

Agents and Causers in the Experiencer-Verb Lexicon

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Abstract : The current investigation explored the thematic roles of the nouns specified in the lexical entries of experiencer verbs. While prior experimental research assumes experiencer and theme roles for both subject-experiencer (SE) and object-experiencer (OE) verbs, syntactic theorists have posited additional agent and causer roles. Experiment 1 provided evidence for an agent as participants assigned a high degree of intentionality to the logical subject of a subset of SE and OE actives and passives. Experiment 2 provided evidence for a causer as participants assigned high levels of causality to the logical subjects of experiencer sentences generally. However, the presence of an agent, but not a causer, coincided with processing ease. Causality may be an aspect rather than a thematic role. The varying thematic roles amongst experiencer-verb sentences have important implications for stimulus selection because we cannot presume processing is similar across differing sentence subtypes.

Keywords : sentence comprehension, lexicon, canonicity, processing, thematic roles, syntax

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