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## VERBS OF PERCEPTION FROM THE COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** *THIS PAPER ADDRESSES THE ISSUE OF CLASSIFYING THE VERBS OF PERCEPTION ACCORDING TO COGNITIVE PRINCIPLES. TWO TYPES OF CLASSIFICATIONS WILL BE PRESENTED: ONE BASED ON THE BIOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THAT THE VERBS REPRESENT AND ANOTHER ONE ACCORDING TO LINGUISTIC CRITERIA. THE FIRST TYPE OF CLASSIFICATION BELONGS TO SOME FAMOUS COGNITIVE SCHOLARS (LAKOFF AND JOHNSON 1999) AND IS BASED ON THE EMBODIED MIND CONCEPT WHILE THE SECOND TYPE IS FORMULATED BY MEANS OF LINGUISTIC CRITERIA. WE HAVE INSISTED UPON THE LATTER, BY MENTIONING SEVERAL LINGUISTIC CLASSIFICATIONS SUCH AS THE ONE TAKING INTO CONSIDERATION THE SEMANTIC ROLE OF THE SUBJECTS: PASSIVE PERCEPTION, ACTIVE PERCEPTION VERBS AND COPULATIVE / EVIDENTIAL VERBS. THE CLASSIFICATION OF PERCEPTION VERBS INTO ACTIVE, PASSIVE AND COPULATIVE IS THE TERMINOLOGY ADOPTED BY US FROM A MULTITUDE OF TERMS DENOTING THE TYPES OF PERCEPTION THAT WILL BE USED THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE PAPER.*

**Keywords:** *VERBS OF PERCEPTION, CLASSIFICATIONS, ACTIVE, PASSIVE, COPULATIVE*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Our research highlights two types of approaches to the study of perception verbs namely the theory based on biological systems and the linguistic theory. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) are the founders of the former classification which is based on the biological systems that the verbs represent. The central postulate of their framework concerns the embodied mind concept. They refuse to accept the separability hypothesis and no longer consider the linguistic and psychological categories as conceptual and disembodied, but derived from our concrete experience and responding to the exigencies of our bodies. “Human conceptual categories, the meaning of words and sentences and the meaning of linguistic structures at any level, are not a set of universal



abstract features or uninterpreted symbols” (Barcelona 1997: 21-48). In other words, the embodied mind constitutes an essential factor in the epistemological structuring of human cognition.

## 2. SOME APPROACHES TO THE CLASSIFICATION OF PERCEPTION VERBS

“These verbs provide information on how one navigates through a biological and social environment as a human being. Of course there are many ways of accomplishing these biological navigations, but those that relate to biological systems and their functions are of special importance because they suggest that biological transducers are inherently responsible for these verb classes. Verbs are important because they enable language users to articulate human physiological actions in detail.” (St. Clair, Rodríguez and Erving 2005: 32-34).

Lakoff & Johnson (1999: 16-18) classify perception verbs by means of the biological systems that they represent and subsequently infer their linguistics characteristics:

The olfactory system	verbs of smell
The auditory system	verbs of hearing
The motor cortex system	verbs of manipulation
The somatological system	verbs of space
The limbic system	verbs of emotion
The visual system	verbs of seeing
The gastronomical system	verbs of ingesting

Although our approach recognizes this extended classification of perception verbs based on biological systems, we shall confine ourselves to the analysis of the main five senses enumerated by cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists:

The visual system	verbs of seeing
The auditory system	verbs of hearing
The olfactory system	verbs of smell
The tactile system	verbs of touch
The gustatory system	verbs of taste

They allow the expression of different biological processes the human being disposes in order to interact with the extra-linguistic reality and each process is the receiver of a sensation modality.

As for the linguistic study of the field of perception, it has attracted far more linguists than the above described theory (Ewans & Wilkins, 1998; Levin, 1993; Viberg, 1984, etc).

The taxonomic approach of traditional grammar conferring verb categorizations an important status attracted cognitive linguists’ criticism who invoked the multiple functions and uses of verbs as the main element showing the limits of this ‘*categorizing*’ attitude.

As Ibarretxe-Antuñano (1999: 19) rightly observes “human categorisation is one of the major issues in Linguistics. The ability to categorise, i.e., to judge that a particular thing is or is not an instance of a particular category, is an essential part of cognition. Categorisation is often automatic and unconscious, except in problematic cases. This can cause us to make mistakes and makes us think that our categories are categories of things, when in fact they are categories of abstract entities. When



experience is used to guide the interpretation of a new experience, the ability to categorise becomes indispensable.”

Aristotle put forward a classification of events by taking into account their internal temporal structure. He differentiated between *atelic energeia* events (activities and states such as *think, sing, write ...*) and *kinesis* actions directed towards an internal final point (accomplishments: *prepare the lunch, draw a house*). The opposition between these types of events initially gave rise to many discussions in philosophy but ended by finding its way within linguistic research. From the early stage of aspectual studies, the verb has been designated as the unit of minimal predication and the correlative of the extralinguistic event.

Semantic criteria such as dynamicity, agentivity, duration and telicity have been invoked in order to introduce the verb in a limited number of lexical aspectual classes. By using two of these semantic features - progression and telicity, Vendler (1967) distinguished four classes: state terms, activity terms, accomplishment and achievement terms. He considers that a verbs such as ‘*see*’ belongs to the classes of achievements, states and accomplishments. Examples of the type “*At that very moment, I saw her and her sister*” support the idea that ‘*see*’ enters the category of achievements. In this case, its meaning is similar to that of *spot*, as in “*At that very moment, I spotted her and her sister*”, which can be durative only if it is a repeated action (“*For ten minutes, I spotted her and her sister*”). The same verb can also function as a state, given its incompatibility with the progressive aspect. \**She is seeing* and *to be able to see* represent a state, equivalent to that of *knowing*. According to Vendler’s classification, this perception verb can also constitute an accomplishment. ‘*He saw an interesting football match last night*’ belongs to the category of accomplishments provided the whole match was seen and the sentence could be rephrased as “*It took him 90 minutes to see the football match*”. With regard to the other visual perception verb ‘*look*’, it can be considered a state (*John wasn’t able to see / \*look well after the car accident*) and an achievement (*He looked at the girl on the street two days ago*).

Another well-known linguist, Croft (2004) further developed Vendler’s observation by taking into consideration the following parameters: *stative* vs. *dynamic*, *durative* vs. *punctual* and *bounded* vs. *unbounded*. State terms (*exist, know*) are stative, durative and unbounded. Conversely, activity terms (*dance, work*) are composed of several temporal phases but, like state terms, they are atelic.

Accomplishments (*write a letter*) and achievements (*recognize*) are dynamic and characterized by the presence of an internal terminal point which has to be reached for them to become possible. Accomplishments are durative while achievements are punctual. Although there has also been a lot of criticism, this classification has inspired many authors among whom Smith (1997), who applied it to verbs of perception. She considers sense verbs to be stative (*see a cloud*) and sentences containing them to express both states and dynamic situations. “Verbs of perception may be Stative, denoting a situation without dynamism; they may also be Achievements, referring to changes into such states of perception” (Smith, 1997:56). Nonetheless, things are not always so clear in sentences like the following:

1. I saw her exercise.
2. I saw her exercising.

Although examples (1) and (2) might suggest an activity namely a seeing event, the verbs are not dynamic given their incompatibility with the progressive aspect and with the pseudo-cleft *do* ‘\**What I did was see her exercise*’. Hence, despite the particular status of the sentence, syntactically, the perception verbs in this case are also stative.

However, there are also situations where sense verbs clearly make reference to activities: ‘*She tasted the tea to see if it was cold*’. Their dynamic status is syntactically proved by the compatibility with the pseudo-cleft *do*: ‘*What mother did was taste the soup*’.



Therefore, the above internal configuration makes sensory verbs syntactically belong to a specific pattern, idea also suggested by Rogers (1974), who divides them into pairs of active and stative (passive). In each pair, one element denotes a state whereas the other one an activity.

The English paradigm of perception verbs is complete as we shall exemplify below. The active / passive distinction represents an important criterion in the elaboration of a three-group classification according to the semantic function of their subjects. The first category is that of ‘passive perception’ (Palmer, 1966: 99) which is the equivalent of involuntary perception in that the verb expresses no intention and will on the part of the perceptor:

- (3) a. Peter *saw* the dog.  
b. Jane *heard* the dog.  
c. Jane *felt* a hand on her arm.  
d. Jane *smelled* her perfume in the room.  
e. Jane *tasted* carrots in the soup.

In (3), ‘the subject does not consciously control the stimuli; it refers to a state or inchoative achievement. The process described in each of the verbs used in this set of examples, namely *see, hear, smell, feel, taste*, is that of the perception of various phenomena via the relevant sense organ: eye, ear, skin, nose and mouth (taste buds) respectively.’ (Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 1999: 43).

The following examples represent the category of ‘active perception verbs’ (Poutsma 1926: 341) referring to an “unbounded process that is consciously controlled by a human agent”. (Viberg, 1984: 121)

- (4) a. Jane *looked* at the dog.  
b. Jane *listened* to the dog barking.  
c. Peter *felt* the pullover (/to see its softness).  
d. Peter *smelled* the cheese (/to see if he could eat it/).  
e. Peter *tasted* the soup (/to see if he could eat it/).

Gisborne (1996) states that we can check the validity of classifying a particular perception verb into the active or passive perception by associating it to the adverb ‘*deliberately*’. If the association can occur, the verb is an active one, whereas in the opposite case, it belongs to the passive perception sphere.

Ann was *deliberately* looking at the boy. (*look* - active)

\*Jane *deliberately* saw the boy. (*see* - passive)

Finally, the so-called copulative verbs (Viberg, 1984: 123), whose subjects represent the stimuli of the perception, constitute the third group of this classification:

- (5) a. My sister *looked* sad.  
b. My sister *sounded* sad.  
c. The pull-over *felt* soft.  
d. My sister *smelled* sweet.  
e. The soup *tasted* good.

They can also develop metaphorical semantic extensions like in: ‘I don’t trust him, all he says *smells* fishy’. (*seems suspect*)

Given that copulative verbs allow the perceiver to emit a modal judgement based on sensory evidence has made linguists call them also *evidentials* or the *SOUND-class* verbs (Gisborne 1998). They have a particular status due to their semantic relations and related entities. The most important uses Gisborne (1998) identifies, also relevant for our discussion, are the evaluative (6) and attributory (7) ones. We propose similar examples to the ones given by him in order to investigate the difference between these two uses:

- (6) They *look* sad.



- She *sounds* foreign.  
The tissue *feels* soft.  
The food *smells* delicious.  
The bread *tastes* sweet.  
(7) The girl's dress *looks* lovely.  
This song *sounds* silly.  
The dress *feels* silky.  
The burrito *smells* spicy.  
This food *tastes* rancid.

The examples in (6) reflect the evaluative meaning of the sound-verb class behaving as evidentials. The evaluation becomes possible due to the referent of the subject which has the necessary properties to express the required evidence. With regard to the attributory use (7), Gisborne (1998: 390) states that “the semantic relations form a ‘complex predicate’. Whereas the evidential (raising and control) uses all mean something like “seem, with respect to a particular sensory modality”, the attributory uses mean “is, with respect to a particular sensory modality”.

Gisborne (1998: 390-392) also proposes the use of paraphrases to identify the type of the sound-class verbs. For the evaluative meaning, the paraphrase with ‘*to judge by*’ as a mark of a speaker judgment is applied to the above examples:

- (8) To judge by their *look* / appearance, they are sad.  
To judge by her *sound*, she is foreign.  
To judge by its *feel*, the tissue is soft.  
To judge by its *smell*, the food is delicious  
To judge by its *taste*, the bread is sweet.

However, the same paraphrase is not compatible with the examples expressing the attributory use:

- (9) \*To judge by its *look*, the girl's dress is lovely.  
\*To judge by its *sound*, this song is silly.  
\*To judge by its *feel*, the dress is silky.

Another type of paraphrase consisting of the conversion of the verb into the corresponding noun, premodified by an attributive adjective is applied to these examples:

- (10) The girl has a lovely dress.  
The dress has a silky feel.  
The burrito has a spicy smell.

The common trait of these uses is of a syntactical nature namely the post-verbal position of the complement and the subject is both the subject of the copulative verb and that of the post-verbal element.

Another linguist, Miller (2003b) takes into account the ontology of a common meaning within the linguistic usages of each type of perception in order to differentiate the peculiarities of this group of verbs. He considers the auditory and olfactory copulative verbs to behave similarly based on the fact that there is no need for a direct contact between these sources and the perceiver. He proposes the following set of examples in order to analyse the evidential use in the case of these two types of sensory perception:

- (11) a. The cheese *smells*.  
b. The cheese *smells* strongly.  
c. The cheese *smells* strong (to Peter).

In sentence (11a), *smell* is used intransitively and characterizes the property of the cheese to emit a particular odour. The relationship between the subject and the predicate has no peculiarity,



revealing of a basic predication. In (11b), no change occurs in the subject predicate relation. The only difference consists in the presence of an additional element, the adverb of manner ‘*strongly*’ which post-modifies the verb. Miller (2003b) suggests that the example (11c) be envisaged as a reinterpretation of the previous one “basée sur le rapport de la manière à l’être. En effet, si la manière d’action du référent du sujet est ‘strong’, alors on peut légitimement en inférer que, apparemment en tout cas, l’être de ce référent doit être ‘strong’ également. La manière du prédicat se réinterprète ainsi comme un jugement de modalité d’apparence de l’être du sujet.”<sup>1</sup> The difficulty to semantically and syntactically separate sentence (11b) from (11c) may also derive from a vague distinction between adverbs of manner and adjectives in English.

The visual copulative verb ‘*look*’ is analysed in a similar manner:

- (12) a. Mary *looked*.
- b. Mary *looked angrily*.
- c. Mary *looked angry*.

Similarly to (11a), in sentence (12a) ‘*look*’ has an intransitive use and denotes an activity of visual emission on the part of the subject referent. The relationship between the subject and the predicate designates a basic predication. An adverb of manner may also occur in association with this copulative verb as in (12b). The main type of semantic interpretation applies as in the case of ‘*smell*’ and it is concluded that if someone’s gaze is angry, that person should also be angry. In sentences (12a) and (12b), the subject is necessarily animated while in (12c), we can also have inanimate subjects as in ‘*The table looked new*’.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter presents some relevant approaches to the analysis and classification of perception verbs. Although our approach recognizes the extended classification of perception verbs based on biological systems, we have confined ourselves to the analysis of the main five senses enumerated by cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists namely the visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile and gustatory system. Another type of classification that we have adopted from a multitude of terms denoting the types of perception is the distinction between active, passive and copulative perception.

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<sup>1</sup> Our translation from French into English: “based on a manner-entity relationship. Indeed, if the manner of the referent’s action is ‘strong’, one can legitimately infer that, apparently in all cases, the referent entity itself must also be ‘strong’. The manner of the predicate is thus reinterpreted as a modality judgment about the appearance of the entity denoted by the subject”.



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