

# V08 Argument Structure

Course in Semantics · Ling 531 / 731  
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Among the most important properties of verbal predicates is that they take arguments.

At first glance we might think that taking arguments is how verbs differ from other lexical categories. But we've seen that prepositions do, and so do many nouns (*part (of)*, *destruction (of)*) and adjectives (*fond (of)*). And of course, in a larger sense, so do determiners, quantifiers, and other operators.

## 1 Valency

Verbs are best defined by their morphosyntactic properties.

Anyways, we can classify verbs by their **valency** ['veɪ.l.m.sɪ].<sup>1</sup> The concepts in that realm predate the notion of event argument by a few thousand years, so when we count "arguments" we exclude the event argument.

- **ambient/impersonal** verbs take no apparent (semantic) argument.
- **intransitive** verbs take one argument.
- **transitive** verbs that take two arguments, a subject and an object.
- **ditransitive** verbs take three arguments, a subject, an object, and a 'dative'

In many languages, verbs can undergo **alternation** between these.

- (1) *Tom **broke off** a piece of the KitKat.* (transitive)
- (2) *A piece of the KitKat **broke off**.* (intransitive)
- (3) *Tom **broke me off** a piece of the KitKat.* (ditransitive)

In English, the alternation requires no morphology. It's called a *zero alternation*. Children will often zero-alternate verbs that adults don't.

- (4) *The doctor will **feel** you better.*  
= The doctor will make you feel better

In other languages, and in some English cases, you need morphology to pull this alternation off.

### Valence-adding morphology

Some morphology adds to valence, creating verbs that require more arguments.

<sup>1</sup>Sometimes the term **valence** is used instead.

Causatives add a causing event and an agent argument:

- (5) Japanese *kawaku* 'dry' → *kawak-asu* 'make dry'
- (6) Quechua *wañu* 'die' → *wañu-chi* 'kill'
- (7) *make laugh*

Applicatives add a non-agent argument:

### Valence-reducing morphology

Voice morphology will reduce valence by one.

Passives describe events with agents, but the grammar allows them not to be mentioned. The undergoing object is 'promoted' to grammatical subject.

- (8)

Anti-causatives describe events that lack any causing agent at all. You can felicitously add 'on its own' to anti-causatives with an inanimate subject.

- (9) Russian *lomat* 'break' (transitive) → *lomat'-sja* 'break' (intransitive)
- (10) Kiowa *bôn* 'bend' (transitive) → *bôn-gyá* 'bend' (intransitive)

## 2 Ergativity

**Ergative** describes case-marking that only applies to certain subjects. Namely, those of transitive verbs. Subjects of intransitive verbs and objects of transitive verbs bear the same case, called **absolutive**. Euskara (Basque) is probably the most well known ergative-absolutive language.

- (11) (ergative)  
Gizon-**ak** emakume-**a** ikusi du  
man-ERG woman-ABS seen has  
'The man saw the woman.'
- (12) (absolutive)  
Gizon-**a** Donosti-tik da  
man-ABS San Sebastián-ABL is  
'The man is from San Sebastián'