

# Conceptualising Transitivity

Update May 2023

# Topic: Semantic Fields and Roles

# What are semantic fields?

- Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 218) refer to ‘experiential domains’, which are areas of experience construed by the lexicogrammar.
- Any one experiential domain may be construed using several process types – see Halliday’s discussion of ‘the grammar of pain’.
- In this project, experiential domains are called ‘semantic fields’.
- Each end-point construction is labelled with one or more semantic fields.
- Examples of semantic fields are: communication; cognition; causation; identity.

# Why specify semantic fields?

- Answer 1: It provides a bridge to other approaches to Construction Grammar e.g. Patten and Perek identifying the constructions in Frames.
- Answer 2: It provides a framework for specifying participant roles.
- Answer 3: It takes us towards building transitivity networks, where we specify the choices involved in arriving at a construction.
- Answer 5: It provides a means for people to find the constructions they are interested in in the database.
  
- (Answers are in no particular order.)

# How to specify semantic fields?

- My first attempts at this were somewhat random and varied substantially in terms of level of generality e.g. the 'person bets person that' construction could be tagged as 'communication' or 'wagering' or both. 'Communication' would fit with Halliday's verbal process type and 'wagering' would fit with the Frame.
- A better process seems to be to tackle the 'V n' pattern (not yet analysed) and to identify the major experiential domains expressed by it. The chances are the other patterns will fit the list so identified.

# A note about Communication and Cognition

- The semantic fields of 'Communication' and 'Cognition' have already been identified. They are inspired by the 'Verbal process' and 'Mental process' identified in SFG, but they are domains, not process types. Each semantic field can be expressed using a number of process types.
- For example, the Communication semantic field can be divided into:
  - VERBAL (e.g. Debbie asked them to pay her)
  - NON-VERBAL (e.g. He shot her an angry glance)
  - REACTIVE (e.g. He chuckled at the memory)
- Each sub-field has specific roles (see the April 2023 update).

# 'He described the moon as a balloon.'

- This invented example illustrates one issue arising: a construction exemplifying more than one semantic field(?).
- The pattern is 'V n as n'. The construction is 'the describe something as construction'.
- We would want to find this construction if we were looking for the meaning of Communication, but we would also want to find it if we were looking for the meaning of Identity.
- = 'You can use this construction to describe how someone talks about something' AND
- = 'You can use this construction to describe what something is like (with attribution)'.

# 'The data indicate that the moon is a balloon'

- This is an example from Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 217). They place it on the borderline of 'verbal' and 'relational' processes.
- Of course, 'the data' do not speak. The constructions list distinguishes between 'the say that construction' (where the subject is a person) and 'the entity indicates that construction' (where the subject is an entity such as 'the data').
- In the latter case, the entity makes someone think something: 'the data' is a source rather than a sayer. Arguably, the semantic field is Cognition rather than Communication. This is one of the ways that speakers can express the concept 'this is how knowledge comes about'.