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## Investigating Iraqi EFL learners' performance in Using Semantic Roles of The Subject

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الْمَخْرُاجِ رَحِيمٍ  
و"مَنْ يَتَّقِ اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ مَخْرَجًا (٢) وَيَرْزُقْهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَحْتَسِبُ وَمَنْ يَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى  
اللَّهِ فَهُوَ حَسْبُهُ نَا اللَّهُ بِلَاغٍ مَأْرَهُ قَدْ جَعَلَ لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدْرًا (٣)".  
(قروسد) قلاطلا )

In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Beneficent  
"And for those who fear Allah, He (ever) prepares a way  
out,(2) And He provides for him from (sources) he never  
could imagine. And if anyone puts his trust in Allah,  
sufficient is (Allah) for him. For Allah will surely  
accomplish His purpose: verily, for all things has Allah  
appointed a due proportion (3)".

(Al-Talak )

## **DEDICATION**

To my family with love and respect.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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# Chapter one

## Introduction

### 1.1 The Problem

This paper is concerned with investigating Iraqi FREEDOM EFL learners' performance in Using the semantic roles of the subject. The study is an attempt to assess students' performance at the recognition and production levels. In other words, the study tries to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the semantic roles of the subject in English?
- 2) What are the difficulties faced by Iraqi EFL learners in recognising and producing the semantic roles of the subject?

### 1.2-Aims

The study aims are :

- 1)shedding light on the semantic roles of the subject in English
- 2)Investigating the difficulties faced by Iraqi EFL learners in recognizing and producing the semantic roles of the subject .

### 1.3- Hypotheses

It's hypothesized that:

- 1-Iraqi EFL learners face difficulties in producing sentences including various semantic roles of the subject.
- 2-Iraqi EFL learners' performance at the recognition level is better than their performance on the production level.

## **1.4 Procedures.**

In order to achieve the aims of the study, the following procedures are adopted:

- 1) Presenting a theoretical background about the subject and its semantic roles.
- 2) Applying a diagnostic test to a random sample of 36 students from the department of English to assess their performance in recognizing and producing the semantic roles of the subject.
- 3) Analyzing the results of the test and coming up with certain conclusions.

## **1.5 –Limits**

The study is limited to survey the semantic roles of the subject including agent, theme,.....etc. The test will be applied to 36 Iraqi EFL learners from the University of Babylon/College of Education for Human Sciences/Department of English , during the academic year 2022-2023.

## **1.6-Value**

It is hoped that the present study will be of value to students of English as a foreign language , particularly in the area of the semantic roles of the subject .It is also of value to those who are concerned with the topic.

# Chapter Two

## Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Semantics : A General Overview

Semantics is the study of the relationship between words and how we draw meaning from those words. People can absolutely interpret words differently and draw different meanings from them. Some examples of semantics will help people see the many meanings of English words ( Web source 1)

Semantics involves the deconstruction of words, signals, and sentence structure. It influences our reading comprehension as well as our comprehension of other people's words in everyday conversation. Semantics play a large part in our daily communication, understanding, and language learning .For example, in everyday use, a child might make use of semantics to understand a mom's directive to "Do your chores whenever you feel like it." However, the mother was probably saying, "Do your chores right now."( Web source 1).

Since meaning in language is so complex, there are actually different theories used within semantics, such as formal semantics, lexical semantics, and conceptual semantics. Formal semantics uses techniques from math, philosophy, and logic to analyze the broader relationship between language and reality, truth and possibility.

Lexical semantics deconstructs words and phrases within a line of text to understand the meaning in terms of context. This can include a study of individual nouns, verbs, adjectives, prefixes, root words, suffixes, or longer phrases or idioms (Web source 1)

Conceptual semantics deals with the most basic concept and form of a word before our thoughts and feelings added context to it. For example, at its most basic we know a "cougar" to be a large wild cat. But, the word "cougar" has also come to indicate an older woman who is dating a younger man. This is where context is important. (Web source 1)

Conceptual semantics opens the door to a conversation on connotation and denotation. Denotation is the standard definition of a word. Meanwhile, connotation deals with the emotion evoked from a word. Connotation will be derived from the manner in which you interpret a word or sentence's meaning. As such, semantics and connotation are deeply entwined. (Web source 1).

## **2.2 Sentence and Proposition**

The description of a sentence is a syntactic analysis. The description of a proposition is a semantic analysis. A syntactic analysis is explanation of the lexemes (lexical units) and function words in a sentence, describing how these combine into phrases, and showing the functions that these lexemes and phrases have in the sentence. Generally these sentence functions are recognized: subject, predicate, object, complement and adverbial (Kreidler, 2002:64).

## **2.3 Semantic Roles :**

In certain theories of linguistics, thematic relations, also known as semantic roles, are the various roles that a noun phrase may play with respect to the action or state described by a governing verb, commonly the sentence's main verb. For example, in the sentence "Susan ate an apple", Susan is the doer of the eating, so she is an agent; an apple is the item that is eaten, so it is a patient.

Since their introduction in the mid 1960s by Jeffrey Gruber and Charles Fillmore, semantic roles have been a core linguistic concept and ground of debate between linguistic approaches, because of their potential in

explaining the relationship between syntax and semantics (also known as the syntax-semantics interface), that is how meaning affects the surface syntactic codification of language. The notion of semantic roles plays a central role especially in functionalist and language-comparative (typological) theories of language and grammar.

Most modern linguistic theories make reference to such relations in one form or another, the general term, as well as the terms for specific relations, varies: "participant role", "semantic role", and "deep case" have also been employed with similar sense. (Web source 2)

Semantic roles (also known as thematic roles or theta roles) attempt to capture similarities and differences in verb meaning that are reflected in argument expression, with emergent generalizations that will contribute to the mapping from semantics to syntax. They belong, then, to the semantics/syntax interface. Some of the characteristics that theories of thematic roles strive for, in order to fulfill their function are the following, according to Dowty:

- i. Completeness: Every argument of every verb is assigned some thematic role or other.
- ii. Uniqueness: Every argument of every verb is assigned only one thematic role.
- iii. Distinctness: Every argument of every verb is distinguished from the other arguments by the role it is assigned. Two levels can be distinguished: strong distinctness, if uniqueness also holds, and weak distinctness, if it does not. In this last case, each argument is assigned a different set of roles from other arguments of the same verb.
- iv. Independence: Each role is given a consistent semantic definition that applies to all verbs and all situations. Thus, role definitions do not depend on the meaning of the particular verb or on the other thematic roles it assigns.



Semantic role lists constitute one of the most common and simplest forms of lexical semantic representation adopted. They are also referred to as "case frames" (Fillmore 1968) or "theta-grids"(Stowell ,1981: 55).

## 2.4 The Subject

The subject in a simple English sentence such as "John runs", "John is a teacher", or "John drives a car", is the person or thing about whom the statement is made, in this case John. Traditionally the subject is the word or phrase which controls the verb in the clause, that is to say with which the verb agrees ("John is" but "John and Mary are"). If there is no verb, as in John – what an idiot!, or if the verb has a different subject, as in John – I can't stand him!, then 'John' is not considered to be the grammatical subject, but can be described as the topic of the sentence.

Defining the subject is more difficult in more complex sentences and in languages other than English. For example, in the sentence "It is difficult to learn French", the subject seems to be the word it, and yet arguably[according to whom?] the real subject (the thing that is difficult) is to learn French. A sentence such as "It was John who broke the window" is still more complex. Sentences beginning with a locative phrase, such as "There is a problem, isn't there?", in which the tag question "isn't there?" seems to imply that the subject is the adverb there, also creating difficulties for the definition of subject ( Valin,2008: 88)

In languages such as Latin and German the subject of a verb has a form which is known as the nominative case: for example, the form 'he' (not 'him' or 'his') is used in sentences such as "he ran", "he broke the window", "he is a teacher", "he was hit by a car". But there are some languages such as Basque or Greenlandic, in which the form of a noun or pronoun when the verb is intransitive (he ran) is different from when the verb is transitive

(he broke the window). In these languages, which are known as ergative languages, the concept of subject may not apply at all (Valin,2005:67)

## 2.5 - What is a Semantic Role?

The concept of semantic roles (thematic roles) has played an important part in linguistic theory over the past twenty years.

To begin with the notion of semantic roles, let's take example below:

Gina raised the car with a jack.

This sentence identifies an event with three entities,(Gina, the car, and a jack,) related by the action described by the verb raise. The sentence shows these entities in specific roles: Gina is the entity responsible for initiating and carrying out the action, the car is acted upon and has its position changed by the action, and a jack is the means by which Gina is able to cause the action (Saeed,2016:149). Such roles have a number of labels in semantics, including participant roles (Allan 1986), deep semantic cases, semantic roles and thematic relations .

Semantic Roles (Thematic roles) are semantic relations that connect entities to events, more particularly, arguments to predicate. Semantic roles are grammatically relevant relations of arguments to predicates, not simply the connection of entities to events. We need predicates and arguments because, on closer inspection, something that we might classify as events by the quality of their obvious form in sentences (Frawley,2009: 200).

What is the predication structure of The flower is red? We might say that

the predicate is represented by is, with flower and red standing for the arguments.

The arguments that accompany the predicate have different semantic functions, or roles, in the proposition. Roles depend partly on the nature of

the predicate and partly on their own meanings. The semantic structure of a proposition can be represented this way:

Predicate

• argument •argument •argument

Arguments are defined by both their relation to the predicate (as agent, theme, etc.) and their referential type (as animate, speaker, topic etc.). Languages vary as to whether their GRs (grammatical relations) select arguments on the basis of role or reference properties or by combining these two kinds of properties. ( Payne ,2006:237).

Every simple sentence—every proposition—has one predicate and a varying number of referring expressions, or arguments. The meaning of a predicate is determined in part by how many arguments it may have and what role those arguments have. For example, the sentences: A window broke, A rope broke, A plate broke all contain the verb break and a single argument. The breaking of a window, the breaking of a rope and the breaking of a plate are not identical events, but English break can be used with the names of all these things. That is part of its meaning, the scope of its application.

And in these sentences A window broke, etc , the referring expressions a window, a rope, a plate have the same role, the same relation to the verb break. Syntactically this function can be called the subject, but that term is too general for semantic analysis. We call this role the affected "someone breaks a window" ( Kreidler,2002:67).

The semantic role 'agent' has been exemplified only with human referring expressions, as in "Tom broke the window". However, the cause of a window breaking and similar acts need not be a human. In A stone broke the window the phrase a stone(syntactically subject) may be said to have the role of instrument (Tom broke the window with a stone). In The storm broke the window the subject has the role of 'event' (The window broke during the storm). The noun phrases in the sentence describe the roles of entities, such as people and things, involved in the action, (Yule,2010:112).

## 2.6 Semantic Roles Of the Subject

The subject has a number of semantic roles. The most typical semantic role of a subject in a clause that has a direct object is that of the AGENTIVE participant: that is, the animate being instigating or causing, the happening denoted by the verb:

1- John hit Bill

.2-Bill was hit by John.

In both of the above sentences, John has the semantic role of agent. A semantic role is the underlying relationship that a participant has with the main verb in a clause.

### 1.2.6\_ Agent and Theme

Agent is the doer of the action while Theme is the infected of the action

3-The boy kicked the ball

4-The wind blew the ball away

5-A car over the ball

6-The dog caught the ball

7-The dog chased the boy

In our example sentence, the boy kicked the ball, 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 so 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), as in (3) , 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 in examples (5)-(6). The theme is typically non-human, but can be human (the boy), as in the last sentence (7)( Yule, 2015:133).

### **2.2.6\_ Instrument and Experiencer**

If an agent uses another entity in order to perform an action, that other entity fills the roles 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. The preposition 'with' is often a clue that the following noun phrase has the role of instrument in English.

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 feel, know, hear or enjoy something, we are not really performing an action (hence we are not agents). We are in the role of experiencer. In the first sentence below, the experiencer (The woman) is the only semantic role. In the second example, the question is asking if (you) had the experience of hearing the theme (that noise)(Yule ,2015 : 133 ).

8\_The woman feels sad

9\_Did you hear that noise?

### **3.2.6\_ 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. Location (Yule , 2015: 133 ).

### 3.2.7

The subject may have a **RECIPIENT** role with verbs such as have, own, possess, and benefit from), as is indicated by the following relation:

10-Mr. Smith has given his son a radio. [So now, his son has a radio.]

11-I bought my daughter a tablet computer. [So now, she has a tablet.]

### 3.2.8

An important role of the subject is **EVENTIVE**. The noun at the head of the noun phrase is commonly deverbal or a nominalization:

12- The Norman invasion took place in 1066.

13- The explosion caused many casualties.

There are clauses in which no participant is required. In such cases, the subject function may be assumed by the 'prop' word it, which has little or no semantic

content.

14- Prop it mainly occurs in clauses signifying

(a) time,

(b) atmospheric conditions, and (c) distance:

- (a) Time

15- It's ten o'clock precisely. It's already midnight.

(b) Atmospheric conditions

16- It's too windy in Chicago.

It's getting dark.

17- It's very hot here.

18- It was sunny yesterday.

19- It's freezing outside.

- (c) Distance

20-It's not very far to York.

21-It's a long way to Denver.

22- It's just one more stop to Toronto.

23-It's only a hundred miles from here to Qurna.

# Chapter Three

## Test

### 3.1 What Is a Test ( assessment )

Tests are an important part of assessing students' understanding of course content and their level of competency in applying what they are learning. Whether you use low-stakes and frequent evaluations—quizzes—or high-stakes and infrequent evaluations—midterm and final—careful design will help provide more calibrated results (webservice 3)

### 3.2 Characteristics of a Good Test

#### 3.2.1 Validity :-

It is the degree to which a test measures what it is supposed to measure, or can be used successfully for the purpose for which it is intended

.There are four types of validity: content, empirical, face,and construct ( Al-Juboury, 2014 : 39).

#### 3.2.2 Reliability :-

It means the stability of the test scores. Presumably,if the same test is given twice to the same group of students, under the same condition,it would give the same result

The requisites of a dependable test are : multiple samples, standard condition, standard scoring, and standard tasks ( Al-Juboury,2014:42)

#### 3.2.3 Practically

A third characteristic of assessment is its practicality or usability. A test which is valid and reliable but difficult to administer, score, or require too much money may fail to gain acceptance



There are two factors that have to be considered to achieve practicality of a test

Money: the cost in time, Money, and personnel of administering a particular test

Ease : the degree of difficulty experienced in the administering and scoring of the test (Al-Juboury,2014:43).

### **3.2.4 Accuracy:-**

The last characteristic of assessment is accuracy. Accuracy means that the test should be free from grammatical, spelling , and punctuation errors. ( Al- Juboury. 2014 : 43).

## **3.3 Test design**

The test consists of two questions. The first question tests the students' ability at the recognition level. It asks the students to choose the correct semantic role of the subject. The second question tests the students' ability at the production level. It asks the students to exemplify some items.

## **3.4 Test Material**

Most items of the test are taken from grammar book {A University Grammar of English workbook R.A.Close} by : Randolph Quirk ,Sidney Green Baum,1973 and The study of Language George Yule ,2020.

### **3.5 The Results of the Test**

**Table (1) : The students performance at the recognition level**

Item	Number of correct responses	Percentage	Number of incorrect responses	Percentage
1	36	100%	0	0%
2	25	69.5%	11	30.5%
3	16	44.5%	20	55.5%
4	11	30.5%	25	69.5%
5	25	72.2%	10	27.7%
6	9	25%	27	75%
7	17	47%	19	52.7%

## **The table above shows that the**

students are familiar with this topic. The number of correct answers is more than the number of incorrect answers

The highest responses and percentage of the correct answers is (100%) in (item 1) . This is because the agent is the most semantic role of the subject the .students can recognize

The lowest responses and percentage of the correct answers is (25%) in (item 6). This reflects the students' insufficient training and ability to deal with this .item

In items (3) (4)(6) and (7) , the number and percentage of the incorrect answers are higher than that of correct answers. This reflects that they lack knowledge .about the semantic roles of the subject

**Table (2) The student's performances at the production level**

Item	Number of correct responses	Percentage	Number of incorrect responses	Percentage
1	36	100%	0	0%
2	30	83.3%	6	16.6%
3	26	72.2%	10	27.7%
4	20	65.5%	16	44.5%
5	33	91.6%	3	8.3%
6	35	97.2%	1	2.7%
7	35	97.2%	1	2.7%

Table (2) above shows that the:

highest responses and percentage of the correct answers is (100%) in ( item 1) . because the agent is the most semantic role of the subject the students are familiar with

In all items of the production level the number of the correct answers and percentage are high. This reflects that the students become more familiar with semantic roles of the subject at the production level

.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Conclusion**

The knowledge of the semantic roles of the subject would provide control over the formed sentence with all its elements.

According to the results of the test in chapter three the correct answers are more than the incorrect answers. This reflects that the students become more familiar in understanding and use semantic roles of the subject

\_ students' achievement at the production level is better than their achievement at the recognition level.

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## Appendix

### The Test

**/ Q1/ Choose the correct semantic role of the subject (whether it is agent, theme, instrument, experiencer, goal, source, or location) :-**

1-John opened the letter.

2-The flowers have died.

3-I was walking with my do.

4-The concert is on Sunday.

5-The dog chased the boy.

. "6-Gee thanks " said George

7-The wind blew the ball away.

**Q2/ Exemplify the following :-**

1-Subject as an agent.

2-Subject as an experiencer.

3-Subject as an instrument.

4- Subject as a theme.

5-Subject as a location.

6-Subject as a goal.

7-Subject as a source.