

Language and Mind
Prof. Rajesh Kumar
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Module - 06
Lecture - 28
Sentence
Semantic Relations

We are looking at sentences and its restrictions. Today we will focus on a special type of restriction that sentences follow, which is known as semantic restrictions, and we are going to be looking at in terms of semantic relations. Very briefly, we will look at this aspect of a sentence as well, because they play a very important role in formation of a sentence. So, understanding of semantic aspects of a sentence is crucial for formation of sentences, and we will relate again to this thing with our discussions of subjects and predicates.

Grammatically speaking subjects and predicates are put together for the purpose of a sentence by agreement by some of the functional categories like number, person, gender, tense, aspects; all that go under the head of inflection, and therefore they are called either inflectional items or functional categories. And they are sometimes morphologically visible on different categories in a sentence, and sometimes they are not at all visible. So, such a description of a sentence is grammatical description.

And then we have looked at what we know as autonomy of syntax, and in that context we have specifically tried to remove the meaning aspect of a sentence saying that, that does not seem to be very crucial as far as the formation of a sentence is concerned. And we have given examples to substantiate the argument that for the purpose of the grammaticality of a sentence, the fact that we get a meaning out of a sentence is not really necessary. We have seen that it is possible to keep meaning out of a sentence, and still keep a sentence grammatical – ‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously’, and several sentences of those types are examples of instances which can be given for the purpose of autonomy of syntax.

However it is possible to look at a sentence with, in terms of its meaning as well. See, we have not tried to define a subject in a serious sense. We underlined at times in our discussions about the underlying patterns of sentences that a subject, grammatically

speaking, a subject is an element in a sentence which agrees with the verb within the predicate. In other words, which is tied with the predicate with functional categories what we call agreement. We have seen some examples from Hindi, some examples from English. Some Hindi examples helped us understand that not every time what looks like a subject is going to agree with a verb.

Remember a sentence like – Ram ne chahi banayee. In this sentence, the verb ‘banayee’ seems to be carrying the gender, which is reflection of agreement on it the gender of the object chahi, and that is a fair enough argument for us to say chahi is a grammatical subject of this sentence. And then we underlined the point that ‘Ram’ which does not agree with the verb, because of the overt position of ergative case marker ‘ne’ is not really fulfilling the requirement of agreement, therefore is not a grammatical subject; however, it still remains the logical subject of the sentence.

So, in a sentence – Ram ne chahi banayee, ‘Ram’ is a logical subject and ‘chahi’ is a grammatical subject of the sentence. This brings us to the notion that - Are there two types of subjects in a sentence? Seems like yes. If we are looking at from grammatical perspective, then we can only say an element that agrees with the verb is the subject of a sentence. And most of the time this helps us understand all the sentences, all the subjects; however, sometimes or at times when we want to look at the semantic aspects of a sentence, we would need to define subject differently. And in that case, we will see that in such a sentence of from Hindi like Ram ne chahi banayee, Ram still retains some properties why it is called a subject. So, we are going to look at some of those things.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:02)

Categorial Selection

- C-selection (categorial selection): certain heads impose particular demands on the category of the XP they combine with. These demands are referred to as **c-selection**.
- This is also referred to as Subcategorization.

We have seen restrictions on sentences in terms of categorial selection that certain categories select its complements, and certain categories have heavy restrictions on such a selection. We have given examples of verbs like 'know', 'ask' and 'wonder' and then we have looked at the description of the same thing from semantic perspective.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:24)

Thematic Relations

- Every argument must have one and only one thematic roles assigned in a sentence.
- X' theory generates sentences and theta theory is a checking condition.
- **Agent**: initiator of the action, capable of volition
 - Brad hit Andrew

Now what we are specifically looking at today is the semantic aspect of a particular argument. So, let us look at the example on the screen - Brad hit Andrew. Grammatically speaking, 'Brad' is the subject, and 'hit Andrew' is the predicate; 'hit' is the verb within

the predicate and this being a transitive verb 'Andrew' is the object of this verb. There is an agreement between the two, the tense is past tense, and all the functional categories that are invisible - for example we do not see an instance of a tense in a marker of a tense on the verb, we do not see a marker for agreement on the verb in the sense that 'Brad' is a singular noun, but we do not see a marker of singularity on the verb 'hit'. Such an example helps us understand that lot of times those functional categories are going to remain dormant, lot of time those functional categories are going to remain invisible. Therefore we do not see them; however, the agreement is well taken care of and the sentence is a well formed sentence.

Now, looking at it from the semantic perspective, 'Brad' is agent of the predicate 'hit'. You see the definition of an agent here? It is initiator of an action. And this is the reason lot of times people end up defining a subject as initiator of the action or the doer of the action, and people mean that such a thing is capable of volition as well. When we have looked at the X bar schema of the description of sentences, and we understand generative aspects of understanding or acquiring language, on the basis of that we can say generative capability of human mind helps us generate sentences; whereas, this perspective, this aspect of looking at a sentence from its meaning, is another kind of checking condition on the formation of sentences.

So Brad... it is a coincidence that in this example, Brad is an... Subjects are usually agents. So 'Brad' is an agent and it agrees with the verb as well; in lot of cases, it so happens in Hindi, English, and all other languages. However, the particular example that we have looked at from Hindi - Ram ne chahi banayee - in that sentence 'Ram' is still the agent of the, agent of the predicate. It is definitely not a grammatical subject, but it is an agent of the verb, agent of the predicate. The agent hood of the predicate is what we indicate by when we say it is a logical subject.

This condition which is also known as theta theory, the condition that looks at thematic relations of several elements like, subjects and objects in a sentence, is known as theta theory. And again we will not get into the details of that. We will simply say that the NPs or PPs in a sentence, if they are sub-categorized, that is if they are required - like, subjects are required, objects are required by verbs within the predicate - if they are required, are called arguments, and they are also called sub-categorized elements. So, if there are sub-categorized elements, they are called an argument.

So in very short, we can say every argument must have one and only one thematic role in its given sentence. So this 'Brad' - if it is agent, it is going to remain agent, and it can only be an agent in this sentence. What would be the thematic role of 'Andrew'? We need to check. There are lots of thematic roles for lots of different kinds of noun phrases in different situations, but we will only look at some of them. So, the thematic role for 'Andrew' will be either theme or patient, whereas the thematic role for 'Brad' is an agent.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:48)

- **Experiencer:** the argument that experiences or perceives the event
 - Bob saw the car.
 - Syntax frightens Jim.
 - Susan loves cookies.
 - A falling rock hit Terry.

We can also look at another thematic role which can be assigned either to a subject or something else in a sentence, this is called an experiencer event, experiencer theta role. The argument that experiences or perceives the event is called an experiencer. So, now look at and see the difference between the sentence that we have discussed just now that - Brad hit Andrew and Bob saw the car. Now 'seeing' is not the kind of predicate that requires volition in the sense that 'hitting' requires. The distinction between two predicates - like 'hit' and 'see' is beautifully captured by the types of elements they select on the basis of this selectional restriction.

And we can clearly see that 'hit' requires, 'hit' involves some sort of volition, and 'seeing' does not. The volition is captured by the thematic role agent, which is carried by its subject 'Brad', whereas the underlined element in the sentence - Bob saw the car, the underlying element is not an example of an agent, because it does not require the kind of

volition that 'hitting' requires. Therefore we can say this is an example of an experiencer subject.

Syntax frightens Jim - clearly an experiencer; Susan loves cookies. Now again the predicate 'love' does not require agency, therefore we call such a subject as an experiencer. A falling rock hit Terry - here the argument Terry is an experiencer of the predicate 'hit'; therefore we will want to argue that looking at specific kind of restriction on sentences, looking at specific kind of restriction on sentences in terms of its semantic selection and semantic restriction helps us understand a different perspective on the construction of sentences. This is an important aspect involved in the formation of sentences which we need to look at in order to understand underlying patterns in formation of sentence, underlying patterns in the formation of sentences, in a more precise and clearer way.

Thank you.