



## Personified Semantic Roles of the Word *Tree* in English and Lithuanian

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**Keywords:** *tree, medis, semantic roles, personification, Agent, Senser, Sayer, Patient.*

### Introductory observations

Throughout the history in many cultures, a man has considered a tree as a symbol of humanity. It has been analyzed in various forms according to the nation's perception of the world. One of the forms is that a tree is a personification of a human being. Personification is one of the simplest forms of symbolism and is treated as an abstraction (symbol). To put in simpler terms, personification attributes human properties to lifeless objects.

The theoretical foundations of this study are rooted in systemic functional linguistics. According to this theory, all lexical elements (i.e. words) can perform the functions of *Processes*, *Participants* and *Circumstances*. According to Van Valin and Lapolla (2002, 82), “the communicative functions of language are central to the analysis of its structure, and one (but not the only) function of language is reference and predication, that is, representing things that happen in the world (or a possible, fictional world) and the participants involved in those situations”. Thus to put in other terms, any language must have the special means to denote these participants and / or states of affairs.

The aim of the present study is to describe and contrast semantic functions of the word *tree* in English and *medis* in Lithuanian. To substantiate the aim, the following objectives have been set up:

1. To overview the theory of the semantic framework of the sentence.
2. To define the basic concepts of semantic functions (roles).
3. To describe and compare the personified semantic functions of the words *tree* and *medis* in English and Lithuanian.

In accordance with the objectives and the aim of the present study, the following working hypothesis can be formulated: English and Lithuanian do not essentially differ with respect to the scope of semantic functions of the words *tree* and *medis*.

### **Materials and methods of the study**

The data for the present investigation have been drawn from two corpora. The examples in order to illustrate the English part have been chosen from British National Corpus (henceforth BNC) offered through the site of Variation in English Words and Phrases (VIEW), developed by Mark Davies at Brigham Young University (available at <http://view.byu.edu/>) and the examples to illustrate the Lithuanian part have been drawn from Lithuanian Corpus Donelaitis (henceforth D) (available at <http://donelaitis.vdu.lt>). Furthermore, the examples for the English part also have been selected from fiction written by English authors, such as Thomas Hardy and Jack London.

Before the analysis was carried out, the setting was arranged to search for the keywords 'tree' and 'trees'. The Lithuanian concept 'medis' was searched in its singular and plural forms, i.e. 'medis' and 'medžiai'. The analysis of these two sets of data involved three steps. Firstly, all instances were extracted from the corpora. Once all the instances in both corpora were analyzed, they were categorized according to the semantic positions the nouns *tree* and *medis* occupy in a sentence.

As already mentioned, the study is contrastive thus the research was carried out within the framework of the contrastive method. The research is based on the evidence of the comparison of semantic functions in English and Lithuanian. The use of the two corpora made it possible to determine the incidence rate of the semantic roles used by these words in the two languages.

Similar to all lexical elements (i.e. words), the sentence can be viewed as consisting of semantic elements, or components, such as Processes, Participants and Circumstances. Thus the use of the method of componential analysis made it possible to establish the meaning of the sentence which is constituted by respective semantic elements.

The semantic functions are a means to represent sentence meaning in logical terms. As it was already mentioned, semantic functions are assigned to nouns and noun phrases in accordance to the relation they have with the process (verb).

### **Theoretical assumptions of the semantic framework of the sentence**

The study of sentence as a means of communication has become an important aspect in linguistics. The sentence is a three-level structure: it is composed of a semantic, a syntactic (formal) and an informational-pragmatic structure. However, in the present study the words under analysis have been analyzed from the semantic point of view. The sentence represents a communicative category. The content of the communication is a situation, which does not refer directly to an extralinguistic reality which exists in the real world, but rather to the speaker's conceptualization of it. The components of this conceptualization of reality are semantic roles: processes, participants and circumstances. Semantically, the sentence describes a situation. To put in metaphorical terms, "a situation is a drama. This 'drama' consists of actors, (i.e. participants), processes and circumstances" (Valėikā,

Buitkienė 2006, 23). Dowty (1991, 150) proposes that we view the semantic roles not as discrete and bounded categories but instead as prototypes, where there may be different degrees of membership. He suggests that there are two basic prototypes: Proto-Agent and Proto-Patient, each of which would contain characteristic lists of entailments such as those:

properties of the Agent Proto-Role: a) volitional involvement in the event or state, b) sentence (and/or perception), c) causing an event or change of state in another participant, d) movement (relative to the position of another participant);

properties of the Patient Proto-Role: a) undergoes change of state, b) incremental theme, c) causally affected by another participant, d) stationary relative to movement of another participant.

Of all the components of the semantic structure of the sentence, the process is the most essential: it is expressed by the verb that determines the choice of participants in the semantic structure of the sentence. The term process is a wide category: it can be a state (notional and semi-notional) (e.g. *John is happy*), an action (e.g. *John is reading*), a transition or change of state (e.g. *It is getting dark*), a climatic phenomenon (e.g. *It's raining*), a process of sensing (e.g. *John smells flowers*), a process of saying (e.g. *John is delivering the speech*), a process of behaving and existing (e.g. *He coughed*; *Such idiom doesn't exist in English*). Hence in functional linguistics, processes are grouped into material, mental, relational, existential, and verbal.

Participants are grouped into animate, inanimate or abstract entities. Furthermore, participants can be both concrete and abstract entities directly involved in the process. We will refer to these participants as semantic roles in states of affairs. The semantic role depends on the state of affairs that the entity is involved in. In functional linguistics, a list of the semantic roles is non-exhaustive. The number and character of semantic functions vary. Some linguists distinguish from 5 to 13 (Fillmore 1968; Anderson 1971; Abraham 1978, 695–723; Cook 1978, 295–309; Dik 1980; Van Valin 1999; Van Valin, La Polla 2002), others to 25 (Downing, Locke 1992; Gerot, Wignell 1994; Butt 2001). Dowty (1991) proposes that we view the semantic functions not as discrete and bounded categories but instead as prototypes, where there may be different degrees of membership. Semantic functions present two categories: inherent and non-inherent. *Agents, Affected Patients, Effected Patients, Recipients, Sensors, Phenomena, Carriers, Attributes, Sayers, Verbiage, Existents, Ranges* belong to inherent (i.e. essential) functions. *Circumstances* non-spatial (*Instrumental, Accompaniment, Manner, Cause, Reason, Purpose*, etc.) and spatial (temporal and non-temporal) belong to non-inherent functions.

To conclude, the process is a pivot of any sentence as it encapsulates a situation whose constituting components are Participants and Circumstances. The process, the participants involved in the processes, the attributes ascribed to the participants and the circumstances related to the processes constitute the semantic framework of the sentence.

### Personified semantic roles

As already mentioned, personification can be described as a figure of speech in which an inanimate object is personified by attributing human traits and qualities to it. In other words, personification occurs when emotions, sensations, physical gestures, speech, etc. are stated in the context of non-living beings. In literature, the natural phenomena may be personified quite often. For instance: *The sun greeted me this morning*; *The sun played hide and seek with the clouds*; *Snow had wrapped a white blanket over the city*; *Lightning danced across the sky*; *The lightning lashed out with anger*; *The moon seemed to smile at me from the sky*; *The stars winked at me*; *The wind screamed as it raced around the house*; *The wind whispered softly in the night*. Furthermore, various plants may be personified as well. Consider: *Plants were suffering from the intense heat*; *The flowers were crying for my attention*; *The flowers begged for water*; *The vines wove their fingers together to form a braid*; *Trees were dancing with the wind*; *Trees bowed to the ground*. From these examples, we clearly see that an inanimate object is described as a person. Furthermore, the first thing to notice about these sets of sentences is that the verb is not the same in each set and that they cannot be substituted for each other. As it is seen from the examples, one part of the participants perform the semantic roles that of *Affected Patients* (*Plants were suffering...*, *The flowers begged...*, etc.), while the rest perform the semantic roles of *Agents* (i.e. perform the actions on the basis of their inner power: (*Trees were dancing...*, *The sun played hide and seek*, *Snow had wrapped...*, etc.). Thus it is obligatory to define two aspects of the state of affairs: properties of the agent, and the manner of the action. Referring to Lakoff and Johnson's (2003, 25-29) theory related to conceptual metaphor, the noun group functions as an ontological metaphor, where the natural phenomenon such as the sun, lightning, wind, etc. or plants, such as flowers, vines, trees, etc. can be metaphorically viewed as entities.

### Results and discussion

Referring to the words *tree* and *medis* in both languages under discussion, in this section we focus our attention on inherent (obligatory) semantic roles. Material processes or processes of 'doing' involve some physical action and show that something is going on in the external world. According to Halliday (1994, 110), "they express the notion that some entity 'does' something – which may be done 'to' some other entity". Material processes are carried out by a participant called the *Agent*, "a wilful, purposeful instigator of an action or event", (Van Valin, La Polla 2002, 85). Furthermore, material processes are causative processes and Agents could be referred to as *Causers*. Agents can be thought of as constituting two types: animate and inanimate. Various causal roles have been identified in semantic studies – Agents, Instruments, Causes, Intermediaries, Forces, and so on. According to Van Valin, La Polla (2002, 121), Force can best be viewed as derivative of the more basic role of Effector. Forces are inanimate Effectors that have two essential features in common with human and

animate Effectors: they can act and move independently, and they are not under the control of another Effector, animate or inanimate; in other words, they can serve as the instigators of an action, event or process.

Agents are prototypically animates, especially humans, and are characterized by control and intentionality over the action that they perform. Some inanimate entities can also have control over the action, but obviously they cannot have any intentionality. This has led to the identification of the semantic role Force, typically played by entities such as natural forces and emotions. The term Agent will be reserved for an Animate Causer and the term External Causer will be reserved for an Inanimate Causer. An agentive participant is a participant exercising will and intention. The External Causer is a participant exercising no intention; it has the features of effectiveness and force. Consider:

(1) *The old tree, shivered, spread his branches and looked out across the river...* (BNC).

(2) *The trees surged back and forth, marking the passage of the animals through the midst of them* (J. London, All Gold Canyon).

(3) *He made a new foundation for a fire, this time in the open, where no treacherous tree could blot it out* (J. London, To Build a Fire).

(4) *A tree struggles to make leaves* (T. Hardy, Throwing a Tree).

(5) *The tree crashes downward: it shakes all its neighbours throughout* (T. Hardy, Throwing a Tree).

The Lithuanian data prove the same semantic role of External Causer:

(6) *Medis ir ugnis gimdė šilumą, dūmus* (D).

(7) *Panašiai esti girioje: kiekvienas medis grumiasi dėl saulės spindulių, žemėje šaknys* (D).

(8) *Augantis medis irgi rašo savo istoriją* (D).

(9) *Medžiai dieną miega, bet jei nuėjęs su visom savo mintimis pastovėsi po medžiu, apsikabinsi, veidą priglausi, pasakysi labas – medis atsibus* (D).

(10) *Medis nė nekrustelėjo, ir aš turėjau iškilti į paviršių ant jos kamieno kaip ant kaklo užvyniota grandinė, jau medis niekur nebegali nueiti <...>* (D).

(11) *Ne plaukiau, o bėgau paviršiumi, mane vijosi kraujo medis, jis įkyriai taškė bangas ir baugiai artėjo <...>* (D).

(12) *Žydintis medis palinko prie gimdyvės, <...>* (D).

(13) *Už lango – mojuoja šaka kaimynas medis* (D).

(14) *Visi keturi spėjo sėkmingai šmurkštelėti už miško priedangos anksčiau, nei medis pabudo* (D).

The material process can involve other participant, such as: Affected Patient which means the one that ‘suffers’, or ‘undergoes’ the process. They are things that are in a state or condition, or undergo a change of state or condition. Consider:

(15) *Then the great tree, burdened with its weight of years and snow, played its last part in the tragedy of life* (J. London, The White Silence).

(16) *At his order, she threw her weight on the end of a quickly extemporized handspike, easing the pressure and listening to her husband’s groans, while*

*Malemute Kid attacked the tree with his axe* (J. London, *The White Silence*).

(17) *The trees were all dead, dry and seasoned, having long since exhausted the thin skin of earth* (J. London, *The White Silence*).

(18) *And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality* (T. Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree*).

(19) *No-one was certain if any hanging had really taken place but on cold, windy nights the tree would creak and moan, startling those who happened to be passing by* (BNC).

(20) *And so they approach the proud tree that bears the death-mark on its side* (T. Hardy, *Throwing a Tree*).

The examples drawn from Lithuanian corpora manifest the same semantic role:

(21) *Lapai liko žali, tik jų kraštai raukšlėjosi ir rudo, ir atrodė, kad serga medis, o ne lapus meta* (D).

(22) – *Negaliu patikėti, – iškvėpė Tulis, kai Timis užgulė pleišta, o medis nė nebandė priešintis* (D).

(23) *Ji sakė, kad tai medis, kuris kenčia* (D).

(24) *Lingavo ir verkė tas medis kaip gyvas, Kaip gyvas ant kapo brangaus* (D).

(25) *Nuo pirmo smūgio medis krūptelia, smulkios šakelės suvirpa* (D).

(26) *Dainose dažnai kenčia arba liūdi medis, augalas, giria, <...>* (D).

Involved in the mental process sentences, the nouns *tree* and *medis* play the semantic function of the Senser, or the Recipient Experiencer, that perceives, knows, likes, wants, loves, etc. The Senser is a sentient being that experiences internal states, such as perceivers, cognizers and emoters (Van Valin, La Polla 2002, 85). Both words carry out such rational functions as those of perception, judgment, decision making, etc.

Mental processes form a conceptual semantic category: there is a clear semantic boundary between something that goes on in the external world and something that goes on in the internal world of the mind. Mental processes involve the processes of feeling, thinking and perceiving. Different to Agents in material process clauses, the Senser must always be animate and is usually human. Apparent exceptions to this are cases of personification, that is, cases in which a non-animate participant is treated as if it were human, for example:

(27) *The old tree <...> looked out across the river...* (BNC).

(28) *The tree across the river felt something wrong* (BNC).

(29) *Tas medis buvo su veidu didelėm akim; žiūrėjo iš viršaus <...>* (D).

(30) *Jis atrodė kaip žmogus, gerai žinantis savo vietą šiame pasaulyje taip, kaip žino medis* (D).

(31) *Kampe stovi medis, kuriam nepatinka būti viduje* (D).

(32) *Pasakysi, medis nejaučia, medis nieko nežino* (D).

(33) *Medis žiedais galvoja* (D).

(34) „*Miško medis į mišką ir žiūri*“ – ... (D).

(35) *Tai aš nuėjau prie jo, ir mes kalbėjomės. Senas, žalias **medis** laimingas, kad dar gyvas...* (D).

(36) *Žmogus mato paukštį. Paukštis mato medį. **Medis** mato žmogų* (D).

(37) *Joks **medis** nenori, kad jam pjautų šakas, skintų žiedus <...>* (D).

(38) *Kito medžio portretas: vienišas, labai liūdnas **medis** pieniškame rūke, juodu mįslingu veidu žvelgiantis* (D).

Verbal processes are processes of saying and communicating. Verbs of saying or communicating constitute an important subclass of activity verbs. W i e r z b i c k a (1987), for example, lists thirty-eight subclasses of verbs of saying in English. Verbal processes are expressed by verbs such as *say, tell, ask, reply, suggest, answer, cry*, etc. A verbal process typically contains the participant Sayer plus in most cases a representation of what is said the Saying. The Sayer is a kind of Agent who is responsible for putting out a signal. As the present analysis proves, the Sayer is not necessarily human in such way obtaining the features of a human being. In addition, many verbal process clauses have a participant which represents the person toward whom the words are directed. This participant is called the Addressee. Consider the examples below, where the Sayer is a personified semantic role of the words *tree* and *medis*:

(39) *We cling to the earth, with glistening eyes, pierced afresh by the **tree's** cry* (BNC).

(40) *To dwellers in a wood **almost every species of tree** has its voice as well as its feature* (T. Hardy, Under the Greenwood Tree).

(41) *At the passing of the breeze **the fir-trees** sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; ...* (T. Hardy, Under the Greenwood Tree).

(42) ***Medis** man nesako: „Tu esi!“* (D).

(43) *Tačiau tai jau asmeninis interpretavimo būdas, kitas žmogus išvelgs kitką, kitaip jam kalbės medis, ...* (D).

(44) *Iš kur žinai, kad nebebus tokios kaip rudenį? – O tu? – savo ruožtu klausia medis* (D).

(45) *Dainuojąs **medis** sulapojo ir ėmė smagias dainas dainuoti* (D).

(46) *Ažuolas panašus į ūkininką („Ūkininkai kalba apie gyvenimą“), senas **medis** bara paklydusį sūnų kaip senas tėvas...* (D).

(47) ***Medis** tvirtina, kad tasai padaras jau pakankamai <...>* (D).

(48) *Aš ieškojau girioje išvartų ar nuolaužų ieškojau tavo Viešpatie nulemtų darbui medžių gal todėl aš sakau man ne vis tiek ką **medis** kalba ir kaip kalba* (D).

(49) ***Medžiai** juoktusi, kaip motina sako* (D).

(50) *Nė vienas jų nepatikėjo, kad **medis** bent puse žodžio užsiminė apie Ligonį* (D).

The results of the present analysis show that the relationship between the type of process and personified semantic roles is inseparable.

### Concluding remarks

To sum up, the linguistic means for describing states of affairs consist of processes (i.e. verbs) and other semantic elements (i.e. semantic roles), which express processes or states, and other referring elements, which denote the semantic roles. Hence the meaning of verbs is in some way related to the state of affairs they express.

The analysis proved that the words *tree* in English and *medis* in Lithuanian embedded in the sentence acquire some metaphorical shading, i.e. they may be personified. Furthermore, a cross-linguistic analysis of *tree* in English and *medis* in Lithuanian has proved the raised hypothesis that in both languages the words under analysis play the same semantic functions, that is of Agent, Senser, Sayer and Patient when undergo the process of personification.

The present study has been limited to a fairly small scope. It has provided new possibilities for investigating other plants or even natural phenomena that may have personified semantic roles on a cross-linguistic scale.

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L o n d o n – Jack London, *To Build a Fire*, (<http://www.online-literature.com>).

The corpus compiled by the Computational Linguistics Centre in Kaunas Vytautas Magnus University (<http://donelaitis.vdu.lt>).

## Solveiga Sušinskienė

### Žodžio *medis* personifikuoti semantiniai vaidmenys anglų ir lietuvių kalbose

#### *S a n t r a u k a*

**Pagrindinės sąvokos:** *medis, semantiniai vaidmenys, personifikacija, agentas, patientas, veiksmo patyrėjas, sakytojas.*

Šiame straipsnyje, vadovaujantis funkcinės lingvistikos atstovų (M. A. K. Halidėjaus, 1994; Van Valin ir La Polos, 2002 ir kt.) idėjomis ir remiantis lietuvių bei anglų kalbų pavyzdžiais, siekiama sugretinti ir aptarti personifikuotus semantinius vaidmenis, siejamus daiktavardžio *medis* (angl. *tree*). Funkcinėje lingvistikoje teigiama, kad semantiniai vaidmenys priklauso nuo konkrečių ir abstrakčių daiktavardžių arba daiktavardinių frazių santykio su veiksmažodžiu. Keliama hipotezė, kad lietuvių ir anglų kalbose su nagrinėjamu žodžiu siejami semantiniai vaidmenys iš esmės nesiskiria.

Straipsnio teiginius iliustruojantys pavyzdžiai rinkti iš *Britų nacionalinio tekstyno*, anglų rašytojų grožinių kūrinių bei *Dabartinės lietuvių kalbos tekstyno*. Darbe taikomi gretinamasis, kontrastinis ir komponentinės analizės metodai.

Sakinys yra komunikacijos priemonė. Komunikacijos turinys – tam tikra situacija. Situacija tiesiogiai nesiejama su ekstralingvistine realybe, bet priklauso nuo to, kaip kalbėtojas tikrovę konceptualizuoja. Šios realybės konceptualizacijos komponentai ir yra semantinės funkcijos (vaidmenys): procesai, dalyviai, cirkumstantai. Svarbiausias sakinio komponentas yra procesas. Darbe išskirti ir aptarti tokie procesų tipai: materialūs, mentaliniai ir verbaliniai, t. y. tie, kurie lemia, ar nagrinėjamas žodis *medis* (angl. *tree*) paklūsta personifikacijos procesui.

Greitinamoji daiktavardžio *medis* (angl. *tree*) analizė atskleidė, kad abiejose kalbose su šiuo žodžiu siejami keturi inherentiniai (esminiai) semantiniai vaidmenys: agento, patiento, veiksmo patyrėjo ir sakytojo.

**Solveiga Sušinskienė**

## **Personified Semantic Roles of the Word *Tree* in English and Lithuanian**

*S u m m a r y*

**Keywords:** *tree, semantic roles, personification, Agent, Patient, Senser, Sayer.*

In the present paper, an attempt is made to analyse the personified semantic roles of the words *tree* and *medis* in English and Lithuanian within the framework of functional linguistics the proponents of which are M. A. K. Halliday (1994), Van Valin and LaPolla (2002), etc. In functional linguistics, semantic roles depend on the relationship between concrete and abstract nouns or noun phrases and the processes in which they are embedded. The following working hypothesis has been formulated: English and Lithuanian do not essentially differ with respect to the personified semantic roles of the words *tree* and *medis*.

The corpus citations are taken from the British National Corpus and the writings of English authors to represent the English part as well as DONELAITIS Corpus compiled by the Computational Linguistics Centre in Kaunas Vytautas Magnus University. The research was carried out within the framework of contrastive and componential analysis methods.

The sentence is a means of communication. The content of communication is a situation. The situation does not refer directly to an extralinguistic reality, but rather to the speaker's conceptualization of it. The components of this conceptualization of reality are semantic functions, or roles: processes, participants, circumstances. Of all the components of a situation, the most important is the Process. In the present study, the following processes have been discussed: material, mental and verbal. These processes determine whether the words *tree* and *medis* are assigned to the personified semantic roles.

To sum up, the comparative analysis of the words *tree* in English and *medis* in Lithuanian revealed that personified semantic roles are associated with Agent, Patient, Senser, and Sayer.

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