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Exploring Semantic Roles as Elements of Meaning in *Men are Pregnant* By Irany

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Abstract:
This paper examines how Irany uses semantic roles as meaning-related components in Men are Pregnant as it places emphasis on how these roles support the text's relational and thematic differences. The study fills in the knowledge gap about how the poem uses linguistic elements like Agent, Patient, Experiencer, Theme, and Goal to express feelings, abstract ideas, and complex societal issues. Fillmore and Jackendoff's theory of semantic roles, which sheds light on the relationships between various sentence entities and actions and states, serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. Also, a qualitative descriptive methodology is used in this study, which includes the analysis and purposeful selection of twelve poems from Irany's collection. By carefully examining these poems, the study reveals how semantic features contribute to the representation of power relationships, emotional sensitivity, and the universal themes of hope and love. The findings show how themes can be evoked by agents like "they" in the context of political exploitation and "we" in the promise of rescue. The study concludes that semantic roles are essential for revealing meanings and improving readers' comprehension of the poems.

Keywords: Semantic roles, elements of meaning, meaning construction, literary semantics

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Introduction

Human communication is based on language, which is the fundamental instrument by which people express their ideas, feelings, and comprehension of the world. Its purpose is not limited to information transfer; it also captures the complexities of society and the human condition. People use language to express their identities, worldviews, and cultural values, incorporating the subtleties of their social and ideological backgrounds into it (Bauman & Briggs, 2003). For example, deeper cultural beliefs, power dynamics, and societal norms are frequently revealed through the words and expressions used in everyday conversations or artistic works. As a result, language reflects society, reflecting its complexity and changing character. It affects people's understanding and relationships with their surroundings and with each other, so it not only reflects but also shapes perceptions (Kramsch, 2014). In this sense, language becomes a potent tool for promoting understanding, conserving cultural heritage, and contesting or reaffirming societal beliefs.

The structure of language as a communication tool is based on norms and patterns that make communication easier (Bonvillain, 2019). Goldstein and Fowler (2003) state that phonetics and phonology, which concentrate on the articulation and recognition of speech sounds, and morphology, which Allen and Badecker (2015) define as the component of language structure used to comprehend word structure, make up the hierarchical structure at the heart of language. Contrarily, syntax describes the rules that determine how words are arranged in sentences and adds to a language's grammatical structure (Chomsky, 2014). Pragmatics takes into account the social and contextual elements that affect language use, whereas semantics studies the meaning of words and sentences (Wyner& Cohen, 2015).

In the light of the above, semantic roles are essential for analyzing how meaning is constructed within sentences, particularly in literary texts where every word and structure often carries layered significance. Wynerand Cohen(2015)describe the functions that different elements in a sentence perform in relation to the action or state expressed by the verb. For example, the agent is the doer of an action, the patient is the entity affected by it, and the recipient is the one who receives something as a result. In literature, these roles help uncover deeper relationships and intentions behind the author's linguistic choices, revealing how characters interact with events, objects, and each other. Through the examination of these roles, readers can better understand the power dynamics, thematic messages, and emotional undertones in a narrative, as well as how context shapes interpretation. This makes semantic roles a vital tool for interpreting the embedded and context-dependent meanings found in literary works, particularly, in *Men are Pregnant* by Irany.

Statement of the problem

Understanding semantic roles is essential to comprehending how language constructs and interprets meaning. They provide a framework for examining how meaning is communicated by defining the connections between actions, agents, and recipients within a sentence. Despite their significance, semantic roles are frequently examined mainly in linguistic contexts, with little attention paid to how they might be applied in more general communicative frameworks or how they might subvert conventional wisdom. This lack of attention creates a gap in our knowledge of how semantic roles function in unusual and non-traditional contexts, like when language is purposefully altered to challenge social norms and constructs. The understanding of semantic roles' ability to affect perceptions and convey meaning is limited by the lack of thorough investigation into their function in these contexts, which is why this study was conducted.

The Concept of Semantics

Semantics is a linguistic field that has garnered varying definitions from scholars. Semantics is a wide sub discipline of linguistics which refers to "the study of meaning. It borders on the analysis and description of symbols in relation to the senses they signal" (Cruse, (2002, p. 89). As Cruse describes, semantics involves understanding how words, phrases, and sentences are used to signal various meanings in different contexts. This field explores the relationships between linguistic expressions and the concepts they represent, aiming to clarify how language users interpret and communicate meaning effectively.

Linguists and philosophers have outlined three primary approaches to explaining meaning in language: word meaning, sentence meaning, and the communication process. The nature of word meaning involves understanding how individual words carry specific meanings and how these meanings can change depending on context (Allan, 2014). Sentence meaning goes further, examining how words combine according to grammatical rules to convey more complex ideas and how these combinations affect interpretation. Lastly, the explication of the communication process looks at how meaning is conveyed and interpreted between speakers and listeners, considering the roles of context, intention, and shared knowledge in effective communication. Each of these approaches provides a different perspective through which to analyze and understand the human language.

Semantics according to Salloum, Khan and Shaalan (2020) is a branch of linguistics, which aims to investigate the meaning of language. Semantics deals with the meaning of sentences and words as fundamentals in the world. Here, Semantics focuses on understanding how sentences and words convey meaning, treating these linguistic elements as foundational to communication in the real world. This field aims to systematically analyze and interpret the significance behind linguistic expressions, simplifying clearer and more effective understanding of human language.

From a linguistic point of view, Bouguelmouna (2022) says Semantics is the branch of linguistics concerned with the systematic study of meaning in language, focusing on the relationships between signifiers and what they stand for. This definition examines how meaning is constructed, interpreted, and communicated, looking at the interplay between linguistic elements and their referents. This includes analyzing how different signifiers can convey various meanings and how these meanings change depending on context, usage, and cultural background.

Semantic Roles

Semantic roles (also known as thematic roles or theta roles) are a fundamental concept in linguistics. As it is all known, each sentence consists of different entities (Rissman & Majid, 2019). Semantic roles are used to indicate the role played by each entity in a sentence. Semantic relations were introduced in generative grammar during the mid-1960s and early 1970s as a way of classifying the arguments of natural language predicates into a closed set of participant types which were thought to have a special status in grammar (Perini, 2019).

Not only can words be treated as containers of meaning, or as fulfilling roles in events, they can also have "relationships" with each other. Here are some common semantic roles: Agent, Theme (Patient), Experiencer, Instrument, Benefactive, Recipient, Locative/ Location, Source and Goal.

Agent: Agent is the entity (somebody/something) that performs an action (the doer of the action). Dowty (1991) describes the agent as the participant who deliberately performs the

action or brings about a state of affairs. Levin and Rappaport (2005) state that the agent is typically the initiator of the action denoted by the verb. Agents can be human (The boy), as in (1) below. Also, they can be non-human entities that cause actions, as a natural force as in (2) (The wind), a machine as in (3) (A car), or an animal as in (4) (The dog). Examples:

1. The boy kicked the ball.
2. The wind blew the ball away.
3. A car ran over the ball.
4. The dog caught the ball.

Theme (Patient): Theme (sometimes called the "patient") is the entity that is involved in or affected by the action. Fillmore (1968) explains the theme as the entity that moves or is located in the event described by the verb. Dowty (1991) defines the theme/patient as the participant which is affected by the action or undergoes a change of state.In the previous examples (1-4), "the ball" was the entity that was affected by the action. Therefore, "the ball" in the sentences above is the theme (patient).

However, the theme can also be an entity (the ball) that is being described (i.e. not performing an action). Examples

1. The ball is red.
2. Mary is beautiful.

Experiencer: Experiencer is the entity (person) who experiences a feeling, perception or state. Jackendoff (1987) describes the experiencer as the argument that perceives or feels something. Croft (2012) defines the experiencer as the participant who experiences the action or state described by the verb. Examples

1. John feels happy. (feeling)
2. Huda heard some noise outside. (perception)
3. Bill is sitting on the chair. (physical state)
4. Jack is thinking about the problem. (mental state)

Instrument: Instrument is the entity that is used to perform an action. Cruse (2000) defines the instrument as the means by which an action is performed. Levin and Rappaport (2005) describe the instrument as an entity that is used by an agent to carry out an action. Examples are provided as follows:

1. The girl opened the door with the key.
2. The woman cut the cake with a knife**.**

Benefactive: Benefactive is the living entity that benefits from the action of the verb.Van Valin and LaPolla (1997) define the benefactive as the participant for whose benefit the action is performed. Cruse (2000) describes the benefactive as the one who benefits from or is adversely affected by the action. Example

I bought a present for my friend.

The benefactive is "my friend". "My friend" benefits from the action of buying the present, so he is the benefactive and he is at the same time the "recipient" because he is the one who will physically receive it. However, in some cases the benefactive is different from the recipient.

Recipient: Recipient is the living entity that physically receives something from the agent. Givon (2001) describes the recipient as the animate goal of a transfer action. Levin and Rappaport (2005) define the recipient as the participant who receives the theme in a transfer

of possession. In the example below, the benefactive and the recipient can be different entities. Example

I bought a present for my friend's child.

Benefactive: my friend's child (It was the child who benefited from the present)

Recipient: my friend (It was my friend who received the present)

Locative/ Location: Locative is the place where the action takes place. Fillmore (1968) describes the locative as the place where the action or state denoted by the verb is situated. Van Valin and LaPolla (1997) define the locative as the spatial or temporal setting of the action or state. Examples

1. John is at the store.
2. The book is on the table.
3. Ali is in the office.

Temporal/Time: Temporal is when an event or action takes place. Examples

1. I have an appointment on Sunday.
2. I'll go shopping in the afternoon.
3. He returned home at 6:00 p.m.

Source: Source is the entity from which something moves or originates. Jackendoff (1987) defines the source as the starting point of a motion event. Cruse (2000) describes the source as the place or entity from which something moves. Examples;

1. John is coming from Jos.
2. Adam arrived from Yola.

Goal: Dowty (1991) describes the goal as the entity towards which the motion or action is directed. Levin and Rappaport (2005) define the goal as the destination of an action involving movement or transfer. Examples;

1. Khalid is driving to school.
2. Habu went home**.**

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this paper is Fillmore and Jackendoff theory of semantic roles (1992) which is seen as a collaborative theory. Fillmore introduced Case Grammar in 1968, emphasizing the idea that verbs govern specific roles, such as agent, patient, and experiencer, which are necessary for interpreting meaning (Fillmore, 1968). Jackendoff further developed the concept of thematic relations in the 1980s, integrating semantic roles into a broader cognitive and syntactic framework to explain how language reflects human thought and perception (Perini, 2019). Together, their theories provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the relationships in language, especially as they pertain to the construction of meaning.

Fillmore's Case Grammar Theory posits that the meaning of a sentence is largely determined by the roles associated with its verb (Fillmore, 1968). He identifies key roles such as the agent (the doer of an action), patient (the entity affected by the action), instrument (the means by which the action is performed), and experiencer (the entity that perceives or feels). Fillmore's approach emphasizes that these roles are not merely grammatical categories but are tied to the cognitive and functional aspects of how humans understand actions and events.

Similarly, Jackendoff builds upon Fillmore's ideas by incorporating thematic roles into his Conceptual Semantics framework, which he began developing in the early 1980s. Jackendoff asserts that thematic roles are not just linguistic constructs but are tied to larger cognitive representations of events and actions (Jackendoff, 1992). He introduced the concept of "thematic relations" to emphasize the connection between syntax, semantics, and cognition. Jackendoff's work has filled the gap between linguistic form and human conceptual understanding, showing how semantic roles mirror universal patterns in how people perceive and describe the world. These theories are directly relevant to the analysis of *Men are Pregnant* by Irany where the subversion of expected roles in lines create a linguistic and cognitive difference that forces readers to reconsider societal norms and the linguistic constructs that uphold them.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive analysis to explore the semantic roles within selected poems by Irany. This approach focuses on systematically collecting and interpreting non-numerical data to identify patterns and meanings in the texts. Relying solely on primary data, twelve poems from the collection were purposively sampled. They are: Before we became, The woman in scarlet, The discussion, The missing RIP, Our father has gone, The grasses, Romance, My virginity, Love in unholy trysts, and Garden of love. For easy analyses, these poems are identified as: Text 1, Text 2, Text 3, Text 4, Text 5, Text 6, Text 7, Text 8, Text 9, and Text 10 respectively. The analysis utilized Fillmore and Jackendoff's theory of semantic roles, with each text analyzed independently to identify and interpret the roles embedded in the language. Referential analysis was employed, providing excerpts from the texts and systematically analyzing them to uncover the semantic relationships and their implications.

Analysis and Discussion

Semantic roles which also imply thematic roles or theta roles are conceptsthat are used to show the role played by each entity in a sentence. In the poems under study, several thematic roles were discovered and the below analysis and discussion show how thematic roles are being manipulated in the texts.

Text 1

Semantic relation: Agent and Theme

They rape our land; they rape our resources (Lines 8–9)

Agent: *They*. Refers to the group (likely politicians or corrupt leaders) who are actively committing the action.

Theme: *Our land* and *our resources.* These are the objects being acted upon. They undergo the negative action of being exploited.

Semantic relation: Agent, Patient, and Instrument

We celebrate them, they disfigure us (Line 14)

Agent: "We". The group that engages in the act of celebration.

Patient: "Them". The people being celebrated (likely the corrupt leaders).

Agent: "They". The leaders or powerful figures performing the disfigurement.

Patient: "Us". The group being disfigured or harmed by those in power.

Text 2
Semantic relation: Experiencer and Theme
She sees the vultures having a feast as usual (Line 2)

Experiencer: "She". *She* is perceiving the event.

Theme: "The vultures having a feast". This is what is being perceived by the woman.

Text 3
Semantic relation: Agent and Patient
We will bring them back (Line 7)

Agent: "We". This refers to the speakers promising to bring the girls back.

Patient: "Them". The girls being referred to as "our girls," who are the victims.

Text 3
Semantic relation: Experiencer and Theme
Do not cry my sister, they will surely come for us (Line 13)

Experiencer: "My sister". The one experiencing the emotion (cry).

Theme: "They will surely come for us". This is the expected rescue which is the content of the experience or hope.

Semantic relation: Agent and Patient
We will devour their soul, spirit, and body (Line 32)

Agent: "We". This refers to the group claiming responsibility (Boko Haram).

Patient: "Their soul, spirit, and body". Refers to the Chibok girls.

Text 4
Semantic relation: Experiencer and Theme
My sister told me she is in love (Line 2)

Experiencer: "My sister". The entity feeling loved.

Theme: "In love". The emotion or state of being the sister experiences.

Semantic relation: Agent, Patient and Theme
Or locks them in a room and starve them for weeks or months until they die of unnatural causes (Line 9-10)

Agent: "He". "*He* refers to *Mr. Rich*, the person performing the action.

Patient: "Them". This refers to *the wives* who are the individuals affected by being locked up and starved.

Theme: "Unnatural causes". The result of the actions, leading to the death of the wives.

Semantic relation: Agent, Theme, and Goal
The hopelessness directs us to Mr. Rich (Line 27)

Agent: "Hopelessness". The state that drives the action.

Theme: "Us". The people being affected by the hopelessness.

Goal: "Mr. Rich". The person to whom the hopelessness leads them for rescue or solution.

Text 5
Semantic relation: Agent and Theme
Your throne is desired by fools (Line 1)

Agent: "Fools". The ones desiring the throne.

Theme: "Your throne" This is the object of desire which refers to the seat of power and leadership held by *the Ukwe*.

Semantic relation: Experiencer and Theme
Our father has gone (Line 3)
Experiencer: "Our". The pronoun showcases the people/children of the community who are the ones experiencing loss.

Theme:"Our father". Referring to the Ukwe Ali Ibrahim, the leader who has passed on.

Text 6
Semantic relation: Experiencer and Theme
I saw the empty space where my father's house once stood (Line 1)

Experiencer: "I". This is the speaker, experiencing a sense of loss and nostalgia.
Theme: "The empty space". The theme shows the absence of the father's house, which depicts loss or destruction.

Semantic relation: Agent and Patient
The grasses looked at me with pity (Line 2)

Agent: "The grasses". The phrase is personified as agents who are capable of performing the action *looked*.

Patient: "Me". It represents the speaker who is the recipient of the grasses' pity.

Semantic relation: Agent, Theme, and Goal
I will gather them and burn them to ashes (Line 17)

Agent: "I". Shows the speaker, who is performing the action.

Theme: "Them". The object to be burned which is *the grasses*.

Goal: "To ashes". This is the result of the action showing total destruction.

Text 7
Semantic relation: Experiencer, Theme and Effect
Your caresses seal my hell (Line 1)

Experiencer: "The speaker". The person feeling the effects of the caresses.

Theme:"Your caresses". It depicts the beloved's gentle touch, which is the focus of the speaker's emotional experience.

Effect: "Seal my hell". The effect of the beloved's caresses is that it closes off the speaker's intense internal suffering or turmoil.

Text 8

Semantic relation: Agent and Theme

You took the virginity of my heart (Line 1)

Agent: "You". The entity who initiates the action of taking the speaker's emotional innocence or purity.

Theme: "The virginity of my heart". This represents the speaker's emotional purity or guardedness, which has been "taken".

Semantic relation: Theme and Agent

The flower I had kept for so long (Line 2)

Theme: "The flower". This represents the speaker's emotional innocence or love, which has been carefully guarded.

Agent: "I". *I* represent the speaker who has protected their heart/emotional purity for a long time, indicating personal vulnerability.

Semantic relation: Experiencer and Theme

My heart finally opened to the knowledge that is whole (Lines 9-10)

Experiencer: "My heart". The phrase refers to the speaker's emotional core.

Theme: "The knowledge that is whole". The phrase represents the complete understanding or emotional awakening that the speaker achieves after their experience of vulnerability.

Semantic relation: Agent and Experiencer

Here, my hero comes to rescue me (Line 17)

Agent: "My hero". This depicts the person who comes to save the speaker representing the beloved or savior.

Experiencer: "Me". This is the speaker in need of rescue or salvation.

Text 9

Semantic relation: Theme and Location

In palaces of kings, (Line 1)

Theme: "Love". Love is a referral theme that shows the central subject, representing an emotion or force that exists in various contexts.

Location: "Palaces of kings". This suggests a place of power.

In prison and in dark places (Line 4)

Theme: "Love". This emphasis.

Location: "Prison and dark places". This suggests that love thrives even in despair and confinement.

Semantic relation: Theme and Agent

In the company of holy liars (Line 5)

Theme: “Love”. This emphasis.

Agent: “Holy liars”. Represents individuals who may misrepresent themselves or their intentions.

Semantic relation: Experiencer and Theme

Where the angels shout "LOVE" is the new hallelujah (Line 10)

Experiencer: “Angels”. These are the beings that experience the significance of love.

Theme: “LOVE”. This is the focal point of the text signifying that love is a new form of praise or worship in the spiritual realm.

Text 10

Semantic relation: Theme and Location

In my garden there are many flowers (Line 1)

Theme: “Flowers”. This theme symbolizes love, beauty, and the richness of emotional experiences present in the garden.

Location: “Garden”. This is the physical or abstract space where the theme is found.

Semantic relation: Agent and Goal

The king wants to buy my garden (Line 4)

Agent: “The king”. This is the agent that represents authority and power.

Goal: “Buy my garden”. The goal implies an attempt to possess love.

Semantic roles serve as a critical tool for identifying meaning, thematic development, and relational dynamics in the poems, as demonstrated by the analysis of the chosen texts. In order to illustrate how entities in the poems interact with actions and emotions, the study looks at roles like Agent, Patient, Experiencer, Theme, and Goal. The examination of Text 1, for example, shows how agents such as “they” (corrupt leaders) take advantage of resources, producing a striking picture of societal inequality and exploitation. The interaction between agents and patients in Text 3 likewise conveys the promise of rescue and hope, mirroring the sociopolitical background of incidents such as the kidnapping of the Chibok girls.

The data also show how semantic roles help readers better comprehend the poems' symbolic and abstract representations. Text 10, for instance, uses the theme of “virginity of my heart,” which stands for innocence and emotional awakening, to convey the speaker's emotional vulnerability. In Text 11, the transformative and universal power of love is portrayed as flourishing in a variety of settings, including prisons and palaces. Location, Theme, and Experiencer are examples of semantic roles that aid in revealing the relationships between love, identity, and resiliency in these settings. Finally, the analysis finds that:

i. Semantic roles like Agent, Patient, and Theme highlight the power structures within the texts. For instance, corrupt leaders (Agents) exploit resources (Themes) and harm citizens (Patients), reflecting societal inequalities and injustices.

ii. Experiencer and Theme roles effectively depict emotional states and personal experiences, such as loss, love, and hope. These roles provide understanding into the psychological and emotional feelings in the poet.

Conclusion

Semantic roles in the chosen poems are analyzed in order to reveal their deep significance as they shed more light in the relationship between language, meaning, and human experiences. Through an analysis of roles like Agent, Patient, Experiencer, Theme, Goal, and Location, this study has revealed the diverse ways in which these linguistic components enhance the texts' understanding. In addition, the roles are essential tools for comprehending abstract concepts like love, loss, and resilience as well as the relational differences between entities and actions. With their roots in both personal and sociopolitical contexts, the poems eloquently depict societal issues like emotional vulnerabilities, inequality and exploitation, and the enduring power of love and hope. The importance of semantic roles in bridging the gap between literary interpretations and linguistic structures is highlighted by this study, which also provides fresh insights into the ways in which language translates meaning.

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