

Generalized Argument Roles (Thematic Roles)

From D. Dowty (1991) "Thematic Proto-Roles and Argument Selection":

For example, consider the subject argument of the two-place predicates *x murders y*, *x nominates y*, and *x interrogates y*: entailments that they all share include that *x* does a volitional act, that *x* moreover intends that this be the kind of act named by the verb, that *x* causes some event to take place involving *y* (*y* dies, *y* acquires a nomination, *y* answers questions—or at least hears them), and that *x* moves or changes externally (i.e., not just mentally). The first entailment is not shared by *kills* (traffic accidents also kill), the second is not shared by *convinces* (one can convince, or kill, inadvertently, but one cannot murder inadvertently), the third is not shared by *looks at*, and the last is not shared by *understands*. ... A role type[= thematic role] like 'Agent' is defined semantically as whatever entailments of verbs about NP referents are shared by the verbal argument-positions that we label with the term 'Agent' (and excludes whatever is entailed for those arguments that differs from one verb to the next).

AGENT: the initiator / cause of some action, capable of acting intentionally

Oswald murdered Kennedy.
Nora petted the little kitty.

ACTOR: non-intentional cause / instigator of some event

The boulder crushed the hedgehog.
The wind blew down the power lines.

THEME/PATIENT: that which is affected or targeted by some action, typically undergoing a change in state, material constitution, or location

Johnny wrote this love letter.
Oswald murdered Kennedy.
Fred shattered the rock.
Fred threw the rock.

(Note: PATIENT is sometimes reserved for those arguments that undergo a change in state / constitution, while THEME is used to describe an argument that undergoes movement.)

INSTRUMENT: the means by which an action is performed or comes about. (In English, typically realized by a *with*-PP.)

Fred shattered the rock with a sledgehammer.
Johnny wrote the love letter with a permanent marker.

LOCATION: the place in which something is situated or takes place

The keys are on the desk.
The monster was hiding under the bed.

SOURCE: the entity or location from which something moves, either literally or metaphorically

The plan came back from Kinshasa.
Nora learned the dirty joke from her grandfather.

GOAL: the entity or location towards which something moves, either literally or metaphorically

Pete reluctantly handed his backpack to the policeman.
Nora told the dirty joke to her friends.

RECIPIENT: the goal of an action involving transfer of possession
(distinguished subtype of GOAL)

He donated his fortune to the church.
He sold me this wreck of a car.

EXPERIENCER: the entity which perceives the action or state described by the predicate, or experiences an emotion or sensation as a result of the action/state

Mary saw the smoke.
The soothing music pleased the old man.

STIMULUS: that which is perceived, or which provokes an emotion or sensation

Mary saw the smoke.
The soothing music pleased the old man.