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Introduction

As the title suggests, this book is a typological study of grammatical roles, such as Agent, Patient, Beneficiary, and of grammatical relations, such as Subject, (Direct) and Indirect Object, which are familiar concepts in traditional grammars; in addition it is concerned with the devices, such as the passive, that alter or switch (or ‘remap’ – see 1.1) the identities between such roles and relations. It will be apparent, however, in a typological study, that the grammatical systems of familiar languages are not typical of many of the languages of the world, and that the traditional terminology is inappropriate, as will be seen in the need to use such terms as ‘Ergative’, ‘Absolutive’, ‘Antipassive’ etc.

It should, nevertheless, be possible to suggest a consistent and reasonably simple overall framework within which such issues may be illustrated and discussed (though nothing is very simple in language). Yet very few attempts to do so have been made, and even fewer have been at all successful. The main aim of this book is to provide such a framework and to illustrate within it some of the typological characteristics of different languages. As such, it will not contain a great deal of theoretical discussion, though theoretical issues cannot be wholly ignored, for the framework must rest on certain theoretical assumptions and observations. One simple point, however, should be made: a typological study is concerned with similarities and differences between languages, and does not rest upon the assumption that there are universal (and identical) features across languages (see Palmer 1986: 2–3 and, for a more detailed theoretical discussion, Croft 1991: 1–32).

Many of the issues to be considered are interrelated and each cannot, therefore, easily be discussed independently in a logical sequence. For that reason the aim of this first chapter is to give a brief account of the main typological categories and to introduce much of the terminology that will be needed. This will form a basis for the more detailed discussion in later chapters.

A major problem is that there is, unfortunately, great confusion in the use of terminology by different writers, and even a lack of appropriate
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terminology for some quite important general concepts. As far as possible, traditional or widely accepted terms will be used, though some new terms are required and, inevitably, some of the decisions about terminology will not meet with universal approval.

1.1 Predicates and arguments

A traditional view (and one that is implicit in much of modern theoretical linguistics) divides the sentence into two parts, subject and predicate. Thus in the sentence below the boy is the subject and chased the dog is the predicate:

The boy chased the dog

The subject is notionally ‘what is being talked about’ and the predicate ‘what is said about it’. The adoption of this subject-predicate analysis of the sentence is clearly shown in Chomsky’s Syntactic structures (1957: 26), where the first rule is:

\[ S \rightarrow NP + VP \]

This states that the sentence consists of a noun phrase and a verb phrase, which correspond closely to the traditional subject and predicate.

An alternative view (and one that is more useful for the purposes of this book) holds that the sentence consists of a predicador and one or more arguments (or ‘terms’ – see below); in the sentence above, the predicador is chased and there are two arguments, the boy and the dog; notionally, the predicador expresses the relationship (here the act of chasing) between the arguments (here the boy and the dog). On this view, the structure of this sentence, would be:

Argument – Predicador – Argument

Or in terms of NPs and VPs (with VP used, in a different sense, to indicate only the verbal element):

\[ NP – VP – NP \]

For a typological study, the two most basic assumptions (or, perhaps, observations) are, first, that the concept of predicate structure is applicable to all languages, and, secondly, that the arguments both (i) differ in their semantic relationships to the predicador and (ii) are clearly distinguished from one another through grammatical marking. Thus in the sentence above the
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distinction between the two arguments is shown by the word order. Switching the positions of two arguments would alter the semantic relationship of the arguments to the predicator and produce a quite different sentence:

The dog chased the boy

A further assumption for a typological study is that the arguments can be identified semantically across languages, and it seems to be the case that, for most of the two-argument structures, one can be identified as ‘Agent’ (notionally the one who performs the action) and the other as ‘Patient’ (the one who undergoes the action). However, the ways in which the distinction between Agent and Patient are marked grammatically in different languages are varied. In particular, word order is not always relevant, as it is in English; moreover, where word order is important, it is not always the case that the Agent precedes the Patient.

Agent and Patient, thus identified by various grammatical features in individual languages and across languages in terms of similarity of meaning, are examples of what are here called ‘grammatical roles’. The concept of ‘grammatical relations’, involving ‘Subjects’, ‘Objects’, etc. and the less familiar notions of ‘Ergative’ and ‘Absolutive’ will be discussed later (1.3.2, 1.4.2).

Two other terminological points may be made here. First, for the grammatical characterization of a sentence (or part of it) the term ‘construction’, rather than ‘structure’, is generally used (see Matthews 1981: 2), and will be used here from now on. Secondly, ‘term’ rather than ‘argument’ will be used to identify NPs that are not specifically identified as either roles or relations.

There is no determinate number of terms that may be marked grammatically, but two constructions can be regarded as the most basic, those with a single term and those with two terms, with the roles of Agent and Patient, as in English.

The boy smiled (the boy)
The boy chased the dog (the boy, the dog)

These constructions are traditionally referred to as ‘intransitive’ and ‘transitive’. There are, however, other terms that are often marked grammatically, particularly those with the roles of ‘Beneficiary’, ‘Instrumental’ and ‘Locative’. These may occur together with the single term of the intransitive and the two terms of the transitive construction. However, the single term of the intransitive and the two terms of the transitive are obligatory elements of the constructions, (so that the constructions are
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defined by their presence), while these other terms are optional. This can be seen from the impossible and possible sentences:

*Saw the dog
The boy chased the dog with a stick/in the garden

One further issue that will be the concern of this book is that there are, in many languages, pairs of sentences which differ grammatically in the marking of the arguments, but with very little change of meaning, e.g.:

The boy chased the dog
The dog was chased by the boy

Traditionally, these are ‘active’ and ‘passive’ respectively. In the passive, the Patient has the grammatical status given to the Agent in the Active, while the Agent has acquired an altogether different status (marked by the preposition by). The passive can, then, be considered to be a device that ‘remaps’ the roles (Klaiman 1991: 11).

1.2 Grammatical roles

It was established in the last section that, to begin with, this book is concerned with grammatical roles, which, like all typological categories, are defined both in terms of language-specific grammatical features and, across languages, by similarity in meaning. Before considering the further issue of grammatical relations more needs to be said about these roles.

1.2.1 Grammatical and notional roles

In purely notional terms, it is possible to identify a large number of roles that are played by the terms of a predication. These are sometimes referred to as ‘semantic roles’, but the less precise term ‘notional roles’ is to be preferred, especially since Klaiman (1991: 11) uses the term ‘semantic roles’ for the grammatical roles of this book.

Perhaps the best-known attempt to approach the problem of the roles in this way is that of Fillmore’s ‘case grammar’ as set out in his ‘Case for case’ (Fillmore 1968); a revised and augmented set of such ‘cases’ (Fillmore 1971: 376) is:

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Agent, the instigator of the event
Counter-agent, the force or resistance against which the action is carried out
Object, the entity that moves or changes or whose position or existence is in consideration
Result, the entity that comes into existence as a result of the action
Instrument, the stimulus or immediate physical cause of the event
Source, the place from which something moves
Goal, the place to which something moves
Experiencer, the entity which receives or accepts or experiences or undergoes the effect of an action


There are three problems with such notional roles. First, like all such notional features, they cannot be defined in any precise way, with the result it is not always possible to apply them unambiguously. Secondly, it is always possible to suggest more distinctions, so that there is, in principle, no limit to the number of possible roles. Thirdly, they are often partly based on the grammatical distinctions noted in languages, as is obvious in Fillmore’s list, and so are not truly notional.

These notional roles cannot, however, be wholly ignored (as may be seen from 1.2.3), but it is important to understand the relationships and the differences between them and the grammatical roles. There are four points.

First, notional roles may be seen as the exponents or realization of the grammatical roles, or as being expressed by these roles. Alternatively, the grammatical roles may be seen as the ‘grammaticalizations’ (or, for some scholars) the ‘grammaticization’ of the notional roles (see Palmer 1986: 3–7).

Secondly, grammatical marking is essentially language-specific, whereas notional or semantic characterizations are applicable to any or all languages; grammatical roles, therefore, are determined for any one language by their grammatical marking, but can be compared across languages (typologically) in terms of the notional roles that they express.

Thirdly, since grammatical roles are defined by their grammatical form, they are clearly identified and limited in number (particularly within a single language, but also typologically), whereas notional roles are far from clearly
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defined, and there can be no clear determination of their number. Thus Agent, Patient, Beneficiary, Instrumental and Locative are the five most important grammatical roles, but the number of notional roles to be defined rests largely on the judgement of the investigator.

A fourth and very important point is that there is seldom, if ever, a one-to-one correlation between notional and grammatical categories. Thus, nouns typically refer to physical objects, but while fire is a noun, fire is not a physical object. Nevertheless, there is a large group of nouns that clearly refer to physical objects, nouns such as chair, tree, horse or book, and it is this set of nouns that establishes the relation between the grammatical class and the reference to physical objects. These are the typical or ‘prototypical’ nouns and reference to physical objects is the prototypical feature of nouns.

In the same way, it is clear that there is no precise correspondence between the two types of role. A familiar illustration of this is the fact that in English and many other languages the grammatical role Agent subsumes not only the notional role of agent, but also the notional roles of perceiver and experiencer, as well as other such roles, as in (see 1.2.3 and 2.1.2):

The girl saw the accident
They like cherries

Yet the notional roles of agent and patient are the ‘prototypical’ roles associated with the two grammatical roles of Agent and Patient.

It may seem a little unfortunate that the same terms ‘agent’ and ‘patient’ are used for both the grammatical and the notional roles, and it might have been better if other terms such as ‘Actor’ and ‘Goal’ had been used for the grammatical terms (see Whistler 1985: 243). Foley and Van Valin (1984, 1985) talk of ‘Actor’ and ‘Undergoer’. However, ‘Agent’ and ‘Patient’ are now well established, and the proliferation of terminology would only lead to confusion, and there, moreover, would be a need to make terminological distinctions for Beneficiary, Instrumental, Locative and their prototypical notional roles. In fact, no confusion need arise. As has already been the practice in this book, grammatical roles will be indicated with initial capitals, while notional roles will not – ‘Agent’, ‘Patient’, etc. vs. ‘agent’ and ‘patient’ etc.

1.2.2 Types of marking

As will be seen later, grammatical marking is essentially a feature of grammatical relations, but this rests upon the prior identification of the
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roles, which must, therefore, be considered first. Such marking can be illustrated, for the grammatical roles of Agent and Patient, from transitive, active sentences of English. Basically, there are three types of marking.

(i) Word order – the Agent precedes, the Patient follows, the verb in declarative sentences:

The boy hit the man ) ( the man hit the boy

Other languages have different word order. In many languages both Agent and Patient precede the verb (the predicator), e.g. Tigrinya (Ethiopian Semitic, personal research):

bärhe na-məšgənna ḥərimu-wə
Berhe ANIM-Mesgenna hit + 3SG + MASC-3SG + MASC
‘Berhe hit Mesghenna’

(ii) Morphology – in the case of pronouns only (except for you) there are different forms:

I hit him ) ( He hit me

In many other languages, nouns as well as pronouns are morphologically marked for case, the case of the Agent being the nominative and the case of the Patient, the accusative, e.g. in Latin:

Puer hominem planxit. Homo puerum planxit
boy + NOM man + ACC he hit man + NOM boy + ACC he hit
‘The boy hit the man’ ‘The man hit the boy’

(iii) Agreement with the verb in terms of number with present tense of full verbs:

The boy hits the man ) ( The boys hit the man

(There is also marginal agreement in terms of person in English, in that the first person pronoun I is also followed by hit, not hits.) In some languages, e.g. French and German, there is person and number agreement in all tenses, and in others, e.g. Tigrinya, there is agreement in terms of gender as well as number for both Agent and Patient:

bärhe na-’astir ḥərimu-wə
Berhe ANIM-Astir hit + 3SG + MASC-3SG + FEM
‘Berhe hit Astir (woman’s name)’
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'astir nə-bārhe ḥarima-tto
Astir ANIM-Berhe hit + 3SG + FEM-3SG + MASC
‘Astor (woman’s name) hit Berhe’

Other roles are marked grammatically in some languages, particularly Beneficiary, Instrumental and Locative (see 2.5 and also 2.6). The corresponding notional roles in other languages are marked by prepositions (e.g. English to, with and in). There is a problem with treating these prepositions as grammatical markers, because there are many different prepositions, so that, if prepositions in general are taken to be markers of grammatical roles, there would be a different role for each preposition. However, since they are of interest for typological comparison especially because they are involved in issues of promotion and demotion (1.4.1), they cannot be entirely ignored, but will be treated as ‘peripheral’ grammatical roles.

These roles are marked by case in some languages. Thus Latin indicates Beneficiary and Instrumental by the dative and ablative cases:

Brutus Marcello librum dedit
Brutus + NOM Marcellus + DAT book + ACC gave
‘Brutus gave a book to Marcellus’

Brutus Marcellum gladio occidit
Brutus + NOM Marcellus + ACC sword + ABL killed
‘Brutus killed Marcellus with a sword’

However, as with most case systems, case in Latin (there are six cases) does not always mark grammatical relations.

1.2.3 Agent and Patient

It will become apparent that Agent and Patient are the two most important grammatical roles in a typological study. They form the basis of the distinction between transitive and intransitive sentences, in that in their active form transitive sentences must always contain both an Agent and a Patient, while for intransitive sentences there is a single obligatory term. This distinction is determined by the verb, the predicant, and traditionally verbs themselves are described as ‘intransitive’ or ‘transitive’, depending on which structure they require. Thus JUMP and LAUGH are normally intransitive, requiring single terms, while HIT and KILL are transitive, requiring both Agents and Patients. Many verbs are both intransitive and transitive, but
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with a difference in meaning, e.g. open (The door opened/He opened the door) and run (He ran in the race/He ran the competition). Agent and Patient are also essential to the distinction between ‘ergative’ and ‘accusative’ systems (1.3) and are the terms most typically involved in devices such as the passive and antipassive (1.4).

The cross-linguistic identification of Agent and Patient depends ultimately on the notional roles with which they are associated. There is no precise correlation between these roles and the notional roles of agent and patient, though these are the prototypical roles that makes the identification possible (1.2.1). There is an extended discussion of this issue in 2.1.2, but it is useful to illustrate briefly some of the ways in which the grammatical roles fail to match the notional ones.

For instance, in English and many other languages, perceivers function as Agents, as in:

The girl saw the accident

Yet it is obvious that perceivers are not agents, for perceivers are in no sense causers or instigators of the perception; on the contrary, it would seem that the thing perceived is more like the cause.

There are also striking contrasts both within and across languages in the choice of Agent and Patient. Thus fear selects the being who is afraid, while frighten selects the cause of the fear as the Agent:

Most men fear death
Death frightens most men

Equally, the same sequence of events may be described by either of the following two sentences:

John sold the book to Bill
Bill bought the book from John

In neither case can the choice of Agent be explained in terms of simple notions of agent and patient.

More strikingly, there are differences across languages. Compare the English sentence below with its Italian translational equivalent (Lepschy and Lepschy 1977: 177, 194):

They like cherries
Gli piacciono le ciliegie
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The English sentence is transitive with an Agent *they* and a Patient *cherries*, but the Italian sentence is intransitive with *le ciliegie* ('cherries') as the single obligatory term and *gli* ('to them') as a Beneficiary (but see 2.5).

For simplicity Agent and Patient will sometimes be referred to by the single letters A and P. For the single argument of intransitive sentences the symbol S will be used, although it is better to consider this S as standing for 'single (argument)', as Huddleston (personal communication) suggests, rather than as 'subject', as suggested by Dixon (1979: 59ff.), which is misleading, since the term 'subject' is traditionally used not only for S, but also for A.

Dixon (1977b: 402) and Foley and Van Valin (1985: 301) call Agent and Patient the 'core constituents' of transitive sentences. However, a term is needed to include not only A and P, but also the single term S of the intransitive, and 'core roles' would seem to be appropriate. The other grammatically important roles, which occur equally in transitive and intransitive sentences, are termed 'oblique'.

1.2.4 Other grammatical roles

Only three other roles appear to be of importance typologically, the oblique (1.2.3) roles of Beneficiary, Instrumental and Locative. A full account of them depends, however, on issues relating to grammatical relations (see 2.2 and 2.5).

The most important of these is that of Beneficiary. Notionally, Beneficiaries refer generally to animate beings indirectly affected by the action with a possible distinction between the notional roles of recipient and beneficiary. These two roles are marked by the prepositions *to* and *for* in English, but also by word order, as in:

- The boy gave a book to the girl
- The boy gave the girl a book
- The boy bought a book for the girl
- The boy bought the girl a book

Marking by preposition is an indication of merely peripheral roles, but marking by word order may be taken to indicate the (single) grammatical role of Beneficiary. In Latin, Classical Greek and many other languages the dative case may be taken to mark the Beneficiary (but see 2.3).

Instrumentals and Locatives are most clearly indicated in less familiar languages. Both can be illustrated from Kinyarwanda (Bantu, Kimenyi 1988: 10)