Dowty (1991) "Thematic Proto-Roles and Argument Selection"

Basic idea: underlying (almost) all of the generalized argument roles (= thematic roles) that a predicate may assign are the two "proto-roles" PROTO-AGENT and PROTO-THEME. Amongst the entailments that characterize these two proto-roles are the following:

Characteristic entailments of the PROTO-AGENT role:

  (i)   intentional involvement in an event or state (= volition)
 (ii)   consciousness and/or perception (= sentience)
(iii)   causing an event, state, or change in another participant
(iv)   movement (relative to the position of another participant)

Characteristic entailments of the PROTO-THEME role:

  (i)   undergoes change (coming into/going out of a state,
        change in size, shape, material constitution, etc.)
 (ii)   causally affected by another participant
(iii)   stationary (relative to movement of another participant)

Many of our traditional argument roles can be viewed as more-or-less central instantiations of the two proto-roles:

   Nora petted the little kitty. (PROTO-AGENT entailments (i)-(iv))
   AGENT

   The boulder crushed the hedgehog. (PROTO-AGENT entailments (iii),(iv) only)
    ACTOR

   This key locks the door. (PROTO-AGENT entailments (iii),(iv) only)
  INSTRUMENT

   Mabel fears the big dog. (PROTO-AGENT entailments (ii) only)
 EXPERIENCER

Argument selection principles (determine linkages between the argument roles that a predicate assigns and the grammatical roles of its arguments):

 • the argument role which includes the greatest number of PROTO-AGENT entailments must be assigned to the subject NP

 • the argument role which includes the greatest number of PROTO-THEME entailments must be assigned to the direct object NP

 • if two argument roles include (approximately) the same number of PROTO-AGENT entailments, either may be assigned to the subject NP
   (likewise for PROTO-THEME entailments and direct object NPs)