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**The Study of Language**

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**Lesson Two**

**Semantic roles : refer to the part played by a noun phrase**

**( such as agent ) in the event described by the sentence .**

**Instead of thinking of words as "containers" of meaning, we can look at the "roles" they fulfill within the situation described by a sentence. If the situation is a simple event , as in :**

**The boy kicked the ball .**

**then the verb describes an action (kick). The noun phrases in the sentence describe the roles of entities, such as people and things , involved in the action. We can identify a small number of semantic roles (also called "thematic roles") for these noun phrases .**

**Agent and theme**

**In our example sentence, one role is taken by the noun phrase ''The boy'' as "the entity that performs the action," technically known as the agent.**

**Another role is taken by the ball as "the entity that is involved in or affected by the action," which is called the theme (or sometimes the "patient"). The theme can also be an entity (The ball) that is simply being described (i.e. not performing an action), as in The ball was red.**

**Agents and themes are the most common semantic roles. Although agents are typically human (The boy), they can also be non-human entities that cause actions,**

**as in noun phrases denoting a natural force (The wind), a machine (A car), or a creature (The dog), all of which affect the ball as theme.**

**The boy kicked the ball.**

**The wind blew the ball away.**

**A car ran over the ball.**

**The dog caught the ball.**

**The theme is typically non-human, but can be human (the boy), as in :**

**The dog chased the boy.**

**In fact, the same physical entity can appear in two different semantic roles in a sentence, as in The boy cut himself. Here The boy is agent and himself is theme.**

**Instrument and experiencer**

**If an agent uses another entity in order to perform an action, that other entity fills the role of instrument. In the sentences**

**The boy cut the rope with an old razor . and**

**He drew the picture with a crayon .**

**the noun phrases an old razor and a crayon are being used in**

**the semantic role of ''instrument'' .**

**When a noun phrase is used to designate an entity as the person who has a feeling , perception or state, it fills the semantic role of experiencer. If we see, know or enjoy something , we're not really performing an actíon (hence we are not agents). We are in the role of experiencer. In the sentence :**

**The boy feels sad .**

**the experiencer (The boy) is the only semantic role. In the question, Did you hear that noise? the experiencer is you**

**and the theme is that noise.**

**Location, source and goal**

**A number of other semantic roles designate where an entity is in the description of an event.**

**Where an entity is (on the table, in the room) fills the role of location.**

**Where the entity moves from is the source (from Chicago) ,**

**and where it moves to is the goal (to New Orleans), as in**

**We drove from Chicago to New Orleans. When we talk about**

**transferring money from savings to checking,**

**the source is savings and the goal is checking.**

**All these semantic roles are illustrated in the following scenario. Note that a single entity (e.g. George) can appear in several different semantic roles .**

**Mary Saw a fly on the wall .**

**She borrowed a magazine from George .**

**She squashed the bug with the magazine .**

**She handed the magazine back to George .**

**'' Gee thanks , '' said George .**