

2. A verb, further specified as a process, describing the change from one state to another of an associated patient:

(2) The elephant died.

3. A verb, further specified as an action, describing the activity of an agent:

(3) The men laughed.

4. A verb, further specified as both an action and a process, describing the action of an agent to bring about a change in the condition of a patient:

(4) The tiger killed the elephant.

In addition, Chafe (1970:101f) speaks of ambient sentences, in which no noun exists at all. Sometimes the verb in such sentences is specified as a state:

(5) It's hot.

(6) It's late.

and sometimes, as a process:

(7) It's raining.

The distinction between state, process, and action is by no means limited to verbs associated only with agents and/or patients. Chafe (1970:144ff) demonstrates this in some measure by applying the verbal distinction to sentences containing a number of other noun configurations as well. I would suggest, in fact, that this verbal distinction is as basic to the semantic classification of human experience as are the noun case roles associated with a verb, and therefore that the distinction of verbs between states, processes, and actions subdivides the sentences containing any given configuration of case roles, unless it can be demonstrated that a given combination of verb type and role set is incongruous with our conceptual experience.

The sentence types which Chafe labels ambient share a common feature with his third basic sentence type (verb specified as action, plus agent), namely, just as the ambients are deleted-patient subsets of basic sentence types 1 and 2, so sentence type 3 is, in essence, a deleted-patient subset of sentence type 4. Note the following illustrations:

V_{state} (patient)

(8) The stove is hot.

V_{state}

(9) It's hot. (i.e. The weather is hot.)

$V_{process}$ (patient)

(10) He's growing up.

$V_{process}$

(11) It's raining.

$V_{process\ action}$ (agent, patient)

(12) The hunter killed the elephant.

V_{action} (agent)

(13) The men laughed.

In the case of sentences such as (13) (Chafe's third basic sentence type), it is probably more accurate to say that the patient is manifested by the same noun as the agent, but is in some way non-prominent in the semantic structure, and lacks the capacity for unique manifestation, rather than to say that the patient is deleted altogether.[3] This does not destroy the analogy with ambient verbs, however. Even ambient verbs could be said to have a patient at some deep level of semantics, but because of its indefinite or irrelevant nature, the patient is relegated to the level of the subconscious and is ordinarily not expressed.[4]

If it is true that the subject of (13) fills both agent and patient roles (the patient being present only in a non-prominent sense), we may wonder whether the predicate[5] relates the two roles in the same way as in (12), and, if so, whether the two predicates should be labeled identically. This, in turn, leads to a more general and important question needing our consideration: what is the distinctive characteristic of predicates relating agents to patients? In sentence (14), it is apparent that the agent causes the patient to undergo a process involving a change of state:

(14) The explorer killed the bear.

Therefore:

(15) The bear died.[6]

This relationship between agent and patient may be symbolized:

$$P_{causative}\ (Ag,\ P_{process}\ (Pt)\ )$$ [7]

It is more difficult to see a causative relationship in a sentence such as (16):

(16) The boy hit the wall.

The difficulty is that the action of sentence (16) does not inherently involve a change of state on the part of the patient, expressible in a paraphrasing process sentence, as (15) paraphrases the change of state inherent in (14). We normally do not include such verbs as 'to become hit' among change-of-state verbs. And consequential processes, such as

(17) The wall caved in.

or

(18) The wall got scuffed up.

are not inherent in (16). Thus we could say:

(19) The boy hit the wall, but nothing happened to it.

But sentence (20) would be anomalous:

(20) The explorer killed the bear, but nothing happened to it.

It seems that an adequate view of the relationship between agents and patients is broader than the causing of a change of state, at least in the more limited sense we have employed thus far. Rather, for sentences such as (16) as well as those such as (14), we may say that the agent causes the patient to be affected in the manner described by the predicate (e.g. 'to become hit'), symbolized:

$$P_{causative}\ (Ag,\ Pt)$$

This, in turn, may cause the patient to undergo some change-of-state process as a direct consequence (e.g. sentence (17) 'caved in')--sometimes as an inherent consequence (e.g. sentence (15) 'died'). This secondary causative is symbolized, as earlier:

$$P_{causative}\ (Ag,\ P_{process}\ (Pt)\ )$$

Causation, then, seems to lie at the heart of the agent-patient relationship. Let us therefore consider all predicates relating agents and patients as $P_{causative}$.

In forming a matrix to serve as a semantic starting point with