

## Verbs of visual perception and category violations

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This presentation investigates three verbs of visual perception in English, *see*, *look* and *watch* and reports on difficulties that native speakers have in defining and differentiating them. It is proposed that these difficulties stem from violations of binary schema such as internal versus external, dynamic versus static, durative versus non-durative and telic versus non-telic.

The English language lexicalizes visual perception around three core verbs: *see*, *look*, and *watch* and all three words are highly polysemous. Despite the high frequency of these verbs in everyday English, the different meanings of these words can be extremely difficult to tease apart. English language learners who make mistakes such as 'I went to the Louvre and watched the Mona Lisa' or 'I saw out of the window' inadvertently draw attention to the complexities of these verbs.

In research carried out by the author through questionnaires listing verb groups such as *run/walk*, *eat/drink/take* and the like, native English speakers consistently rated *see*, *look* and *watch* as being among the most difficult verbs to define and differentiate. When asked to attempt to define the words and account for the differences in meaning and usage of the words, the explanations were usually hesitant, fragmentary, circular and contradictory. One regularity which was observed in videos of these explication attempts was the systematic use of gestures, namely gesturing towards the self for the verb *see* or away from the self for *look* and *watch*. This seems to be in keeping with findings by Winer et al (2002) that detail the persistence of extramission-based folk theories of visual perception despite the scientific evidence of intromission-based visual perception. The folk conceptualization of these verbs seems to orient towards an intromission (external to internal) schema for the verb *see* and an extramission (internal to external) based schema for *look* and *watch*.

The internal/external binary categorization may be just one such categorization schema that pertains to visual perception verbs. It is suggested here that other possibly relevant schemas are; dynamic versus static, durative versus non-durative and telic versus non-telic. Category violations are deeply felt by humans (see Douglas, 2003) and the verbs of visual perception violate these proposed category boundaries in such ways as crossing the internal/external boundary in opposite directions, (E.g. intromissive *see* versus extramissive *look*), flipping between static and dynamic (*look* for static objects of attention and *watch* for dynamic objects of attention), and conceptualizing the same verb as both durative and non-durative, (e.g. *look at something* referring to fixing attention on something over a period of time or *look at something* meaning switch attention instantaneously to something), or telic versus non-telic (E.g. *watch a movie* versus *see a movie*). These category violations are, it is suggested, at the heart of the difficulties encountered when trying to analyze the semantics of the verbs of visual perception even though the words are used unproblematically by speakers in daily discourse.

### References

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