

The Development and (De-)Subjectification of the English Copulative Perception Verbs with Special Reference to Modern American English

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There are a group of perception verbs in English, called as *Copulative Perception Verbs* (CPVs) following Taniguchi (1997), which are similar to copular verbs such as *be* and *seem*. Typical examples are quoted from Viberg (1983, 124):

- (1) a. Peter looked happy.
- b. Peter sounded happy.

As illustrated above, the subject referent of the CPVs is prototypically not the perceiver who takes a perceptual action but the object of perception which the speaker perceives.

They verbs first appeared 500 years ago according to Taniguchi (1997), it should be reasonable to assume their formal and functional extensions. However, there has been little linguistic research on this topic. This paper, therefore, investigates the development, using the Corpus of Historical American English (Davies 2010–, COHA) and the Corpus of American Soap Operas (Davies 2012–, SOAP). The results indicate that the CPVs have developed in two different directions: *Subjectification* and *De-subjectification*.

First, this paper confirms that the subject referent prototypically plays two semantic roles at once: (i) the percept and (ii) the topic of inference. Let us consider the following examples from Rogers (1971, 214):

- (2) a. Reuben looked stoned to me.
- b. I saw Reuben.

The sentence of (2a) implies the perceptual achievement in (2b). The perception provides evidence for further inference about the subject. Due to inference in their semantics, the similarity of the CPVs to *seem* has been mentioned sporadically. One significant similarity is that they now take as its complement finite clauses headed by *as if (though)* and *like* as in the example from Gisborne (2010, 269):

- (3) Jane {seems/sounds} {like/as if/as though} she won.

This is distinct from other possible patterns in that it not just functions as a predicate of the subject referent but also is complete in terms of proposition because it contains both a subject and a predicate. It has weakened the status of the subject referent in the main clause.

- (4) Everything looked as if the Republican party would prove itself the Democratic Party after all. (COHA)

This example indicates that the subject referent of the main clause is no longer the topic of inference. *Everything* is not what the sentence is about, but just evidence for the proposition expressed by the following the *as if* clause. Reversely, the subject referent in (5) can serve as a topic of inference but not as evidence.

(5) (I've heard/seen the forecast and) tomorrow's weather sounds/looks fine. (Gisborne 2010)

It is probably enough to mention that *tomorrow's weather* cannot be perceived by any means.

Lastly, the subjects in the following examples serve as neither of the two roles and similar to the expletive *it*. It is often omitted formally as in (6b) and often unrecoverable pragmatically.

(6) a. It looked as if he had lived a pretty narrow life. (COHA)

b. "Wow, doesn't look like you've gotten much done." (COHA)

Although whether *it* in the case of the CPVs is a genuine expletive is open to debate, since it can be interpreted as some abstract and generalized situation similar to *everything* in (4), it seems safe to say that the speaker intends to say about the content of the *as if* clause. Here, *look as if(although)/like* function like modal expressions to avoid assertion, similar to adverbs such as *maybe*. In short, this process can be regarded as a result of *Subjectification*, from more objective perception to more subjective inference or evaluation.

Interestingly, however, there has been another direction in which the CPVs have developed, *De-subjectification*. The CPVs here do not express any inference by the speaker.

(7) a. Well, nothing, except I don't want to look like I'm trying too hard. (SOAP)

b. I don't want to sound like I'm blaming her or anything,.... (SOAP)

They denote not only the appearances of the speaker but also hypothetical inference possibly made by the hearer and general people, excluding the speaker's. Moreover, this use has an influence on *seem* which is not usually used to show any evidence for inference.

(8) I'm sorry – I don't mean to seem like I'm kicking you out, but I'm kicking you out. (SOAP)

Taking into account their limited context, say, 1st person subject + negative + intention, they are not established yet, being in the process of development.

References

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