**CHAPTER 14**

**Grammatical semantics**

**14.2 The meaning of major grammatical categories**

Another approach takes a cognitive view and sees nouns as denoting a 'region of cognitive space' (Langacker 1991b), whereas adjectives and verbs denote 'relations', adjectives portraying the states of affairs they denote as atemporal and verbs presenting their denotations as temporal. The cognitive viewpoint here seems correct. However, the notion of a 'region of cognitive space' is not very perspicuous.

**14.3 Grammatical meanings associated with nouns and noun phrases**

Certain types of meaning are typically carried by grammatical inflections or markers—associated with nouns or noun phrases. The most important of these are: definiteness, number, animacy, gender, and functional roles. Definiteness is dealt with in Chapter 15, and will not be discussed here; functional roles are as much concerned with verbs as with nouns and will be discussed in the next section. Here, we shall look at number, animacy, and gender.

**14.3.1 Number**

Number is an inflectional category of nouns or noun phrases, which is not found in all languages. Semantically, number systems are all concerned, one way or another, with how many there are of some item. Number systems are not to be confused with numeral systems, which are linguistic devices for counting *(one, two, forty-three, one hundred and ninety,* etc.); obviously there

are connections between the two, but numerals are syntactically and semantically

distinct from number markers. The number system in English has only two terms: **singular** and **plural.** We shall examine the semantics of these in a moment. A minority of languages

have a three-term number system including a **dual,** used for just two things.

**14.3.1.1 Count nouns and mass nouns**

English nouns are traditionally divided into two classes, count nouns and mass nouns. They can be recognized by the following criteria:

(i) Count nouns:

(a) cannot occur in the singular without a determiner:

*This cup\\*Cup is clean;*

(b) occur normally in the plural;

(c) are quantifiable by *a few, many,* and numerals:

*a few/many cups; (\*much cup), thirty cups.*

(ii) Mass nouns:

(a) can occur in the singular without a determiner:

*Butter is good for you;*

(b) are odd in the plural (or require reinterpretation):

*butters, milks,*

(c) are quantifiable by *a little, much:*

*a little/much milk; (\*many milk).*

Count nouns present something as being manifested in discrete, boundedunits that in principle can be counted; mass nouns present their referent as an bounded mass.

***Basic mass nouns used as count nouns***

Examples:

(4) Three beers/cheeses/cakes/chocolates

(5) Three wines

**14.3.1.3 Singular nouns with (optional) plural concord**

Two further number anomalies are worth pointing out. The first concerns so called group words. These are count nouns which have the peculiarity that in the singular form they can take either singular or plural concord with the verb:

(12) The committee is/are considering the matter right now.

There is a subtle difference of meaning between the uses. With singular concord, the group is conceptualized as a unity; with plural concord, it is conceptualized as constituted out of separate individuals. Predicates which can only apply to each individual separately are anomalous with singular concord:

(15) The committee are wearing their hats.

(16) \*The committee is wearing its hat/their hats.

Predicates which can only be true of the group as a whole are anomalous with plural concord:

(17) The committee was/\*were formed six months ago.

**14.3.1.4 Plural nouns with (optional) singular concord**

The second anomaly is the converse of the first, namely, plural nouns with singular concord:

(19) Five wives is more than enough for anyone.

This use seems to be confined to noun phrases with numerals in them:

(20) Those wives is more than enough for any man.

(21) ?Several wives is too much for an old man.

In this usage, the quantified noun phrase is interpreted as a single quantity.

**14.3.2 Gender and animacy**

Gender is a classification system for nouns, which affects such grammatical matters as agreement and pronominal reference.It is usual to make a distinction between **natural gender** and **grammatical gender.** English is usually said to exhibit natural gender (in so far as it has

gender at all—it affects only pronominal reference), since the appropriate pronoun

*(he, she,* or *it)* can be predicted with a high degree of success purely on the basis of the sex (male, female, or neuter) of the referent. In languages possessing grammatical gender, at least a significant proportion of cases of gender assignment are apparently semantically arbitrary. Gender is of course intimately bound up with animacy, since prototypically, only living things can be male or female.

An examination of the English pronoun system shows that it, too, correlates to some extent with the animacy scale:

***He\she* only  *he\she\it\ it* only**

non-infant infant humans things

humans animals

gods, angels (cars, ships)

**14.4 Grammatical meanings associated with the verb**

**14.4.1 Tense**

A distinction is usually made between **primary** (or **absolute)** tenses, which encode event time directly relative to time of speaking, and **secondary** (or **relative)** tenses, which encode event time relative to a secondary reference time which, in turn, is located relative to speaking time, thus making the relation between event time and speaking time an indirect one.

There are three basic primary tenses, past (event occurs before time of speaking); present (event occurs concurrently with speaking time, or includes it); and future (event is projected to occur after the time of speaking):

(25) John saw Bill.

(26) John sees Bill.

(27) John will see Bill.

In the case of secondary tenses, there are nine possibilities (in each of the following, the reference time is John's arrival, and the time of Bill's action is situated relative to that):

(28) At the time John arrived, Bill had switched on the lights.

(event prior to reference time; reference time in past)

(29) At the time John arrived, Bill switched on the lights.

(event coincident with reference time; reference time in past)

(30) At the time John arrived, Bill was about to/was going to switch on the lights.

(event subsequent to reference time; reference time in past)

(31) At the time John arrives, Bill has switched off the lights.

(event prior to reference time; reference time in present—can only receive habitual interpretation)

(32) At the time John arrives, Bill switches off the lights.

(event coincident with reference time, reference time in present—can or receive a habitual interpretation)

(33) At the time John arrives, Bill is about to switch off the lights.

(event subsequent to reference time, reference time in present)

(34) At the time John arrives, Bill will have switched off the lights.

(event prior to reference time; reference time in future)

(35) At the time John arrives, Bill will switch on the lights.

(event coincident with reference time, reference time in future)

(36) At the time John arrives, Bill will be about to switch off the lights.

(event subsequent to reference time, reference time in future)

**14.4.2 Aspect**

It is important to distinguish aspect clearly from tense. Tense serves to locate an event in time; aspect says nothing about when an event occurred (except by implication), but either encodes a particular way of conceptualizing an event, or conveys information about the way the event unrolls through time.

**14.4.2.1 Perfective/imperfective**

One of the most widespread aspectual distinctions is that between imperfective

and perfective. In English, there is no regular way of indicating the distinction, but it is often associated with the progressive/simple alternation and can be observed in the following:

(37) I saw the chicken cross the road. (perfective: the event was viewed in its

entirety and is treated as unanalysable)

(38) I saw the chicken crossing the road. (imperfective: event is viewed as

taking time, allowing other events to be temporally located within its

boundaries. Makes no commitment as to whether the chicken successfully

made it to the other side of the road, but sees the chicken's movement

as part of a complete crossing)

**14.4.2.2 Perfect/prospective**

The English **perfect** is a typical example. Consider the difference between the following:

(39) John read the book.

(40) John has read the book.

Both indicate that John's reading of the book occurred in the past. But the first sentence directs our attention into the past, to the specific time when the event occurred; the second sentence, on the other hand, directs our attention towards John's present state, or at least at aspects of it which are attributable to his having read the book at some (indeterminate) time in the past. This is

the essence of the perfect: present relevance of past events.

Some linguists distinguish a counterpart to the perfect, but involving the future, called the prospective. A gloss of this would be: the present relevance of a future event. Consider the difference between the following:

(43) John will leave tomorrow.

(44) John is leaving/is going to leave tomorrow.

One explanation is that the first sentence can be a pure prediction, and can apply to an event which is not under the control either of John or of the speaker. The second sentence, on the other hand, implies that the event is under the control of one or the other, and that decisions and arrangements are currently complete; in other words, things are currently in a state such that, if

all goes according to plan, John will leave tomorrow.

**14.4.3 Voice**

In this section we shall look only at the three traditional voices:

(i) Active: John opened the door.

(ii) Passive: The door was opened by John.

The door was opened.

(iii) Middle: The door opened.

The effect of the middle voice is to abolish the logical subject altogether, and construe the event as being causeless. (Even in the short passive, although the logical subject is not overtly mentioned, the event is construed as being the result of an action by an 'off-stage' agent.) Clauses whose semantics depart radically from the prototype may resist passivization:

(73) The box contains Mary's jewellery.

(74) \*Mary's jewellery is contained by the box.

(75) John resembles his brother.

(76) \* John's brother is resembled by him.

**14.4.4 Functional roles**

Consider the sentence *John opened the door.* There are two main participants

in the event, John and the door. The relationships that will be illustrated are variously

called **functional roles, case roles, deep cases, participant roles, thematic roles.**

Fillmore's proposals had an elegant simplicity, but history shows elegant simplicity to be a fragile thing in linguistics. Fillmore's original list (1968:24-5) went as follows:

[i] AGENTIVE (A), the case of the typically animate perceived instigator of the action

identified by the verb.

[Mary kicked the cat.]

[ii] INSTRUMENTAL (I), the case of the inanimate force or object causally involved in

the state or action identified by the verb.

[John used the hammer to break the window.

The hammer broke the window.]

[iii] DATIVE (D), the case of the animate being affected by the state or action identified

by the verb.

[Mary heard the nightingale.

The nightingale enchanted Mary.]

[iv] FACTITIVE (F), the case of the object or being resulting from the action or state

identified by the verb, or understood as part of the meaning of the verb.

[John cooked a delicious meal.]

[v] LOCATIVE (L), the case which identifies the location or spatial orientation of the

state or action identified by the verb.

[Mary vaulted **the wall.**

John put his finger **on the button.]**

[vi] OBJECTIVE (o), the semantically most neutral case, . . . conceivably the concept

should be limited to things which are affected by the action or state identified by the verb.

[Mary opened **the door.**

**The door** opened.]

The following indicates the flavour of some later developments:

(i) **Agentive:** Most modern treatments subdivide the AGENTIVE role. There are various problems. A prototypical agent is animate, supplies the energy for the action, and acts deliberately. First of all, an agent-like cause may not be animate: *The wind rattled the windows.* By Fillmore's definition, *wind* should be INSTRUMENTAL, but this does not seem satisfactory;

some linguists suggested a new case, FORCE, which was distinct from AGENTIVE.

(ii) **Instrumental:** Instruments are supposed to be inanimate; what, then, are we to make of *sniffer dogs* in *The police used sniffer dogs to locate the drugs?*

(iii) **Dative** (sometimes called **Experiencer):**

A distinction is often made between EXPERIENCER and BENEFACTIVE, the latter being exemplified by *Mary* in *John made Mary a cake.*

(iv) **Factitive:** This is not now usually separated from PATIENT (see below).

(v) **Locative:** Various subdivisions can be made of this role. One is a simple, static location, as in: *The Ighzui inhabit a remote island in the Pacific.*Three dynamic subdivisions are possible (i.e. cases where motion is at least implied. First, we have SOURCE, as in *The lamp emits heat;* second, PATH, as in *Mary crossed the street;* and finally GOAL, as in *We finally reached the igloo.*

(vi) **Objective:** A frequent division under this heading focuses on whether the affected entity is changed by the process or action, or not. An unchanged inanimate affected is a THEME, as in *John put on his hat;* a changed item is a PATIENT, as in *Mary minced the meat.*

**14.5 Adjectives and properties**

**14.5.1 Modification**

There are two main positions for adjectives in English:

a long book **attributive** position

the book is long **predicative** position

Most adjectives can occur in both positions (there are exceptions: *The man is afraid/\*the afraid man; the main problem/\* The problem is main).*

**14.5.2 Gradable and non-gradable adjectives**

There are two major dichotomies in the classification of adjectives. The first separates **gradable** from **non-gradable** adjectives. This has grammatical consequences, because prototypically, the degree inflections occur only in connection with gradable adjectives; if an adjective is basically non-gradable, then it has to be reinterpreted when inflected for degree (the affix coerces a reinterpretation), as in *Kate was very married* and *Mary is very alive.* These topics are

treated in some detail in Chapter 9.

**14.5.4 Order of modifiers**

Adjectives have a tendency to occur in a particular order when there are several attached to one noun:

(112) Three excellent thick sturdy old black front doors

(113) \*Sturdy thick old front black three excellent doors

There have been many attempts to account for this ordering (which is not identical in all languages, although there are general similarities). One approach describes the order in terms of general concept types:

**Quantity > Value > Physical Property > Age > Colour**