The event structure of perception verbs

By Nikolas Gisborne


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Introduction

*The Event Structure of Perception Verbs* is about verbs of perception in English. In the author’s own words: “This book is a theoretical contribution to the literature on verb meanings, and how they relate to syntax and other parts of cognition, conducted with Word Grammar (Hudson 1984, 1990, 2007)” (31). He views Word Grammar as being a part of the following traditions: usage-based cognitive linguistics and “constraint-based theories, such as Construction Grammar, Lexical-Function Grammar, and Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar” (3).

This book explores the syntax-semantics interface of perception verbs, using a Word Grammar framework to discuss only the English perception verbs (such as *look, see, feel, hear* and *sound*). These verbs were chosen because they “form a tightly knit set which allow us to explore semantic relatedness and irregularity as well as” issues like the predictability of syntactic aspects from semantic, sub-parts of a verb’s meaning and polysemy (2).

Hudson remarks that Word Grammar theory makes the “following generalization: ‘A language is a network of entities related by propositions’.” For Gisborne, Word Grammar construes language as a “classified conceptual network,” i.e. a system of interconnected concepts. A crucial grammatical notion for Gisborne’s analysis is the concept of ‘dependency’, defined in the glossary as a “syntactic relation which also encodes additional information such as word order, and which is prototypically associated with semantics” (289). He views dependency as differing from the more mainstream term ‘constituency’. That is to say, phrase structure is not employed in describing sentence structure. In Word Grammar, sentence structure is formulated in terms of dependencies between words, e.g. the verb is a parent, and the noun depends on it. A sentence’s structure is dependent on information about individual words.

Gisborne strives to “come up with a convincing account of the behaviour of perception verbs” (2) and answer questions such as: What is the relationship between *look* and *see*? How is the complement of *look* and *listen* formed? When and why are prepositions (particles) such as *at* needed on these verbs, e.g. *look at* but not *listen at*? “In writing this book, [Gisborne] set out to fulfill two main ambitions: to provide a competent description of perception verbs; and to defend
a particular view of lexical semantics by testing [his] views about semantic structure in this notoriously difficult area of meaning” (3).

**Intended audience**

The book is intended for linguists and graduate linguistics students who are comfortable in syntax and semantics. The discussion is well-suited for those who are interested in the English perception verbs as well as linguistic issues such as causation, argument-linking, and polysemy. The book would also be of interest for linguists working within the Cognitive Linguistics and/or Word Grammar approach. Those working in lexical semantics should find the discussion stimulating also.

**Content of the book**

The front matter of the book consists of the following.

1. An abbreviated Table of Contents one page long, and a detailed Table of Contents four pages long.
2. One page of acknowledgements.

The body of the book consists of the following.

3. The author’s 23 page introduction (Chapter 1).
4. Six content chapters (2. Word Grammar, 3. Causation and Relations between events: An introduction to WG Semantics, 4. Network structure and the polysemy of SEE, 5. Perception verbs and the semantics of content, 6. Non-finite complementation, 7. SOUND-class verbs) and a conclusion (Chapter 8). These chapters are summarized and the key terms are discussed in more detail below.

The back matter of the book consists of the following.

5. A short Glossary three pages long, which lists some useful linguistic terms employed in the book.
6. A References section 17 pages long.
7. An Index nine pages long.

In Chapter 1, Gisborne provides a general introduction to the book. His goal is to describe perception verbs in English thoroughly. He gives many examples to begin stimulating the reader to recognize which issues are relevant. For instance, the first set of example sentences has three different classes of verbs: “I looked at the painting. I saw the painter’s signature. The painting looked damaged” (4). The second set parallels the first set: “I listened to the tenor. I heard him
struggle. The high C sounded flat” (5). Perception verbs are subcategorized into three classes: the “agentive LISTEN-class” (as in I listened to the tenor), the “experiencer HEAR-class” (as in I heard him struggle), and the “percept SOUND-class” (as in The high C sounded flat). In addition to a description of perception verbs, other areas in lexical semantics such as argument linking, polysemy, and evidentiality are also of interest to him since those areas raise semantic issues associated with perception verbs. He then raises five questions that give a map of where he is headed with his analysis: 1. “How can we capture both the generalizations and the idiosyncrasies that we have seen in the domain of argument linking?” 2. “How do we represent relationships between different verb senses?” 3. “How do we analyze modal semantics?” 4. “What are the theoretical issues raised by non-finite complementation?” and 5. “How does the network negotiate the underspecification of the temporal semantics of hear-class verbs?” (20–21).

Chapter 2 provides an introductory framework that is used for the investigation of perception verbs. It establishes the fundamental notions of Word Grammar.3

Chapter 3 explores event structure, particularly relations between events, which Gisborne considers necessary before dealing with perception verbs in the remaining chapters. It is mainly concerned with causation. He argues that not all ditransitive verbs are causative, contrary to Goldberg (1995), Jackendoff (1990), and McIntyre (2005). The Result relation is insufficient to bring out a causative interpretation. Causation also involves a force-dynamic dyad. Peter gave her some flowers, for example, does not involve a force-dynamic transfer between the subject and the object. He opened Bert a beer, on the other hand, does not contain the Result relation. This is supported by cancelling the implicature (but the dog knocked it over). Other kinds of relations between events do not receive much attention, as Gisborne considers those other relations not to be relevant to his purposes.

In Chapter 4, Gisborne claims that polysemy can be analyzed by utilizing information for complementation, selectional restrictions, and Aktionsart (internal temporal constituency of a situation), and that sub-lexeme analysis should be employed to represent polysemy appropriately. (The glossary defines a sub-lexeme as a “subtype of a lexeme, often associated with a different sense, and a different valency pattern” (291).) With these distinctions, Gisborne distinguishes five senses of see.

Gisborne considers the first three senses to be basic to his argument. See1 is the prototypical sense denoting physical perception (as in Jane saw Peter and Jane saw the dog cross the road). See2 and See3 are sub-parts of the first sense. See2 involves a directional element—the physical activity of gaze reaching, as collocated with the propositional phrase (as in Jane saw into the room). See3 involves a sense of image-forming without any indication of physical perception (as in Jane is seeing stars). See3 is dynamic (it requires the progressive construction), while the first two do not have Aktionsart according to Gisborne.

See4 has a sense of ‘understanding’, where the second argument is a proposition with a that clause or NP (as in Jane saw that Peter was right, I see a problem). It is not clearly addressed why it is considered an outcome of perceptual experience. See5 is similar to See4 except that it has an evidential feature (as in I saw in the paper that there was another government scandal).
Chapter 5 explores the semantic relatedness of look and see. Both look and see (“gaze reaching sense,” as Gisborne calls it) have a theme argument, which is the gaze of the subject referent. They differ in that look does not stipulate contact, while see has to make contact with its goal (*Jane saw at the telly! Jane saw towards Ely). He claims that see is underspecified for dynamicity, while look is dynamic. Another issue discussed in this chapter involves the relationship of listen and hear, which are underspecified for Aktionsart. It is the percept (an “entity which is perceived” in the glossary (290)) which supplies aspectual characteristics (durative, telic, homogenous) of listen and hear.

Chapter 6 is concerned with a complex area of syntax and semantics of non-finite complementation. Gisborne argues that in Jane saw Peter cross the road, the perceiving event and the perceived event have to be co-temporal, and the latter has to be a stage-level predicate (a “predicate which is not permanent, including all dynamic predicates, but also some states” in the glossary (291)). This sentence cannot be passivized because the subject (Peter) is just part of the perceived event. As for a to-infinitive complement, see in this construction has the sense of understanding (see4) not the perceptual sense. It allows stative complements (as in We saw him to be an imposter). Dynamic complements cannot occur in the to-infinitive construction (as in *We saw Kim to leave the bank).

In Chapter 7, SOUND-class verbs are explored. Gisborne argues that SOUND-class verbs are polysemous, having three senses. The first two senses are evidential (evidential-1, evidential-2). The difference lies in the source of the evidence. The first evidential interpretation (perceptual evidential) is one where the subject’s referent is the stimulus for the evidentiality (He sounds foreign). The second evidential use is a reported evidential (Tomorrow’s weather sounds fine). They involve a force-dynamic transfer, where the evidential source is the initiator; the speaker is the endpoint of the transfer. The third sense is called ‘attributary use’; meaning is understood “with respect to a particular sensory modality” (The music sounds lovely). SOUND-class verbs can occur with like. Gisborne treats like as a preposition which can take a nominal or a clausal complement.

Chapter 8 summarizes the main theoretical contributions of the book.

**Conclusion**

*The Event Structure of Perception Verbs* represents a development of Hudson’s Word Grammar. The framework of Word Grammar was useful in investigating perception verbs, in coming “up with a convincing account of the behaviour of perception verbs” (2)—one of Gisborne’s goals stated in the introduction. The fact that Gisborne commits himself to English does not undermine the book’s usefulness to other languages. It will be a valuable reference work for linguists interested in areas of lexical semantics including causation, argument-linking, and polysemy. It is clearly written and well argued. However, the book deals with advanced linguistic subtleties, so non-native readers might have difficulty following some discussions.

This book is rich in argumentation and presents interesting data that provides more comprehensive understanding of English perception verbs.
Notes

1 Numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers in Gisborne’s book.

2 Richard Hudson, Word Grammar. Blackwell, 1984; cited at:

3 See the third paragraph in the Introduction for a description of Word Grammar.

References


