Events and their Participants in Verb Semantics

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Eventuality (in Emmon Bach’s terms) → Verbs

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Verb Semantics
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• What elements of the eventuality becomes part of the verb semantics?
Content of the talk

- Eventuality (in Emmon Bach’s terms) → Verbs
- → stands for *linguistic encoding*.
- What elements of the eventuality becomes part of the verb semantics?
- Focus on participants and their syntactic realization.
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Predicating or Referring to an eventuality

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- “Look at the beautiful *sunset*”.
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“The fire is spreading through the house”.

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- Time and time structure.
- Argumenthood.
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- Time and time structure.
- Argumenthood.
- Inherent Meaning.
The denotation of a verb is an eventuality, and an eventuality is located and structured in time.
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The event receives a specific aspectual encoding when it becomes the denotation of a verb.

Events may be complex, i.e. they may be include subevents (Parsons 1990, Pustejovsky 1991).

- Kill includes an action (cause) which precedes a necessary effect (be dead).
- Show includes an action (make visible) which is followed by a likely effect (see).

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There is no verb without at least one argument (controversial case of natural events described by verbs called impersonal: *to snow, to rain, to thunder*).
Argumenthood is the property of verbs (and eventuality-denoting nouns) of requiring (a certain number and type of) syntactic slots to express the grammatically relevant participants in the event.
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- Some participants may be *incorporated* in verb semantics.
- Some participants may be *backgrounded* in the linguistic encoding.
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- Others...
Arguments are associated with:

- Thematic (or semantic) role (agent, experiencer, theme, patient, instrument etc.). Roles are usually verb-dependent.
- Semantic Type (physical object, human, event, location, artifact, etc.). SemType are inherent features of the arguments.
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“Il fratello di Giulia abita a Milano.”
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- perception verbs (see, smell, hear, listen)
- verbs of cognition (understand, grasp)
- verbs of communication (talk, tell, whisper)
On what basis is it possible to group verbs in semantic classes?

- *sit* is a verb of motion, as it implies a movement of the person sitting but cannot be considered a verb of movement like *enter* and *exist*. It denotes a change of position (Levin 2003, Jezek 2011).
- *arrive* presupposes a movement but describes its outcome (the person who arrived is in a different place than where he was before the event of arriving took place).

It is therefore legitimate to ask whether *to arrive* is a verb of change of place rather than a verb of movement, and which is the most suitable criterion to distinguish between the two classes.
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Some arguments may remain unexpressed: are they still arguments?

- “Lynn reread what she had written until the taxi arrived in front of the hotel.”
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- “The boys are drinking beer in the pub.”
- “The old man rested, drank, and was haunted by a strange thought.”
Classification of arguments in three major types:
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Compositional operations on arguments: Defaulting
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If omitted, True Arguments leave the verb meaning incomplete; the meaning must be saturated and the argument must be expressed:

"After she locked the front door, she went to bed"

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They are **informative** with respect to these properties, i.e. they add information besides the aspectual and semantic information provided by the verbal root.
Fillmore 1968, 119: “Sometimes an argument is obligatorily left out of the surface structure because it is subsumed as a part of the meaning of the predicate.”
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“An example of a verb with an incorporated Object is DINE, which is conceptually the same as EAT DINNER but which does not tolerate a direct object.”
Pustejovsky 1995; a shadow argument is obligatorily left out of the syntax because it is **redundant** from the point of view of its contribution to the interpretation of the verb. It can be expressed if it is specified: (subtyping and extraction).
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“She phoned the office”. 

"She phoned the office on the phone."

"She phoned the office on the mobile phone."
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Shadows with Instrument Role

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- iron the dress (straighten Obj with S-arg)
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- bike to the lake shore (move by S-arg)
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• lock the door (close Obj with S-arg)
• iron the dress (straighten Obj with S-arg)
• brush your teeth (clean Obj with S-arg)
• bike to the lake shore (move by S-arg)
• glue two pieces of wood together (put together using S-arg)
dress the kids before breakfast (put S-arg on the kids)
- dress the kids before breakfast (put S-arg on the kids)
- butter the toast (put S-arg on toast, cover toast with S-arg)
“The girl danced every dance”.
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“She lived her life in Boston”.

“Think positive thoughts!”

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• “The girl danced every dance”.
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• “She slept a sound sleep”.

Shadows and Cognate Objects
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Types of Shadows

Not only denominal verbs, cf. Jezek 2016,2018

- camminare

  - Luca stava camminando
  - Luca stava camminando a piedi
  - Luca ha visto una stella cadente
  - Luca ha visto una stella cadente con gli occhi
  - bollire
  - L'acqua bolle
  - La pentola bolle
  - bollire le patate in acqua
  - bollire le patate in acqua salata
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  - *bollire le patate in acqua
  - “bollire le patate in acqua salata”
Types of Shadows
Not only denominal verbs, cf. Jezek 2016,2018

- Verbs with shadow body parts *kick* (leg), *walk* (leg), *knock* (hand, finger), perception verbs *smell*, (nose); *see*, *watch* and *look* (eyes); *listen*, *hear* (ears), *sneeze* (nose), *nod* (head).
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- *I smelt gas with my nose.*
Modes of coming into being

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(= created object → fotografia).
“Mary translated the Italian poem in two weeks. It is a beautiful piece of work”.

Dopo aver dipinto il paesaggio con ampie pennellate, lo ha lasciato al sole ad asciugare.

'After painting the landscape with broad brushstrokes, he left it in the sun to dry'
Syntactic test for Hidden Arguments: anaphora
Pustejovsky and Jezek 2018, Jezek and Pustejovsky 2019

- “Mary translated the Italian poem in two weeks. **It** is a beautiful piece of work”.
- “I copied your passport for the office, but **it** is too blurred to use”.
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Defaulting is a compositional operation that affects true arguments (Jezek 2016)
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Cf. Definite and Indefinite Null Instantiation in Fillmore 1986.
“John started (...) at 8.30 and finished at 5pm."
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Pragmatic Defaulting

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- Pragmatically defaulted true arguments are omissions of an instance salient in the situational context.
- Objectless verbs of this kind still denote a two-place relation, even though the second argument is not realized in surface syntax.
- With true arguments, the need of completion is not a contextual matter, but a context-independent property of the verb type.
Lexical Defaulting

“John ate at 5pm”.

Elisabetta Jezek  Università di Pavia  Verb Semantics
“John ate at 5pm”.
“l parked in front of the building”.
Lexical Defaulting

- “John ate at 5pm”.
- “I parked in front of the building”.
- “John read in the car”.

Elisabetta Jezek  Università di Pavia  Verb Semantics
Lexical Defaulting

- “John ate at 5pm”.
- “I parked in front of the building”.
- “John read in the car”.
- “John listened in the car”.

Elisabetta Jezek  Università di Pavia  Verb Semantics
There is no need to retrieve the particular thing that John wrote and parked, as was the case of start and finish.
Lexical Defaulting

- There is no need to retrieve the particular thing that John wrote and parked, as was the case of start and finish.
- The unexpressed object is to be generically understood as the class of entities (food, information, vehicle) selected by the predicate.
Only at this condition (i.e. the condition that the object is understood generically as a class, and the focus is on the action being performed), can the argument be lexically defaulted (i.e. left unexpressed).
Lexical Defaulting

- Only at this condition (i.e. the condition that the object is understood generically as a class, and the focus in on the action being performed), can the argument be lexically defaulted (i.e. left unexpressed).

- If a specific instance of the class needs to be mentioned (a pizza, a letter, the BMW etc.), lexical defaulting cannot apply, unless the specific instance can be reconstructed pragmatically, in which case, however, the correct interpretation of the omission is pragmatically and not lexically defaulted argument.
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- “They were ordered to abandon the room”.
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It is possible to represent the relations between the different types of arguments using the notion of incorporation (Mithun and Corbett 1999).
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\[[[V_{root} \hspace{0.5cm} \text{shadow-arg}] \hspace{0.5cm} \text{lex-def-arg}] \hspace{0.5cm} \text{true-arg}]V_{predicate}\]
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Concluding Observations

- Events and their participants are encoded linguistically as verbs and arguments.
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There is **no one-to-one mapping** between participants and arguments.

Arguments may be absent in the syntax but unless shadowed or defaulted, they must always be “saturated” at the level of **interpretation**.

Arguments may undergo change **as the event unfolds**. Hidden arguments encode this information.
THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!
The Lexicon

An Introduction

By Elisabetta Ježek, Associate Professor of Linguistics, University of Pavia

Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics

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Complements of verbs are *arguments* if they act functionally in determining the semantics of the verb in the context of use; otherwise, they are *adjuncts* (Jezek 2021).
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‘mettersi in moto’

“il dolore parte dal braccio/a livello del collo” (2 arg)
‘avere origine da qsa’