

Finnish verbs of perception in a typological perspective

Expressions of sensory perception canonically include (at least) two participants, an experiencer E (an animate entity that perceives something) and the stimulus S (the entity perceived by E). In his typological study on verbs of perception Viberg (1984, 124–127; 2001, 1295) argues that these verbs can be divided into experiencer-based verbs which select the experiencer as the subject, and phenomenon-based verbs which select the stimulus as the subject and leave the experiencer outside their argument structure. Experiencer-based verbs are further divided into activities (agentive verbs of perception, e.g., *look*, *listen*) and experiences (non-agentive verbs of perception, e.g., *see*, *hear*). Expressions with phenomenon-based verbs include, e.g., *Peter looked sad*, *Peter sounded sad*, *The cloth felt soft*. However, in my view the status of this last group of expressions as indicators of basic sensory perception is dubious, since in addition to perception they also code an impression that is evoked in the experiencer by what is perceived. Phenomenon-based perception is more purely coded by verbs with meanings such as ‘be visible; show’ (as in *Does the scar still show?*), ‘be audible’, etc.

In my paper I discuss the Finnish system of perception verbs in the light of Viberg’s typology. Finnish codes all sensory domains with separate verbs for activities, experiences and phenomena. The stems of these verbs are: *katso-* ‘look, watch’, *näke-* ‘see’, *näky-* ‘be visible, show [intransit.]’; *kuuntele-* ‘listen’, *kuule-* ‘hear’, *kuulu-* ‘be audible’; *haistele-* ‘smell [agent.]’, *haista-* ‘smell [agent. or non-agent.]’, *haise-* ‘[emit] smell’; *maistele-* ‘taste [agent.]’, *maista-* ‘taste [agent. or non-agent.]’, *maistu-* ‘taste [intransit.]’, *tunnustele-* ‘feel [agent.]’, *tunte-* ‘feel [non-agent.]’, *tuntu-* ‘feel [intransit.]’. The harmony is thus broken by the experience verbs of smell and taste which can also have an agentive reading. It is also easy to see that many activity and phenomenon verbs are morphologically derived from the experience verbs by adding the affix *-ele-* vs. *-u*. Elsewhere the affix *-ele-* indicates iteration (e.g., *hyppä-* ‘jump once’ => *hyppele-* ‘jump repeatedly’) and the affix *-u-* reflexivity (e.g., *kaata-* ‘fell’ => *kaatu-* ‘fall’).

Viberg notes (2001: 1296) that especially verbs of experience are ambiguous between an inchoative vs. a static reading (e.g., *see* ‘notice by vision’ vs. ‘perceive a vision continuously’) and that they mark their arguments non-canonically by taking a dative subject in many languages. In Finnish the experience verbs are exceptional in that they take the accusative object even when they indicate a state, though elsewhere the accusative is only used with telic verbs indicating an accomplishment or an achievement (thus associated with high transitivity) whereas the partitive marks the object if the sentence is atelic, progressive, or the activity is terminated but not accomplished (low transitivity; see Helasvuo 2001). Thus the non-canonical argument marking shows up not in the subject but in the object.

In my paper I first give an overview of the Finnish system of perception verbs and then discuss the semantic division of labor between these verbs, their aspectual ambiguity, and their argument marking against the background of Viberg’s typology.

References:

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- Viberg, Åke 1984: The verbs of perception: A typological study. *Linguistics* 21:123–162.
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