

---

## SEMANTIC FIELD OF PERCEPTION: A STUDY OF (A)SYNNOYMIC DICHOTOMIES

---

Mihaela Georgiana MANASIA

“Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu Jiu, Romania

**Abstract:** *THE SEMANTIC FIELDS OF PERCEPTION AS VIEWED THROUGH THE LENS OF INTENTIONAL AND NON-INTENTIONAL VERBS IS A WIDELY USED METHOD TO UNDERSTAND PERCEPTUAL REALITY OF LANGUAGE. THIS PAPER EXPLORES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND THE COGNITIVE PROCESS OF PERCEPTION AND AIMS AT SETTING UP A WIDE-RANGE EXPLANATORY RESEARCH FRAME TO THIS CONCEPT FROM A LINGUISTIC POINT OF VIEW. SOME THEORETICAL INFORMATION WILL BE LOGICALLY ANALYSED THROUGHOUT THE PAPER AND ACCOMPANIED BY EXAMPLES THAT WILL FURTHER ILLUSTRATE THE PURPOSE OF ITS SIGNIFICANT RELEVANCE. THE FIRST PART OF THE ARTICLE WILL EXPLORE THE SEMANTIC FIELD OF PERCEPTION BY REFERRING TO THE DICHOTOMY OF VOLUNTARY VS. INVOLUNTARY PERCEPTION. VERBS OF PERCEPTION WILL BE THE ONLY PART OF SPEECH USED IN ORDER TO PREFACE OUR ANALYSIS OF THIS DICHOTOMY. OTHER DISTINCT PAIRS INTERSECTING THE FIELD OF PERCEPTION WILL BE ADDRESSED IN OUR ATTEMPT TO ESTABLISH WHETHER DIRECT AND INDIRECT PERCEPTION ARE PERFECT SYNONYMS FOR PHYSICAL VS. COGNITIVE, CONCRETE VS. ABSTRACT AND EPISTEMICALLY NEUTRAL VS. EPISTEMICALLY LOADED PERCEPTION. THE STUDY FURTHER SHOWS THAT THE SEMANTIC FIELDS OF PERCEPTION DO NOT NEATLY CATEGORIZE THEMSELVES INTO PERFECT DICHOTOMIES. THEIR SEMANTIC CATEGORIZATION IS HIGHLY CONTEXTUAL AND DEPENDS ON THE PRAGMATIC USAGE OF LANGUAGE.*

**Keywords:** *ACT OF PERCEPTION, DIRECT VS. INDIRECT PERCEPTION, PERCEIVER, VOLUNTARY VS. INVOLUNTARY PERCEPTION.*

**Contact details  
of the  
author(s):** Email: [mihaela.manasia@gmail.com](mailto:mihaela.manasia@gmail.com)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The term perception etymologically stems from the Latin ‘*perceptio*’ which entails “receiving, collecting, action of taking possession, apprehension with the mind or senses” (OALD, 2021). The



definition is relevant to the importance of this cognitive process which allows animated beings to become aware of information on the surrounding world via external stimuli.

The study of this concept has been undertaken by numerous fields such as psychology, philosophy, literature, cognitive linguistics, and others. The relationship between perception and language, which is the focus of our research, has been particularly exploited by cognitive linguists who undertook a complex reconfiguration of the links between language, perception and action. “The impression that perception and language are closely related may stem from a feeling that people use language primarily to talk about the world they perceive” (Miller and Johnson-Laird, 1976, p.119). An essential aspect is to understand how language applies to the perceptual reality by means of categorization and by actively structuring it, and how this structure is essentially coupled to action.

## 2. THE SEMANTIC FIELD OF PERCEPTION

Semantically, the field of perception is expressed by terms such as *see, watch, look at, hear, listen to, smell, taste and touch*. There are other parts of speech that convey acts of perception, the explication of which is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. This paper will deal only with the definitional scope of sensory verbs. An important distinction made in this line of study refers to *voluntary and involuntary perception*. Voluntary perception, expressed by verbs such as *look at, watch* and *listen to* is opposed to involuntary perception expressed by verbs as *see, hear* and so on. This distinction is made by taking into consideration the perceiver’s prototypical characteristics, stimulus and the act of perception itself.

On the one hand, the subject of an act of voluntary perception is an observer actively oriented towards the stimuli: using their sense organs in the entirety of their purpose. S/he voluntarily perceives visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and gustatory phenomena. On the other hand, the involuntary perceiver is an experiencer undergoing perception without one’s own agreement, and in which the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile phenomena *are offered* to our sensory cells without making any effort to perceive them. It is only when the stimulus deserves the attention of the perceiver that voluntary perception occurs. Therefore, there is a reason for initiating or prolonging the perception: stemming from factors like the attractive or salient characteristic of the stimulus, its status compared to other stimuli, among others. However, the stimulus of involuntary perception is imposed to the consciousness of the experiencer and does not necessarily present specific traits. Besides this, voluntary perception is only made of entities of first order i.e. concrete objects that exist in time and space (1) while involuntary perception also selects more abstract objects (2).

(1) *watching a man / listening to the radio*

(2) *seeing a man / hearing the radio / hearing the fear in somebody’s voice*

Furthermore, the voluntary perceiver expects the occurrence of the stimulus and can anticipate its perception; the duration of the stimulus must be long enough so that it could be perceived. Voluntary perception also consists of an activity controlled by the perceiver. For instance, ‘*listen to*’ means to prick one’s ears in order to figure out if there is something to hear and pay attention to any potential auditory stimuli, whereas ‘*watch*’ and ‘*look at*’ are translated by opening and directing the eyes in order to know if there is something to see and identify the visual stimuli. Nevertheless, involuntary perception represents a mental process that establishes a connection between a conscious experiencer and an experienced phenomenon so verbs such as *see, hear, feel, smell* and *taste* correspond to the irruption of a visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory or gustatory event in the perceptive field of the perceiver. Moreover, the voluntary processes come from the perceiver, while involuntary perception comes from the stimulus. Consequently, the voluntary perception act is more complex than involuntary perception because it involves the directing of attention and the perceiving effort.



One last difference between the two modalities is that voluntary perception is almost always direct perception while involuntary perception can be direct or indirect. It follows that *look at* and *watch* are syntactically less productive and appear in a lot more limited number of constructions than the verb *see*. Verbs of involuntary perception are likely to extend their semantic field more than verbs expressing voluntary perception. *Watching* does not imply *seeing* as much as *listen to* does not imply *hearing*, which means the perceiver can project their sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste towards the stimulus without even an effective presence of the entity in question. The visual perceiver can, for instance, direct and open their eyes without actually seeing something like in the case of visually impaired people.

In short, the semantic field of perception is mainly intersected by the opposition between voluntary and involuntary perception. We will next address other dichotomies that are frequently used in this line of study.

### 3. DICHOTOMIES IN THE CLASSIFICATION OF PERCEPTION

The field of perception is clearly marked by the opposition separating direct from indirect perception which we have previously mentioned briefly while discussing voluntary vs. involuntary perception. We will now reiterate the idea that voluntary perception is considered to be direct perception whereas involuntary perception can be both direct and indirect. According to Guasti (1993, p.6), the term *direct* conveys the idea that the perceiver shares a direct relation to the perceived object or event. When people directly perceive a certain thing, they grasp the object as it stands *hic and nunc*. This direct experience doesn't require any initial beliefs the perceiver might have about what is perceived, due to the fact that it is simply derived from our inborn capacity to perceive things around us. In other words, external stimuli immediately provide the perceiver with information on the exterior world hence there is no need to make use of other knowledge of the world. The same researcher (Guasti, 1993, p.6) states that 'indirect' perception entails 'direct perception as well as inferential activity on the basis both of what has been perceived and of knowledge of the world'. Otherwise stated, the person involved in the perception act obtains this data by means of deductive reasoning and calculates on the basis of what he perceives.

This distinction between direct and indirect perception is connected to the phenomenological philosophy and especially to Husserl (1983, pp.20-25) who has introduced the opposition between *direct* perception of perceptual properties and *indirect* perception of abstract properties. Despite the fact that these two notions involving the terms *abstract* and *concrete* appear in an important number of linguistic studies on perception verbs, there is still some confusion as to the determinacy of their meanings and are often misnomers for other terms. We will next investigate some of the terms that have been put forward as synonyms for the notions of direct and indirect perception.

In order to refer to the distinction between direct and indirect perception, Schüle (2000, pp.3-10) uses the pairs *physical* vs. *cognitive*; *concrete* vs. *abstract*; and *epistemically neutral* vs. *epistemically loaded*. Nevertheless, these concepts are not always perfect synonym-pairs because it has been demonstrated that the bifurcation *direct* vs. *indirect* does not entirely cover the opposition *physical* vs. *cognitive*.

Another dichotomy that we will look at consists of the pair *physical* vs. *cognitive* perception. Hierarchically, the opposition *physical* vs. *cognitive* is subordinated to the *direct* vs. *indirect* perception. One may think that direct perception is always physical perception (1) while indirect perception, cognitive. In any case, it is commonly accepted that cognitive perception represents the equivalent of an act of knowledge in that '*to see that somebody is right*' equates '*to know that a person is right*'. Consequently, cognitive perception is always indirect because it implies a deduction, but it can be both physical (2) and cognitive (3).



- (1) I see you leaving every day.
- (2) I see (in your eyes) that you are sick.
- (3) I see what you mean.

The statements above reflect the reason why we think that terms such as *physical* and *cognitive* perception should not be used as perfect synonyms of *direct* and *indirect* perception. However, these terms may be envisaged as subcategories of indirect perception: *physical indirect perception* and *cognitive indirect perception*.

Turning now to the pair *epistemically neutral vs. epistemically loaded*, researchers (Barwise and Perry, 1983, pp.194-196) used it as well in order to refer to direct vs. indirect perception. After some debate, it was concluded that the *epistemically neutral perception* depends neither on the cognitive state nor on the beliefs of the perceiver while the *epistemically loaded perception* implies cognitive processes of interference. Bayer (1986, pp.10-13) defines them as corresponding to an event-perception and fact-perception, using the following two examples in order to highlight the difference:

- 1) The mother heard her baby cry. (event-perception in *epistemically neutral perception*)
- 2) The mother heard that her baby cried. (fact-perception in *epistemically loaded perception*)

The first example can be followed by "but she didn't realize that it was her baby" whereas the second one cannot accept this clause.

As these terms cover the field of the opposition *direct vs. indirect* perception, the expression of *epistemically neutral perception* will be accepted as a synonym of direct perception and the notion of *epistemically loaded perception* as a synonym of indirect perception.

Another opposition which is terminologically problematic is that between *primary* and *secondary* perception. Some linguists have used these terms as equivalents of direct and indirect perception whereas others used them similar to the pair *physical vs. cognitive* in order to distinguish between the two subtypes of indirect perception. According to Barwise and Perry (1983, p.194), primary indirect perception corresponds to the acquisition of knowledge via the perception of a deductive reasoning (1) and is separated from a second type of an even more *indirect perception*, which consists of the acquisition of knowledge via the perception of deductive reasoning amplified by what one knows (2):

- (1) I see (in your eyes) that you are tired.
- (2) I see (in your eyes) that you returned home late.

In case (1), the physical perception of the eyes provides the information on someone being tired. In case (2), based on the same type of information, one can conclude that someone is tired and consequently returned home late. In both the cases, the perception of physical details makes it possible to draw these conclusions; therefore, perception is necessarily indirect and physical. However, the interference process is more elaborate in the second example: to the remark that someone is tired, the preliminary knowledge that somebody who is tired and upon late arrival is added. That person also knows that the other one is in the habit of coming home late. All these arguments point towards the conclusion that *primary indirect* and *secondary indirect* perception can be considered subclasses of *physical indirect* perception.

The last dichotomy to be investigated in the field of direct vs. indirect perception is that of *concrete vs. abstract* pair. Very often, *concrete* is associated with direct and that of *abstract* with indirect. If *abstract* is defined as something that exists only under the form of an idea and *concrete* as the expression of something material and sensitive, we may conclude that the dichotomy *concrete vs. abstract* crosses both the fields of direct and indirect perception as illustrated hereunder:

- (1) I see the children arriving. (*concrete* direct perception)
- (2) I see (in your eyes) that you got back late. (*concrete* indirect perception)
- (3) I see time approaching. (*abstract* direct perception)



(4) I see that you are right. (*abstract cognitive perception*)

In (1) and (2), the material stimuli, that is, ‘the children’ and ‘eyes’, generate a direct and indirect perception. In examples (3) and (4), no *concrete* referent can be perceived. In illustration (3), the perceiver expresses the idea of seeing time approaching, and in (4), s/he sees that somebody else is right. These examples reflect the fact that the category of direct perception includes not only concrete physical direct perception (1), but also a type of more abstract direct perception (3). Concrete indirect perception covers the field of physical indirect perception; the domain of abstract indirect perception corresponds to cognitive indirect perception. We remark that the difference between *concrete* and *abstract* direct perception is defined in terms of a leap characterized by metaphor and metonymy. For instance, someone can utter “*I see time approaching*” after having taken a look at the watch placed on the wall. As the idea of a deduction is absent, this sentence represents an act of direct perception. But time denotes an abstract entity and not a real referent perceptible via senses. The metaphor consists of the use of perception verbs, usually denoting the perception of a concrete entity, in an abstract context by means of analogical substitution. Nevertheless, as no perception act is independent of our cognitive system, we are obliged to recognize that at the level of abstract direct perception, the frontier between direct and indirect perception is vague and therefore can be questioned.

Furthermore, Austin (1961, pp.16-17) introduces a particular type of indirect perception mostly characteristic of auditory perception, which enables the perceiver to receive information from an intermediary source. Therefore, in this case, the perceiver is being told something (the acquisition of a certain information via another source that is called *the informant*). Dick and Hengeveld (1991, pp.231-259) call this type of indirect perception: ‘*the reception perception*’. The high frequency of the reception perception in the auditory field is explained by the prototypical semantic extension that can be established between *auditory perception* and *the act of communication*. In a sentence such as “*I hear that you are sick; your sister phoned me,*” the perceived entity is linguistic in nature and there is an intermediary person (*your sister*) functioning as the source of information. The reception perception is also present in the visual field but is less frequent: “*I see that you are sick; I have read the medical certificate.*”

In addition to the pairs already discussed, many other terms have been suggested to refer to such as *agentive vs. non agentive perception* (Gruber, 1967, pp.37-65); *agentive vs. passive* (Willemes and Defrancq, 1983, pp.6-20); *active vs. cognitive* (Rogers, 1974, pp.7-11); and *perception vs. apperception* (Krefeld, 1998, pp.155-173). All these pairs show that the variation between these two ways of perception has been defined under a wide variety of terms mainly by taking into consideration either the fact that the perceiver is actively oriented towards the stimulus in order to seize several aspects, or the stimulus appears to the experiencer and is imposed to its consciousness. The main cause of the confusion between direct and indirect perception is that, as proved by cognitive psychologists, every act of perception is accompanied by a deductive process and as Gee (1975: 200) states there is no strict borderline between “where perception ends and recognition or realization based on perceptual evidence begins, the two are often mixed to various degrees and in subtle ways.” We will not go into depth regarding the latest terminology expounded because it is impossible to deal with all the issues in a paper of such brevity.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To summarise, our study proves that not all the pairs of terms put forward by different linguists are perfect synonyms for direct and indirect perception. While most of the semantic tropes of perception base their dichotomization on voluntary and involuntary perception, all such dichotomies are contrasted and compared in the light of the *direct-indirect* pair. Each difference-pair including voluntary vs. involuntary perception; abstract vs concrete; physical vs cognitive; concrete vs abstract;



primary vs secondary; and several others are imbricated on the direct-indirect concept; however, there seems to be no mutually exclusive overlays that support any such strict dichotomic boundaries. The semantic infusion of one category over the other between two different opposite pairs is more prominent. Moreover, the bipartition between direct and indirect perception is not always rectilinear. Sometimes, it might be difficult to situate a construction with a perception verb in relation to this dichotomy. Hence, situating them under exclusive typologies is rather conceptually and linguistically problematic.



## REFERENCES

- Austin, J.L. (1961). *Philosophical Papers*. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, pp. 16-17. Retrieved from: <http://www.cambridge.org/aus/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521886734&ss=exc>
- Barwise, J. and Perry, J. (1983), *Situations and attitudes*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 194-196.
- Bayer, J. (1986), The role of event expression in grammar. *Studies in Language 10*, pp. 1-52.
- Curelar, M.R.O. (2016). Psychological and Mysterious Matters Existing in the Short Stories of I. L. Caragiale. *Annals of the Constantin Brancusi University of Târgu Jiu, Letters and Social Sciences Series*, 1, pp. 3-7. Retrieved from <https://heionline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/ancnbt2016&div=4&id=&page=>
- Dick, S. C. and Hengeveld, K. (1991). The hierarchical structure of the clause and the typology of perception verb complements. *Linguistics 29.2*, pp. 213-259 (revised version of Dick & Hengeveld 1990).
- Gruber, J. S. (1967). Topicalisation on child language. *Foundations on Language 3*: pp. 37-65.
- Guasti, M. (1993). *Causative and Perception Verbs. A comparative study*. Rosenberg & Sellier, p. 6.
- Husserl, E. (1983). *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp. 20-25.
- Krefeld, T. (1998). Transitivity aus rollensemantischer Sicht. Eine Fallstudie am Beispiel französischer und italienischer Wahrnehmungsverben. *Transitivität und Diathese in romanischen Sprachen*, Geisler, H. & Jacob, D. (eds.). Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, pp. 155-173.
- Miller, G. and Johnson-Laird, P. (1976). *Language and perception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.119.
- Paliță, E. (2017). Shakespeare between Adoption and Adaptation: A Romania Case Study. *Annals of the Constantin Brâncuși University of Târgu Jiu, Letters and Social Sciences Series*, 3, pp. 72-76. Retrieved from <https://heionline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/ancnbt2017&div=58&id=&page=>
- Perception. (2021). In *Oxford Online Dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/perception>
- Rogers, A. (1974). *Physical perception verbs in English: a study in lexical relatedness*. London: University Microfilms International, pp. 7-11.
- Schüle, S. (2000). *Perception verb complements in Akatek. A Mayan language*. Thesis (PhD), Universität de Tübingen. pp. 3-10. Retrieved from <https://d-nb.info/963189174/34>
- Willems, D. and Defrancq, B. (2000). L'attribut de l'objet et les verbes de perception. *Langue française 127*, pp. 6-20.