

PROTOTYPICAL MEANINGS IN PERCEPTION VERBS

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ABSTRACT. This paper discusses the core meanings of English perception verbs and subsequently compares them to the equivalent paradigms in Romanian and French. We will start by highlighting the complete paradigm of visual, hearing, tactile, olfactory and gustatory according to their classification into active, passive and copulative verbs. The second part of this paper will focus more in detail on the prototypical meanings of the visual and auditory perception verbs.

KEY WORDS: prototypical meanings, verbs of perception, active perception, passive perception, copulative verbs.

The paradigm of basic perception verbs in English that makes the object of our study is exemplified below:

| Sensory modality | Passive | Active | Copulative |
|------------------|---------|------------|------------|
| Vision | see | look/watch | look |
| Hearing | hear | listen | sound |
| Touch | feel | touch | feel |
| Smell | smell | smell | smell |
| Taste | taste | taste | taste |

The terminology used in the classification of perception verbs belongs to several linguists: active [1], passive [2], and copulative [3]. As the table shows, English has a complete range of perception verbs corresponding to each of the different sensory modalities. The first two columns contain the verbs where the perceiver appears in the subject position, whereas the third column indicates the equivalent evidential or copulative verbs.

Membership to the group of passive verbs such as *see*, *hear*, *feel*, *smell* and *taste* is based on some common characteristics such as the idea of non-intentional perception and that of different means of obtaining the sensorial information (via humans' inherent and uncontrolled properties: vision, hearing, touch, smell and taste).

The active verbs denote controlled activities for reaching certain types of perception. Their dictionary definitions clearly highlight the purpose of these voluntary processes: ‘*in order to see*, *in order to hear*, *in order to find out what flavour it has*, etc’. Therefore, it results that the common trait of verbs in this group is ‘*in order to perceive*’.

The final group of our paradigm is that of evidential or copulative verbs. Some linguists do not consider them real perception verbs but we still include them within this class mainly due to their common property to express situations that, indirectly, are interpreted as perceptions: *look/sound/feel/smell/taste* somehow transmit the idea of somebody or something being visually/auditorily/tactilely/olfactorily/gustatorily perceived by a speaker.

Two examples such as ‘*Mary sees well*’ and ‘*Mary looks good*’ are semantico-syntactically different and belong to distinct subclasses. The first example expresses Mary’s capacity to perceive visual stimuli. It is important to observe that Mary is the subject of the sentence. In the second example, things change in that Mary, from the position of the subject now becomes the object of perception, while the perceptive act is carried out by a non-lexicalized referent (the speaker). Here, the perception expressed by ‘*look*’ is inherently evaluative.

Due to a multitude of verbal forms denoting perception, we have tried to select the prototypical ones by means of Rosch’s [4] prototype theory:

- Visual perception:

| Superordinate level | Basic level | Subordinate level |
|---------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| Perceive | see | look at, watch, gaze |

- Auditory perception:

| Superordinate level | Basic level | Subordinate level |
|---------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| Perceive | hear | listen, overhear, eavesdrop |

- Tactile perception

| Superordinate level | Basic level | Subordinate level |
|---------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| Perceive | touch | feel, caress, stroke |

- Olfactory perception:

| Superordinate level | Basic level | Subordinate level |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Perceive | smell | sniff |

- Gustatory perception:

| Superordinate level | Basic level | Subordinate level |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Perceive | taste | savor, partake |

To these prototypical forms corresponding either to passive or active perception, we have tried to find the equivalent in the case of each sense, for instance the passive verb ‘*see*’ has been correlated with the most used corresponding active verbs namely ‘*look at*’ and ‘*watch*’. This is the procedure allowing for the construction of the English paradigm of perception verbs.

The semantic configuration of **visual verbs** expresses different types of perception. Generally, they are grouped into three categories: the first one gives information about the position of the eyes, which do not establish any direct connection with an object (*stare, twinkle, blink*), while the second category reflects the various stages of the perception process. The last group “informs 1. about the direction of the look at somebody or something or somewhere (group *look*), 2. about getting information due to the perception of the object (Y) - group *watch* and 3. about the appearance of Y’s image in the eyes of X as a result of visual perception.” [4]

Other verbs that fit in the group *look* are usually those followed by a particle (*at-* with an object and *out, into-* without an object). Those from the group *watch* (*observe, examine, scrutinize, study, survey, search, seek, scan*) and group *see* (*notice, spot, discern*) are more present in communication.

The multitude of existing forms has obliged us to perform the above mentioned selection procedure. Therefore, in the case of vision, the prototypical form expressing involuntary perception is ‘*see*’ while those expressing voluntary perception are ‘*look at*’ and ‘*watch*’. Their physical meanings provided by dictionaries [5] are exemplified below:

See □□□verb

USE EYES □□

1. To be conscious of what is around you by using your eyes: *Turn the light on so I can see.*
2. to watch a film, television programme, etc.: *Did you see that documentary on Channel 4 last night ?*

Look □□□verb

1. To direct your eyes in order to see:

Look! There’s grandma.

They looked at the picture and laughed.

Watch □□verb LOOK AT□□

1. To look at something for a period of time, especially something that is changing or moving: *I had dinner and watched TV for a couple of hours.*
2. To stay with something or someone such as a child for a short time to make certain that they are safe: *If you want me to watch the kids for a couple of hours while you go out, just let me know.*

Things are clear for ‘*see*’, the marker of active perception while the difference between ‘*watch*’ and ‘*look at*’ is that the former cannot be employed in the sense of the latter when there is no kind of movement. This is the reason why sentences like ‘*watch the book*’ or ‘**She is watching the table*’ are obviously ungrammatical. In the case where ‘*watch*’ is used with its core meaning namely that of a perception verb, a bare infinitive or a present participle emerges in the complementation.

Since the next section will be entirely devoted to the concrete and metaphorical semantic extensions of perception verb, we also consider important to mention some of the uses of perception verbs followed by particles. Because these forms are specific to English and do not occur cross-linguistically, we present them in the section devoted to prototypical meanings of perception verbs even though their uses correspond in most cases to semantic extensions and not to their core meanings.

Here are some cases of ‘*see*’ followed by particles extracted from the Macmillan (2009-2012) dictionary:

- *see about* (to deal with or organize something):
I must go and *see about* this job.
 - *see out* (to go with someone to the door when they are leaving in order to say goodbye to them):
My secretary will *see* you *out*.
 - *see through* (to recognize that something is not true and not be tricked by it):
We can all *see through* your little game, Adam.
 - *see off* (to go somewhere such as a station or airport with someone in order to say goodbye to them)
Anne *saw* Terry *off* at the station.
 - *see to* (to deal with or take responsibility for someone or something):
You try to get some sleep, I'll *see to* the children's breakfast.
- In the case of 'look', we have extracted some uses of this type from the CALD:
- *look after somebody* (to take care of or be in charge of someone or something):
We *look after* the neighbours' cat while they are away.
 - *look into something* (to examine the facts about a problem or situation):
We're *looking into* the possibility of merging the two departments.
 - *look out* (either to watch what is happening and be careful or said and shouted in order to tell someone that they are in danger):
The police have warned shopkeepers *to look out* for forged notes.
Look out! There's a car coming!
 - *look round* (to visit a place and look at the things in it):
She spent the afternoon *looking round* the shops.
 - *look up* (to become better):
I hope things will start to *look up* in the New Year.
The verb 'watch' is also used in association with particles:
- *watch out* (used to warn someone of danger or an accident that seems likely to happen):
"Watch out!" he shouted, but it was too late – she had knocked the whole tray of drinks on the floor".
 - *watch out for sb/sth* (to be careful to notice someone or something interesting):
Watch out for his latest movie, which comes out next month.
 - *watch over sb* (to protect someone and make certain that they are safe):
The prince has two bodyguards *watching over* him every hour of the day.
- As we said before, the majority of these phrasal verbs no longer express the core meanings implying perception and represent semantic extensions, with different meanings.
- Auditory verbs** represent the second area of perception we shall investigate. Linguists agree that visual verbs denoting active perception (*look at, watch*) are characterized by the highest number of positive traits: the perceiver controls the perception and the stimulus is obligatorily dynamic. Since the stimulus, in the case of the verb *listen to*, is necessarily dynamic, it is situated at a lower level of transitivity. If in the case of passive perception the perceiver controls the perceptual event less, this control completely disappears in the case of 'hear'.
- While visual verbs generally refer to intellectual faculties, auditory perception involves an internal comprehension and receptivity. Consequently, hearing corresponds to a mental act rather than physical. It does not entail body movements but a cognitive activity consisting of

paying attention to stimuli. Finally, the manipulable nature of vision explains the relationship ‘see’ involves ‘look at’. However, the fact that ‘hear’ does not imply ‘listen to’ is due to the physiology of the receptor organs which cannot be controlled similarly to the eyes which can be closed.

The objects of auditory perception may be humans (a) and animate (b) or inanimate (c) entities that produce a noise:

- a. She *hears* the baby (crying, laughing, ...).
- b. She *hears* the dog (barking, running, ...).
- c. She *hears* the bus (leaving, ...).

Auditory perception is more restrictive than visual perception. When ‘*She hears the dog*’, that person really hears the sound the dog makes. Therefore, auditory perception involves a part / whole type of metonymy. In contrast, ‘*seeing an entity*’ means that the perceiver sees the stimulus itself.

Regarding this, Fillmore [6] introduces the distinction between the *stimulus* and *source stimulus*. In the case of visual perception the two concepts cover more or less the same reality: in ‘*She sees the dog*’ for example, the dog is both the perceived stimulus and source generating the stimulus. In the field of auditory perception, the stimuli are represented by noises or sounds that can be perceived, while the source stimuli are noise-producing entities. As the two notions do not refer to the same entity, auditory perception is less direct than visual perception.

What is heard or listened is located in time unlike vision which is always located in space. Auditory perception involves the perception of the effect of a presence: we do not hear an object or process, but the result of the process or action made by the source. The source of the same auditory stimulus is localized in space. For example, when ‘*She hears John singing*’, that person can locate John in space but the event of ‘*singing*’ and the sounds produced are not related to a specific location.

The core meanings of the hearing verbs expressing involuntary and voluntary perception (*hear, listen to*) are:

Hear □ □ □ verb

RECEIVE SOUND □ □ □ to receive or become conscious of a sound using your ears: *She heard a noise outside.*

Listen to □ □ □ verb

□ to give attention to someone or something in order to hear them: *What kind of music do you listen to?*

Similarly to the analysis of visual verbs, we shall now present some phrasal verbs containing the forms ‘hear’ and ‘listen’:

- *hear from sb* (if you hear from somebody, you get a letter or a telephone call from them, or they tell you something):

We haven’t *heard from* her for ages.

- *hear of sb/sth* (if you have heard of someone or something, you know that that person or thing exists):

I’d never *heard of* him before he won the prize.

- *hear sth of sb* (to receive news about someone):

We haven’t *heard anything of* Jan for months.

- *hear sb out* (to listen to somebody until they have said everything they want to

say):

At least *hear me out* before making up your mind.

- *listen in on sth* (if you listen in on a conversation, you listen to it, especially secretly, without saying anything):

I wish Dad would stop *listening in on* my phone conversations.

- *listen out for sth* (to make an effort to hear a noise that you are expecting):

Would you *listen out for* the phone while I'm in the garden?

- *listen up* (mainly US informal) (something you say to make people listen to you):

Okay everyone – *listen up!* I have an announcement to make.

In this paper, we have selected the perception verbs forming the basic English paradigm to be analysed within our approach. We have also provided the dictionary definitions reflecting their core meanings, examples illustrating their association with particles and whether synthetic English forms denoting perception are rendered by analytic form in the Romance languages under investigation.

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