A Pragmatic Study of Thematic Roles in Selected American-English Proverbs

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دراسة تداولية للأدوار المحورية في أمثال أمريكية انجليزية مختارة

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المستخلص

يجري هذه البحث دراسة تداولية للأدوار المحورية في أمثال أمريكية إنجليزية مختارة، لاستكشاف كيفية تأثر هذه المفاهيم النحوية والدلالية التقليدية بالعوامل التداولية في استخدام اللغة. تواجه الدراسة تحديات في تطبيق الأدوار المحورية للأمثال نظرا لطبيعتها المجازية وبساطتها المقصودة. حُللت الأدوار المحورية مثل المنفذ والمحور والأداة والمتأثر والمستفيد والمحل والهدف والمصدر والفاعل الحقيقي والمتلقي والمحفز وأدوار إضافية اخرى في سياق الأمثال. تعتمد طريقة التحليل إنموذجًا انتقائيًا يجمع بين تحليل الأدوار المحورية وتصنيف سيرل لأفعال الكلام. طُبِّق التحليل النوعي على أربعة أمثال أمريكية إنجليزية، مع تناول الأدوار المحورية ووظائف افعال الكلام في كل مَثَل. تشمل الأمثال التي تم فحصها "عندما تكون في روما، افعل كما يفعل الرومان"، و"الفضول قتل القطة"، و"لا تعض اليد التي تطعمك"، و"أن تأتي متأخرًا خير من ألا تأتي

أبدًا". تكشف النتائج عن الديناميكيات المعقدة للأدوار المحورية في الأمثال، حيث تساهم اللغة المجازية والبساطة في صعوبة تعيين الأدوار المحورية. يقدم كل مَثَل وظيفة تداولية متميزة، حيث يقدم النصائح أو التحذيرات أو التفضيلات. تساهم الدراسة في فهم الأدوار المحورية في السياقات اللغوية التداولية، وتسليط الضوء على العلاقة المعقدة بين بناء الجملة والدلالات والتداوليات في الأمثال الأمريكية الإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: *الأدوار المحورية، الامثال، التداولية، علم اللغة، اللغة الإنجليزية.*

Abstract

This paper conducts a pragmatic study of thematic roles in selected American English proverbs, exploring how these traditional syntactic and semantic concepts are influenced by pragmatic factors in language use. The study faces challenges in applying thematic roles to proverbs due to their metaphorical nature and intentional simplicity. Thematic roles, such as agent, theme, instrument, experiencer, beneficiary, location, goal, source, actor, recipient, stimulus, and additional roles, are analyzed in the context of proverbs. The method of analysis adopts an eclectic model, combining thematic role analysis with Searle's categorization of speech acts. The qualitative analysis is applied to four American English proverbs, addressing thematic roles and speech act functions in each proverb. The proverbs examined include "When in Rome Do As the Romans Do," "Curiosity Killed the Cat," "Don't Bite the Hand That Feeds You," and "Better Late Than Never." The findings reveal the complex dynamics of thematic roles in proverbs, where metaphorical language and simplicity contribute to challenges in role assignment. Each proverb serves a distinct pragmatic function, providing advice, warnings, or preferences. The study contributes to the understanding of thematic roles in pragmatic contexts, shedding light on the intricate relationship between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in American English proverbs.

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Key Words: *Thematic Roles; Proverbs; Pragmatics; Linguistics; English*

1. Introduction

This study examines the interplay between syntax, semantics, and pragmatic nuances in American English proverbs. The examination of thematic roles occurs within the framework of real language usage, which is crucial for understanding intended meanings. The objective of the research is to elucidate the intricate connections between syntactic structures, semantic choices, and pragmatic factors by unravelling the language employed in proverbs. By examining these practical subtleties, it illuminates the ways in which language is formed and used in cultural manifestations. A pragmatic study of thematic roles involves examining how thematic roles, which are traditionally a syntactic and semantic concept, are influenced by pragmatic factors in language use. Pragmatics deals with the study of how language is used in context to convey meaning, and it goes beyond the literal meaning of words and sentences. When it comes to thematic roles, pragmatics considers how they are assigned and interpreted in real communication situations. Analyzing thematic roles in American English proverbs can sometimes present challenges due to the nature of these succinct and often metaphorical expressions. While proverbs can convey wisdom and cultural values, they may not always fit neatly into thematic role categories. Here are some potential problems or challenges when applying thematic roles to English proverbs:

- Metaphorical Language: Proverbs often rely on metaphorical language, making it challenging to assign concrete thematic roles. For example, in the proverb "Every cloud has a silver lining," it's not immediately clear who or what plays the role of the "cloud" and what the "silver lining" represents in terms of thematic roles.

- Simplicity and Ambiguity: Proverbs are intentionally simple and concise, which can lead to ambiguity. This simplicity may not provide enough context to identify specific thematic roles. For instance, the proverb "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" conveys a valuable lesson but doesn't specify the actors or actions involved.

2. Thematic Roles

To begin with, a precise definition is not provided as a result of the interference and overlap between naming and origin. For instance, Crystal (2008, p. 428) defines a thematic role as a term used in syntax and semantics to indicate the thematic relations that link a "predicate" to its "argument" in the description of a situation. Therefore, in the sentence:

(1) *Tom broke the pencil*

The entities are connected by the action described by the verb, i.e., *Tom* as the agent; and *the pencil* as the theme. Crystal says that,

> It has been suggested that these roles may be subsumed into two main types: the macro-roles of actor and undergoer, or, in an alternative terminology, the proto-roles of agent and patient. These roles have been important in the establishment of semantic classes of verbs. (Crystal, 2008, p. 428)

Cruse (2006, p. 68) calls the thematic roles as functional roles and states that they illustrate the semantic relationship between the nouns associated with a verb, such as the subject, object(s), and complement, and the verb's meaning. An analysis of diverse languages worldwide indicates that there exist a finite number of potential

functional roles. Generally, a specific functional role can only be depicted once in a phrase, and a specific noun can only serve one duty.

In addition to this, according to Trask and Stockwell (2007, p. 251), a thematic role is a specific way in which a person or item can participate in an event or situation. The concept of semantic roles holds significant importance in various linguistic descriptions, especially in systems that use functionalism. The concept is that a specific entity participating in an event must have a discernible role in that event. For example, in (2), Susie is an agent (*It is "she" who is the one who started the activity.*), *the nut* is a patient (something is happening to it), and *a spanner* is an instrument (it is being used to accomplish some purpose).

(2) "*Susie tightened the nut with a spanner*"

(3) "*Susie received a letter*"

In contrast, in (3), *Susie* is a recipient (something is arriving at her), while *a letter* is a theme (nothing is happening to it except that it is being moved) (Trask & Stockwell, 2007).

2.1 Categories of Thematic Roles

Linguists vary in the number of positions they assign and the labels they use for these roles. From the extensive collection of literature, it is feasible to enumerate a compilation of thematic roles, as outlined in the subsequent subsections.

2.1.1 Agent

The most common thematic role is the **agent** role. Agents are typically, but not exclusively, human (e.g. (4) "*The wind blew the ball away*"). The agent of a

sentence is the person deliberately carrying out the action described (Hurford et al., 2007, p. 245). Other examples are:

(5) "*John is working*" and (6) "*Jane opened the door*".

2.1.2 Theme

Theme (also known as **patient**) is another thematic role, it refers to the undergoer of the action expressed by the verb (Löbner, 2002, p. 113). Examples are:

(7) "*The cat has eaten the egg*",

(8) "*The door opened ...*",

and (9) "*My uncle marries Molly*".

The theme is typically non-human, but can be human as in:

(10) "*The dog chased the boy*".

On the other hand, Saeed (2016, p. 149) differentiate between **theme** and **patient**. He says that "**patient** is the entity undergoing the effect of some action, often undergoing some change in state, and defines **theme** as the entity which is moved by an action, or whose location is described."

2.1.3 Instrument

Instrument is the means by which an action is performed or something comes about (Crystal, 2008, p. 428). It serves as an intermediary cause. Typically, an agent exerts influence on an instrument, and the instrument has an impact on the event or

situation. For example, 'the hammer' refers to an instrument in the following examples:

(11) "*He broke the window with the hammer,*"

(12) "*This hammer will break the window,*"

and (13) "*The window was broken by the hammer.*"

2.1.4 Experiencer

Experiencer is "the entity which is aware of the action or state described by the predicate but which is not in control of the action or state" (Saeed, 2016). As in:

(14) *Kevin felt ill*,

and (15) *Kim saw the deer*.

2.1.5 Beneficiary

Beneficiary is the entity for whose benefit the action was performed (Saeed, 2016). As in:

(16) *Robert filled in the form for his grandmother*.

(17) *They backed me a cake*.

2.1.6 Location

Location is the role of an argument that names the location in which the action of the predicate occurs. For example:

(18) "*The fireman climbed the ladder*" (Kreidler, 1998, p. 70)

2.1.7 Goal

Goal is "the entity or place towards which something moves" (Crystal, 2008, p. 428). Examples are:

(19) "*We drove to New York*",

and (20) "*She walked to school*"

2.1.8 Source

Source is "the entity or place from which something moves" (Crystal, 2008, p. 428). As in:

(21) "*They borrowed chairs from George*",

and (22) "*The rocket was launched from Central Command*"

2.1.9 Additional Thematic Roles

The following are considered additional, or sub thematic roles.

2.1.9.1 Actor

Actor is the entity which performs, effects, instigates, or controls the situation denoted by the predicate (i.e., a super type of agent) (Saeed, 2016, p. 152). As in:

(23) *The bus hit pedestrian*.

2.1.9.2 Recipient

Recipient is a subtype of goal involved in actions describing changes of possession (Saeed, 2016, p. 153). For example:

(24) *Bill sold the car to <u>Mary</u>.*

2.1.9.3 Stimulus

Stimulus is the entity which is perceived or experienced (Saeed, 2016, p. 161). As in:

(25) *Mary fears <u>thunder</u>.*

2.2 Thematic Roles Ambiguities

Analysing sentences or texts based on semantic roles can provide valuable insights. However, analysts typically have differing opinions on which semantic roles should be identified, and it can be challenging to assign roles in a systematic way. For example, in:

(26) "*Susie filled the bucket with water*",

It is clear that *Susie* is an Agent, but what are *the bucket* and *water*? Location? Goal? Patient? Theme? Instrument? Due to the challenging nature of addressing such inquiries, numerous linguists have opted to completely dismiss semantic roles when formulating their explanations. However, a significant number of linguists remain convinced that semantic roles hold essential significance despite the inherent challenges. (Trask & Stockwell, 2007, pp. 251-52).

One problem is that some thematic roles are more difficult to confirm, since none of the general notions mentioned above seem to be applicable to them, e.g., the role of the subject in:

(27) "*the stone is falling*"

and of the object in:

(28) "*know the answer*" (Primus, 2016, p. 404).

Riemer (2010, pp. 341-42) says that there are many cases where it is easy to decide what role to assign arguments to. In (29), for example, the identity of the roles is very clear, i.e., *Tom* is the agent and *Jane* is the theme. However, there are several instances where the situation is not as straightforward, and it is possible to assign one argument to multiple thematic roles.

(29) *Tom hits Jane*

In (30), for example, the subject could be analyzed as both agent and theme:

(30) *John rolled down the hill*

Given this data, certain researchers have proposed that nouns can concurrently embody two thematic roles. The arguments of numerous verbs appear challenging to allocate to any of the established thematic functions. For example, it's not obvious how these roles associated with the following clauses should be labeled (Riemer, 2010):

(31) a. "*The shirt fits me.*"

b. "*The caravan sleeps a whole family.*"

c. "*Ten cents will buy you thirty seconds.*"

d. "*Clouds mean rain.*"

Hence, there is a clear discrepancy in terms of usage. For example, Radford (1988) argues that a single role can be assigned multiple labels, such as patient and theme, which he considers to be distinct names for the same role. On the other hand, Saeed's labelling approach adapts the distinction that patient refers to any entity that is acted upon and has been altered by the action of the verb.

Furthermore, the theme serves to depict any entity that undergoes movement,
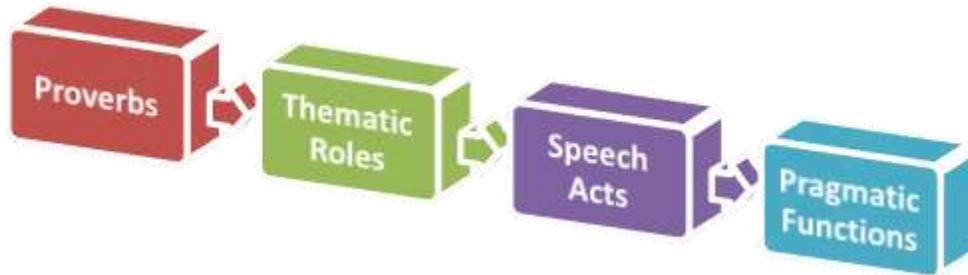
whether in a literal or metaphorical sense, as a result of the verb's action. These two different roles can be shown in the noun phrase "*the rock*" in two different examples, it could be both a patient, as in (32), and a theme as in (33) (Saeed, 2016, pp. 150-51)

(32) *Fred shattered the rock.*

(33) *Fred threw the rock.*

3. Model of Analysis

This paper adopts an eclectic model of analysis that aims at analysing two aspects of American-English proverbs, namely, thematic roles, and Searle's categorization of speech acts (1976). The eclectic model of this study is the main tool

Figure (1): The Eclectic Model for Analysing Thematic Roles in American-English Proverbs

used in the analysis of thematic roles in the selected proverbs. It also includes examining, pragmatic strategies of speech acts, and the resulting pragmatic functions. Additionally, the current study conducts a qualitative method of data analysis. To make clear the levels of the model, Fig. (1) shows the eclectic model of the current study.

4. The Analysis

This section is devoted to the qualitative analysis of thematic roles in the selected proverbs according to the eclectic model developed by this study. American English proverbs represent the data of this study. Particularly, four extracts are analysed according to the model of the present study. The proverbs are quoted from a book by Harry Collis & Mario Risso (1992), entitled as: *101 American English Proverbs*. The selected four proverbs are illustrated on the cover page of the same book—as well as mentioned inside the body of the book.

Text (1):

"When in Rome Do As the Romans Do" (Collis & Risso, 1992, p. 27)

a. Thematic Roles:

1. Location: the phrase "When in Rome" refers to where the action occurs.
2. Agent/Subject: The implied agent or subject of this proverb is the person to whom the advice is given. It is typically someone in a foreign or unfamiliar place who is being advised to adapt their behavior.
3. Action/Verb: The action in this proverb is "do" or "act." The subject is being advised to perform certain actions or behaviors.

4. Theme/Object: The theme or object of the action is "as the Romans do." This phrase refers to the specific behavior or customs of the people in Rome. It implies that the subject should conform to the local customs and practices of the place they are visiting.

b. Speech Acts: Directive act, directives involve attempting to get the listener to do something.

c. Function: Advice. This is because the proverb provides advice or guidance to someone in a foreign or unfamiliar place, suggesting that they should adapt their behavior to align with the local customs and practices. Searle's categorization includes various illocutionary acts, and "advising" falls under the category of directives, which involve influencing the actions or beliefs of the listener.

Text (2):

"Curiosity Killed the Cat" (Collis & Risso, 1992, p. 30)

a. Thematic Roles:

1. Agent/Subject: The agent or subject in this proverb is "curiosity." Curiosity is depicted as the entity or quality that initiates the action.

2. Action/Verb: The action in this proverb is "killed." The verb "killed" is used metaphorically to suggest the negative consequence of excessive curiosity.

3. Patient/Object: The patient or object of the action is "the cat." In this context, the cat is a symbolic representation of the one who is experiencing the negative consequences of their curiosity. The cat serves as a cautionary example.

b. Speech Acts: Directive act, is an attempt by a speaker to get the hearer to do something.

c. Function: Warning. In a conversational context, it can serve as an indirect form of warning. It is often used to caution someone against being overly curious or nosy, implying that being too inquisitive can lead to negative consequences.

Text (3):

"Don't Bite the Hand That Feeds You" (Collis & Risso, 1992, p. 32)

a. Thematic Roles:

1. Agent/Subject: The agent or subject in this proverb is implied to be the person or entity who is receiving some form of assistance or support (i.e., *You*, don't bite …). This subject is advised not to take negative actions.
2. Action/Verb: The action in this proverb is "bite." It is used metaphorically to represent harming or mistreating the source of support or assistance.
3. Theme/Object: The theme or object of the action is "the hand that feeds you." This phrase symbolizes the provider of the support, assistance, or resources. It could be a person, organization, or entity that is offering help or sustenance.

b. Speech Acts: Directive act, Searle's categorization includes various illocutionary acts, one of which is the category of directives, which involves influencing the actions or beliefs of the listener.

c. Function: Advice. This is because the proverb offers advice or guidance to the listener, suggesting that they should not harm or mistreat the source of their support or sustenance.

Text (4):

"Better Late Than Never" (Collis & Risso, 1992, p. 89)

a. Thematic Roles:

1. Agent/Subject: The agent or subject in this proverb can be interpreted as "one" or "a person." It represents anyone who is faced with a decision or an opportunity to act.
2. Action/Verb: The action implied in the proverb is "being late" or "taking action." It doesn't represent a specific action but rather the general concept of either arriving or acting after a point in time.
3. Theme/Object: The theme or object is "never." This represents the alternative to taking action or arriving late. "Never" in this context symbolizes the complete absence of any action or arrival.

In this interpretation, the proverb suggests that it is better for a person (the agent) to take action, even if it's delayed (the action), rather than never taking any action at all (the theme). It conveys a preference for action over inaction.

b. Speech Acts: Directive act, directives involve attempting to get the listener to do something.

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c. Function: Advice. This interpretation views the proverb as conveying advice or guidance, suggesting that taking action, even if it's delayed, is preferable to not taking any action at all.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research delves into the pragmatic intricacies of thematic roles in American English proverbs, unraveling the interplay between traditional syntactic and semantic concepts and the pragmatic factors that shape language use. The challenges encountered in applying thematic roles to proverbs, characterized by metaphorical language and intentional simplicity, underscore the nuanced nature of these linguistic expressions. The eclectic model of analysis, incorporating both thematic role analysis and Searle's speech act categorization, proves instrumental in dissecting the selected proverbs. Through the qualitative examination of proverbs, the study elucidates the diverse pragmatic functions these linguistic constructions serve. The findings not only contribute to the understanding of thematic roles in the specific context of proverbs but also shed light on the broader dynamics of semantics, syntax, and pragmatics in language usage. The complexities of assigning roles, the influence of verbs and sentence structures, and the pragmatic functions embedded in proverbs collectively enhance our comprehension of how language conveys meaning in real communication situations.

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