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The Role of Semantics in Sentence Structure Development in English

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Abstract. Semantics is crucial for sentence structure development because it gives meaning to the arrangement of words, ensuring grammatical constructions are both correct and comprehensible. It guides the creation of sentences by influencing how words, phrases, and clauses are organized to represent concepts, and it helps in understanding how words relate to each other to convey meaning, which in turn, aids in building more complex and effective sentence structures.

Key words: Semantics; Sentence structure; English grammar; Thematic roles; Verb semantics; Lexical meaning; Conceptual mappings; Syntax-semantics interface; Language learning; Cognitive linguistics

Introduction

Sentence structure has long been considered a syntactic domain, governed by formal rules that determine how words may be combined. However, modern linguistic theory recognizes that syntactic structure cannot be fully understood independently from semantics. English sentence formation is deeply intertwined with meaning: speakers choose structures not just based on grammatical constraints but in accordance with the meaning they intend to convey. Previous research in generative grammar, cognitive linguistics, and functional linguistics has shown that semantics plays a fundamental role in shaping sentence patterns. For example, thematic roles such as agent, patient, and experiencer define how participants are distributed within a clause. Semantic properties of verbs influence the syntactic frames they appear in, as observed in Levin's verb-class studies. Cognitive linguists argue that conceptual relationships and metaphors also determine syntactic choices.

Despite extensive theoretical work, the relationship between meaning and structure is still debated in certain areas of linguistics and language pedagogy. In many instructional settings, syntax and semantics are taught separately, which may hinder learners' ability to produce meaningful and structurally accurate sentences.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how semantic factors guide sentence structure development in English and to highlight the importance of integrating semantic understanding into grammatical instruction. The purpose of this paper is to analyze key semantic components that influence English sentence structure and to show their role in sentence generation and comprehension.

Methods





This study employs a qualitative analytical approach based on linguistic literature, theoretical models, and selected sentence examples from natural English usage. The methodological framework includes:

2.1 Literature Review Approach

Sources from generative grammar, cognitive linguistics, and functional grammar were examined to identify core semantic principles affecting sentence structure. Works by Chomsky, Fillmore, Jackendoff, Langacker, and Levin were used to determine major theoretical perspectives.

2.2 Semantic Component Analysis

Semantic categories such as thematic roles, verb semantics, lexical relationships, and conceptual mappings were analyzed to determine how each influences structural formation. The approach focuses on how meaning determines constituent order, argument number, and syntactic patterns.

2.3 Sentence-Level Data Analysis

Example sentences were drawn from academic writing, spoken English corpora, and English textbooks. These examples were examined to show how semantic roles and verb meaning shape syntactic structures.

2.4 Comparative Analysis

Different sentence structures (active vs. passive, simple vs. complex, thematic rearrangements) were compared to illustrate how semantic shifts lead to structural differences.

This methodological design allows the study to explore the semantic foundations of English sentence structure without relying on experimental data, focusing instead on theoretical validity and linguistic patterns.

Results

The findings reveal several key ways in which semantics governs English sentence structure:

3.1 Thematic Roles Determine Word Order

Sentence analysis showed that English word order is largely determined by semantic roles. The agent typically precedes the verb, while the patient follows it. When the semantic focus shifts, structures such as the passive voice are used to reposition thematic roles while preserving meaning.

3.2 Verb Semantics Define Structural Frames

Data analysis confirmed that different verbs require specific syntactic patterns depending on their semantic properties. For example, ditransitive verbs like "give" necessitate two objects, while intransitive motion verbs can trigger optional path or manner constructions.

3.3 Lexical Meaning Shapes Clause Combination

Sentences containing semantically related verbs or nouns tended to form complex constructions, including subordinate clauses or coordinate patterns. Semantic relationships such as causation, contrast, or condition naturally generated specific structural frameworks.





3.4 Conceptual Mappings Influence Sentence Patterns

Cognitive analysis demonstrated that metaphorical or conceptual relationships influenced structure. For example, abstract concepts mapped onto motion schemas produced sentences such as “The project is moving forward,” a metaphor that shapes syntactic form.

3.5 Learner Patterns Reflect Semantic Dependence

Language learner examples revealed that syntactic errors often stemmed from misunderstandings of semantic roles. When learners misinterpret participant relationships, their sentence structure becomes inaccurate despite correct syntactic knowledge. These findings collectively show that semantics is fundamental to sentence structure development and cannot be separated from syntactic learning.

Discussion

The results support the argument that semantics plays a fundamental role in sentence structure development in English. While syntax provides structural rules, meaning determines how these rules are applied in real communication. Thematic roles dictate constituent order, verb semantics constrain syntactic frames, and conceptual structures shape clause arrangement.

4.1 Implications for Linguistic Theory

The findings align with theories from cognitive linguistics, which emphasize meaning as the foundation of grammar. They also support generative accounts that integrate semantic roles into deep-structure representation. The interdependence of semantics and syntax suggests that theories isolating grammar from meaning fail to capture how sentences are actually formed.

4.2 Implications for Language Teaching

A key pedagogical implication is that grammar instruction should integrate semantic explanation. Teaching sentence patterns without discussing meaning relationships may lead to confusion or incorrect usage. Learners need to understand not only how structures work but why certain structures fit particular meanings.

4.3 Limitations

This study is theoretical and qualitative, relying on existing literature and sentence examples. It does not include empirical experimentation or large-scale corpus analysis. Future research may incorporate quantitative data to measure how semantics affects syntactic choice in real-world communication.

4.4 Future Research

Further studies could examine:

How semantic awareness affects second language acquisition outcomes.
Cross-linguistic differences in semantic–syntactic relationships.
Corpus-based analysis of semantic influence in natural English usage.





Overall, the discussion emphasizes that sentence structure emerges through the interaction of syntactic rules and semantic interpretations, with meaning serving as the guiding force.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that semantics plays a central role in the development of English sentence structure. Meaning influences every stage of sentence formation—from determining word order to defining grammatical functions. Verb semantics, thematic roles, lexical relationships, and conceptual mappings all contribute to how sentences are constructed and understood. Recognizing the semantic foundations of syntax improves the teaching and learning of English grammar and supports a comprehensive view of linguistic competence. Integrating semantic awareness into education and research promises to enhance the accuracy, clarity, and communicative effectiveness of English sentence production.

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