

Eventualities

Linguistics 322

Intermediate Syntax

Contents: predicate | argument | operator | basic eventuality | complete eventuality |

A #predicate is a conceptual term (a branch of semantics). It is equivalent to a head (noun, verb, and so forth) in the syntax. Conceptually, the concept of dying is basically realized as the verb head DIE in the syntax. But it can also be realized as PASS AWAY, CROAK, KICK THE BUCKET, and so forth. Each of these terms denotes a special concept: euphemism (pass away), slang (croak), slang idiom (kick the buck).

An #argument is an implied object or predicate associated with the main predicate. Term is used in both conceptual semantics and syntax for the same thing. For example, take the concept of *die*. The being that undergoes death is an argument of the *die*. The verb DIE implies that someone or some living thing undergoes death. That person or living thing is an argument of death. Note that the concept of a person or living thing does not automatically imply *dying*; it may occur someday but it is not implied. Death is not implied in:

(1) John likes candy.

Most nouns do not take an argument. However, some do:

(2) This cup of tea needs more sugar.

Here, cup is a container noun and it implies the substance that it contains. *tea*, on the other hand, is a THING which does not imply an argument. In 2, the NP *this cup of tea* is an argument of *need* as is the noun phrase 'more sugar'.

In more complex examples, a thing can be implied conceptually, but not in the syntax; i.e.:

(3) John likes to eat.

The verb *eat* implies food, but there is no NP in 3 which expresses food implied by the *like*.

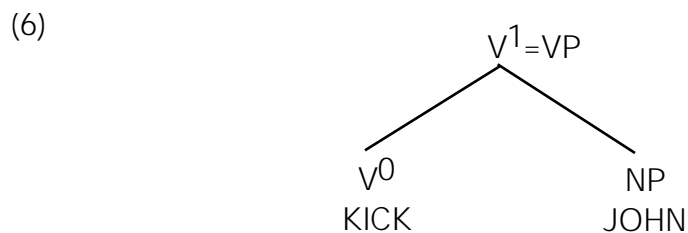
A #basic eventuality is a predicate plus all of its arguments. Conceptually,

(4) 4. "DIE" <"JOHN" >

is a basic eventuality, since "die" has only one argument. In the syntax this corresponds to a basic phrase:

(5) 5. DIE <JOHN>, PASS AWAY <JOHN>, CROAK <JOHN>.

The basic structure in 5 has the following configuration:



#A #modified eventuality can a basic eventuality that is modified. There are two ways to modify an eventuality. The first is by any of an indefinite set of lexical modifiers called adverbs:

(7) John slowly died.

The second way is through a grammatical modifier called an operator. Operators are heads required by the grammar of a specific language. There is no corresponding notion of an operator in conceptual semantics. Lexical modifiers are always optional. In 7 the lexical adverb *slowly* can be deleted without changing the inherent meaning of the basic phrase *John died*. Operators cannot be deleted. In some contexts the grammar will not use a specific operator, in other contexts it will. The most common verbal operator in English is tense. Its corresponding conceptual form is called "TIME". Tense must be included as a default operator for English verb phrase.

The basic phrase 4 above is not modified for tense. It must be. Tense can be either present or past represented as [\pm Past]:

(8) [\pm Past] < DIE < JOHN >>

This means that John died in the past. In the section on verbs, it will be shown how the form in 8. is logically transformed into the surface structure taught in L222. There are other operators such as aspect, voice, relevance, prominence, to name the basic ones.

A complete eventuality corresponds to a clause in the syntax. A clause contains the head, usually a verb, and all the required operators modifying the verb:

(9) John has peacefully died.

The term **proposition** is a semantic term. It is unclear whether there is a syntactic correspondence. David Crystal defines a proposition:

“The unit of meaning which constitutes the subject matter of a state, and which is asserted to be true or false. It takes the form of a simple declarative sentence.”

Propositions, then, must exclude questions, commands, conditional clauses, and counterfactual clauses. Note of these can be true or false:

(10) Was John coming to dinner?

The question is to determine the truth or falseness of whether John was actually coming to dinner.

The following sentence is a proposition since it can be either true or false:

(11) Bill dropped a cup.

This sentence is either true or it is false in the real world. However, the speaker is asserting that the sentence is true. Usually, a speaker utters a positive sentence with the intention of it being true; but, of course, a speaker can be lying. But the speaker is asserting that it is true.

The speaker asserts (11) to be true. Note that the sentence may or may not be true in the real world. Whether it is true is a matter of pragmatics. What we are interested in here is that it is an assertion. The speaker of (11) asserts that the propositional meaning of (11) is true.

Consider the following sentence that contains a conditional clause and a consequential clause:

(12) If Bill drops a cup, he will have to pay for it.

The conditional clause if Bill drops a cup. This by itself is not an assertion of its truth value. It means that if the proposition becomes true at some point, then there will be a consequence: he will have to pay for it. The consequence is not an assertion either.

The next sentence contains a counterfactual clause and a consequence:

(13) If Bill had dropped a cup, he would have had to pay for it.

The speaker asserts in (13) that Bill did not drop a cup, but if he had, he would have had to pay for it. The complementizer if heads both constructions, but the form of the verb changes.

And finally, the speaker may ask a question:

(14) (14) Did Bill break a cup?

Here, the speaker is trying to obtain the information about the truth value of the basic proposition. Two possible answers are (11) or (12):

(15) (15) No, Bill did not break a cup.

Of course, the respondent could answer with:

(16) (6) I don't know whether Bill broke the cup.

The only assertion is that the speaker does not know the answer to the question.

Negative questions tend to mark an expectation:

(17) (7) Didn't Bill break a cup?

The speaker is trying to obtain the same information as in (5), but his expectation is that he thought Bill would have broken it, but he now thinks that perhaps Bill didn't.

The study of propositions is left for semantics and will not be covered in syntax.

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Course Outline
Argument Structure
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