

On Circumstances in the English Language. A Study Case

Oana Cenac*

Abstract: *With this paper, we shall tackle the issue of circumstances in the English language paying a special attention to the semantic roles of each and every type of them, together with their classification and relevance for the sentence.*

Keywords: *semantic roles, circumstances, locative, temporal, process, respect, contingency, degree.*

Rezumat: *Demersul nostru vizează problema circumstanțialului în limba engleză acordând o atenție specială rolurilor semantice ale fiecărui tip în parte cu evidențierea tipurile de circumstanțiale și a relevanței acestora în ansamblul propoziției.*

Every conversation that we may have with the member of our family or a friend might be seen as a drama with actors (or participants) who take on a particular roles and it takes place within a setting, which we may or may not choose to specify. In the example “*John offered Anna a flower on the bench last night.*” the participants in the drama of “offering” are John and Anna and a flower. The drama of “offering” has the cast of “offerer”, “offeree” and “thing offered”; they have the semantic roles of *agentive*, *recipient* and *affected* respectively. The other two elements represent the setting (or circumstances) of the drama. They indicate us where it took place (“on the bench”) and when it took place (“last night”).

The participants are more or less obligatory elements in a sentence. A particular situation type, represented by a verb with a particular meaning, expects a certain cast of participants, represented by nouns with appropriate semantic roles. The situation of offering in the example above expects agentive, recipient and affected participants. Without the explicit or implicit presence of one of these participants, the sentence is incomplete. On the other hand, circumstances are usually additional information about a situation which we may include in a sentence, or not, as a matter of choice. Nevertheless, there are cases in which the circumstantial element is more or less obligatory.

Eg. *They are playing the Nut Cracker in the Palace Hall.*

I have put the vegetables on the table.

I bought the fruits in the market.

She lives in Bucharest.

The horses galloped across the field.

The circumstance *in the Palace Hall* may be omitted without making the sentence incomplete; the situation of “playing” does not require the expression of place.

However, in the case of “buying”, the situation implies a buyer, goods bought and the source of goods. To omit the circumstance in the market makes the sentence incomplete, unless “I bought the fruits” is intended as a denial of “I stole the fruits” or “I grew the fruits”.

With situation types involving movement, such as the example with *gallop*, there is usually an expectation of a place from, to or within which the movement occurs, besides a person or thing undertaking the movement.

In the case of the second sentence, the circumstance “on the table” is obligatory; if it is omitted, the resulted construction cannot be considered as “complete”: **I’ve put the vegetables.* The same situation occurs with the sentence “She lives in Bucharest.” where the omission of the circumstance “in Bucharest” turns the construction into an incomplete sentence.

The distinction between participant and circumstance is not a clear-cut issue. Consider the following examples:

(1) *The manager sent a letter to every employee.*

(2) *The manager sent apologies to the meeting.*

(3) *The manager sent a substitute to the meeting.*

In the first case, the situation with *send* has the participants *agentive* (the manager), *affected* (a letter) and *recipient* (every employee).

* Lecturer, PhD, “Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati

In the third case, the situation with send has the participants agentive (the manager), affected (a substitute) and a circumstance of place (to the meeting) referring to where the affected participant was sent.

The sentence (1) may have the paraphrase “The manager has sent every employee a letter” but (3) may not have the same paraphrase. The element “to the meeting” in (2) appears to be intermediate between these two interpretations. However, it is rather difficult to indicate which question it answers:

(4) Who has the manager sent his apologies to?

(5) Where has the manager sent his apologies?

If (4) is the appropriate question then this would point to the analysis of “to the meeting” as a recipient participant, but if (5) is the appropriate question then “to the meeting” is to be interpreted as a circumstance of place.

Nevertheless, both (4) and (5) could be appropriate questions to which (2) would be an answer, though we may regard (5) as preferable.

Types of circumstances

The examples *John offered Anna a flower on the bench last night.* has two types of circumstance expressed: place (on the bench) and time (last night). These are given the labels locative and temporal, and they are the two most commonly occurring circumstances in sentences. There are four further types of circumstances, which we shall analyze below: *process, respect, contingency, degree*. Most of these, including locative and temporal, have a number of subdivisions.

- **Locative** is a label which subsumes a number of subtypes of circumstance relating to space: *position, direction* and *distance*.

Position is a static notion by contrast with the dynamic *direction*. It provides an answer to the question *where?*

In the example “*He sat on the edge of the bed*”, the position locative is the underlined construction.

Direction locatives refer to three different kinds of movement in space: movement from a *source*, movement to a *goal*, and movement along a *path*. In the example “The student rushed from the class without a word”, the source directional is “from the class”. The verb *rush* refers to movement since direction locatives are regularly associated with movement verbs, either intransitive or transitive. At the same time, we should notice that *source* is associated with particular prepositions namely *from, out of* etc.

In the following example, we provide a case of path and goal directionals: *He threw himself across the floor towards the entrance*. - the *path directional* is “across the floor” and the *goal directional* is “towards the entrance”. The verbs are transitive involving movement (*throw, follow*) and the preposition associated with *path* is *across* and with *goal* is *towards*.

The third type of locative is *distance* which refers to space expressions answering the question “How far?”: *I can walk all the way to the school*.

Besides referring to type of quantity (way) the distance expressions also contain a word referring to amount: *many, all*.

- **Temporal** – the temporal semantic role involves a number of circumstances of time, such as: *position, duration* and *frequency*. Position in time provides an answer to the question “when?”, which places an action or event at a point of period of time.

In the afternoon, we decided to go out again.

The journey ended that evening.

The parallel between locative and temporal position is reinforced by the fact that many prepositions may be used for both types of position.

at: *at home* (locative) / *at five o'clock* (temporal)

in: *in the house* (locative) / *in the afternoon* (temporal)

on: *on the bus* (locative) / *on Sundays*. (temporal)

For other types of position, locative and temporal circumstances use different prepositions. Compare *in front of* (locative) with *before* (temporal); *behind* (locative) with *after* (temporal).

The notion of *duration* in time may be related to orientation in time, either *forward* into the future or *backward* into the past. Duration with forward orientation corresponds to the question “until when?”, and duration with backward orientation corresponds to the question “Since when?”.
Eg. *He was ill for three days.*

She has lived here since last year.

It would probably snow until the evening.

The temporal expressions “for three days”, “since last year” and “until the evening” relate to duration. In the second and third examples, there is an orientation to the duration, *backward* in the second examples with the preposition “*since*”, and *forward* in the third example with the preposition “*until*”. The temporal expression of duration in the first example is of general type, with the characteristic preposition “*for*”.

The third subtype of temporal circumstance is that of frequency and the reference is to the incidence of an event or action in time, relating to the question “How often?”; the answer to this question is represented by adverbs like *frequently* and *often*.

Another typical expression of frequency involves the use of the word *times*.

Eg. *He had read the letter several times before posted it.*

During the summer, we spent our time sometimes with our friends but more often alone, swimming.

- **Process:** circumstances of process relate to the question “How?”. However, it includes a number of different types of process, namely *manner*, *means*, *instrument* and *agentive*.

Eg. *He went furiously outside.*

He was able by means of a trick to win the game.

She was warned by everyone that he could not be trusted.

The type process-agentive is different from the other in that it refers to a person. It may be seen as an answer to the question “By whom?” or “By whose agency?”. The agentive is the person who carries out an action and the agentive process is usually introduced with the preposition *by*, though it may also introduce other type of process.

- **Respect** – is a category with a fairly minor circumstantial role. It has also no subtypes and it is typically introduced by prepositional expressions such as *concerning*, *in respect of*, *with respect to*, *so far as... is concerned* etc.

Eg. *All human activity, as far as its final significance is concerned, is like feeding on the wind.*

The north of England is strong in this respect.

The respect circumstances provide a point of reference for the sentence in which it is placed.

- **Contingency** is a semantic category with an important circumstantial role, with a number of subtypes expressing various kinds of contingent circumstance, including *cause*, *reason*, *purpose*, *result*, *condition* and *concession*. Many of these types of contingency are related to each other, differing only in perspective. For example, *cause*, *reason* and *purpose* are all related to the question “why?” but answer it in slightly different ways. Purpose is also related to result, and condition with concession. Cause refers to a circumstance of contingency which expresses an objectively cause or motive for an action or event. Reason expresses a personal or subjective view of a contingency. Purpose includes a goal element in its expression of contingency. The following examples illustrate cause, reason and purpose contingency.

Eg. *The summit in September was postponed because of a crisis situation. (cause)*

The book publication was banned because of its religious nature. (reason)

She studied very hard so that she could pass the entrance exam. (purpose)

The conjunction *so that* may also be used to introduce a result contingency, as in *The complete course takes three of these sessions, so that this year was the second year of the course.*

The final two types of contingency circumstance are condition and concession as illustrated below:

Eg. *Most farmers will not be affected if it snows in winter.*

Not many people change sides during an election, though a little change can mean much.

- **Degree** is a semantic role of circumstance which relate to the expression of the degree to which something happens. There are three broad types of degree:

- *amplification* which refers to a greater than neutral or a “high” degree.

Eg. *Conditions for factory workers and other trades have been greatly improved.*

- *diminuation* refers to a less than neutral or a “low” degree.

Eg. *The problems involved have not been adequately thought it over.*

- *measure* implies neither a high nor a low degree

Eg. *It is not possible to lower fares appreciably.*

The circumstance of degree can be viewed as an answer to the question “How much?”. The adverbs much and a little may be considered as representatives expressions of amplification and diminuation as in:

Eg. *I shall look forward to seeing you very much.*

After the quarrel, he tried to joke a little hoping that she came back.

However, the adverb *badly* is typically used for amplification, as in the example below:

She wanted badly to go on that trip.

In conclusion, we may argue that it has proved to be quite interesting to embark upon the study of the circumstances, especially from a semantic perspective, because it has been an opportunity to reveal the numerous facets that a language might have. We intended to discuss upon the participants involved in the “drama”, their semantic roles together with other elements which are important for the general context since their absence may turn the sentence into an “incomplete” one, semantically speaking.

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