

## On the Status of Agent

Shiro Takeuchi

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### Abstract

Following Holisky (1987), Van Valin and Wilkins (1996), and mainly Nakau (1994), this paper argues that Agent, which has played a central role in linguistic theory as far as semantics is concerned, is not a lexically or constructionally assigned role but a pragmatic concept. By distinguishing those roles that are inherent in predicates or constructions and those that are not, we can account for examples of the double object construction (DOC) and the prepositional dative construction (PDC).

### 1. Introduction

Semantic roles, thematic roles ( $\theta$ -roles), participant roles, case roles, or whatever you call them are meant to capture inherent semantic relations between predicates and their arguments. Certain predicates or sentences comprising them share the same semantic relations. Gruber (1965/1976) contended that both sentences in (1) shared certain “prelexical structures,” namely the Theme and that which underlies *to Bill* (the goal of the motion) and *from John* (the source of the motion):

- (1) a. John sold flowers to Bill. (Gruber (1965/1976: 157))  
b. Bill bought flowers from John. (Gruber (1965/1976: 157))

By assuming common abstract structures, Gruber tried to capture the fact that the roles Goal, Source, and Theme played by the NPs remain constant in the two sentences despite the differences in the predicates and in the NPs’ surface syntactic positions. However, he also observed that the sentences in (1) are not exact paraphrases with identical prelexical structures because sentence (1a) and sentence (1b) ascribe Agent to John and Bill, respectively.

Observing the same kind of constancy of semantic roles in different sentences, Fillmore (1968) pleaded that the base component of grammar acknowledged semantically defined case roles like agent(ive) and that these roles should replace syntactically defined grammatical relations like subject and object at that particular level. Case roles or, as we will say, semantic roles were assumed to be universal.

Researchers like Fillmore (1968) have always been interested in how human beings, speakers of natural languages, construe what is happening around them such as who did what to whom, and how natural languages or semantic roles (syntactically) reflect that construal (e.g. Fillmore (1968: 24)). This is perhaps one of the reasons why previous studies on semantic roles or on theories of semantic roles are abundant (Anderson (e.g. 1971, 2006), Culicover and Wilkins (1984, 1986), Dowty (1991), Jackendoff (e.g. 1972, 1983, 1990, 2002, 2007), Landau (2010), Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995), Ostler (1979), Rappaport and Levin (1988), Reinhart (e.g. 2000, 2002), Sowa (2000), Van Valin and Lapolla (1997), among many others). Since Gruber (1965/1976) and Fillmore (1968), Agent or Agentive has often been considered to be one of the fundamental, essential semantic roles in linguistic theory.

Agent is traditionally defined as “a human participant to whom is ascribed volition and conscious (mindful) control with respect to the situation denoted by the verb (Holisky (1987: 115)).” A verb assigning Agent to its subject argument is sometimes called an agentive verb and is defined as one “whose subject refers to an animate object which is thought of as the willful source or agent of the activity described in the sentence (Gruber (1967: 943))”. Definitions like these may sound appropriate, but, as Cruse (1973: 12) notes, they face serious problems once sentences like the following are considered:

- (2) a. John kicked the bucket over. (Cruse (1973: 12))  
 b. John accidentally kicked the bucket over. (Cruse (1973: 12))

If the verb *kick* in (2a) is an agentive verb and assigns Agent to its subject, the verb *kick* in (2b) will not be and does not do so, since sentence (2b) has in it the adverb *accidentally*, which explicitly denies the subject referent having had the intention of kicking a bucket over. The sentences in (2), whose subject referents are invariably human beings, also illustrate that to be human or animate is not enough to be an agent (e.g. Anderson (2006: 81)). In these cases, agency cannot be ascribed to the noun *John*.

Holisky (1987), Nakau (1994), and Van Valin and Wilkins (1996) claim that Agent is not a lexically assigned role but a role that pragmatically overlays others. Nakau (1994), in particular, systematically argues that semantic roles are divided into two groups: those that are assigned by predicates and those that are assigned or determined pragmatically. Following Holisky (1987), Van Valin and Wilkins (1996), and mainly Nakau (1994), the present study is to argue for the two-way distinction between semantic roles. We will observe that this hypothesis can account for not only data presented by Nakau but also those of the double object construction (DOC) and the prepositional dative construction (PDC). Nakau's (1994) analysis is the most systematic among the three; this is why I mainly follow his argument. In due course, I will slightly extend his framework.

The present study argues for the idea that semantic roles deserve a place in the grammar or

at some grammatically relevant level of lexical or constructional semantics. While doing so, the present study acknowledges some skepticism presented in the literature about the necessity of semantic roles in linguistic theory. For example, Dowty (1989: 109) notes that semantic distinctions made by semantic roles are mere tendencies and are non-linguistic. The present paper is an attempt to illustrate the necessity of semantic roles in linguistic theory.

The present paper is organized as follows: section 2 briefly overviews the theoretical background on the basis of which the present study is built; section 3 demonstrates how this study accounts for examples of the DOC and the PDC; section 4 offers concluding remarks.

## 2. Theoretical background

Nakau (1994: 309ff.) argues that semantic roles are divided into two groups: those that are inherent in predicates and are assigned by them; and those that are not, are determined pragmatically, and overlay other roles.<sup>1</sup> The former includes such roles as Location, Source, Goal, Theme, Actor and Patient, and are called “basic semantic roles;” the latter includes Agent.<sup>2</sup> For example, the subject arguments in the sentences in (3a-e) are assigned semantic roles by the verbs and bear Location, Goal, Source, Theme, and Actor, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

- (3) a. The bottle contains wine.  
b. He received a ticket.  
c. She lost a lot of money.  
d. The letter went from Tokyo to New York.  
e. John dug the ground.

The basic semantic role of Location is given to an argument where a Theme argument stays; there is no movement of a Theme either physically or abstractly. The semantic role of Goal is given to an argument to which a Theme argument moves, either physically or abstractly. The semantic role of Source is given to an argument from which a Theme argument moves or starts, again either physically or abstractly. An argument bearing Actor exerts force on other objects, is prototypically a human being, and is neutral with respect to being intentional (Nakau (1994: 315, 388ff.)).<sup>4</sup> I will add, at the beginning of section 3, another semantic role of Causer to the group

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of two-way distinction between semantic roles is found in and advocated by, for example, Culicover and Wilkins (1984, 1986) and Jackendoff (1990, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> The Experiencer role assigned to the subject argument of the experiencer *have* construction (e.g. *She<sub>i</sub> had her<sub>i</sub> purse stolen*) can also be a pragmatic role (see, for example, Nakau (1998) and Takeuchi (2013)).

<sup>3</sup> For convenience, I simplify Nakau’s framework.

<sup>4</sup> The Actor role in Nakau (1994) roughly corresponds to the Effector role in Van Valin and

of basic semantic role.

Agent is not a basic semantic role. As we saw in section 1, Agent is traditionally defined as being intentionally involved in the situation named by the predicate (e.g. Klingvall (2005: 94)) and/or as the intentional source of the activity named by the predicate (e.g. Gruber (1967: 943), see also Anderson (2006: 105)). Nakau (1994: 322) seems to adopt this kind of definition of Agent as well, emphasizing that it is a pragmatic concept interacting with many different elements, both linguistic and non-linguistic. Bearing this definition of Agent in mind, consider the sentences in (4), all of which contain an adverb that explicitly describes the existence of intention on the part of the subject referent:

- (4) a. John lost the game intentionally. (Gruber (1965/1976: 159))  
 b. John is standing in the corner intentionally. (Gruber (1965/1976: 161))  
 c. John held the book intentionally. (Gruber (1965/1976: 159))

Not only do the subject arguments in (4a-c) bear Source, Theme, and Actor, respectively but also they have themselves overlaid with Agent.

Nakau's (1994) framework has constraints on types of basic semantic roles which Agent can overlay; in other words, not all basic semantic roles can pragmatically have themselves overlaid with Agent. Basic semantic roles like Source, Theme, and Actor are compatible with it; on the other hand, basic semantic roles like Location and Goal are not. This constraint is illustrated in the following examples:

- (5) a. \* John deliberately knew the answer. (Nakau (1994: 397), Dowty (1979: 55))  
 b. \* Will inherited the money intentionally.  
 (Nakau (1994: 395), Jackendoff (1972: 32))  
 c. John lost the game intentionally.  
 (Nakau (1994: 395), Gruber (1965/1976: 159))

The subject arguments of the sentences in (5a-c) bear the basic semantic roles of Location, Goal, and Source, respectively. As we saw above, Agent can be thought of as the intentional source of the activity named by the predicate. Thus, the basic semantic role of Source can be considered to be conceptually compatible with it. On the other hand, the basic semantic roles of Location and Goal are, by definition, not the source of motion or an action; in particular, a goal is the exact contrary to a source. Thus, Location and Goal are conceptually incompatible with Agent; an argument bearing Location or Goal cannot have itself overlaid with Agent.

The same reasoning applies to sentences which have a purpose clause beginning with such expressions as *in order to* or *so that*. Consider the following sentences:

- (6) a. \* John received the book from Bill in order to read it.

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Wilkins (1996).

- b. ? John lost the money so that he could get sympathy.

(Nakau (1994: 402), Jackendoff (1972: 32))

As we saw in the sentences in (3b-c), the verbs *receive* and *lose* assign the basic semantic roles of Goal and Source to their subject arguments, respectively. By definition, Goal cannot be compatible with Agent while Source can be. Thus, only (6b) is acceptable.

When it comes to assigning Agent to arguments, pragmatic considerations have to be taken into account. For example, an argument bearing the basic semantic role of Theme can also have itself overlaid with Agent, as exemplified in (4b), repeated here as (7):

- (7) John is standing in the corner intentionally.

But it is not always the case that Agent can overlay a Theme argument. Consider the minimal pair in (8):

- (8) a. John deliberately rolled down the hill.  
b. \* The rock deliberately rolled down the hill.

(Nakau (1994: 398), Jackendoff (1972: 32))

The verb *roll* assigns Theme to its subject argument. Both sentences in (8) contain in them the adverb *deliberately*, which explicitly describes the existence of intention of rolling down a hill on the part of the subject referents. The subject referent in (8a) is a human being and thus has a potential of being intentional; on the other hand, that of (8b) is not and thus cannot be considered to be intentional as easily as a human being, leading to the incompatibility with the pragmatic notion of Agent.

In Nakau's framework, the sentences in (2a-b), repeated here as (9a-b), are analyzed in the following way:

- (9) a. John kicked the bucket over.  
b. John accidentally kicked the bucket over.  
c. John intentionally kicked the bucket over.

The verb *kick* assigns Actor, one of the basic semantic roles, to its subject argument. The subject argument in (9a) bears Actor; sentence (9a) is underspecified for the existence of intention of kicking a bucket over on the part of the subject referent. The subject argument in (9b) also bears Actor, regardless of the presence of the adverb *accidentally*, which explicitly denies the subject referent having intentionally done the act denoted by the verb phrase. The appearance of adverbs like *accidentally* in a sentence, by definition, does not prohibit its subject argument from bearing Actor. The sentence in (9c) has the adverb *intentionally* in it; thus, in addition to Actor, the subject argument in (9c) has itself overlaid with Agent. Since Actor is prototypically a human being and since a human being can be intentional, Actor is conceptually compatible with Agent and can have itself overlaid with it (e.g. Nakau (1994: 397)).

Before going to the next section, a brief note about an underlying theoretical assumption is

in order. Since Nakau assumes semantic roles like Location, Goal and Source, and applies these semantic roles to the analysis of states of affairs that are not of a spatial nature, it is reasonable to assume that he follows a hypothesis like the Thematic Relations Hypothesis (TRH) proposed by Jackendoff (1983: 188). I follow Nakau in this respect, too.

I further assume here that basic semantic roles are assigned at the level of semantic or conceptual representation, although I will not propose any representation for sentences discussed in this paper. One basic idea is that the position that an argument occupies in a given semantic representation determines the argument's basic semantic role (e.g. Jackendoff (1983, 1990, 2002, 2007)). That is to say, basic semantic roles are inherently relational notions (e.g. Rappaport and Levin (1988: 17)). For example, a possible semantic representation for predicates like *receive* will be like the following:

- (10) a. Beth received the doll.  
 b. [GO<sub>Poss</sub> ([DOLL], [TO<sub>Poss</sub> ([BETH])])]

(Jackendoff (1983: 192), with slight modifications)

Here, the verb *receive* is decomposed into the functions GO and TO. The first argument of the function GO receives Theme and the argument of the function TO receives Goal. Arguments of functions are mapped to syntactic structure. The subscript *Poss* indicates that the functions apply in the semantic field of possession. The reader is supposed to consider the semantic representation in (10b) to be one possible way of assigning Theme and Goal to arguments.

### 3. Double object construction and prepositional dative construction

In this section, I will extend Nakau's framework; more specifically, I will apply the framework discussed in the previous section to analyzing constructions. Predicates assign basic semantic roles to their arguments; in a more or less similar fashion, constructions assign basic semantic roles to their arguments in the way of Goldberg (1995).<sup>5</sup> In the ensuing discussion, we deal with the double object construction (DOC) and the prepositional dative construction (PDC), adding another semantic role of Causer to the group of basic semantic role.

Following, for example, Beck & Johnson (2004), Bruening (2010a, b), Goldberg (1992, 1995), Harley (2003), Krifka (1999, 2004), Pinker (1989), and Takeuchi (2015, 2016, 2018), I assume that the DOC and the PDC are two distinct constructions, and are associated with two distinct meanings: the DOC encodes caused possession and the PDC caused motion (cf. Green

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<sup>5</sup> Nakau (1994: 321ff.) distinguishes predicates like verbs from constructions and notes that the latter consist not only of predicates that contribute to their meaning but also of other many different elements. Nakau himself discusses nothing specific about the subject arguments of the DOC and the PDC.

(1974), Gropen et al. (1989), Oehrle (1976)). This approach is sometimes called the multiple meaning approach. By caused possession, I mean the bringing about of a relation between the object referents by the subject referent (Rappaport Hovav and Levin (2008)).<sup>6</sup> By caused motion, I mean the transfer of the direct object referent to the referent of the prepositional object by the subject referent (Goldberg (1995)).

Constructions encoding different meanings indicates that their arguments bear different semantic roles. On the basis of the discussion by, for instance, Takeuchi (2015: 137ff., 2016, 2018) (cf. Rappaport Hovav and Levin (2008)), I argue that the DOC assigns Causer to its subject argument. On the basis of the discussion by, for instance, Takeuchi (2015: 137ff., 2016, 2018) (cf. Goldberg (1992, 1995)), I argue that the PDC assigns Actor to its subject argument. Consider the DOC in (11a) and the PDC in (11b):

- (11) a. The exam gave Mary a headache. (Fujita (1996: 149))  
b. John gave a book to Mary.

The subject argument in (11a) caused the bringing about of the relation between the object referents;<sup>7</sup> that in (11b) acted as the one who transferred a book to someone else. Causer arguments literally refer to causes of states of affairs. As Klingvall (2005: 94) notes, causers can be either human or non-human and accordingly do not presuppose any intentional involvement in the situation named by the construction. It has been known that the subject argument of the

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<sup>6</sup> The present study regards the sentences in (i) and (ii) as direct manifestations of the caused possession meaning associated with the DOC.

- (i) a. Sally gave Bill a headache. (Goldberg (1992: 61))  
b. Mary's behavior gave John an idea. (Goldberg (1992: 61))  
(ii) a. She got me a ticket by distracting me while I was driving.  
b. The missed ball handed him the victory on a silver platter.  
(Goldberg (1992: 60))

Goldberg (1992) assumes that the DOC encodes the transfer of possession meaning. She resorts to the *Causal Events are Transfers* metaphor, which she argues can license sentences like those in (i) and (ii). Since the present approach assumes that the DOC is associated with the caused possession meaning, not the transfer of possession meaning, the hypothesizing of such a metaphor is not necessary.

<sup>7</sup> It is left for future research whether or not the Causer role assigned by the DOC to its subject argument is similar to or the same as the role assigned to the subject arguments of the following causative sentences:

- (i) a. {The boy / His carelessness} broke the glass. (Fujita (1996: 151))  
b. {John / The rumor} annoyed Mary. (Fujita (1996: 151))

PDC cannot be a causer (e.g. Green (1974), Oehrle (1976)), as illustrated in the following:

- (12) \* The exam gave a headache to Mary. (Fujita (1996: 149))

Not only Actor but also Causer is a basic semantic role. This claim can be confirmed and argued for by observing the fact that both constructions can contain either *intentionally* or *accidentally*, as illustrated in (13) and (14):

- (13) a. John intentionally gave Mary a bouquet of wilted roses. (Kroeger (2005: 58))  
 b. Pat intentionally gave the book to Chris. (Van Valin (2001: 33))

- (14) a. You remember the list – this guy I knew made a list on his computer of all the women he ever had relations with, then he accidentally gave me the list when he gave me a bunch of other computer files... What a freak. And he doesn't even know I know, and he wants to be pals with me.

(*Autumn Reason*, Sydney Anderson (1996), underline added)

- b. 'No, I bought the clothes before then.' Ellie clasped her hands in her lap. 'I had to. Edith accidentally gave all my clothes to the charity shop.'

(*Who's Afraid of Mr Wolfe?: The Perfect Romantic Comedy for Summer 2018*, Hazel Osmond (2011), underline added)

These two adverbs are compatible with both Causer and Actor, since these roles, by definition, do not require arguments bearing them to be intentionally involved in the situation denoted by the predicate or construction.<sup>8</sup> The Causer and Actor arguments in (13a) and (13b), respectively, have themselves overlaid with Agent.

One can also justify Agent overlaying Causer by observing the fact that a causer can appear as the object of the preposition *from*, which denotes source, as illustrated by the following:

- (15) The window broke from the pressure. (Alexiadou and Doron (2012: 19))

Since Causer and Agent both denote a source of an action or an event, Causer is conceptually compatible with Agent and thus can have itself overlaid with it.

The constructional specifications discussed so far give rise to the difference in acceptability in sentences like those in (16-18) (cf. Takeuchi (2015, 2016, 2018)):

- (16) a. Interviewing Richard Nixon gave Norman Mailer a book. (Oehrle (1976: 44))  
 b. \* Interviewing Richard Nixon gave a book to Norman Mailer. (RH and L (2008: 151))

<sup>8</sup> Goldberg (1992: 59) presents the following example of the DOC, where *accidentally* appears:

- (i) Joe accidentally loaned Bob a lot of money {by mistaking Bob for Bill, his twin / without realizing that Bob would skip bail with it / instead of giving the money as a gift as he had intended}.

- (17) a. The American program to land a man on the moon gave Mailer a book.  
(Oehrle (1976: 27))  
b. \* The American program to land a man on the moon gave a book to Mailer.  
(Takeuchi (2015: 159, fn. 16 (ib)))
- (18) a. The paint job gave the car a higher sale price. (Goldberg (1992: 61))  
b. \* The paint job gave a higher sale price to the car.

While events and inanimate entities can bring about a certain situation (e.g. a person writing a book) and can thus bear Causer, they cannot themselves (physically) transfer entities to others and thus cannot bear Actor, leading to the difference in acceptability. The subject arguments of the (b) sentences above cannot have themselves overlaid with Agent either, since they cannot bear Actor in the first place and the sentences are ungrammatical.

Note that the subject arguments of the (a) sentences in (16-18) bear only Causer. In these cases, it is sufficient for them to bear Causer and only Causer in order for the sentences to be grammatical; the sentences are perfectly grammatical without the subject arguments having themselves overlaid with Agent. In fact, the subject arguments do not denote animate entities, and thus they cannot be construed as being agentive in the first place. This is illustrated in the following data:

- (19) a. \* Interviewing Richard Nixon intentionally gave Norman Mailer a book.  
b. Interviewing Richard Nixon accidentally gave Norman Mailer a book.
- (20) a. \* The American program to land a man on the moon intentionally gave Mailer a book.  
b. The American program to land a man on the moon accidentally gave Mailer a book.
- (21) a. \* The paint job intentionally gave the car a higher sale price.  
b. The paint job accidentally gave the car a higher sale price.

An argument denoting a seemingly inanimate entity can have itself overlaid with Agent, as long as it can be construed as having the potential to be intentionally involved in the situation denoted by the construction. Observe the following data:

- (22) The proactive mandate intentionally gave UNSCOM the authority to act assertively in dealing with the Iraqi regime, which was required to cooperate “unconditionally” in the disarmament process.

(*The United Nations and Iraq: Defanging the Viper*,  
Jean E. Krasno and James S. Sutterlin (2003))

A mandate is given by people; thus, one can construe the existence of intention of making someone do something on the part of people who give a mandate. The subject argument of sentence (22), a Causer argument, thus has itself overlaid with Agent.

The present framework can provide an explanation for the fact that sentences like those in (23) can denote near-identical situations:

- (23) a. John gave the bell boy a large tip.  
 b. John gave a large tip to the bell boy.

(cf. Van Bell and Van Langendonck (1996: 238))

As argued by Van Bell and Van Langendonck (1996), our world knowledge neutralizes the difference between sentences like those in (23) (cf. Takeuchi (2015, 2016, 2018)). In present terms, our world knowledge of what it is like to give tips makes possible the pragmatic assignment of Agent to the Causer role of the DOC in (23a) and to the Actor role of the PDC in (23b). It seems almost always to be the case that giving someone a tip involves a transfer of a tip from the giver to the givee. It also seems almost always to be the case that giving someone a tip is an intentional act. Consequently, the subject arguments of both sentences in (23) have themselves overlaid with Agent, leading to both sentences in (23) referring to very similar situations, regardless of the difference in meanings constructionally associated with them.

#### 4. Conclusion

Following Holisky (1987), Van Valin and Wilkins (1996), and mainly Nakau (1994), this paper has argued that Agent is not a semantic role assigned by predicates or constructions but a pragmatic concept, and overlays other roles. Slightly extending Nakau's framework, this paper has demonstrated that the hypothesizing of distinction between those roles that are lexically or constructionally assigned and those that pragmatically overlay other roles can account for not only phenomena given by Nakau but also those exhibited by the double object construction (DOC) and the prepositional dative construction (PDC).

Last but not least, given that the subject arguments of the DOC and the PDC have themselves overlaid with Agent, it is expected that certain examples of these two constructions can have at least two interpretations: one where the subject argument bears only Causer or Actor and one where it also bears Agent. It is left for future research whether or not this expectation is actually borne out.

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