

Thematic roles are determined syntactically in transitive motion expressions

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This paper examines the interpretation of NP arguments in transitive manner of motion expressions. The thematic roles that arguments hold in transitive motion expressions are widely held to be *lexically idiosyncratic*, i.e. introduced with the verb. This paper presents evidence that the thematic roles are actually determined syntactically. The second part of the talk presents a new analysis of the syntax of these clauses. I show transitive motion is not ‘resultative’ (*contra* previous analyses), but involves a transitive Event Modification syntax.

An enduring question in the study of argument structure is whether thematic roles are introduced with the verb/root, or determined in relation to the structure in which the verb/root and NPs occur (e.g. Borer 2013, Marantz 2013, Wechsler 2015). Particularly important support for the former view is the apparent possibility of lexically idiosyncratic roles, exemplified by transitive motion (1). Specifically, in (1a) the subject is supposedly a Theme thematic role holder, in the sense that it is interpreted as undergoing change of location (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 2001 a.m.o.). In (1b), the object is apparently an Agent of *waltz*, together with the subject (“Accompanied Motion”) (Folli & Harley 2006 a.m.o.).

1. a. The wise men followed the star to Bethlehem. (Wechsler 1997)
b. Mary waltzed John around the room. (Folli & Harley 2006)

If this characterization of thematic roles is correct, it has the significant consequence that the lexico-semantics of the (roots of) verbs *follow* and *waltz* are (in some sense) able to ‘override’ the canonical relationship between syntax and semantics, whereby transitive subject → Agent / transitive object → Theme (e.g. Kratzer 1996, et seq.). I argue (1a-b) in fact support (2):

2. NP thematic roles are determined by a relation between syntax and compositional semantics. Verb/root lexico-semantic properties do not interfere with this relation.

Thematic content can be identified by syntactic/semantic tests like adverbial modification. I apply a battery of adverb tests to the NP arguments in (1). Tests for agency are the ability to: wield a *with* PP instrument; control a Rationale clause PRO; be modified by agent-oriented adverbs. (I show these tests reliably pick out Agents, and not e.g. subjects). The subjects of both (1a-b) pass these tests; neither of the objects do. I conclude the object in (1b) does not hold an Agent role in the formal grammar. I label *John* in (1b) a *Pseudo-Agent*.

Tests for Themehood (‘undergoing change or holding a state’, in line with traditional descriptions of (1a) as a ‘Theme subject’) include: contradiction when the NP is denied as holding an end-state/location (3a); coercibility into a state-holder interpretation by specifying a definite temporal point with which the (change-of-) state/location coincides (3b); and a non-attained result state interpretation of *almost* modification (3c). (3) shows the apparent ‘Theme Subject’ in (1a) fails each of these tests. (In contrast the Pseudo-Agent *John* in (1b) passes all these tests). I label the subject in (1a) a *Pseudo-Theme*.

3. a. The wise men followed the star to Bethlehem, but they ended up in Allentown due to unexpected cloud cover.
b. ??The wise men had followed the star to Bethlehem at 2pm.
c. The wise men almost followed the star to Bethlehem. (Means *the wise men* almost *followed*, not that they almost arrived at Bethlehem)

(3) contrasts with the object of *lead* (4). *Lead* and *follow* can be understood to describe the ‘same event’; but the participant roles of the NPs depend on their position in the clause.

