

HOW EVIDENTIALS IN ENGLISH TAKE PART IN THE INTERPERTATION OF PERCEPTION VERBS COMPLEMENTS

By Lies Harmidy

Perception verbs, those verbs denoting sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell in English, are capable of signifying an evidential meaning in addition to the general sense of perception, i.e. they encode the speaker's evidence for the proposition. The type of evidence can be either direct (as in first-hand perception) or indirect (as in hearsay or inference). There is virtually no literature examining the evidential use of perception verbs in English, and hence we know very little about how perception shaping our mind. My corpus-based study of perception verbs (PVs) in English reveals that not only is the high degree of polysemy expressed by some perception verbs demonstrated in the evidential domain as well, but also that certain evidential meanings are bound to certain complementation patterns/construction types of the perception verbs.

The selection of a specific grammatical subject as base, i.e. either the perceiver or the object of perception, allows us to distinguish between active and passive perception verbs on the one hand and copulative on the other. Note that *active* and *passive* do not refer to voice distinctions here. The following examples demonstrate this point:

- (1)
- a. I heard the birds.
 - b. She listened to the birds
 - c. He sounded happy.
 - d. I saw your point of view.

Experiencer based verbs here are distinguished from source based verbs in that the former take animate subjects that undergo a certain experience while the latter choose the experienced entity as the subject. Both active and passive PVs select the perceiver as their grammatical subject and are thus categorized as experienced based verbs (Viberg, 1983) as can be seen in examples 1a and 1b respectively. Copulative PVs select the perceived entity as their grammatical subject as is shown in (1c), i.e. it is source based verb, and therefore differ from active and passive PVs.

In the case of example (1d), it does not need to involve the eyes at all, that is, it needs not to involve any element in the semantics of physical perception, and it simply relates to the fact that "*I understood your point of view.*" If we observe carefully, the verb *see* in (1d) has experienced a process of metaphorical extension from *seeing* to *understanding*. Thus the only variable in the sentences in (1a-c) is the inherent condition of the direct object referent. It is, therefore, adequate to confirm that the meaning of PVs vary with the nature status of its direct object. The different meanings of the instances of *see* in (1a-c) are not due to the grammatical status of the direct object.

Some linguists, such as Borkin 1973, Aijmer 1980, and Duffley 1992, treat the difference between (1a) and (1b) in terms of *direct* and *indirect* perception. The claim is that direct perception consists of directly experiencing an event or thing whereas indirect perception consists of coming to understand a state of affairs via perception. This analysis does not work for examples like sentence (1d) above. However, it does work for some

other examples like (2a-b), which are evidential. “Evidentiality is a term for the ways in which a speaker qualifies a statement by referring to the source of information (Saeed, 2003: 143).” For example:

- (2)
- a. Jane *heard that Peter had voted Green.*
 - b. Jane *saw why Peter had voted Green.*

Languages provide the means for describing evidentials relation through a variety of lexical or syntactic resources. Speaker often reveal how they arrived at certain knowledge of state, for example, *I saw John eating the pie* indicates that the speaker had first-hand access to the eating event. In a slightly different utterances like *I saw that John eat the pie*, the utterance reflects an inference on the part of the speaker, perhaps from seeing John’s mouth covered with blueberry. At other times, speakers when making a statement convey information about their attitude towards that statement, for instance their degree of certainty:

- (3)
- a. I know that John ate pie.
 - b. I think John ate the pie

The linguistics elements indicating the informational source of a statement (perception, inference, or hearsay) and/or the speaker certainty or commitment to the statement (strong or weak) are known as evidentials. Since evidentials are the linguistic means to indicate the sources of information, consequently, they would play quite an important role in the interpretation of perception-verbs’ complements. At this point, *vision* and *hearing* PVs appear to be in competition with each other with respect to serving as the main source for cognitive extensions.

Finally, whenever a speaker makes an alleged fact, it is based on a source of information, such as perception, the reports of others, or an inference. Evidentials are the linguistic means to indicate these sources. Thus, they are among the epistemic modalities, however, there is an overlap into the areas of tense and aspect as well (Willet, 1988: 51-55). Despite vagueness, the borderline between evidentials and other parts of speech are clear enough to phrase a working definition.

A true evidential shows the kind of justification that a speaker has for the alleged facts, in such away that

- It is a specification added to a claim about something else, not the main predication.
- It indicates the source of evidence as its primary meaning, not just as contextual implication.

Morphologically, evidentials are inflections, clitics, or other free syntactic elements, not compounds or derivational forms (Anderson, 1986:274-275 and Willet, 1988: 84). Since there are many sources of information, the questions arise (a) *what* are the evidential contrasts that occur in language and (b) *how* are they marked. According to Willet, 1988:56), the primary distinction for evidentials is whether the speaker’s information is based on direct or indirect evidence. This condition can lead us to the fact

that certain evidential meanings are bound to certain complementation patterns or construction types of the perception verbs.

Since evidentials are the linguistic means to indicate the sources of information, consequently, they would play quite an important role in the interpretation of perception-verbs' complements. At this point, *vision* and *hearing* PVs appear to be in competition with each other with respect to serving as the main source for cognitive extensions.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Loyd B. 1986. Evidentials, paths of change, and mental maps: typologically regular asymmetries. In W. Chafe and J. Nichols (eds.). *Evidentiality: The Linguistic Encoding of Epistemology*. Norwood: Ablex.
- Dik, S., and K. Hengeveld. 1991. The hierarchical structure of the clause and the typology of perception verb complements. *Linguistics* 29:231-259.
- Geeraerts, Dick. 1993. Vagueness's puzzles, polysemy's vagaries. *Cognitive Linguistics* 4 (3):223-272.
- Evans, Nicholas, and David Wilkins. 2000. In the mind's ear: the semantic extensions of perception verbs in Australian languages. *Language* 76 (3):546-592.
- Felser, Claudia. 1999. *Verbal Complement Clauses*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Giorgi, Alessandra, and Fabio Pianesi. 1997. *Tense and Aspect*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gordon, Lynn. 1986. The development of evidentials in Maricopa. In W. Chafe and J. Nichols (eds.). *Evidentiality: The Linguistic Encoding of Epistemology*. Norwood: New York.
- Saeed, John I. 2003. *Semantics*. Malden. MA: Blackwell.