

Components of lexical meaning 2

Prof. Joseph Pentangelo

LING 405

10 November 2023

Recapping last week



- When the meaning of B is a component of the meaning of A, sentences with A entail identical sentences with B in place of A.
 - A: assassinate, B: kill. “Oswald assassinated Kennedy” entails “Oswald killed Kennedy.”
- Selectional restrictions are constraints on specific word combinations.
 - #John drank his sandwich and took a big bite out of his coffee.
- The meaning of (some) words can be formalized by certain features. E.g. we can define *adult*, *man*, *woman*, *child*, *boy*, and *girl* in terms of the features “male” and “adult.” Features can be +, -, or \emptyset (unspecified).

Verb meaning

- The semantics of verbs are especially interesting because they have a direct impact on syntax.
- What is syntax?
- Syntax refers to what you may think of as “grammar” – the structure of phrases and sentences, including word order and agreement.

By agreement, I mean “He washes the car” vs. “I wash the car.”

- What are transitive verbs?

I opened the door.

*I opened.

There is a *subject* that does the verb, and an *object* that receives the action of the verb.

Some verbs can be transitive or intransitive.

I ate a sandwich.

I ate.

Classes of verbs

- Charles Fillmore (1970) identified two different classes of transitive verbs in English.

hit class

“surface contact”

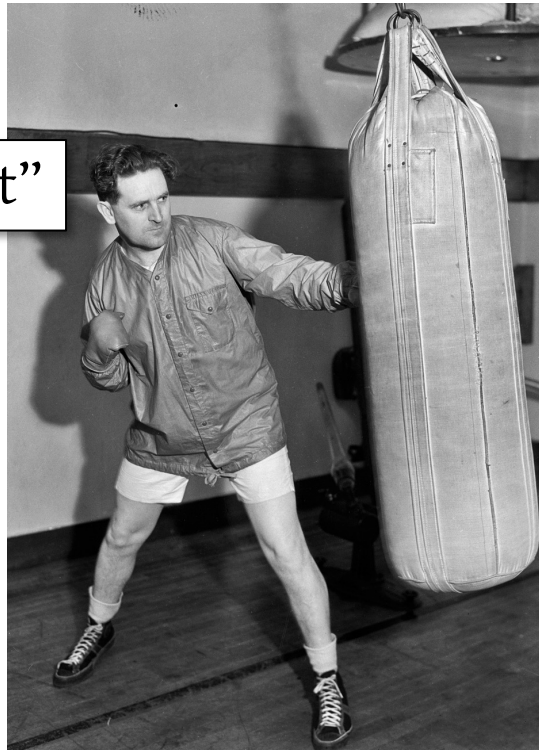
hit

slap

strike

bump

stroke



break class

“change of state”

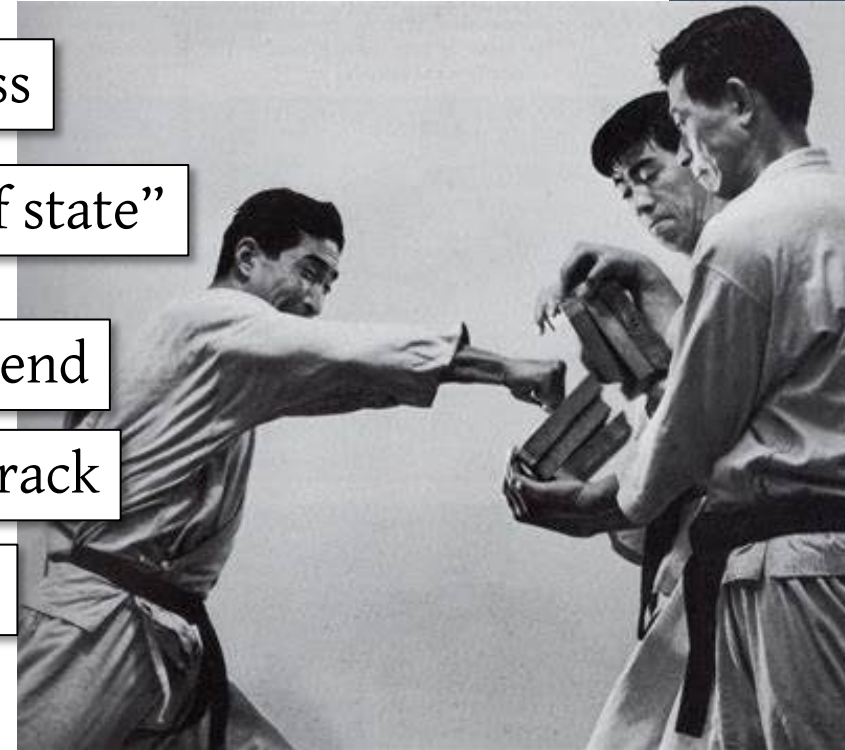
break

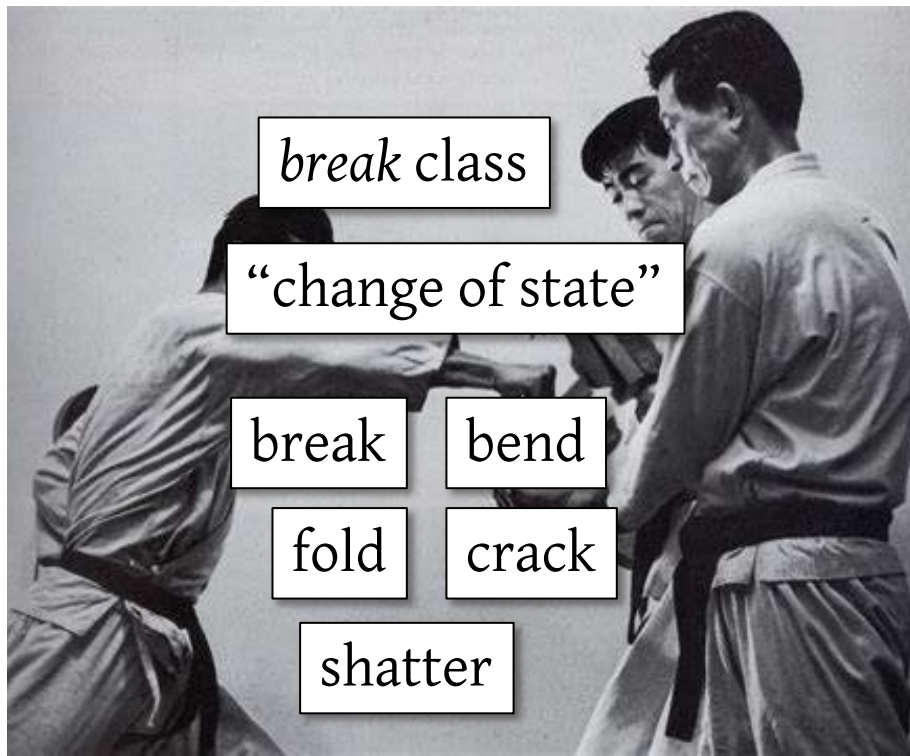
bend

fold

crack

shatter





causative →

• The sensei broke **the bricks**.

inchoative →

• **The bricks** broke.

The subject of an inchoative verb *receives* the action.

- The robot bent the pipe.
- The pipe bent.
- Fold? • Crack? • Shatter?

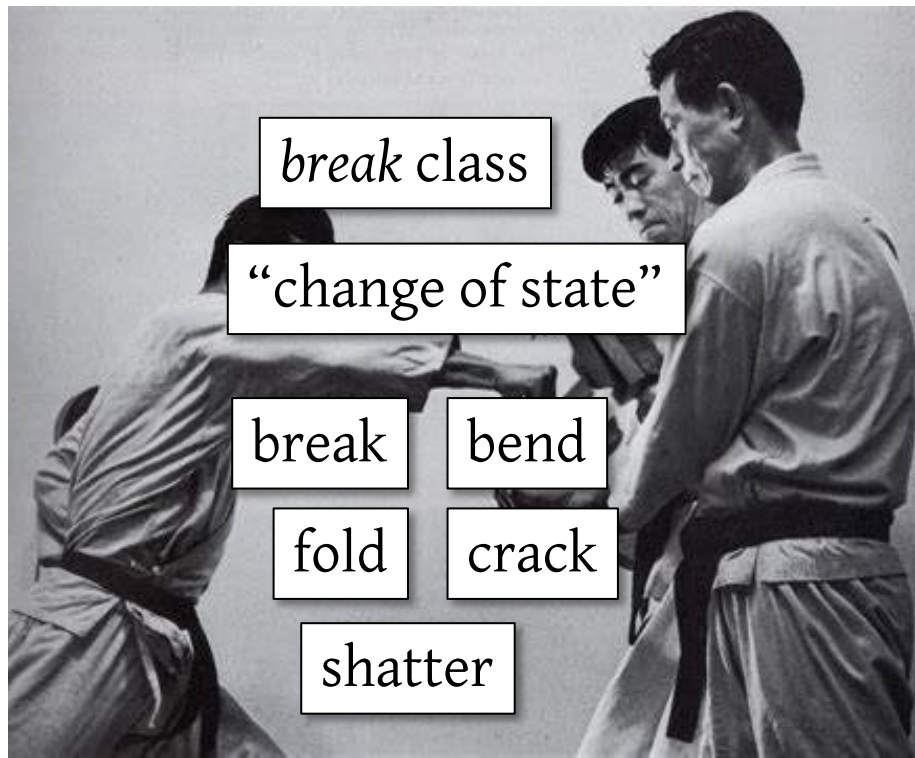
Now consider these other verbs that can be both transitive and intransitive.

eat smoke read

- I ate a bagel.
- I ate.
 - My friend smokes cigarettes.
 - My friend smokes.
- I read books.
- I read.

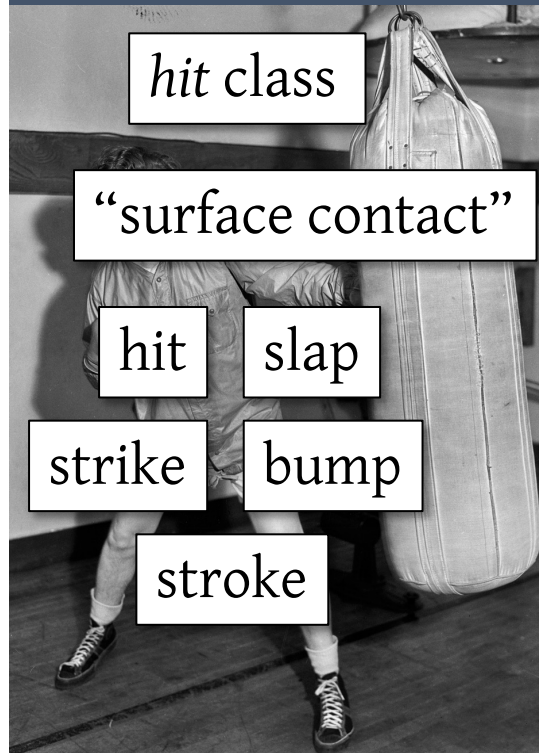
What's different about these sentences?

The object isn't moving into subject position. The subject is still the one doing the verb, not the one having the verb done to it.



Break class verbs exemplify systematic polysemy, with a causative sense and an inchoative sense. It's predictable.

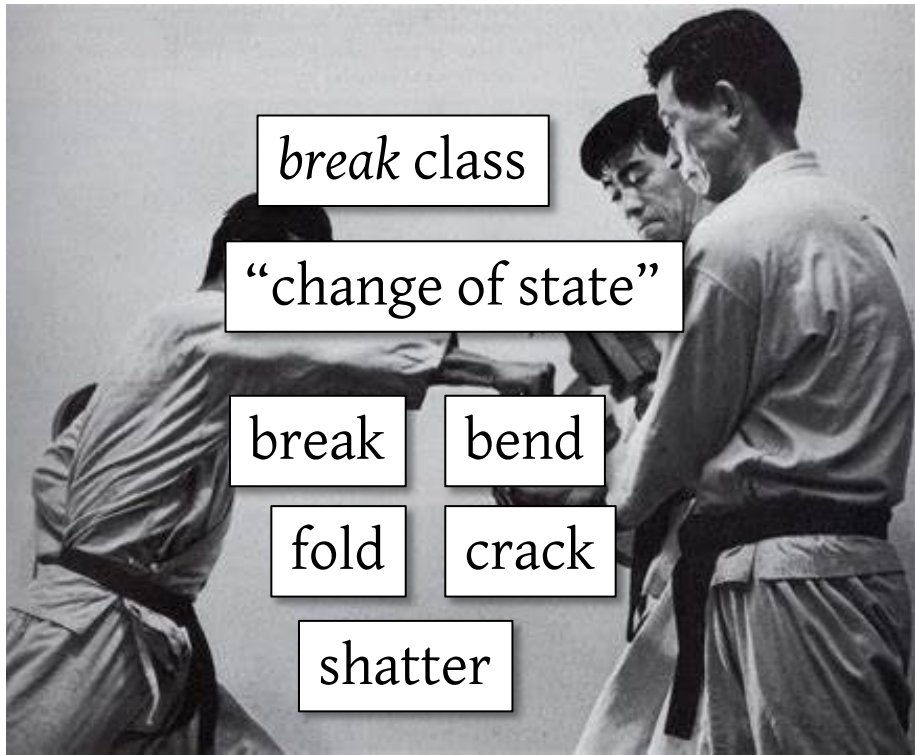
Does this also work for *hit* class verbs?



- I hit the ball.
- *The ball hit.
- *I hit.

- Slap?
- Strike?
- Bump?
- Stroke?

- caus. → • The sensei broke the bricks.
- inch. → • The bricks broke.
- The robot bent the pipe.
- The pipe bent.
- Etc.



• Can you identify more *break* class verbs?

melt

The sun melted my ice cream.
My ice cream melted.

burn

The fire burned my shirt.
My shirt burned.

freeze

I freeze the water.
The water freezes.

rip

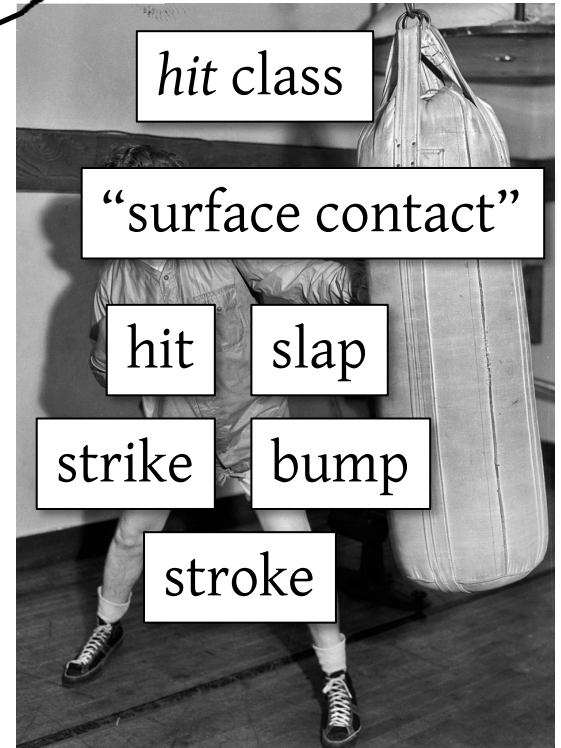
She ripped her scarf.
Her scarf ripped.

touch

He touched his nose.
*He touched.
*His nose touched.

brush

She brushed her hair.
*She brushed.
*Her hair brushed.



cut

He cut the paper.
*He cut.
*The paper cut.

pet

She pet the cat.
*She pet.
*The cat pet.

punch

He punched the man.
*He punched.
*The man punched.

• Can you identify more *hit* class verbs?

Classes of verbs

- These two verb classes behave differently, consistently, in terms of syntax. They are also different in terms of semantics.
- All *break* verbs inherit one component of meaning – “change of state” – but add their own twist to it.
- Similarly, all *hit* verbs inherit another component of meaning – “surface contact” – and add their own twist to it.
- Researchers after Fillmore identified other classes of verbs as well, with different syntactic tests. This research expanded upon, but did not undermine, Fillmore’s findings.

Are the following sentences inchoative or not?

- My window broke. Inchoative
- Doug bought the basketball. Not
- Melissa ate. Not
- The lake surface froze. Inchoative
- All my cheese got eaten! Not
- All my cheese melted! Inchoative
- Statues crumble. Inchoative
- Jerry wrote. Not
- Earth revolves around the sun. Not
- I read a fabulous book. Not
- A good book got read. Not



For next week...

- Do quiz #3, to be sent out this weekend.
- Read chapter 8.