

The Diversity of Agency and its Validity as a Grammatical Concept

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Overview

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Agency in various theories
- 3) RRG: Expanding the semantic space
- 4) Non-canonical cases
- 5) Conclusion

1) Introduction

John gave the book to Mary.



Mary killed a fly.



Adrian jumped to the door.



1) Introduction

Problematic cases:

John stumbled and fell.

The dog broke the window.

The rock broke the window.

?Sophie intentionally fell.

2) Agency in various theories

Agency:

- ▶ Often tacitly assumed to be semantically primitive
- ▶ Vague
- ▶ ‚Thematic relations‘

Atomic
e.g. Fillmore

Non-atomic
e.g. Dowty

3) RRG: Expanding the semantic space

- ▶ Semantically driven framework
- ▶ Monostratal

Basics:

Aktionsart classes + lexical decomposition

→ Set of tests available to determine both

RRG

„Thematic relations“ = functions of argument positions in relation to the predicate

John killed the deer

[do' (John, \emptyset)] CAUSE [BECOME dead' (deer)]

Agent



Patient



RRG: Effector

Effector = dynamic participant in an event

Larry killed the deer.

John read a book.

Sophie hit the target.

Agent

RRG treats ,agent‘ as a *reading* of the more basic ,effector‘.

John killed the deer

→ agentive

John accidentally killed the deer

→ non-agentive

Holisky's principle (1987)

Most verbs are unmarked for agency.

Bottom line: If there is a human effector, it is interpreted as agentive, unless if there is evidence to the contrary.

→ Agency is an implicature

Effector

Different factors influence reading of effector:

- ▶ Pragmatics (Holisky's principle)
- ▶ Properties of the referent
- ▶ Construction
- ▶ Properties of the verb

→ 3 readings: agent, instrument and force

Effector: properties of referent

Some referents are more prone to agent-readings than others:

The baby broke the window.

?The baby broke the window intentionally.

The looter broke the window.

The looter broke the window intentionally.

Effector: properties of referent

John broke the window.

John broke the window intentionally.

The dog broke the window.

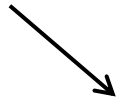
?The dog broke the window intentionally.

*The bottle broke the window.

Effector: construction

Purposive constructions can force an agent-reading:

Jesus died to save us from our sins.



patient → construction forces agent-reading

?/*John died to make us clean up our room.

Properties of the verb

Aktionsart-classes correlates with likeliness of agent-interpretation:

John melted the ice.

John intentionally melted the ice.

Sophie saw the picture.

?Sophie intentionally saw the picture.

Properties of the verb

activity/accomplishment > achievement > state



Increasing likeliness of agent-reading

Effector – other readings

Instrument: inanimate, intermediate effector.
Under control of another effector.

Force: inanimate effector, NOT under control of another. Can take instruments!

Instrument

John broke the window **with a rock**.

Mary smashed the vase **with a hammer**.

Patrick skinned the boar **with a knife**.

...

Force

The wind blew down the tower.

The storm made the ship capsize.

The typhoon destroyed the village with large quantities of sea water.

...

Force

The storm destroyed the barn.

The storm destroyed the barn with flying branches.

The rock broke the window.

*The rock broke the window with a branch.

→ Forces \neq Instruments

→ Forces behave more like agents

Force

Share features of both agents and instruments:

- ▶ Inanimate (I)
- ▶ Can take instruments (A)
- ▶ Never intermediate effector (A)

Agency = part of much bigger semantic space

4) Non-canonical cases

The Praetor destroyed the city with 4000 soldiers. → comitative reading

The Praetor destroyed the city with 4000 soldiers. → non-comitative reading

The Praetor had the city destroyed with 4000 soldiers.

Non-comitative reading

The Praetor destroyed the city with 4000 soldiers.

Az USA	Grenadá-t	mindössze
the USA-NOM	Grenada-ACC	altogether

400 ember-rel	szabadította	fel
400 man-INS	liberated	up

→ Coded as instrument
4000 soldiers = instrument?

INS-S alternation

John broke the window **with a rock**.

The rock broke the window.

Sara put out the fire **with the water**.

The water put out the fire.

▶ If instrument → INS-S alternation

4000 soldiers destroyed the city.

Seems instrument-like...

No, because:

Manipulating entity is not implied

→ ergo, **agent**

Contrary to:

The rock broke the window.

→ Manipulator is implied → ergo, **instrument**

„Dehumanized“ instrument

If they are dehumanized, they should behave like regular instruments.

Q: Why then no INS–S
alternation possible?

Real dehumanized instrument:

Bill destroyed the window with John's corpse.

John's corpse destroyed the window.

Causee/Executor

Paraphrase:

The Praetor had the 4000 soldiers destroy the city.

→ Same semantic structure, different linking to syntax.

Causee/Executor

Sophie had Mary tip over a cow.

?Sophie tipped over a cow with Mary.

Causee/Executor

Human instruments and causees/executor are one and the same: additional reading of effector.

→ Some verbs allow both the INS-linking and ,causee'-linking. Others allow only ,causee'-linking.

Reasons?

- 1) Core function of INS-coding is to code instruments, causees only peripherally.
- 2) INS-coding as marker of focus on instigator. Its use backgrounds the causee.
- 3) Certain verbs forbid INS-linking due to their semantic properties.

4th effector type

Effector subtypes				
	Agent	Force	Instrument	Causee
Animacy	+	- ([+motive])	-	+
Instigator	Yes	Yes	No	No
INS-S alternation	N/A	N/A	Yes	No
HP relevant	Yes (+)	No	No	Yes (+/-)

Causee and volition?

Causees can be volitional or non-volitional.

Quechua:

Nuqa Fan-ta rumi-ta apa-ci-ni
1SG Juan-ACC rock-ACC carry-CAUSE-1SG
→ [- volitional]

Nuqa Fan-wan rumi-ta apa-ci-ni
1SG Juan-INS rock-ACC carry-CAUSE-1SG
→ [\pm volitional]

Causee and volition

French:

J'ai	fait	nettoyer	les
1SG=AUX.1SG	made	clean.INF	DEF.PL

Toilettes	par	le	général
Toilets.PL	by	DEF.SG	general

→ [\pm volitional]

Causee and Volition

J'ai	fait	nettoyer	les
1SG=AUX.1SG	made	clean.INF	DEF.PL

Toilettes	au	général
Toilets.PL	to.DEF.SG	general

→ [- volitional]

Test:

„...et il l'a voulu“ → non-sensical

Causee and volition

English:

I made Juan carry the rock.

*I made Juan carry the rock and he wanted to.

I had Juan carry the rock.

I had Juan carry the rock and he wanted to.

I had Juan carry the rock against his will.

Causee and volition

Had/INS/par → [\pm volitional], governed by Holisky's principle.

Made/ACC/à → [-volitional]

Boundaries of semantics?

→ Animacy and volition: defining for agency/causee/instrument?

The robot broke the window.

The computer virus destroyed the state's database.

The AI defended the firewall.

The game's AI had planned an all-out assault.

5) Conclusion

Instruments, agents, forces and causees are interconnected concepts.

- All part of the same semantic space.
- Complex playing field that is dependent on individual language.
- Societal innovations (may) call certain concepts into question.

**Thank you for your
attention!**

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