

150 CANONICAL SENTENCES FOR IDENTIFYING SEMANTIC PRIMES AND THE CORE LEXICOGRAMMAR OF ANY LANGUAGE

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This list can be used as an aid to identifying exponents of semantic primes and for eliciting a semantically-based sample of the core lexicogrammar of any language. It is not exhaustive of all combinatorial possibilities posited for semantic primes. The list is divided into sections that correspond roughly to the conventional groupings used for semantic primes, but there is a great deal of overlap between the sections. Many primes occur in several different sections and some very common items, e.g. ‘big’, ‘small’, ‘not’, do not have separate sections devoted to them. Some sentences are composed exclusively in semantic primes, while others include complex vocabulary items which may need to be adjusted to suit the cultural context.

The current “canonical sentences’ list is the latest in a line that goes back to the *Semantic and Lexical Universals* project (Goddard and Wierzbicka eds., 1994). It is not regarded as final and suggestions are welcome for its improvement. We have tried to supply sentences that are likely to be fairly “ordinary” in most cultural settings. They can be used in a variety of ways. For example, one can use them in direct elicitation, embed them in mini-narratives or scenarios as stimuli or prompts for informants, or seek to locate matching or comparable examples in natural texts.

When identifying exponents of primes one has to be alert to three possible complications: polysemy, allolexy, and portmanteau exponents. Polysemy occurs when, for example, two semantic primes share a single exponent, with each meaning appearing unambiguously in certain grammatical frames. Allolexy is when a given semantic prime has two or more exponents (allolexes) used in different contexts, e.g. ‘other’ and ‘else’ in English. As for portmanteau exponents, this refers to the situation in which a combination of primes, e.g. ‘like this’ or ‘a long time before’, is typically or even invariably expressed by means of a single word.

SOMEONE~WHO, SOMETHING~THING~WHAT, PEOPLE, BODY

Many other examples occur throughout. (Sometimes expressions like ‘one person’ may be used instead of SOMEONE.)

1. Who did it?
2. Someone took (ate, broke, etc.) it. I don’t know who.
3. What happened?
4. I did something bad.
5. What is this?
6. This thing is big/small.
7. They are good people.
8. Many people don’t know this.
9. Sometimes bad things happen to (good) people.
10. The body of a man is not like the body of a woman.
11. The stomach (liver, etc.) is part of people’s bodies, it is inside the body.

PARTS, KINDS

12. This thing (knife, axe, etc.) has two parts.
13. People's (human) bodies have many parts.
14. There are two/many kinds of yam (bat, bird, etc.).
15. It looks like the same kind (of fish, bird, etc.). But it's not. It's another kind
16. There is (only) one kind of fish in this lake (one kind of bird in this forest, etc.)

THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE

Many other examples occur throughout.

17. This is good/bad.
18. This is a big/small basket (knife, bowl, etc.).
19. (I saw) these two people; all these people.
20. I saw the same person (or: the same people) the day after.
21. It happened at the same place/time, not at another place/time.
22. She did/said the same (the same thing).
23. Someone else did it.

ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MANY~MUCH, LITTLE~FEW

There are many examples of ONE, TWO, and MUCH~MANY in other sections. In some languages, THIS will have a special variant when used as a quasi-substantive. Sentence 36 involves a common portmanteau expression ('everything').

24. How many children does she have?
25. She has one child (two/many children).
26. How much water is there (in that well, bowl, etc.)?
27. There is much (little, very little) water here.
28. Many (or: not many) people live here.
29. (There were many people there.) After that, one/two (of them) left.
30. Some of these yams (lemons, etc.) are good, some are rotten.
31. In some places there are lots of fish (rabbits, birds, etc.).
32. There is water here.
33. Very few people live there now.
34. Many of them went to the east, some went to the west.
35. All his sons (daughters, etc.) are now married.
36. The fire burnt everything (e.g. in the house, on the island).

GOOD, BAD

BIG and SMALL are not listed separately but appear in many examples throughout. There are examples of GOOD and BAD in other sections too. (It is not expected that a dependent clause in the scope of 'good' or 'bad' will necessarily be introduced by the equivalent of 'if'.)

37. Good people don't do things like this.
38. This was good/bad for me.
39. It is good/bad if someone (or: people) does something like this.
40. I know this person/place well.
41. Some people can do this well, some people can't.

THINK, KNOW, WANT, DON'T WANT

'Know (someone)' is no longer regarded as a semantically primitive meaning.

42. What are you thinking about?
43. I thought about it for a long time.
44. This person thinks something bad about me.
45. I thought like this: “ – – ”
46. Think well about it first (before you do it).
47. (Where is he now?) I don't know. Maybe Mary knows.
48. He knows much (a lot) about things like this.
49. (She left yesterday). I know.
50. I want (don't want) you to do it.
51. I want (don't want) this to happen.

FEEL, SEE, HEAR

There are several examples of SEE in other sections. In some languages, some of the FEEL sentences may involve portmanteau expressions.

52. When you look at the stars at night, what do you feel?
53. When I swallow (something), I feel something very bad in my throat.
54. At that time (then), I didn't feel anything.
55. I don't feel anything bad towards him anymore.
56. I saw something (a dog, bird, etc.) there.
57. (After that), I saw something else.
58. She was singing – I heard it.
59. I hear something (over there in the bushes).
60. I couldn't hear it.

SAY, WORDS, TRUE

There are several examples of SAY in other sections.

61. 'This is good', I said.
62. What did he say?
63. He said something to her, but she didn't hear it.
64. If I do this, people can say bad things about me.
65. She said the same (the same thing), but in other (i.e. different) words.
66. In language X, the word for 'good' is palya.
67. If you say one more word,
68. That's not true.

DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH

There are many examples of DO and HAPPEN in other sections.

69. What did you do then (after that)?
70. Those people did something good for me.
71. What do people do with things like this (a spoon, needle, etc.)?
72. People do this with a knife (axe, stick, etc.).
73. Something good/bad happened to this person (to me).
74. At that moment, something happened inside him.
75. Something bad happened in that place.
76. (Look!) Something is moving over there.

- 77. Don't move! (e.g. while putting on a bandaid or removing headlice)
- 78. I was very scared. I couldn't move.
- 79. Something was touching my hand.
- 80. Don't touch it! (It's hot.)

THERE IS, (IS) MINE

- 81. There is someone in the garden.
- 82. There is/are no [e.g. water/spiders] here.
- 83. There are no ghosts (unicorns, etc.).
- 84. There are many kinds of nuts (yams, bats, etc.).
- 85. It's mine.
- 86. It's not yours. It's mine.
- 87. I know it's not mine. I want it to be mine.

BE (SOMEWHERE), BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)

- 88. What is on the table? I can't see it.
- 89. I want to be with my mother (grandfather, father, etc.).
- 90. It was a long time ago. My father was a child at that time.
- 91. I don't know what this is.
- 92. I don't know who this is.

LIVE, DIE

There are many examples of LIVE in other sections.

- 93. [In story of olden days] These people lived for a long time.
- 94. Turtles (horses, whales, etc.) live for a long time.
- 95. At that time she was living with her mother.
- 96. Fish live in the sea.
- 97. All people die.
- 98. These people died a long time ago.

TIME~WHEN, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, IN ONE MOMENT

There are many examples of TIME~WHEN and A LONG TIME in other sections. Sentences 102 and 103 involve common portmanteau expressions ('sometimes', 'always'). Note that BEFORE and AFTER may have adverbial, rather than adpositional, syntax.

- 99. When did you do it? I did it when everyone was asleep.
- 100. I don't know when it happened.
- 101. At the same time, something happened to me.
- 102. Sometimes I drink coffee in the morning, sometimes I drink tea.
- 103. This dog always barks at night.
- 104. They live in X now. They lived in Y before (this).
- 105. It happened beforehand/afterwards.
- 106. John was born before/after Harry (was born).
- 107. This happened a long time ago.
- 108. He was only there for a short time, but she was there for a long time.
- 109. She thought about it for some time.
- 110. It happened some time ago (i.e. some time before).

111. It happened in one moment.

PLACE~WHERE, HERE, NEAR, FAR, ABOVE, BELOW, ON (THIS) SIDE, INSIDE

There may be several words for positional relationships like ABOVE and BELOW, cf. English *below, under, beneath, underneath*. Try to find one which is purely about relative position, without implying anything about visibility or “covering”. There are other examples of INSIDE in sentences 11 and 74.

112. Where is he now?
113. It didn't happen here. It happened somewhere else (in another place).
114. Is it far from here?
115. Was Fred standing (sitting, etc.) near John?
116. The house (camp, etc.) is near the river.
117. It is far above the ground.
118. The head is above other parts of the body.
119. The feet are below other parts of the body.
120. John is now [standing/sitting] on this side (of me).
121. Mary was [standing/sitting] on my right-hand side, Sally was on my left-hand side.
122. They live on the other side of the river (mountain, etc.)
123. There were people standing on both sides of the road.
124. There is an insect inside this [e.g. walnut, apple].
125. Don't open it. You don't know what is inside.
126. Some people were in front of the house, others were inside.

BECAUSE, IF, MAYBE, CAN

NOT is not listed separately but appears in numerous examples throughout. There are several examples of CAN in other sections.

127. There was a lot of noise (shouting, etc.). Because of this, I couldn't sleep.
128. Why are you crying? Because he hit me.
129. If someone does this, something very bad can happen to people here.
130. Maybe he will come tomorrow, maybe he won't (come tomorrow).
131. I can't do it now, maybe my brother (friend, etc.) can.
132. I can't do it now, but I can do it later.
133. I can't not do it (i.e. I have to do it).
134. I can't move my fingers (hands, etc.) now.

VERY, MORE

There are several examples of VERY in other sections. In some languages, the combination VERY VERY is expressed by a portmanteau.

135. It is very good/bad/big/small.
136. This place [e.g. Gundaroo] is very far from here.
137. The stars (moon, etc.) are very very far.
138. When it happened to him, he felt something very very bad.
139. I very much want to do this.
140. More! (e.g. a child crying for food)
141. (I don't know much about it.) I want to know more.
142. I want to see more.
143. She doesn't live here anymore.
144. I want one more.

LIKE

There are several examples of LIKE in other sections.

145. This child is not like other children.
146. This is like lilac (or: any plant), but it is not lilac.
147. At a time like this; in a place like this.
148. He did it (sang, danced, etc.) like this: ...
149. It happened like this: ...
150. She sang like this: —— [to demonstrate loudness, pitch, voice quality, etc.]