

The Two Senses of Flip Perception Verbs

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Flip perception verbs, such as *look*, *sound*, *smell*, *taste*, and *feel*, are a class of verbs whose subject denotes the perceptual stimulus rather than the experiencer. They occur with a variety of complement types, including adjectival phrases, prepositional phrases, and clauses. Among these, constructions with clausal complements have received the greatest attention because of their apparent similarity to raising constructions, as illustrated by the pair *It looks like John is tired* and *John looks like he is tired*. This resemblance has given rise to a long-standing debate over whether the latter construction instantiates a special type of raising involving a copy in the embedded clause and, if so, whether the copy is obligatory, whether it must be the embedded subject, and what semantic role the matrix subject bears.

Rather than treating these constructions primarily in terms of their resemblance to raising constructions, I propose an alternative perspective that focuses on their function. I argue that flip perception verbs have two distinct but related lexical senses. The first expresses a perceptual depiction, describing how an entity is perceived. The second expresses a perceptually based inference about an entity. This distinction is motivated by a range of semantic and syntactic diagnostics across different complement types and is captured in an HPSG analysis that formally represents the distinction between the two senses.

A corpus-based annotation study of English and Hebrew data provides substantial support for the proposed distinction, while also revealing systematic cases of ambiguity between the two senses. I argue that these cases arise because pragmatic reasoning operates over the lexical distinction in two complementary directions: speakers routinely draw inferences from perceptual experiences, but hearers also reconstruct the underlying perceptual experience from an expressed inference. The interaction between lexical meaning and pragmatic reasoning explains why the two senses are frequently conflated despite being grammatically distinct.