

## Thematic roles and case-marking

### I. Thematic roles ( $\theta$ -roles, theta-roles)

- Background reading: Santorini & Kroch (2007-) on thematic roles

(1) “It is often convenient to identify arguments of (Fregean) predicates in terms of the following thematic roles...”

(a) **Arguments** of X are subjects and complements of X (as distinct from modifiers)

- To think about: Are thematic roles ever useful for modifiers as well?

(b) What do you think Santorini & Kroch have in mind when they say “convenient?”

- What kinds of **evidence** would serve as good linguistic arguments that thematic roles are part of the mental grammar?

(2) Some of the most useful thematic roles (condensed from the reading)

*agent* instigator of a state of affairs (conscious, sentient, volitional)

- What is a common syntactic role for an agent?

*theme* undergoer of a change of state or transfer; most ‘affected’ element

- What is a common syntactic role for a theme?

*experiencer* undergoer of a sensory, cognitive, or psychological state (not volitional)

*recipient* receives something; endpoint of a transfer

*location* place *where*, or endpoint of path *to/toward*

- The thematic role *goal* is sometimes used instead of *recipient* and/or *location*

Important note:

- These informal definitions/characterizations help us conceptualize the different thematic roles, and help us hypothesize which kinds of thematic roles we might look for in which kinds of constructions.
- However, ultimately we will make arguments about which thematic roles are involved in any given phenomenon on the basis of linguistic data (e.g., showing that different thematic roles have different morphological or syntactic behavior).

### II. Nominative object constructions

- Background reading: Koizumi (2008), §6.1 (all), §6.2.1, §6.2.2, §6.2.4

(3) What is a **nominative object construction** as defined by Koizumi?

(a) The **object** of the verb (or other predicate) is marked with *-ga*, the **nominative** case marker

(b) The subject can always be marked with *-ga* (nominative case marker), and in most cases can alternatively be marked with *-ni* (dative case marker)

(4) Is the verb in this sentence (Koizumi’s example (2)) **transitive**? Why or why not?

Hiromi-ga (*or* -ni) syuwa-ga deki-ru.  
 Hiromi-NOM (-DAT) sign.language-NOM can.do-NONPAST  
 ‘Hiromi can use (a) sign language.’

- (5) What does Koizumi mean by...
- (a) “logical” subject/object? —> thematic roles (which are which?)
  - (b) “grammatical” subject/object? —> position in syntactic structure (what is it?)
- (6) What arguments does Koizumi make to show that a nominative object **is not a grammatical subject**?
- (a) Subject honorification
  - (b) Reflexive (*zibun*) binding (=coference)
  - (c) Arbitrary interpretation for *pro*
- (7) What arguments does he make to show that a nominative object **is a grammatical object**?
- (a) “Formal noun” *koto*
  - (b) Double-object constraint
- (8) Koizumi does not define “stative predicate.”
- (a) What is this? —> As a rough guideline, you can identify a state by the **subinterval property**: any subinterval of the interval of time during which a state is true is itself an interval in which the state is true
    - Compare: Aya loves music/loved music (stative)  
Aya builds a house/built a house (eventive)
    - Also: States are not instantaneous; states do not have a natural endpoint
  - (b) What is the relationship between stative predicates and nominative objects?

### III. Putting it all together

- (9) Look at Koizumi’s examples of predicates that take a nominative object (his ex. (16))

Predicates that take a nominative object<sup>4</sup>

a. Transitive adjectives

*kowa(-i)* ‘afraid of’, *hosi(-i)* ‘want’, *suki(-da)* ‘like’, *kirai(-da)* ‘hate’,  
*hituyoo(-da)* ‘need’, *tokui(-da)* ‘good at’, *heta(-da)* ‘bad at’, etc.

b. Stative transitive verbs

*deki(-ru)* ‘can do’, *waka(-ru)* ‘understand’, *ar(-u)* ‘have’, etc.

c. Complex stative predicates

i. Potential verbs (V-rare/e(-ru) ‘can V’)

*tabe-rare(-ru)* ‘can eat’, *nom-e(-ru)* ‘can drink’,  
*hanas-e(-ru)* ‘can speak’, *tumur-e(-ru)* ‘can close’, etc.

ii. Desiderative adjectives (V-ta(-i) ‘want to V’)

*tabe-ta(-i)* ‘want to eat’, *nomi-ta(-i)* ‘want to drink’,  
*hanasi-ta(-i)* ‘want to speak’, *tsumuri-ta(-i)* ‘want to close’, etc.

What **thematic role** do these predicates assign to the **syntactic subject**? Is it agent?

- (10) Google experiments

- (a) Can we show that stative/experiencer-subject predicates and other predicates have distinct patterns of object case marking?
- (b) Do stative/experiencer-subject predicates ever mark their objects with *-o* (accusative)?