

Valency

Valency is a semantic (or syntactic—but that’s a linguistic debate I don’t want to try to resolve at the moment) property of verbs. If the sentence is a party, valency is how many people (nouns) the verb is allowed or required to bring to the party.¹

In English, every sentence must have a verb, and every verb must bring at least one noun to the party, a subject—a valency of one (monotransitive, or intransitive). The subject does not need to come inside or bring a casserole, but it must be available.

- A subject that comes in (is spoken) and brings a casserole (has content): My mother likes chocolate-covered cherries.
- A subject that doesn’t come in: Stop it! (‘you’ is the implied subject of imperative verbs)
- A subject that comes in but doesn’t bring a casserole: It’s raining (what is the it?—the sky, the weather, the clouds, the combined factors that make for rain...). (Subjects that are structurally required but that lack semantic content are called ‘dummy subjects’.)

Linking verbs and stative verbs have a valency of one (predicate nominatives don’t count because they don’t come with the verb but with the subject—the plus one can bring a plus one, and that’s a predicate nominative).

Transitive verbs can bring two people to the party, a subject and a direct object—a valency of two:

- The cat ate the cheese.

Most action verbs can be used transitively, even the ones that don’t seem that active:

- The sleeping car sleeps eight.
- That kid sneezed a golf ball of phlegm out of her nose.

Many verbs can be used ditransitively, a subject, an indirect object, and a direct object—a valency of three:

- I (S) gave my mother (IO) chocolate-covered cherries (DO).²

Valency and transitivity are properties of verbs themselves as well as ways that verbs are used in sentences (so it’s important to be clear which one you’re talking about); ‘give’ is a ditransitive verb, and it can be used intransitively:

- I gave at the office (no objects—the prepositional phrase is adverbial).

Tritransitive verbs do exist (and probably more), but I’ve never seen a convincing example of one in English; the examples that some people think might be tritransitive are just misanalyses of the nouns in the examples.

¹ If the sentence is not a party, my social life is even worse off than I thought.

² If this is confusing, see the handout on nouns.