ABSTRACT. Traditional thematic roles include comprehensive categories that subsume under a single label a large number of unrelated participants involved in a variety of situations. The utility of these roles is centered on the study of relations between role-types and the grammatical relations of verb classes. I believe that the thematic roles must serve other purposes as well, for example the description of the lexical conceptual structure of a verb. This will allow semanticists to address three questions: How can semantic change in verbal categories be explained? The second problem is connected with the vexing issue of polysemy: How do we define sense variation in verbs? The third question deals with lexical relations: Can verbal synonymy and antonymy be explained as phenomena modulated by specific contexts? In order to shed light upon these questions the delimitation of thematic roles must reflect the semantic peculiarities of individual verbs. Thus, in this work I justify the need for a more fine-grained characterization of semantic roles and offer the theoretical basis for its implementation.

KEY WORDS: Thematic Roles, Verbal Semantics, Polysemy.

1. TRADITIONAL CLASSIFICATIONS OF THEMATIC ROLES

In my view, traditional classifications of thematic roles have been subject to an excessive generalization. This is justifiable by the main purpose that they served, which is to group verbs into semantic classes. In this sense, it is worth mentioning the work of Levin (1993), which is based on semantic and syntactic criteria. Jackendoff (1990) worked out semantic classes by grouping verbs whose arguments accepted the same thematic roles.

Verbal meaning is highly dependent on the semantic roles that substantiate its argument structure. In this sense, we find different syntactic behaviors that to a certain extent reflect semantic aspects of the verb. Traditionally we have differentiated between two basic classes of verbs: transitive versus intransitive. In the case of intransitive verbs there exits less dependence on other sentential elements. These verbs’ meaning seems to be “self-contained”. They exhibit fewer senses, thus are less polysemous. In the traditional framework, the subject of intransitive verbs typically denotes an AGENT.

When it comes to transitive verbs, they display more complex lexical conceptual structures. Their meaning depends above all on the internal argument, syntactically encoded by its objects. This does not imply that the external argument or subject is not semantically constrained by the meaning of the verb. A typical semantic pattern in which transitive verbs participate is that where the subject denotes an AGENT and the direct object a PATIENT.
A third category in traditional grammar, *prepositional verbs*, labels those verbs whose internal argument is introduced by a preposition. In relation to this third type, two other approaches must be briefly mentioned which are beyond the scope of traditional grammar. First, Cognitive Linguistics that does not consider prepositions mere case markers and instead treats them as full lexical units. Therefore, the meaning of these prepositions must be semantically determined by the verb that precedes them and the object they introduce. Jolly observed that the meaning of the verb and the preposition displayed a high degree of semantic consistency. This fact led her to propound the principle of *redundancy*: "an argument PP shares all of its arguments with the verb, a fact which follows from its redundancy with the verb and its correspondence to a two-place relation (Jolly 1991: 48)." Second, it is worth mentioning the contribution that Construction Grammar has made to this field. Particularly, to the analysis of those cases where the verb is not followed by what we would strictly call an *argumentative preposition*. Instead, we find a preposition that modifies substantially the meaning of the verb in its canonical usage, i.e., *I talked her out of seeing her ex-boyfriend again.*

2. A NEW CONCEPTION OF THEMATIC ROLES

Before explaining why I think it is necessary to implement a new theory of thematic roles that is sensitive to the semantic content of each verb, I will explain why thematic roles are so relevant in the study of verbal semantics.

Verbs are predicative elements, therefore, their meaning cannot be described without explicitly alluding to the entities with which they collocate: the participants of the situations that they portray. Thus, I claim that sense variation in the case of verbs depends on differences in the entities that fill their argument structure. Then, in order to explain all the senses of a verb, we should be able to describe the differences between those entities.

This type of analysis has a clear antecedent within the framework of cognitive linguistics: prepositional analysis. The issue that has puzzled linguists most, as a great part of scholarly work shows, is the high degree of polysemy that prepositions display. This has motivated a considerable number of attempts to devise a method of analysis which is elegant and at the same time articulate enough to carry out the huge undertaking of defining all prepositional uses.

Some approaches have established a single general meaning to prepositions and have defined uses as a contextual phenomenon external to the preposition. However, most works have defined a series of uses and have done so by distinguishing different types of landmarks (prepositional objects) which are allowed by the selection restrictions of the preposition. Thus, if prepositional senses are defined in terms of the landmarks with which they collocate, by analogy, the verb senses can be defined through the participants identified in the different situations that they serve to express.

Therefore, the thematic roles identified traditionally have to be specified so that they identify categories of participants which are mutually exclusive in relation to the actions depicted by the verb. The traditional roles are kept, but subtypes must be put forward to differentiate semantic features that give rise to distinct verb senses. The ontological description of participants in a situation is more efficiently effected by means of a componential analysis based on a number of semantic primitives. Different clusters of semantic primitives must be devised *ad hoc* for individual verbs. In this manner, discrete thematic roles should be treated a superordinate categories that include more specific roles determined by the verb with which they occur. Thus my approach allows variation amongst AGENTS, PATIENTS, etc.
In my view, one of the main clues that helps us assess a case of verbal polysemy is thematic role variation. For the sake of illustration, consider the verb *feel* in *I felt that horrible pain again* and *Children love feeling my fur coat*. In the first case, *feel* means to experience a particular physical feeling while in the second, it means to touch or hold something with the result of obtaining a physical feeling. This distinction in meaning is not only present in the verb *to feel* itself but in the different types of entity that function as its direct object in each sentence. This is the type of evidence that supports my claim that verbal polysemy is the result of the interaction of the verb lexical content and the entities with which it collocates. The cognitive implication of my approach is that speakers are aware of the polysemy of a verb because it is based on the speakers’ classifications of things in the world.

In this work, polysemous verbs are considered categories of senses. Thus, examining all the types of thematic roles that are accepted in the argument structure of a verb should result in a detailed description of all the senses of that verb. If we go a step further and consider polysemous verbs as categories of *related* senses, then we can obtain a description that distinguishes between basic and derived senses. The interesting side of the story is to observe how the thematic roles that occur with basic senses differ from those that collocate with derived senses.

The notion of polysemy here is strongly connected with that of metaphoric uses. Conventional metaphors are interpreted here as a case of sense variation. If we interpret metaphor as a case of homomorphism between unrelated semantic fields, it is necessary to note the traits in the thematic roles that underlie this homomorphism. In other words, the relation holding between the primary meaning of the verb and its metaphorical derivations must be reflected in the thematic role of both uses in the form of common lexical conceptual features.

4. THEMATIC ROLES AS INDICATORS OF LEXICAL RELATIONSHIPS: SYNONYMY AND ANTONYMY

As stated earlier in this paper, a new theory to thematic roles that responds to a more fine-grained description presents the advantage of permitting a detailed analysis of the differences between senses of a single verbal category. Such fine-grained analysis in fact cannot serve the purpose of classifying verbs into comprehensive classes but this methodology can help to establish semantic relationships between verbs, particularly as regards synonymy and antonymy.

The innovative aspect of this approach is that synonymy does not have to be considered as a relation between full categories but as a similarity between individual senses of two or more verbs. This view helps evidence to explain why two synonyms are not usually considered absolute synonyms. Synonymy is defined as a the property that permits to substitute a word for another, however, this is restricted to contextual requirements. These contextual requirements, understood as operating within the sentence frame, are defined in terms of the features that characterise the participants involved in the situations presented by the senses of both verbs. Let us consider a sentence where the verb is substituted by another which apparently is synonymous. Changes in the interpretation of the sentence which prevent the consideration of the verbs as actual synonym in a context are to be attributed to differences in the characterisation of the participants imposed by each specific verb.

Therefore, the ontological nature of the participants must be analysed from a set of features that are salient as a consequence of its collocation with a specific verb. For instance,
an entity that we define as person has different salient features when it acts as the agent of the verb read as opposed to the verb speak.

When it comes to antonymy, a full correspondence between two verbs must be supported by participants having identical characterizations in the situations portrayed by both. As with the case of synonymy, if the participants fail to be identical in the relevant set of features established by the verbs’ roles, antonymy will not be identified as a relevant relation in a given sentence.

5. SEMANTIC EVOLUTION OF VERB CATEGORIES

As WordNet, an online lexical data base shows, verbs are more polysemous than nouns, thus, a diachronic description of the changes experienced by a verbal category requires that the analyst looks carefully into the emergence and loss of senses. The more senses one word has the more likely is to have alterations in its semantic scope.

While in the case of concrete nouns, changes in its denotation are produced by the evolution that the object referred to might experience, in the case of verbs, the scenario is remarkably more complex. The verbs, as predicates, depend on the entities with which they collocate to actualise their different senses. This makes its referential force more powerful, as its highly polysemous character indicates, and more complex.

The diachronic evolution of a verb can have different results. For instance, the most central meaning of the verb may fall into disuse. This development may cause the derived senses to disappear as well, or, instead, a derived sense can occupy the position held before by that central sense that ceased to be used. This could have consequences regarding the metaphoric extensions of the verb. Paradoxically, the existence of idiomatic extensions may ensure the survival of a sense that is no longer used. However, its meaning will be regarded as obscure by the speakers.

Secondary senses, which are less frequent, seem to have more probabilities of falling into disuse. However, this is not necessarily the case, the cultural aspects also play a part here. If eventually an action is no longer carried out by the members of a community, they will stop using the sense of the verb that names that action even if it is a central sense. Other senses, less central, will prevail as long as they keep themselves “up-to-date” with the community’s communicative demands.

A priori it could be thought that verbs expressing basic actions are beyond the cultural conceptual “instability”. These include verbs of motion which, on the whole, have kept their content unchanged, i.e. OE gan PDE to go. Nevertheless, even these verbs are subject to experience remarkable changes. For example OE faran PDE to go is no longer used as a motion verb. Its derived metaphoric sense to die has also fallen into disuse.

However, nowadays it is used with a new meaning, a semantic extension from its basic primary meaning to go. Going to places implies reaching a destination or goal. Reaching one’s goals in life is conceptualised metaphorically in spatial terms as getting to places. This metaphorical conceptualisation underlies the current meaning of fare: to be or not successful. Now the argument structure of this verb requires the presence of certain types of complement. For example, an adverbial that rates to which extent the subject succeeds or not: Chicago fared better than Seattle, however unemployment remains a problem or a locative expression that identifies the field where the participant can fail or succeed: Ed’s mother wondered how he had fared in the interview. The study of the relevant corpora could shed some light as to which of the two lost senses disappeared first. Being faran an intransitive verb, this evolution is explained by finding out which entities acting as doers/experiencers of the event were still part of the thematic structure of this verb. In the same fashion, attesting
the occurrence of the present-day sense requires the collocation of this verb with the complements indicated above.

6. CONCLUSION

The problem that arises with most lists of thematic roles is centred directly around the level-of-granularity issue. Because the models are designed without taking into account the semantic complexity of verbs, they are too general to shed light on the semantic relations between the senses of a single verb and between the senses of different verb categories. Thus, I believe that the creation of a description of the entities that act as roles will serve the purpose of finding the differences that define the senses of a verb. This implies viewing the objects involved in the situation conveyed by the verb as real-entities and not as grammatical entities.

Some could argue that if we lose the more general role types then we cannot make general statements about the relations between verb classes. However, I must emphasise that the aim of the theoretical claims made here is not finding a way of making generalizations about semantic roles and grammatical relations. Instead, I intend to establish an analysis which is motivated by the fact that roles are borne by real-world entities rather than by abstract semantic roles. The utility of this model is that it provides a mean to explain in detail the lexical conceptual structure of a verb both, from a synchronic and a diachronic perspective.

REFERENCES