

Perception Verbs in West Germanic and Language Change

In this paper, I first establish the syntactic structures of perception verb complements in English, building on the work of Akmajian 1977, Gee 1977, Higginbotham 1983, Neale 1988, Hsiao 2000, among others. I argue that in English, the argument structure of such perceptual reports is ambiguous between a double object construction and that of a transitive verb. Thus, there are two possible syntactic structures for a sentence such as (1), given in (2) and (3) below. The ability to passivize the object DP *John*, i.e. grammaticality of sentence (4), disambiguates the two structures.

- (1) *I saw John move/moving the little puppets.*
- (2) Double Object Construction: *I saw* [_{DP} *John*] [_{DP/VP} *move/moving the little puppets*]¹.
- (3) Transitive Verb: *I saw* [_{DP/VP} *John move/moving the little puppets*].
- (4) *John was seen moving the little puppets.*

Sentence (4) is fine if John was also seen (i.e. the structure in (2), in which *John* is an argument of the verb *see*). On the other hand, if John was behind an opaque screen and as a result could not be seen by the audience, someone who knows that John was behind the screen could still utter sentence (1). Yet in the latter scenario, (4) is not acceptable. Thus, in (3), it is the whole event that is seen, and not the individual participants. Sentences (5) and (6) further illustrate this point.

- (5) *I saw* [_{DP/VP} *it rain yesterday*] (and not *I saw* [_{DP} *it*][_{DP/VP} *rain yesterday*]).
- (6) **It was seen raining yesterday.*

I turn next to the following grammaticality contrasts between Standard German and some Swiss German speakers.

- (7) Standard German:
**Er ist singen geh rt worden.*
 He is sing heard become
 ⒶHe was heard sing.Ö

- (8) Swiss German:
*Er isch gch rt woorde singe ..*²
 He is heard become sing
 ⒶHe was heard sing.Ö

- (9) Standard German:
Ich habe es regnen gesehen.
 I have it rain seen
 Ⓐsaw it rain.Ö

- (10) Swiss German:
*?/*Ich ha gsee r gne.*
 I have-it seen rain
 Ⓐsaw it rain.Ö

¹ For reasons of space, I leave out the justification and consequences of labeling [*move/moving the little figures*] a DP (labeling it a VP is less controversial). This is dictated by the semantics of perceptual reports, namely that perceptual verb complements combined with a covert existential quantifier must be of type <<e, t>, t> to ensure interpretability (see Higginbotham 1983, Neale 1988 and Hsiao 2000).

² The different word order in the verb clusters is independent of the grammaticality contrast, as Standard German and Swiss German speakers prefer different linear ordering of the verbal elements. (7) and (8) reflect their preferences, respectively. The same remark applies to (9) and (10).

The observation is that Standard German speakers allow weather expletives (cf. (9)) but not passivization of perception verb complements (cf. (7)). Swiss German speakers, on the contrary, allow passivization (cf. (8)) but dislike weather expletives (cf. (10)).³

The proposal put forth in this talk is the following: these contrasts reflect a language change process whereby perceptual verbs are changing from di-transitive verbs to transitive verbs. Swiss German represents the older dialect in which perceptual verbs are still di-transitive. Standard German, on the other hand, is the product of normalization and represents the changed state where perception verbs are transitive. Loss of an internal argument in Standard German may be due to the nature of direct perception: whenever an event is perceived, its participants (if any) are usually perceived.

This hypothesis, if correct, provides a nice explanation for the grammaticality contrasts between (7) and (8), on the one hand, and between (9) and (10), on the other. (7) is not possible in Standard German (i.e. perception verbs as transitive verbs) because *er* is not a direct object of the verb *sehen*; it is part of the event, which as a whole is the direct object. In other words, it is too deep embedded to raise to the matrix subject position. (10) is bad in Swiss German (i.e. perception verbs as di-transitive verbs) because the weather expletive would have to occupy an internal argument position of the verb *see*, which makes it odd, since expletives are non-thematic by definition.

I conclude by showing that sentences such as (10) were absent in the history of the German language (other constructions were employed instead), providing indirect evidence for the language change process as well as the direction of language change. I will also draw examples from other German dialects (e.g. Lower Bavarian and Upper Austrian German) in which we see the language change in progress, i.e. both passivization and weather expletives are bad.

References

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³ Remarks to the acceptability of sentence (10): speakers of certain Swiss German dialects find (10) totally unacceptable (These speakers are grouped together based on the word order possibilities they allow in verb clusters containing perception verbs. Details and relevant data are to be made explicit in the talk). Other speakers find it better with a clitic, as given in (10), but still not fully grammatical.