

# 16

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## VARIABILITY

### FEATURES OF SIMPLE SENTENCES CONTAINING AN ACTANT

### CARACTERÍSTICAS DE VARIABILIDAD DE ORACIONES SIMPLES QUE CONTIENEN UN ACTANTE

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#### ABSTRACT

The semantics of simple sentences with actant content plays a crucial role in understanding language structure and meaning. While much research has been conducted on sentence structures, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis that combines the examination of external semantics, variability in semantic actant combinations, and the compatibility of sentence members with semantic actants within simple sentence models. The goal of this work is to describe the semantics of simple sentences with actant content in their models and to determine the general characteristics of the implementation of these models in terms of grammatical and lexical semantics. Our study revealed patterns in the variability of semantic actant combinations and their typical meanings. We identified specific compatibilities between sentence members and semantic actants within the studied simple sentence models. Furthermore, we traced general characteristics and variability of simple sentence models according to their semantic implementation, providing insights into the flexibility and constraints of these structures. This research contributes to better understand sentence semantics, potentially informing areas such as natural language processing, linguistic theory, and language education. The findings on actant variability and compatibility could lead to improved models for sentence analysis and generation, enhancing our ability to create more sophisticated language processing systems and refine linguistic theories.

**Keywords:** Actant, Simple sentence, Variability, Semantics, Sentence models, Actant variability

#### RESUMEN

La semántica de oraciones simples con contenido actante juega un papel crucial en la comprensión de la estructura y el significado del lenguaje. Si bien se han realizado muchas investigaciones sobre las estructuras de las oraciones, existe una falta de análisis integral que combine el examen de la semántica externa, la variabilidad en las combinaciones de actantes semánticos y la compatibilidad de los miembros de la oración con los actantes semánticos dentro de los modelos de oraciones simples. El objetivo de este trabajo es describir la semántica de oraciones simples con contenido actante en sus modelos y determinar las características generales de la implementación de estos modelos en términos de semántica gramatical y léxica. El estudio reveló patrones en la variabilidad de las combinaciones de actantes semánticos y sus significados típicos. Se identifica compatibilidades específicas entre los miembros de la oración y los actantes semánticos dentro de los modelos de oraciones simples estudiados. Además, se determina las características generales y la variabilidad de los modelos de oraciones simples según su implementación semántica, lo que proporciona información sobre la flexibilidad y las limitaciones de estas estructuras. Esta investigación contribuye a una mejor comprensión de la semántica de las oraciones, lo que potencialmente informa áreas como el procesamiento del lenguaje natural, la teoría lingüística y la educación lingüística. Los hallazgos sobre la variabilidad y compatibilidad de los actantes podrían conducir a modelos mejorados para el análisis y la generación de oraciones, mejorando la capacidad para crear sistemas de procesamiento del lenguaje más sofisticados y refinar las teorías lingüísticas.

**Palabras clave:** Proverbios, Refranes, Trabajo, Cultura, Refranes rítmicos.

## INTRODUCTION

Linguistics is a scientific discipline dedicated to study language in all its forms and manifestations. To accomplish this, it is subdivided into specific subfields that analyze different aspects of human language such as: 1) phonetics and phonology, which study speech sounds and their patterns; 2) morphology and syntax, which examine the internal structure of words and the rules of sentence formation; 3) semantics and pragmatics, which focus on the meaning and use of language in context; 4) sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, which explore the relationship between language, society, and cognition; 5) the study of linguistic evolution and change; 6) the theory of universal grammar and language acquisition; 7) applied linguistics; and 8) the intersection between language and technology. All of these areas contribute to improve our knowledge of how human language works in its multiple dimensions (Van Rooy, 2023). Thus, linguistics as a discipline not only helps us better understand how we communicate, but also sheds light on fundamental aspects of human cognition, culture, and society. Because of that it is intrinsically interdisciplinary connecting fields as diverse as psychology, anthropology, neuroscience and artificial intelligence (Alaqlobi et al., 2024), making it a rich and constantly evolving field of study (Verhagen, 2024).

Within linguistics, and more specifically semantics, an actant is a necessary semantic participant in the action or state expressed by a verb, regardless of its syntactic realization in the sentence. The concept of “actant” in its modern form was first proposed by Lucien Tesnière in 1959. It arises from the consideration of predicate words, i.e., words that denote situations that have a certain number of obligatory participants performing certain roles (Meyer, 2023). A typical class of predicate words are verbs, but other kinds of predicates exist too, such as adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, and so on. Moreover, certain verbs are not predicates such as, for example, impersonal verbs: it's getting late, it's getting cold, and so on. Depending on the specific linguistic theory being used, the types of actants may vary, but several main types are generally recognized (Mel'čuk, 2015):

1. **Agent:** The participant who performs the action. Example: “John opens the door.” (John is the agent)
2. **Patient:** The participant who receives the action or is affected by it. Example: “The cat chases the mouse.” (The mouse is the patient)
3. **Experience:** The participant who experiences a mental or emotional state. Example: “Mary loves music.” (Mary is the experiencer)

4. **Beneficiary:** The participant who benefits from the action. Example: “I bought a present for my sister.” (My sister is the beneficiary)
5. **Instrument:** The means by which the action is performed. Example: “He cut the bread with a knife.” (The knife is the instrument)
6. **Locative:** The place where the action or state occurs. Example: “The book is on the table.” (The table is the locative)
7. **Goal or Destination:** The end point of an action involving movement. Example: “The train arrived at the station.” (The station is the goal)
8. **Origin or Source:** The starting point of an action or state. Example: “The package came from China.” (China is the origin)
9. **Theme:** The participant who is moved, transferred, or whose location is described. Example: “I sent a letter.” (The letter is the subject)
10. **Recipient:** The participant who receives something, often in transfer verbs. Example: “I gave the book to Peter.” (Peter is the receiver)

The study of actants falls mainly within the subfield of semantics, but they also have important implications for other fields as well. For example, in relation to syntax it can be seen that while actants correspond to the syntactic arguments of a verb (subject, direct object, indirect object, etc.) it is important to note that the correspondence is not always one-to-one. The study of actants also has pragmatic implications, especially when considering how these participants are (or are not) realized in real discourse. For example, some actants may be omitted in certain communicative situations if they can be inferred from the context. Within cognitive linguistics, the concept of actants is related to the idea of semantic frames and thematic roles. Here, actants are understood as the prototypical participants in a conceptual scene evoked by a verb or a linguistic construction. In the analysis of longer texts, the study of actants can help to understand how the roles of participants are constructed and maintained throughout a narrative or discourse, which is of great interest within discourse analysis (Kheirabadi et al., 2022). Finally, it is important to mention that the concept of actants, although originating in linguistics, has been adopted and adapted by other disciplines. For example, in narrative semiotics (developed by Greimas), actants are used to analyze fundamental roles in narrative structures, extending beyond the purely linguistic function.

It is important to note that the same participant can play different actant roles depending on the context and the verb used. However, not all verbs require all of these types

of actants. In general, the number and type of actants depend on the valency of the verb in question. On the other hand, when studying poly-predicative constructions, it is customary to clearly contrast actant and adverbial sentences. Actant sentences are usually constructions in which a dependent predication replaces one of the valences of the main predicate, while adverbial sentences are constructions in which the dependent predication is a constant in the main predication. In other words, a parallel is drawn between various types of poly-predications, nominal actants, and circumnutates in a simple sentence. This approach reflects the fact that in different languages, dependent predication, expressed by various types of nominalizations, usually attaches the same case indicators as the noun for a given matrix predicate (Kimmel, 2011).

Considering the above, the aim of this work is to describe the semantics of simple sentences with actant content in their models and to determine the general characteristics of the implementation of these models in terms of grammatical and lexical semantics. Specifically, we seek to: 1) examine sentence models at the level of external semantics, focusing on the variability of representation by combinations of semantic actants, 2) Determine the possible compatibility of sentence members with semantic actants within the studied simple sentence models, 3) trace the general characteristics and variability of simple sentence models according to their semantic implementation.

## DEVELOPMENT

### On some properties of actants in the English language

In modern linguistics, it is customary to distinguish between nominal and sentential (predicate) actants of predicates. Naturally, the prototypical, "normal" filler of the actant position for most verbs is the nominal group. In studies devoted to the concept of actants and the typology of actants, nominal actants are usually considered in much more detail than sentential ones. However, it is believed that the actant position can be filled with a clause or a sentence. Sentences such as, for example, "Jane knows Tom's secret" and "Jane knows that Tom secretly went to Germany," are very close both semantically and syntactically. Let us consider two examples: 1) a) He convinced me otherwise. b) He convinced me that there was no need to come. Both the complement "otherwise" in (1a) and the sentential complement in (1b) have a semantic role of content. There are also cases when there is no coincidence of roles or different interpretations are possible: 2) a. Jack believes Ted. b) Jack believes in his friends c) Jack believes that his friends will not let him down. It is not obvious that the sentential actant in (2c) has the same semantic role as the nominal actants in (2a) and

(2b). Below we neglect these cases and consider those where the roles of nominal and sentential actants for the same verb are the same.

So, in example (1), the verb "convince" has an object in both of the above cases – it is nominal (noun phrase) in the first example, while in the second it is sentential (clause). Noonan (1985, p. 52) defines a construction with a sentential actant as follows: "...the syntactic situation that arises when a notional sentence or predication is an argument of a predicate." In other words, a sentential actant is a predication that is an actant of the main predicate.

At the same time, it is not entirely clear how complete this correspondence between nominal and sentential actants is. While in a sentence like "The smell of roses is pleasant" anyone can notice the subject (the smell of roses), constructions of forms such as "It's nice to be here" or "I'm pleased that you came to congratulate me" are often seen as impersonal. In this case, it is considered that the infinitives or phrases of the type "to be here" in them are part of the vertex predicate and are not its actants at all. Moreover, the form "pleasantly" has a distinctive use, largely because it can be used impersonally.

Some researchers go further in this same direction. For example, while Guiraud-Weber (1984) classifies sentences with a simple form and Gerritsen (1990) classifies them as impersonal. It is quite clear that a structure with sentential actants is much more difficult to classify than a structure with nominal actants. This follows from the structure of the verb's actant structure – at least when it comes to languages of the so-called Central European standard. Naturally, the most obvious signs of a subject in English are verbal agreement and (except in specific contexts such as nominal predicates) marking with the nominative case. The concept of "polypredication" began to be actively used in linguistic studies in the 1980s. According to Serdobolskaya (2005, p. 11) if previously complex sentences were considered separately from phrases with non-finite forms of the verb, then with the advent of new material, it became obvious that typologically the boundary between these two cases is not always easy to determine.

In the latest linguistic paradigms, polypredication is defined as "an abstract structural model of a complex sentence in which one or more clauses are embedded". There are differences between coordinating and subordinating constructions. Among the subordinate constructions – depending on the syntactic position of the nested predication – sentential actants, sentential circumstantials (circumstances), and sentential definitions are distinguished. This classification is discussed in detail in the works of the Novosibirsk typological school by, for example,

Cheremisin and Litvin. In turn, special literature is devoted to each type of polypredicative construction. Among the studies of constructions with sentential actants, we will name, in addition to the work of Noonan (1985) mentioned above, other Western typological works by Givón (1980), and the work of the St. Petersburg typological school. In particular, Nedyalkov and Noonan paid great attention to the study of the forms that encode the embedded predicate of the sentential actant.

### Simple sentence structure with actant content

In the typical meanings of sentences, the structure of objective situations reflected by consciousness receives its most generalized linguistic implementation. We proceed from the primary division of all simple sentences into sentences expressing the attribute of a substance and sentences expressing relations between substances. In this case, the following typical meanings are distinguished:

#### I. "Object and its sign":

- It's getting warmer.
- The days are getting longer.
- This game is interesting.

- There were three of them.

#### II. "Relationship between objects":

##### 1) The relationship between two objects:

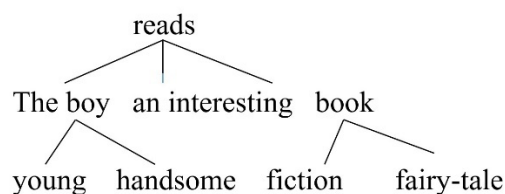
- The boy is reading a book.
- I do not smoke.
- My daughter is a student.

##### 2) The relationship between three objects:

- I gave the book to a colleague.
- I dropped the letter into the mailbox.

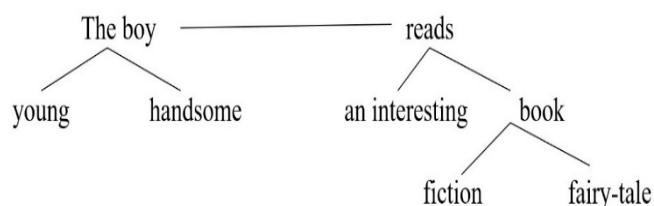
Thus, there are differences between a simple sentence with a verbal predicate in the structural aspect (Figure 1) and a simple sentence with a verbal predicate adopted in traditional grammar (Figure 2) differ significantly.

Fig 1. Structural scheme of a simple sentence with a verbal predicate.



Source: own elaboration

Fig 2. Scheme of a simple sentence with a verbal predicate adopted in traditional grammar.



Source: own elaboration.

Traditional grammar, explicitly or implicitly, is based on logical principles. It reveals in a sentence the logical opposition of the subject (in logic: subject) and the predicate (in logic: predicate); the subject (in essence: subject) is what something is reported about, the predicate (in essence: predicate) is what is reported about the subject. Despite the fact that in a sentence there are grammatically 1-5 sentence members, logically they correspond to two members of the judgment: the subject and the predicate. According to traditional grammar, words related to the subject form the pole of the subject (in our example, the words "young" and "handsome" refer to the word "boy" and together with it form the pole of the subject), and words related to the predicate together with it form the pole of the predicate (in our example, the words "an interesting," "book," "fiction," and "fairy-tale"). Thus, the pole of the subject is opposed to the pole of the predicate. For example, the sentence "Jane dances well". All traditional grammar – from Aristotle to Por-Royal, even now – is based on logic. But purely linguistic observations of linguistic

facts do not confirm the statement about the opposition of the subject to the predicate.

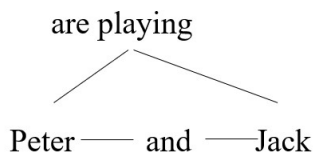
We know that all nouns, as well as some adjectives, are actants. Therefore, the opposition of the subject (noun) against the predicate (verb) violates the balance in the sentence, since it excludes one of the actants – the subject – from other actants and contrasts it with the predicate. The remaining actants, together with all the constants, are therefore attributed to the predicate. Thus, one member of the sentence is given disproportionate importance.

In addition, the opposition of subject to predicate hides the ability of actants to be interchanged, and this process forms the basis of collateral transformations. For example, *the daughter loves the mother* can be transformed by a simple interchange of actants into the passive *the mother is loved by the daughter*, where each actant remains at its level.

In modern structural linguistics, it is considered that actants are persons or objects participating in the process. We have already noted that actants are expressed as nouns and they are directly subordinated to the verb. "Actants differ in their nature, which in turn is connected with their number in the verbal node. The question of the quality of actants, thus, is the determining factor in the entire structure of the verb node. Verbs have different numbers of actants. Moreover, the same verb does not always have the same number of actants. There are verbs with one, two or three actants" (Tesnière, 1988, p. 22). A verb with one actant expresses an action in which one person participates; For example: *Pete is playing*. Pete is the only participant in the action, there is no need for someone else to participate in it except for Pete.

With this definition, one might think that in the sentence Pete and Jack are playing the verb are playing includes two actants. This is not true. Instead, it is the same actant that is repeated as the same role is performed by two different persons: Pete and Jack are playing = Pete is playing + Jack is playing. This is a bifurcation of the actant. However, this phenomenon is not taken into account when determining the actant (Figure 3).

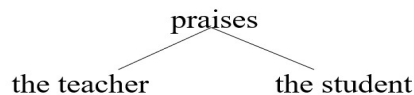
Fig 3. Example of bifurcation of the actant.



Source: own elaboration.

On the other hand, verbs with two actants express an action in which, without duplicating each other, two persons or objects participate. In the sentence the teacher praises the student there are two actants: 1) the teacher, who praises, and 2) the student, who receives (Figure 4).

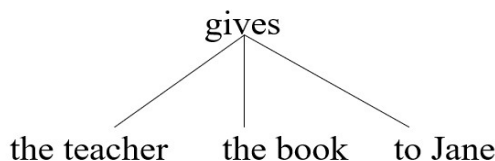
Fig 4. Example of sentence with two actants.



Source: own elaboration.

Verbs with three actants express actions in which, without duplicating each other, three persons or objects participate. In the sentence *the teacher gives the book to Jane*, there are three actants: 1) the teacher, who gives the book, 2) the book that is given to Jane and 3) Jane, who receives the book (Figure 5):

Fig 5. Example of sentence with two actants.



Source: own elaboration.

For verbs with three actants, as a rule, the first and third actants are persons (the teacher, Jane), and the second is an object (book). Entering an auxiliary verb in the organization of the actant structure does not produce any changes.

**Variability of simple sentences with actant content**

Modern linguistics considers linguistic variability as an objective immanent property of the language system, affecting all subsystems and units identified in the language in terms of form and content, in synchrony and diachrony, as well as intersystem relations and relations between "language and external world".

This fundamental property of natural human language has "... great, if not decisive, importance for characterizing the ontological essence of language units and thereby for characterizing the ontological nature of language as a whole"(Solntsev, 1977, p. 213). The analysis of variability as a universal phenomenon led researchers to the idea of creating a special science that would deal with

this phenomenon. It was proposed to call it orthology, that is, a discipline whose main category should be variation.

The basic concepts of the theory of variability are reflected in terms such as “variability,” “variance,” “variation,” “variant,” “invariant,” “constancy,” and “norm.” The first two terms are usually used synonymously. There are broad and narrow interpretations. Variability in a broad sense means any variability or modification. With this understanding, there is no need to contrast a variant with an invariant. In a narrow sense, variability is defined as “a characteristic of the mode of existence and functioning of language units in synchrony” (Solntsev, 1984, p. 31).

The problem of variability had previously attracted the interest of other researchers at the phonological level, which resulted in the publication of the first works devoted to variability. For example, a phoneme began to be considered as an invariant, and its sound realizations as variants. The classical principles of identifying invariant units were formulated by Trubetskoy. According to his theory, the invariant of a unit is a kind of abstraction and is a set of differential features. None of the segments identified in speech and directly given to us in observation can be designated as an invariant since these are only so-called “material symbols.” In speech, we are given only options that correlate with invariants as phenomena and essences.

The concepts of “variance” and “invariance” were thereafter transferred from phonology to other areas of linguistics. For example, Hjelmslev uses the terms invariant and variant when describing the process of dividing a text into certain segments. He found that “in many places in the text there is ‘the same’ complex sentence, ‘the same’ simple sentence, ‘the same’ word, etc.” Based on this, it was concluded that it is possible to implement many samples of any complex sentence, any simple sentence, any word, and so on. Trubetskoy (1960) proposed to call these samples variants, and their total prototype invariants.

The asymmetry of the plans of expression and content in the aspect of the sentence is seen in the fact that the same content (meaning) can be expressed by different formal variants of the sentence. “Each multiple propositional predicates corresponds to not one, but several verbal predicates, differing in their syntactic orientation, intentionality” (Katznelson, 1986, p. 138). For example, in English, the sentences “I teach them music” and “I teach music to them” have the same meaning, as this interchange is accompanied by a change in the form of the component being moved. In the English language, differences in the semantics of verbs are usually associated, as in the example given, with their formal differences. Thus, the same verb root can be used in both cases: “He splashed the

soup on the wall.” / “He splashed the wall with the soup.” “The book is on the table.” / “There is a book on the table.” Moreover, sentences with some other verbs can vary similarly: “A bell rang.” / “There rang a bell.”

The grammatical basis of a sentence is made up of a noun and a verb or a noun phrase and a verb phrase. In the latter case, it means that both main components of the sentence are expanded due to the introduction of dependent, optional components. By applying these rules not to a single word, but to a component of a sentence, one can obtain a sentence of any degree of distribution. Thus, a sentence of the simplest type NV: “The boy is reading” can be distributed as follows:

V — VN: “The boy is reading a book.”

N — AN: “A little boy is reading an interesting book.”

V — VD: “A little boy reads an interesting book out loud.”

A — AD: “A very small boy reads a very interesting book out loud.”

The operation of expanding, or unfolding, a sentence can theoretically be continued as long as desired, i.e., we cannot specify the longest sentence (Chomsky, 1964, p. 213). However, in practice, this process is not endless. Sentences that are too complex are very difficult to understand, so they do not appear very often – at least not in spoken language. In theoretical terms, the question of the minimum – necessary and sufficient – composition of a sentence turns out to be more important, which is reflected in the listed structural-semantic models.

When referring to the rules for the distribution of nouns and verbs, we are referring to their external distributors, which are included in the model as all optional components. Internal distribution is, however, also possible, relating only to the verb – or more precisely, to its use in a sentence as a predicate. This refers to methods of transforming the predicate that affect only its internal structure and do not in any way affect the model of the sentence as a whole. The predicate can be extended and complicated by introducing into its composition two types of extenders, or operators: aspect (phase) or modal (Levitsky, 1995, p. 15). As a result, the following derived forms of the predicate are obtained:

- Aspectual: “He reads.” / “He began (continued, finished) reading.”
- Modal: “He reads.” / “He can (should, wants to, etc.) read.”

Both main initial types of predicates – verbal and nominal – are subject to similar transformations, and repeated use

of both types of operators is possible, both separately and together (Levitsky, 1995, p. 28).

Thus, regular implementations in the modern Russian language, in addition to phase, modal, and some other transformations of the predicate, include sentence forms “with an unsubstituted subject position” (Katznelson, 1986, p. 22). In other words, the number of regular realizations includes partly members of the transformational paradigm of a sentence and partly contextual variants of sentences (statements). Causative transformations lead to a more significant change in the model, both formal and semantic (Khrakovsky, 1973, p. 23):

- Jane lay down.
- The grandmother laid Jane down.
- The doctor asked the grandmother to put Jane down.

For all cases of the spread of models, the common result is that “derived sentences in their grammatical status and meaning naturally differ from the original one” (Khrakovsky, 1973, p. 13). In this regard, it is possible to establish the isomorphism of the variants of sentence propagation, its “syntactic derivational paradigm with the morphological word-formation paradigm”. Thus, identifying sentence models involves two points: firstly, compiling a list of models, and secondly, ordering this list and its hierarchization – “from samples of a high level of abstraction (minimal schemes) to specific ones” (Lyutikova, 2002, p. 85). In the cases considered, the most abstract – the highest-level models – are structural, the lower level is formed by structural-semantic ones, while even lower ones are formed by various types of distribution of structural-semantic models.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we have highlighted the complex relationships between traditional grammar and structural linguistics. While traditional grammar emphasizes the opposition between subject and predicate, structural syntax challenges this notion, suggesting a more fluid view of sentence structure. This divergence underlines the need for a holistic approach in sentence analysis. Furthermore, the theory positing the central position of the verb node offers a more unified and efficient framework for understanding the relationships between different sentence elements, addressing some of the limitations of traditional methods. Therefore, the integration of multiple linguistic approaches in this analysis is invaluable, providing a more complete and nuanced understanding of language syntax. By combining perspectives from traditional grammar, structural linguistics, and situational structure analysis, we can

address analytical challenges and open up new avenues for future research in linguistic typology and sentence structure analysis. This integrated approach promises to significantly enrich our understanding of the complexity and diversity of linguistic structures.

In this context, the study of actants reveals their crucial role in constructing and understanding sentence structures. These elements not only participate in the action expressed by the verb but also define specific roles within the sentence, contributing significantly to the narrative and allowing for essential variability and flexibility in linguistic expression. This way, the function of actants transcends mere grammatical structure, influencing the semantic richness and narrative complexity of utterances. Their ability to assume different roles—whether as subject, direct object, or indirect object—allows for more precise articulation of meaning, facilitating the construction of sentences that accurately reflect the relationships and dynamics between the elements of the action described. This versatility of actants not only enriches language, but also provides a fundamental framework for linguistic and literary analysis, offering valuable insights into how meaning is constructed and conveyed in different communicative contexts. As seen during this research, as we better understand actants and their functions we are able to unravel the complexity of human communication as well as advancing our understanding of fundamental linguistic structures.

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