

National Workshop on Cognitive Linguistics and Languages of the Northeast  
Tezpur University  
February 4–5, 2017

# Morphological constructions: An analysis of *-er* nominals in English

Klaus-Uwe Panther & Linda L. Thornburg

# Content

1. Introduction
2. Problems and puzzles
3. The analysis
  1. Participant level
  2. Event level
4. Test yourself!
5. Homonymy or polysemy?

# 1. Introduction

# English *-er* nominals

What everyone  
knows:

Verb<sub>action/activity</sub>

+ *-er* =

‘one who does V’

*teach*

+ *-er* =

*teacher*

# English *-er* nominals

- *teacher, farmer, actor, trucker...*
- *educator, philosopher, liar...*
- *baker, broiler...*
- *downer, season opener...*
- *owner, Beijinger, believer...*

How many problems can you find?

## Spelling of suffix

- *teacher, farmer, actor, trucker...*
- *educator, philosopher, liar...*
- *baker, broiler...*
- *downer, season opener...*
- *owner, Beijinger, believer...*

## Non-verbal base

- *teacher, farmer, actor, trucker...*
- *educator, philosopher, liar...*
- *baker, broiler...*
- *downer, season opener...*
- *owner, Beijinger, believer...*

## Verbal bases that do not denote actions

- *teacher, farmer, actor, trucker...*
- *educator, philosopher, liar...*
- *baker, broiler...*
- *downer, season opener...*
- *owner, Nanjing, believer...*



## Verbal bases that do not denote actions

- *teacher, farmer, actor, trucker...*
- *educator, philosopher, liar...*
- *baker, broiler...*
- *downer, season opener...*
- *owner, Beijinger, believer...*

Any other problems you can find?

## Non-agents

- *teacher, farmer, actor, trucker...*
- *educator, philosopher, liar...*
- baker (baking apple), broiler (chicken for broiling)
- *downer, season opener...*
- *owner, Beijinger, believer...*

## 2. Problems and puzzles

# Problem 1

- **The orthographic problem:** *-er*, *-or*, and *-ar*. These are treated as *one* suffix with the pronunciation [ə<sup>r</sup>].

## Problem 2

- **The derivational rule problem:**

There are hundreds of English *-er* words that are “exceptions” to the rule:

$V_{\text{act}} + \text{-er} = N$  ‘one who performs the action denoted by the verb’

## Problem 2 (cont'd)

- **Non-action verb bases:** *owner, possessor, receiver, undergoer, believer....*
- **Non-verbal bases:** *foreigner, downer, New Yorker, Beijinger ....*
- **Phrasal bases:** *no-brainer, out-of-towner, fast-tracker, back-to-the-lander, up-and-comer, do-it-yourselfer, fixer-upper....*

# Problem 3

- **The denotational problem:**

**Many kinds of denotata:** *people, animals, plants, objects* (concrete and abstract), *events* of all sorts including weather events, e.g. *gully-washer, soaker*, etc.

**Wide range of semantic roles:** *Agent, Causer, Patient, Instrument, Location, Time*, etc.

# Problem 4

- **The polysemy vs. homonymy problem.** Many *-er* formations have multiple senses, e.g.:  
***sleeper*** denotes ‘one who sleeps’, ‘a train car for sleeping’, ‘a baby’s sleepwear’, ‘sleeping pill’, ‘boring event’, ‘inactive spy’, ‘something or someone that has a delayed or unexpected success’, ‘underground railroad tie’.

Are all of these senses **conceptually related**?



# Problem 5

- **The “look-alike” problem:** Many words look like *-er* words but do not seem to be “derivations” in the conventional sense. These forms may have no identifiable base to which the *-er* suffix is attached. We can call them *-er gestalts*.

**Examples:** *miser* ‘avaricious person’, *humdinger* ‘someone or something excellent’, *hammer* ‘tool for hammering nails’ ...

# Problem 6

- **The compositional problem:** Related to **Problem 5**: The meaning of an *-er* word is often not compositional, i.e. not predictable from the base and the *-er* suffix, e.g. *corker* ‘a lively person/event’ and *mudder* ‘racehorse that can run fast in mud’.

# Problem 7

- **The “constraints” problem:** Although *-er* is undoubtedly one of the most productive derivational suffixes in English, its creative potential is not without limits: e.g. *happener*, *exister* are unlikely formations. Why?

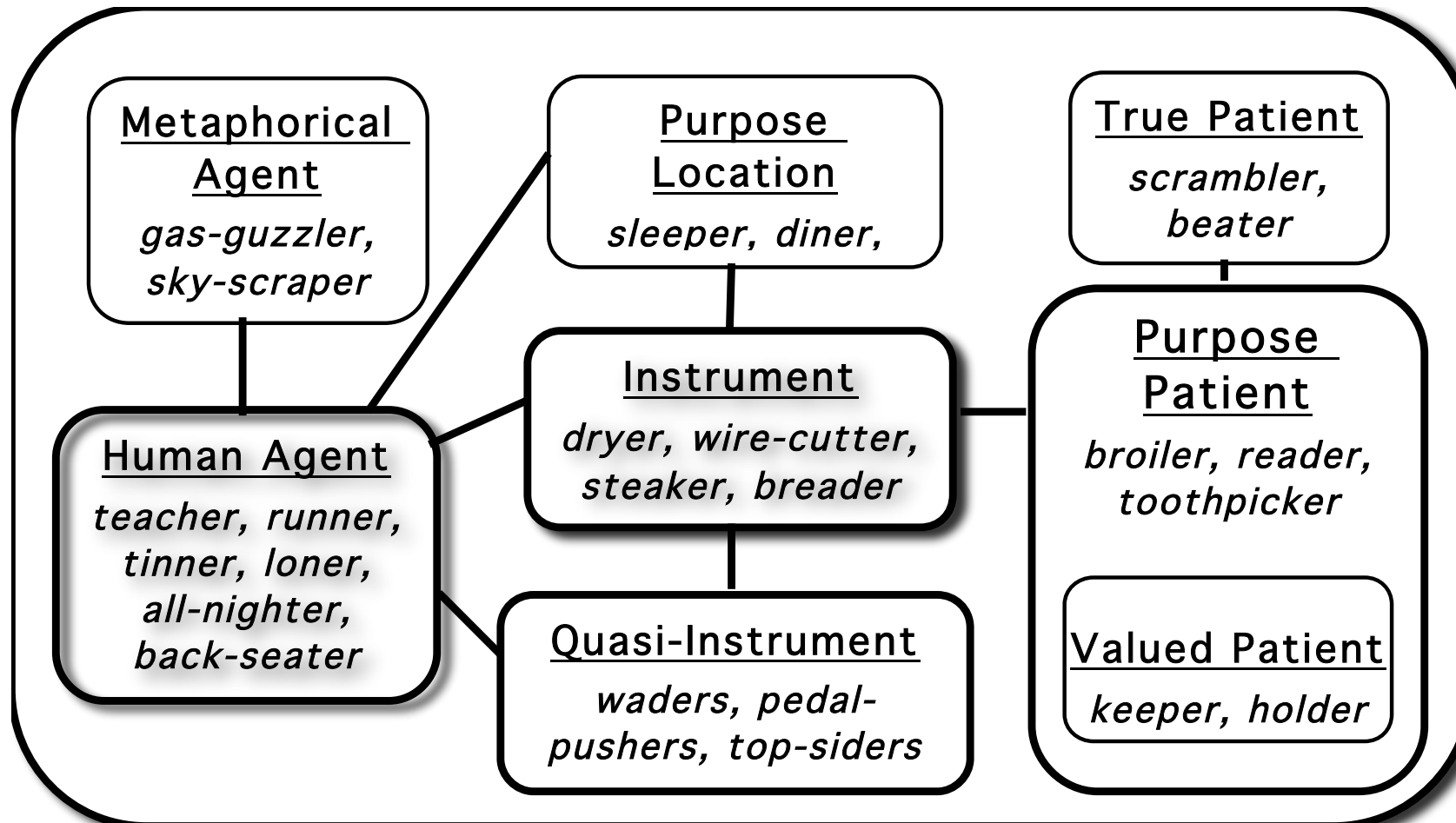
# Problems 1–7

- So many exceptions to the “rule”!
- How to handle this chaotic mess of *-er* words in English?
- Is there some kind of underlying order or system for all these *-er* forms?

## 3. The analysis

## 3.1. Participant level

## Participant Level Schema (Object Level)



# How to account for forms and meanings of all English *-er* nominals

Conceptual tools needed:

- Action scenario (i.e. a *prototypical transitive scene*)
- Extended senses come about through metonymic and metaphoric extensions that act on both the base and the *-er* suffix.



## Prototypical transitive scene (based on Hopper & Thompson 1980)

- There is a setting, i.e. a *place* and a *time*, in which an event takes place.
- There are two distinct *participants* that are in an *asymmetrical* interaction.
- One participant is an *intentionally acting human*. The other is *directly affected /effected* by the action.
- Deviations in prototypicality result in less prototypical *-er* nominals.

Prototypical  
transitive scene

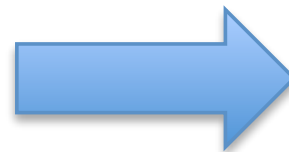
Time

Place

AGENT

PATIENT

*Mary*



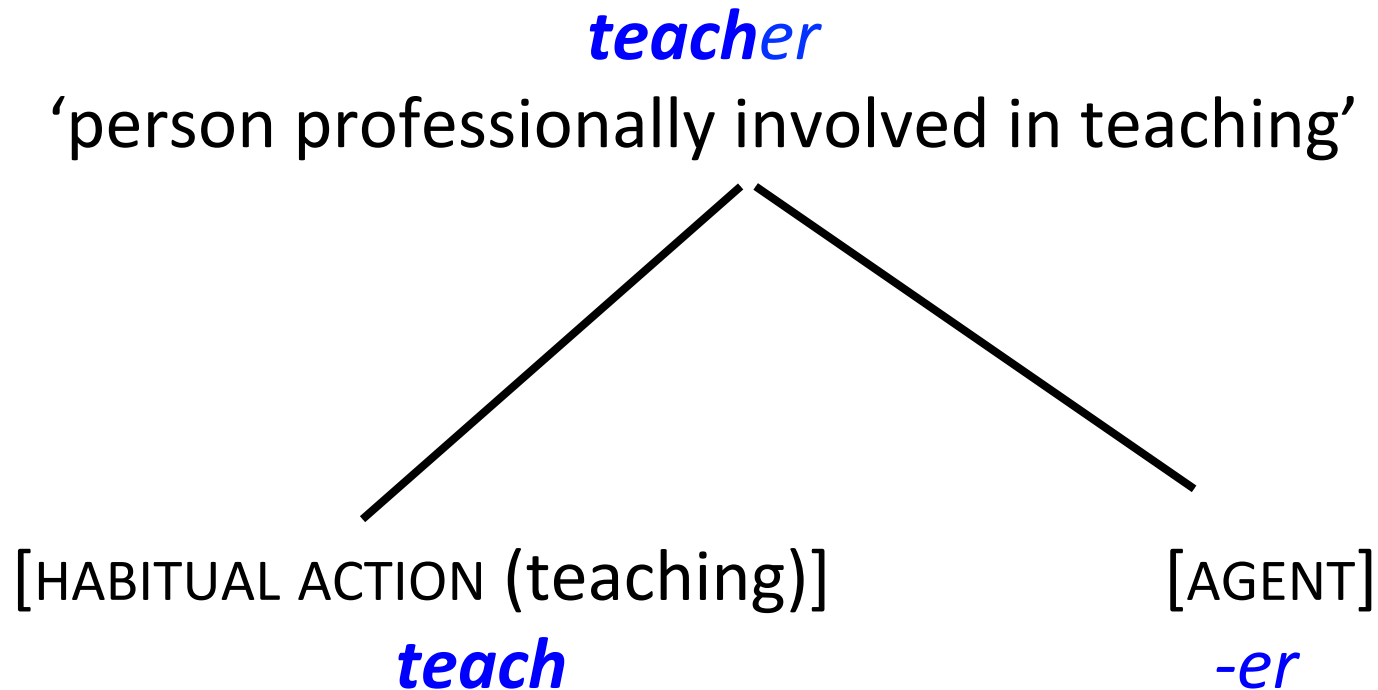
*teaches*

*first-graders*

# Flexibility of the Transitive Scenario

- Participants can vary in number: e.g. *giver* (3 participants), *runner* (1 participant)
- Participants can vary in their degrees of agenthood and affectedness: e.g. *exterminator* (potent AGENT, highly affected PATIENT); *owner* (low degree of Agentivity; low degree of Patienthood)
- The actions/activities denoted by the VERB vary in *aspectual* and *modal* properties: e.g. *exterminator* (accomplishment); *jogger* (activity).

# Prototypical Agentive -er nominal



Other exx.: *baker, brewer, governor, manager*, etc.

# Less prototypical Agentive -*er* nominal I

*hatter*

‘professional hat-maker’

How does this one come about?  
Why is *hatter* “less prototypical”?

Prototypical  
transitive scene

Time

Place

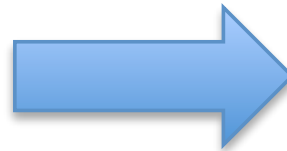
AGENT

PATIENT

*John*

*makes*

*hats*



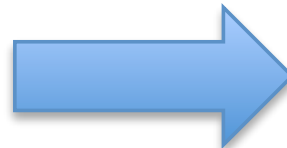
Prototypical  
transitive scene

Time

Place

AGENT

*John*



**PATIENT**

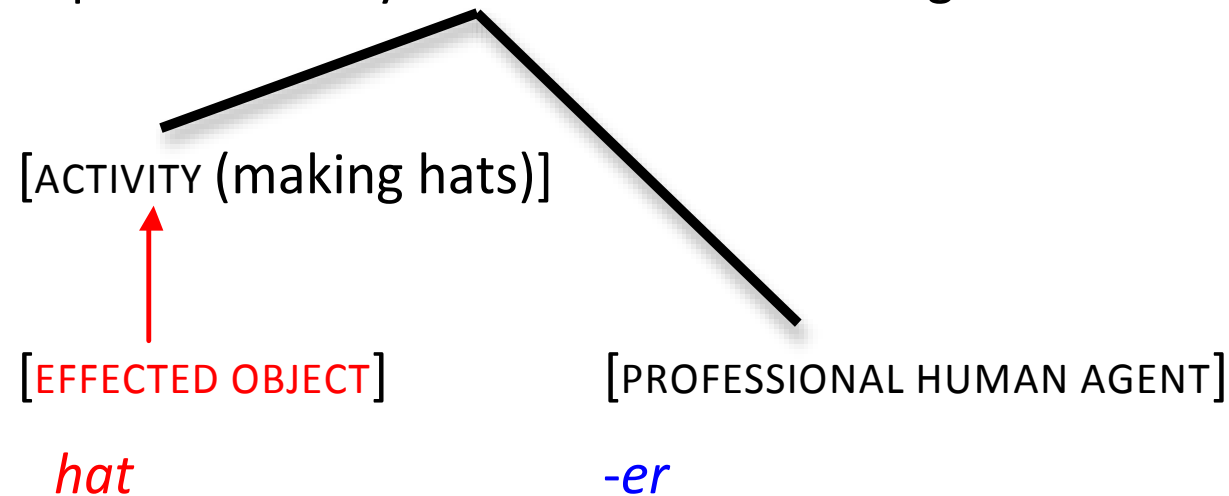
*makes*

*hats*

# Metonymically derived Agentive I

*hatter*

‘person professionally involved in hat-making



→ metonymy



# Less prototypical Agentive -er nominal II

*Wall Streeter*

‘person employed on Wall Street’

How does this one come about?

How is *Wall Streeter* “less prototypical”?

Less prototypical  
transitive scene

Time

**Place**

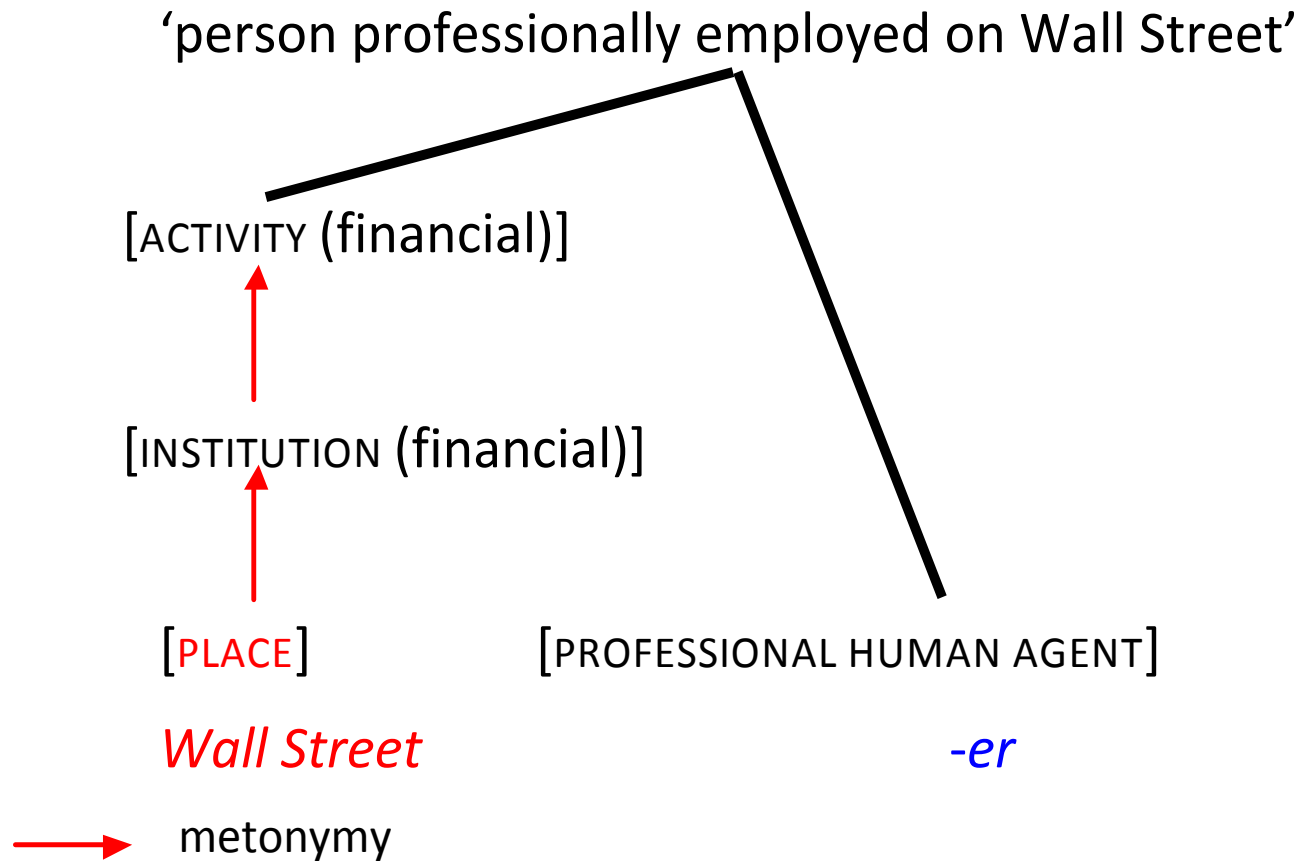
AGENT

*Harry*

*works on Wall Street*

# Metonymically derived Agentive II

## *Wall Streeter*



# Less prototypical -er nominal: Experiencer

*goner*

‘person doomed to die’

How does this one come about?

How is *goner* “less prototypical”?

Less prototypical  
transitive scene

Time

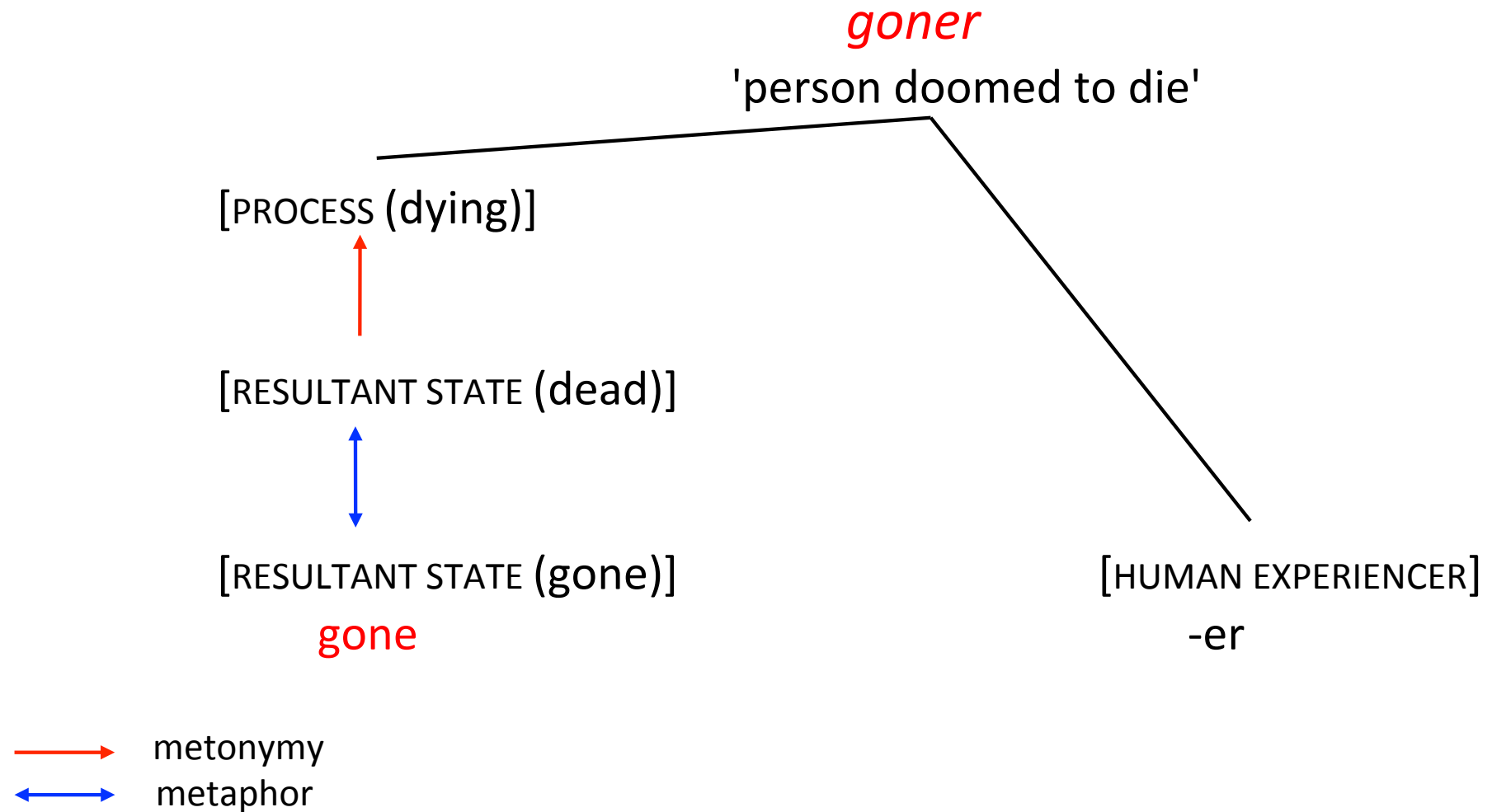
Place

UNDERGOER

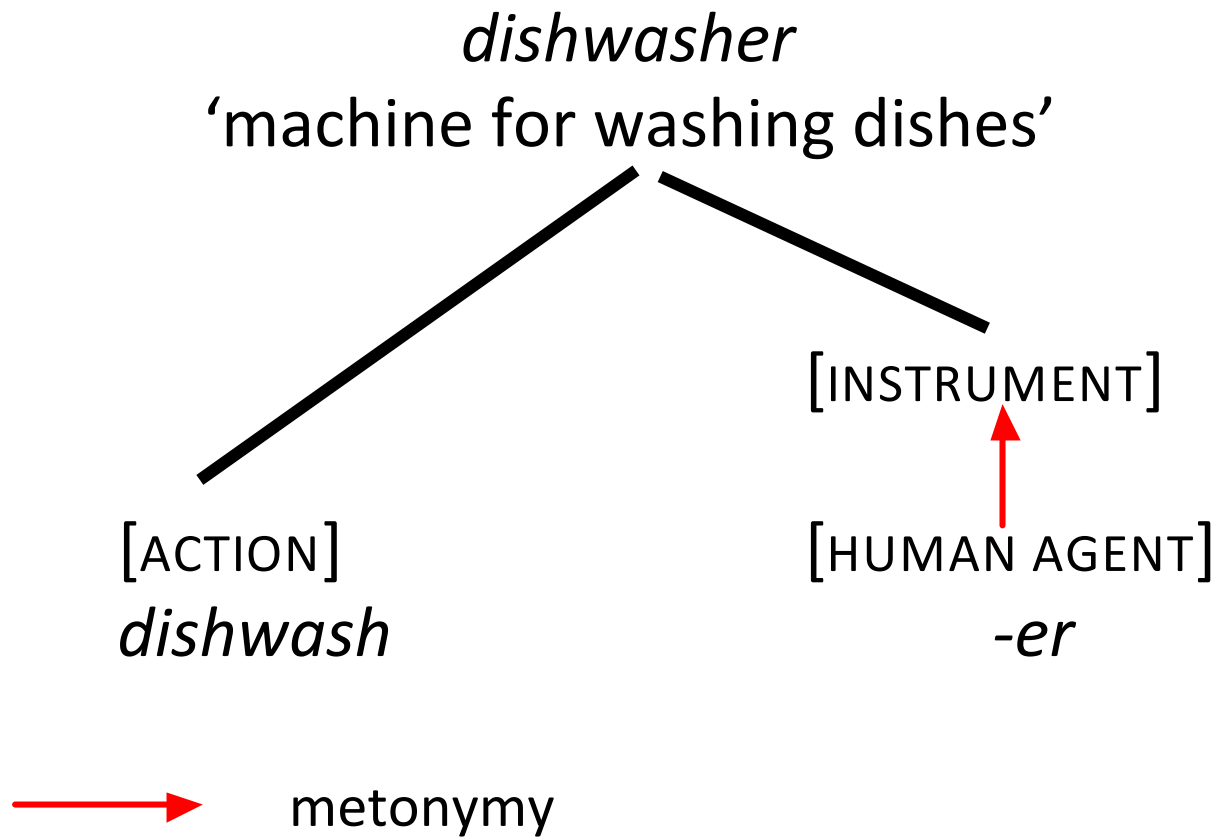
Bob

is nearly “gone” (i.e. dead)

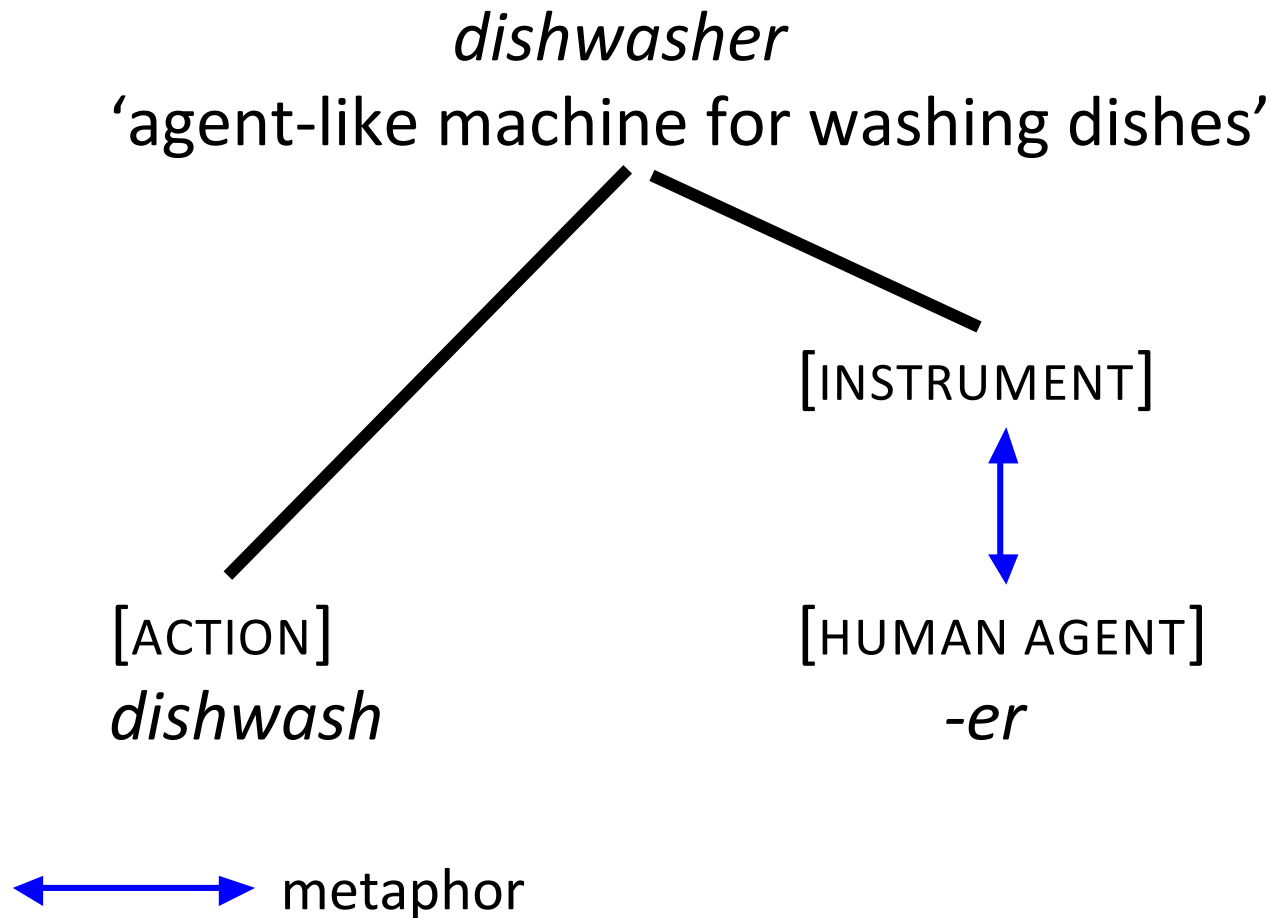
# Human experiencer/undergoer



# Instruments I: Metonymic Interpretation

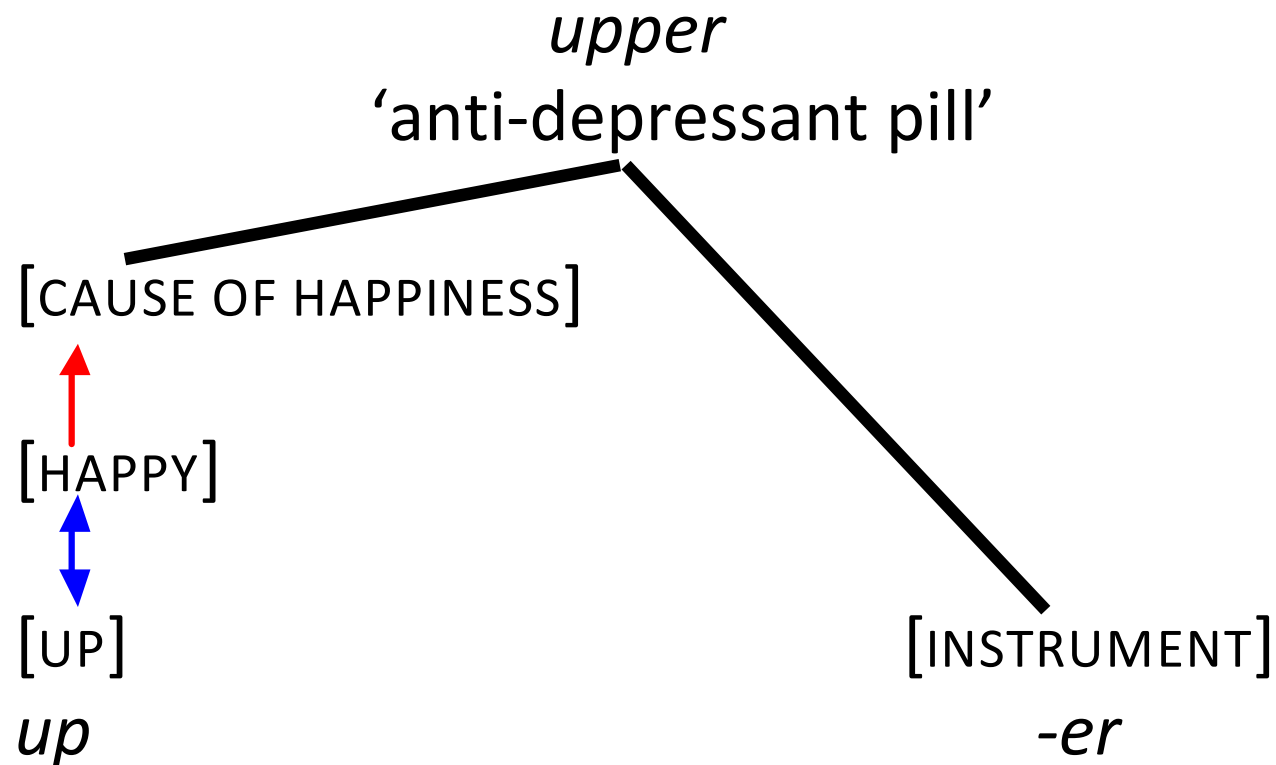


# Instruments II: Metaphoric Interpretation

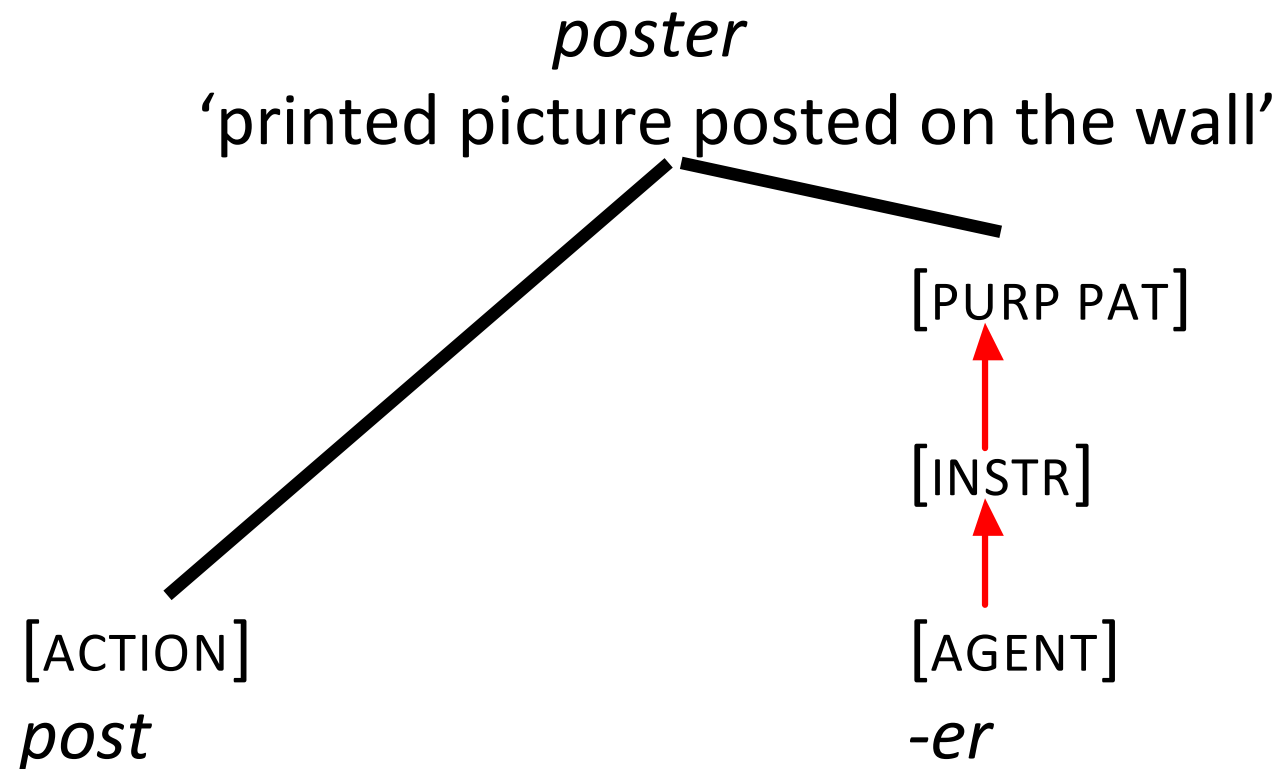




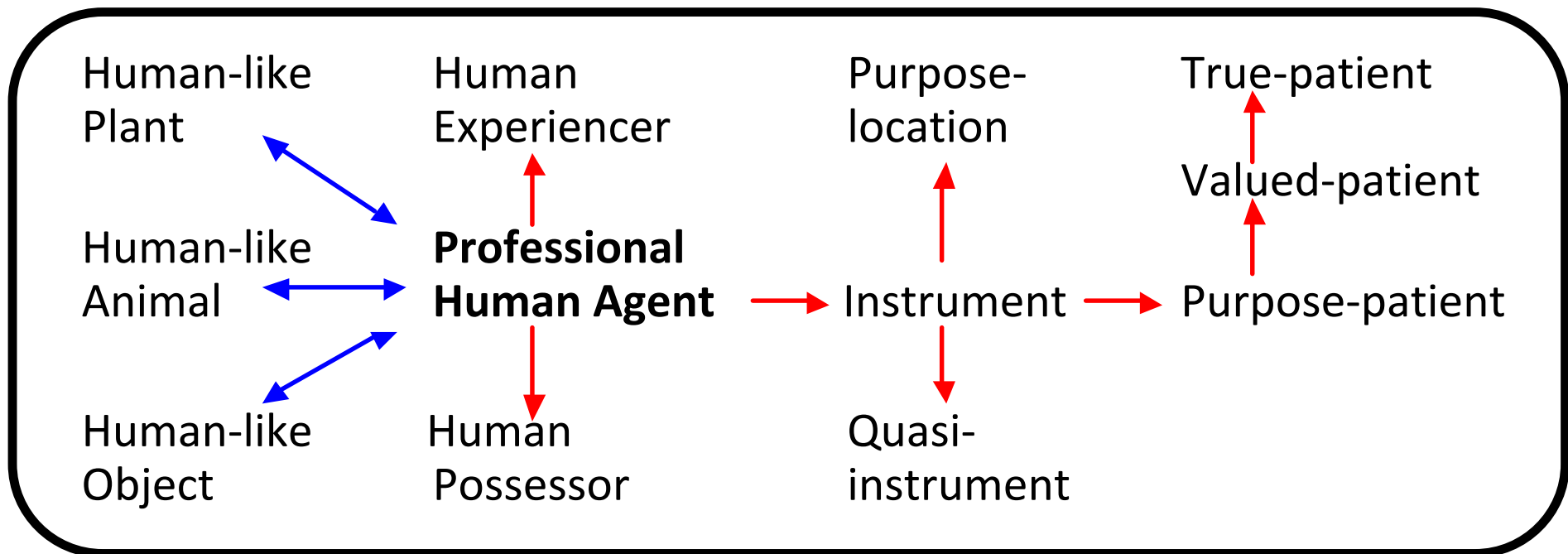
## Instruments III: Metaphor & metonymy



# Purpose Patient



# Participant Level Schema I

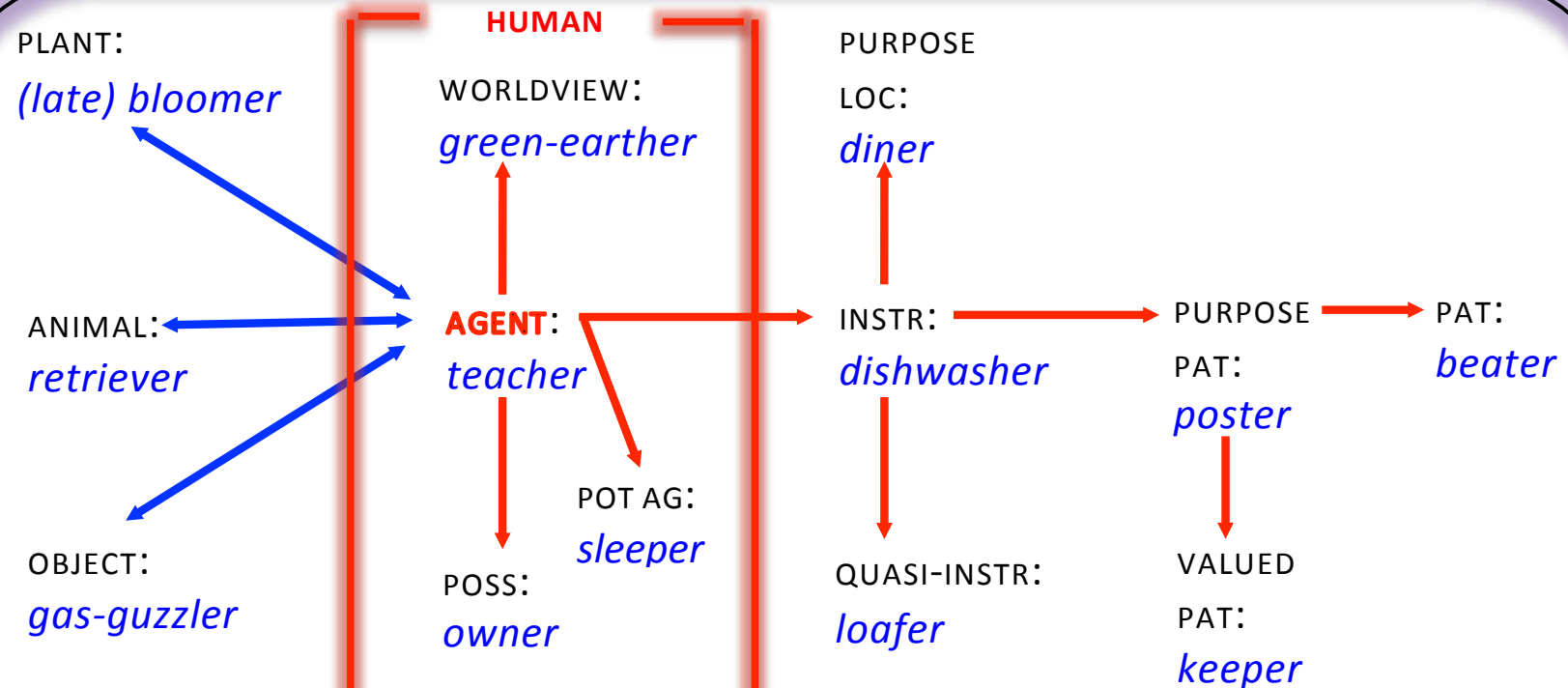


metonymic extension



metaphoric extension (PERSONIFICATION)

## Participant level -er nominals



- metonymic extension
- ↔ metaphoric extension (PERSONIFICATION)

## Event level -er nominals

### Reification: Events are Objects

#### Agent/Causer event

*thriller, bummer,  
stunner, groaner,  
eye-opener ...*

#### Instrument event

*mixer, updater,  
season-opener,  
fundraiser ...*

#### Valued-patient event

*keeper, forgetter ...*

**Base names action / process**

*no-brainer, rear-ender, kegger, tailgaiter, sundowner,  
rager, actioner, in-the-parker, bender...*

**Base names salient event component**

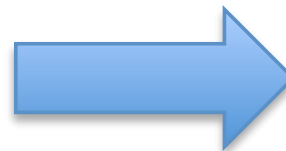
## 3.2. Event level

Prototypical  
transitive scene

Time

AGENT  
EVENT

[movie]



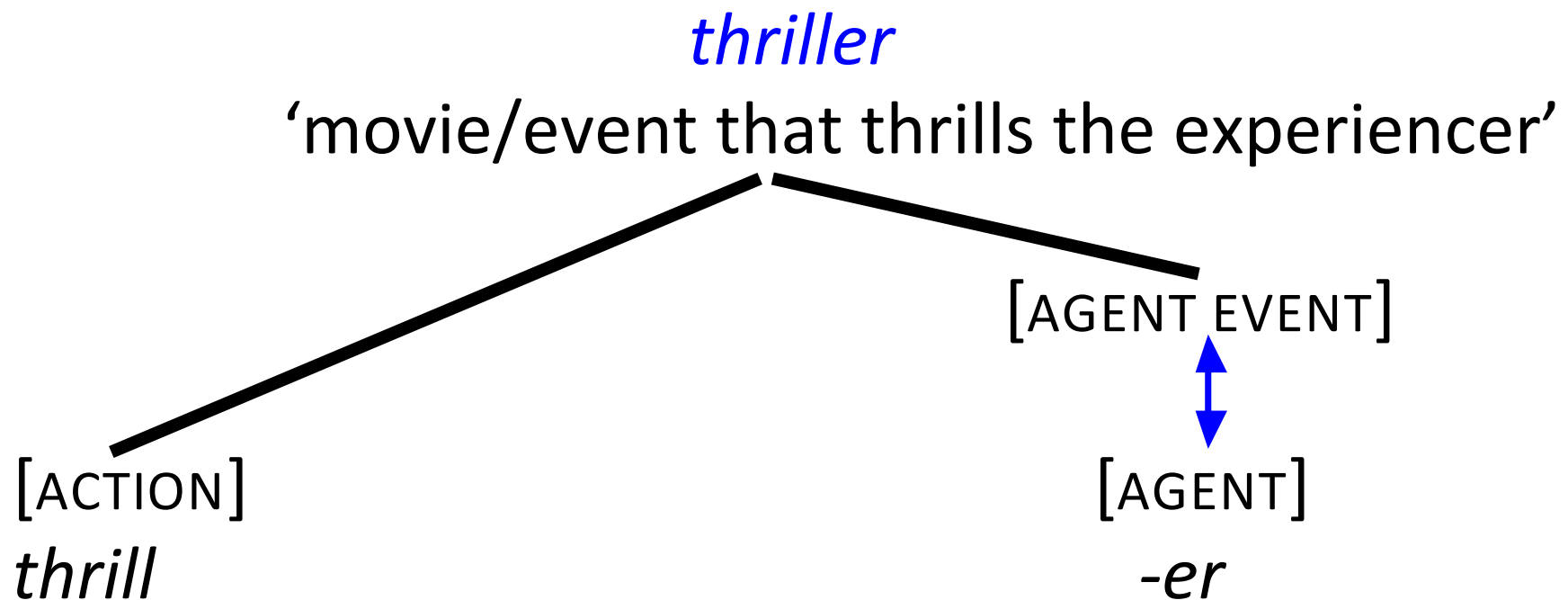
Place

PATIENT

*viewers*

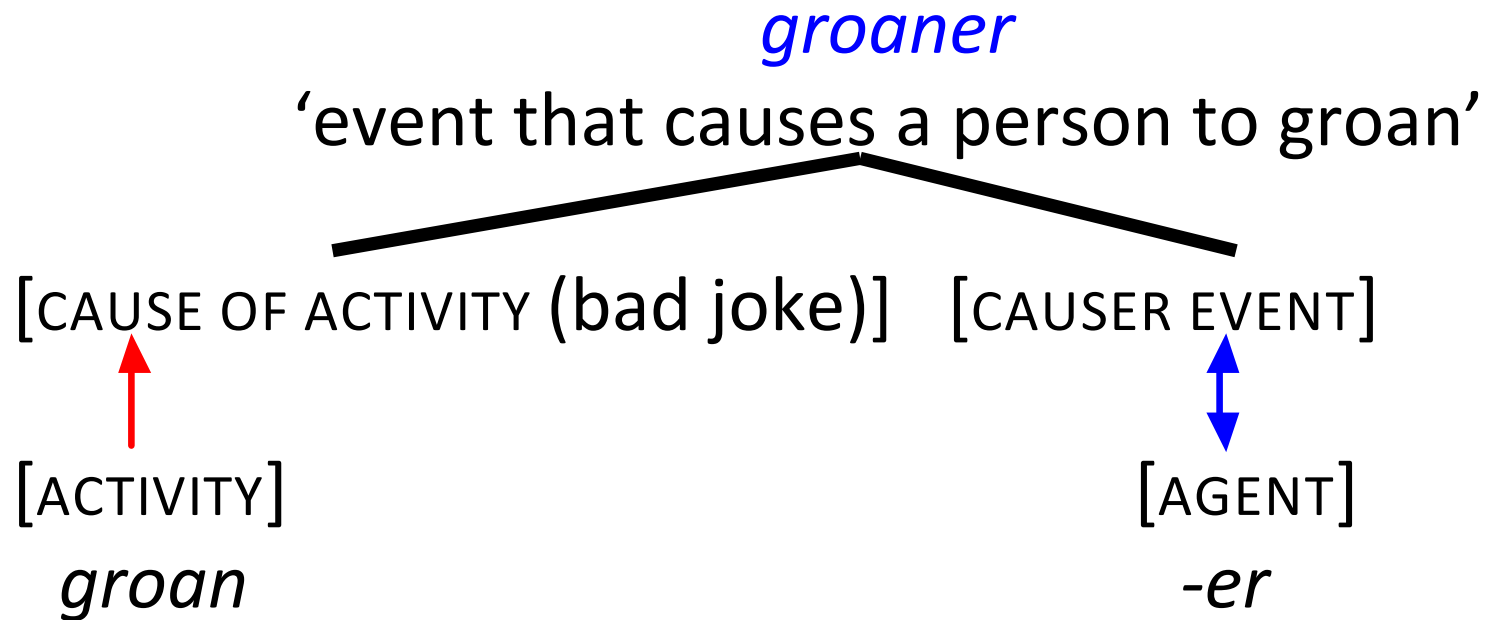
*thrills*

# Event level: Agent event

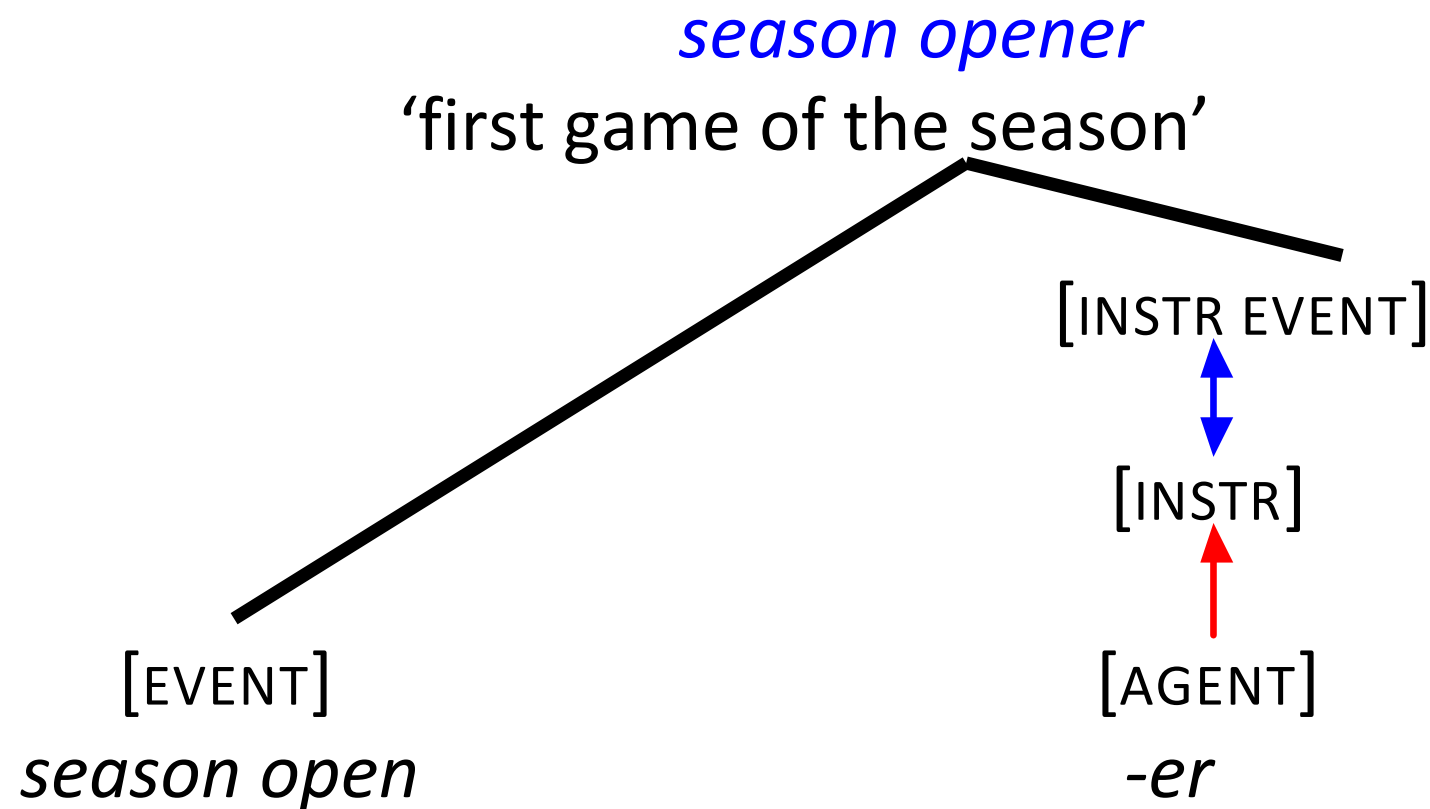




# Event level: Causer event



# Instrumental Event



# Test yourself!

How would you analyze / account for the following examples using the conceptual tools demonstrated today?

# *eye-opener*

*International Herald Tribune* (April 28, 1999)

Book review:

*The New Yorker at Midcentury*

*by Mary F. Corey*

The ambiguities Corey finds in the New Yorker's [magazine] presentation of blacks and ethnic Americans will come as no surprise, nor does her interpretation of its attitudes toward McCarthyism and the Cold War. But her chapter on its treatment of women is an *eye-opener*.

# *love nester*

Headline from a movie summary:

*Accused **Love Nester** on Trial Today*

The 1949 movie, *Adam's Rib*, stars Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn, who play two lawyers on opposite sides of a headline-making attempted murder case. Amanda (Hepburn) defends a wife accused of shooting her philandering husband and his mistress. Adam (Tracy) defends the philandering husband.

# *young-earthers* and *old-agers*

*Harper's Magazine* (November 1996)

[From an article on creation “science”]

*Young-earthers* read the Bible as a scientific source document and labor to find evidence of a world created by God in six days about 6,000 years ago. All other creationists, closer to the mainstream, are known as *old-agers*—those who accept most current scientific thinking (including the fact that the universe is billions of years old) ...

# *fender-bender*

*Chicago Sun Times*

April 12, 2002

Movie review by film critic ROGER EBERT

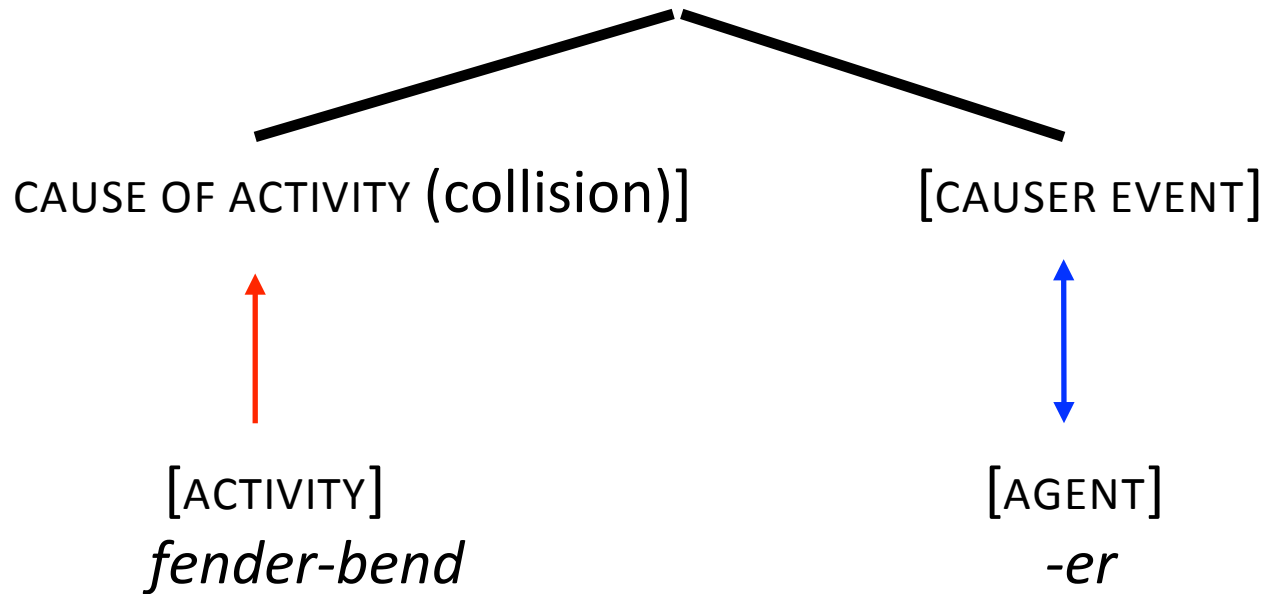
“Changing Lanes”

... The story involves two flawed men, both prey to anger, who get involved in a **fender-bender** that brings out all of their worst qualities. And their best. ...

# *fender-bender*

*fender-bender*

‘minor car accident that causes bent fenders’



→ metonymy  
↔ metaphor

Metaphor: EVENTS ARE THINGS

Metonymy: EFFECT FOR CAUSE



## 4. Homonymy or polysemy?

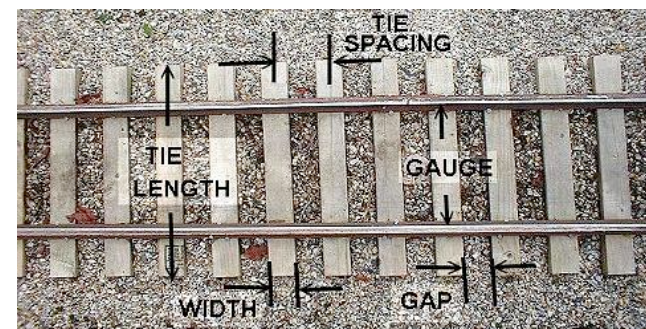
# Recall Problem 4

- **The polysemy vs. homonymy problem.** Many *-er* formations have multiple senses, e.g. the word *sleeper*.

Here are pictures of several things the word *sleeper* may denote.

Look at them and ask yourself: Are all of these senses **conceptually related**? Or not?

# *sleeper* denotata



# *sleep* denotata

- ‘one who sleeps’



- ‘a baby’s sleepwear’



- ‘a train car for sleeping’



- ‘sleeping pill’



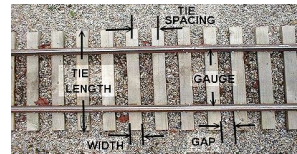
- ‘something or someone that has a delayed or unexpected success’



- ‘inactive spy’



- ‘underground railroad tie’



Are these senses **conceptually related?**

YES?

OR

NO?

- How many think: YES
- How many think: NO

# Polysemy of *sleeper*

PHONOLOGICAL POLE

CONCEPTUAL POLE

/sli:p +əʳ/

'ONE WHO SLEEPS'

'child's sleepwear'

'train car for sleeping'

'sleeping pill'

'so/sth that has an  
unexpected success'

'inactive spy'

'underground RR tie'

motivated relations:

*metonymic extensions* ----->

*metaphoric extensions* .....>