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Valency grammar

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Philipp Stoeckle

valency grammar

model of a grammar based on the assumption of the central position of one element (typically the verb) which predetermines the syntactic and semantic structure of a clause.

Valenzgrammatik

Grammatikmodell, das von der zentralen Stellung eines Elements (typischerweise des Verbs) ausgeht, das die syntaktische und semantische Struktur eines Satzes prädeterminiert.

Valency grammar is mainly based on the work of the French linguist LUCIEN TESNIÈRE and his concept of valency. Unlike other models of grammar which focus on the subject-predicate-structure (e.g. constituent structure), valency grammar considers the verb as the fundamental element of a clause which determines both the form of the subject and of other actants (objects, adverbials). Consequently, in this theory the subject loses its exceptional position.

All verbs are classified according to their quantitative valency, i.e. the number of actants they claim. Most languages have verbs ranging from zero actants (*rain*) to up to three (*give*) or even four actants. A further important aspect concerns the qualitative analysis of the actants. In the sentence *He was eating a sandwich* the verb *to eat* claims two actants: *he* and *a sandwich*, the latter being a facultative actant. However, the realisation of the two actants is subject to certain restrictions: on the syntactic level both of them have to be realised as an NP, *he* taking the subject position and *a sandwich* the position of the direct object. Semantically, the subject exhibits the feature HUMAN, whereas the direct object must be INANIMATE (cf. HELBIG/SCHENKEL 1969: 96).

The concept of valency gained popularity through its application in foreign language teaching (cf. THURMAIR 2006).

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