

A Study on Subject Ellipsis with Perception Verbs

知覚動詞における主語省略の研究

Kayoko SHIBATA

柴 田 かよ子

四 天 王 寺 大 学 紀 要
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〈Abstract〉

This paper examines the relationship between the subject ellipsis and variation of verbs and variation of subjects in perception verbs in English. Generally it is recognized that English is a language, which requires a grammatical subject (Filmore, 1986). Nevertheless, it is observed that subject is omitted in a certain context in various places, not only in spoken utterances but also in written language. This study investigates the relationship between the subject ellipsis and variation of verbs and variation of subjects using a corpus *The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*.

Key words: subject ellipsis, variations of verbs, variation of subjects, perception verbs, context

1. Introduction

This study discusses subject ellipsis that occurs in sentences with perception verbs in English. It is suggested that factors that contribute to the subject ellipsis include the context, cohesion, conversation style, “the law of least effort (Zipf, 1949),” co-occurrence with fixed expressions, variation of verbs, variation of subjects, informativeness of the sentence and turn-taking. Among these factors, this paper focuses on variation of verbs and variation of subjects in perception verbs. One reason is that the relationship between the subject ellipsis and those factors is mentioned in previous studies, however, the number of the studies described by the data is scarce so far. Therefore, it is valuable that we should investigate and present the data using a corpus.

According to Biber et al. (1999), ellipsis is classified into two types: textual ellipsis and situational ellipsis. This study focuses on the latter, situational ellipsis. “Situational ellipsis” is referred to as the one “where the omission and interpretation are dependent upon the situational context”¹⁾ (Biber et al., 1999, p.156).

1) The situational context means “knowledge and understanding derived from the environment which the speaker and the addressee share” and this includes any perception at the site of the discourse, mutual/background knowledge, social setting, register and relationship between speech participants (Nariyama, 2004, p.240).

2. Method

In this research, an investigation of subject ellipsis with perception verbs was conducted so as to observe the relationship between subject ellipsis and the variation of verbs and the variations of implicit subjects. One of the corpora, *The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*, was utilized in order to investigate spoken and written English in America. *COCA* contains as many as 450 million words and its data was recorded from 1990 to 2012. Its data is derived from *CNN, ABC, Fox, NBC, CBS, NPR, MSNBC, PBS*, and *Independence* in spoken English. The written English in the corpus comes from: sources of news (international, national, local, money, life, sports, and editorial), magazines (news/opinions, financial, science/technology, social/arts, religion, sports, entertainment, home/health, women/men, African-American, and children), and academic articles or books (education, history, geography/social science, law/politics, humanities, philosophy/religion, science/technology, medicine, and miscellaneous).

In this case study, 200 example sentences were chosen in each investigation and subsequently the figures derived from the data were calculated in terms of how many examples appeared within one million words. These figures are shown in parentheses (e.g. (0.003) in Table 3). In Tables 3 to 6, the abbreviation “con.” stands for “conversation”. It indicates the frequency of subject ellipsis which occurs in the conversation. With regard to the data, “verbs + noun” (SVO) and “verbs + adjective” (SVC), especially “verbs + it” and “verbs + good” were collected in spoken and written English. The reason why the adjective *good* was chosen is that the frequency of the co-occurrence of perception verbs and the adjective *good* is very high, as shown in Table 1. In this research, the relationship between subject ellipsis and perception verbs is discussed, and this study introduces the following classification method (in Table 2).

Table 1. The ranking of occurrence of perception verbs and adjectives (COCA)

	Feel (s)	Look (s)	Sound (s)	Smell (s)	Taste (s)
1	good (1164)	good (860)	familiar (102)	good (45)	good (62)
2	comfortable (585)	great (441)	good (72)	bad (11)	great (17)
3	bad (486)	bad (196)	like (55)	great (8)	different (9)

Table 2. The basic paradigm of verbs of perception based on semantic roles of subjects in English (Ibarretxe-Antunano 1999, p.42)

Sense modality	Experience (SVO)	Activity (SVO)	Percept (SVC)
Vision	see	look	look
Hearing	hear	listen	sound
Touch	feel/touch	touch/feel	feel
Smell	smell	smell/sniff	smell
Taste	taste	taste	taste

Perception verbs are categorized into three groups (see Table 2) (i.e. experience, activity, and percept) based on “the semantic role of their subjects” (Ibarretxe-Antunano, 1999, p.42), which has also been supported by various other researchers (e.g. Gisborne, 1996; Lehrer, 1990; Palmer, 1966; Rogers, 1971; and Viberg, 1984). This classification is used in Tables 3 to 6. In those tables, (E) stands for experience verbs, (A) for activity verbs, and (P) for percept verbs. Both (E) and (A) have SVO (Subject, Verb, Object) patterns. (P) has SVC (Subject, Verb, Complement) patterns. The judgment of whether a verb is (E) or (A) was determined based on Viberg (1984), since (E) and (A) both have SVO patterns. For instance, in the case of the verb, taste, when the phrase “to see if he could eat it” is added at the end of the sentence and it makes sense, it is determined that the phrase belongs to (A); that is, activity verbs, rather than (E).

3. Data and Discussion

3.1. Subject Ellipsis with Perception Verbs

As mentioned earlier, in this section, an investigation was conducted in order to discuss the relationship between subject ellipsis and perception verbs. Table 3 shows the results of the investigation, concerning the frequency of subject ellipsis with perception verbs of the types (E) (experience) and (A) (activity) in spoken and written English.

Table 3. Subject ellipsis with perception verbs in spoken and written English (1)

Experience (E)	Spoken	Written
see + noun	1 (0.003)	0
hear + noun	0	0
hear you	2 (0.12)	1 (0.0048)
feel + noun	2 (0.08)	0
feel it	1 (0.06)	0
smell + noun	0	2 (0.0086) (con.0.0043)
smell it	1 (0.0078)	0 (con.0.0023)
taste + noun	0	0
taste it	0	0
Average	(0.03)	(0.001)
Activity (A) ²⁾	Spoken	Written
look at	0	0
listen to	0	0
feel	0	0
smell	0	0
taste	0	0
Average	0	0

2) The phrases “look at” and “listen to” are treated as set phrases.

Table 4 gives the frequency of subject ellipsis with perception verbs (P) (percept) in spoken and written English.

Table 4. Subject ellipsis with perception verbs in spoken and written English (2)

Percept (P)	Spoken	Written
look(s) + adj.	4 (0.84)	1 (0.12)
look good	0	0
looks good	56 (1.12)	6 (0.042) (con. 0.014)
sound(s) + adj.	16 (0.32)	14 (0.7)
sound good	3 (0.012)	5 (0.01)
sounds good	85 (1.70)	37 (0.15) (con. 0.06)
feel(s) + adj.	10 (3.90)	4 (1.08)
feel good	4 (0.24)	0
feels good	23 (0.27)	5 (0.04) (con. 0.008)
smell(s) + adj.	20 (0.11)	2 (0.008) (con. 0.012)
smell good	2 (0.0046)	0
smells good	17 (0.0058)	0 (con.0.0016)
taste(s) + adj.	0	0
taste good	0	0
tastes good	8 (0.0024)	6 (0.03)
Average	(0.57)	(0.15)

Analyzing the data for the three groups of verbs, (E), (A), and (P), in Tables 3 and 4, it seems that subject ellipsis occurs with verbs in groups (E) and (P) but not with verbs in group (A). Furthermore, comparing the average figures between (E) and (P), subject ellipsis occurs more with verbs in group (P) than with those in group (E). Moreover, the frequency of the phrases such as *looks good* (1.12), *sounds good* (1.70), and *feel adj.* (3.90) is remarkably high. This means that subject ellipsis occurs depending on what verbs appear. Furthermore, comparing the average figures³⁾ between spoken and written English in Table 4, the frequency of ellipsis with perception verbs is higher in spoken English than in written English.

3.2. Variations of Subjects in Cases of Subject Ellipsis with Perception Verbs

The question of whether there is a correlation between subject ellipsis and variations of subjects with perception verb was also examined.

3) With regard to the average figure at the bottom of Table 4 for written English, the frequency of the conversation, that is, "con.", is not included. Moreover, the reason why "average" is used rather than "total" in § 3.1 is that it is easier to compare with the other data within the perception verbs.

Table 5. Variations of subjects with perception verbs in spoken English

Experience	I	you	we	he/she	it	they
see + noun	0	1 (0.003)	0	0	0	0
hear + noun	0	0	0	0	0	0
hear you	2 (0.12)	0	0	0	0	0
feel + noun	2 (0.08)	0	0	0	0	0
feel it	0	1 (0.06)	0	0	0	0
smell + noun	0	0	0	0	0	0
smell it	1 (0.0078)	0	0	0	0	0
taste + noun	0	0	0	0	0	0
taste it	0	0	0	0	0	0
Percept	I	you	we	he/she	it	they
look (s) + adj.	0	2 (0.42)	0	0	0	2 (0.42)
look good	0	0	0	0	0	0
looks good	0	0	0	4 (0.08)	52 (1.04)	0
sound (s) + adj.	0	0	0	0	16 (0.32)	0
sound good	0	0	0	0	3 (0.012)	0
sounds good	0	0	0	0	85 (1.7)	0
feel (s) + adj.	2 (0.78)	8 (3.12)	0	0	0	0
feel good	3 (0.18)	1 (0.06)	0	0	0	0
feels good	0	0	0	0	23 (0.27)	0
smell (s) + adj.	0	0	0	0	20 (0.11)	0
smell good	0	0	0	0	1 (0.0023)	1 (0.0023)
smells good	0	0	0	0	17 (0.0058)	0
taste (s) + adj.	0	0	0	0	0	0
taste good	0	0	0	0	0	0
tastes good	0	0	0	0	8 (0.024)	0
Total	10 (1.17)	13 (3.66)	0	4 (0.08)	224 (3.45)	3 (0.42)

Since the data in Table 3 show that subject ellipsis with activity verbs did not occur, the investigation in this section is only limited to the experience and percept verbs shown in Table 5. Observing the data for experience verbs in Table 5, subject ellipsis occurs with the subjects *I* and *you*, while with percept verbs, it occurs with all of the subject types except for *we*. With percept verbs, the subject *it* has a higher frequency of subject ellipsis. The following are some utterances where subject ellipsis occurs with the phrase *feels good*. Example (1) is from spoken English.

(1) A: I like Charlie's chair.

B: *Feels good, right?* > Charlie's chair *feels good to you, right?* (COCA)

Example (1) illustrates the procedure of retrieving the subject. In this case, *Charlie's chair* or the subject *it* can be retrieved based on three factors. The unspoken items in perception verbs can be retrieved on the basis of the following three factors: the situational context, the immediate context, and the co-occurrence with a fixed expression, which helps the listeners restrict the candidates of the implicit

items as well. Example (2) is another instance of *feels good* in written English.

- (2) A: If you've been carrying 40 pounds for the weekend trip, start by trimming five pounds of excess gear. *Feels good, right?* (COCA)

Likewise, in example (2), the subject *it*⁴⁾ can be retrieved mainly from the situational context, immediate context, and the co-occurrence with a fixed expression. Table 6 illustrates the results of the investigation of variations of the subject for perception verbs in written English.

Table 6. Variations of the subject with perception verbs in written English

Experience	I	you	we	he/she	it	they
see + noun	0	0	0	0	0	0
hear+noun	0	0	0	0	0	0
hear you	1 (0.0048)	0	0	0	0	0
feel+noun	0	0	0	0	0	0
feel it	0	0	0	0	0	0
smell+noun	0	2 (0.0086)	0	0	0	0
smell it	0	0	0	0	0	0
taste+noun	0	0	0	0	0	0
taste it	0	0	0	0	0	0
Percept	I	you	we	he/she	it	they
look (s) +adj.	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0.12)
look good	0	0	0	0	0	0
looks good	0	0	0	1 (0.007)	5 (0.035) (con.0.014)	0
sound (s) +adj.	0	0	0	0	14 (0.7)	0
sound good	0	0	0	0	5 (0.01)	0
sounds good	0	0	0	0	37 (0.15) (con.0.06)	0
feel (s) +adj.	0	0	0	0	4 (1.08)	0
feel good	0	0	0	0	0	0
feels good	0	0	0	0	5 (0.04) (con.0.008)	0
smell (s) +adj.	0	0	0	0	2 (0.008) (con.0.012)	0
smell good	0	0	0	0	0	0
smells good	0	0	0	0	0 (con.0.0016)	0
taste (s) +adj.	0	0	0	0	0	0
taste good	0	0	0	0	0	0
tastes good	0	0	0	0	6 (0.03)	0
Total	1 (0.0048)	2 (0.0086)	0	1 (0.007)	55 (0.26)	1 (0.12)

4) The retrieved word "it" was confirmed by a foreign lecturer.

The data in Tables 5 and 6 for spoken and written English have a near similar trend, i.e. subject ellipsis occurs with specific subjects. Ellipsis occurs with the subjects *I*, *you* *he/she*, *it*, and *they* in both tables. Among those subjects, the amount of times that ellipsis occurs with the subject *it* is remarkably high with percept verbs in both tables.

The reason why subject ellipsis occurs with the subjects *I* and *you* can be explained in terms of “internal feeling”⁵⁾ (Kuno, 1973). It is also possible to explain it with the theory of “given” and “old” information (Chafe, 1972, p.50-51). That is, the subjects *I* and *you* are assumed to be recognized as “given” or “old information”, rather than “new” information (Chafe, 1972, p.50-51). Chafe (1974, p.123) mentions that “the identity of speaker and addressee is typically “given”, as are those concepts having to do with the particular time and location of the act of speech”. Moreover, Chafe (1974, p.111) proposes that “given information is suggested to be that which the speaker assumes to be already present in the addressee’s consciousness at the time of an utterance”. In other words, concerning subject ellipsis with subjects *I* and *you*, since the subjects *I* and *you* are already present in the speaker’s and the listener’s mind, it is not necessary to utter words that are already known among the interlocutors. If the theory by Chafe (1974) is true, it seems natural that subject ellipsis tends to occur with the subjects *I* and *you*.

Previous research has only seldom investigated subject ellipsis with the subject *it*. Only Nariyama (2004, p.255) mentions that “subjectless sentences are understood as expressing the view of the speaker and not of the subject ‘it.’”

3.3. Semantic Roles of Perception Verbs

So far, in this case study, an investigation of perception verbs was conducted based on “the semantic role of their subjects” (Ibarretxe-Antunano, 1999, p.42). This section further explains the idea of “the basic paradigm of verbs of perception based on semantic roles of subjects in English” (Ibarretxe-Antunano, 1999, p.42). As mentioned earlier, perception verbs “can be classified into three different groups according to the semantic role of their subjects” (Ibarretxe-Antunano, 1999, p.42), that is, experience, activity, and percept. This method of classification is also supported by other researchers including Gisborne (1996) and Viberg (1984).

To start with, let us focus on group E or Experience verbs. The verbs in group E are called “passive perception” (Palmer, 1966, p.99) or “stative with experience subject” (Lehrer, 1990, p.223). They are also described as “the receiving of an expression by the senses independently of the will of the person concerned” (Poutsma, 1926, p.341). Regarding the subjects in this group, Ibarretxe-Antunano (1999, p.43) suggests that “the subject does not consciously control the stimuli; it refers to a state or inchoative achievement”. The following are examples of experience verbs.

5) Thomas (1979, p.47) also suggests that subjects *I* and *you* are recoverable in elliptical sentences since the subjects *I* and *you* have a special status of “given” information, different from that of other subjects.

- (3) (I) smell it.
- (4) (I) hear you.

In this study, the results of the investigation of the frequency of subject ellipsis with experience verbs (i.e. group E) were presented in Table 3 in § 3.1. Those results show that the phenomena of ellipsis can be seen to some degree in group E, although the number of verbs that ellipsis occurred with was small.

The next verb group examined was that of “active perception verbs” (Poutsma, 1926, p.341), which have “active experience subject[s]” (Lehrer, 1990, p.223). In this study, this group is represented by “A” in Table 3. Viberg (1984, p.123) argued that activity verbs have an “unbounded process that is consciously controlled by a human agent”. No ellipsis is observed in this group, according to the data in Table 3. The following are some examples with verbs in this group.

- (5) Peter looked at the birds. (Viberg, 1984, p.125)
- (6) Peter listened to the birds. (Ibid.)

Last, the verb group P or percept verbs shows a high frequency of ellipsis in Table 4. These have been called “flip verbs” (Rogers, 1971, p.206). Lehrer (1990, p.223) calls their subjects “stimulus subjects”. Ibarretxe-Antunano (1999, p.44-45) notes that their “subjects are the stimuli of the perception” and that “the verb takes the experienced entity as a subject”. Moreover, Viberg (1984, p.123) calls them “copulative”, as they are generally called now. The following are some examples.

- (7) (It) tastes good.
- (8) (It) sounds good.

Considering that subject ellipsis occurs more often with percept verbs than with experience verbs and more often with experience verbs than with activity verbs (see Tables 3 and 4), it is assumed that there is a certain relationship between subject ellipsis and those types of verbs.

4. Conclusions

This study discussed the relationship between subject ellipsis and perception verbs among perception verbs. It was found that the subject ellipsis occurred depending on the variation of the verbs and that of the subjects. Regarding verbs, the data showed that subject ellipsis occurred with experience and percept verbs. In this respect, it can be hypothesized that subject ellipsis has some relationship with perception. Previous studies have only suggested the subject ellipsis occurs with stimulus percept verbs. This phenomenon is one of the issues focused on in another study. Furthermore, the phenomenon in terms of the subject *it* will be discussed in further paper. Considering the limitations to solving the

problems concerning the relationship between subject ellipsis and verbs from a pragmatic view, we have also realized that it is essential to deal with those problems from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. To that end, a future study will focus on the problems from the perspectives of semantics, particularly as they relate to the process of subjectification⁶⁾ (Langacker, 1990, 1998, 1999).

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6) Langacker (1999, p.297) defines subjectification as “a shift from relatively objective construal of some entity to a more subjective one”. Langacker (2002) also explains the phenomenon of subjectification, citing an example from daily life involving a pair of glasses in the following manner. If we see a pair of glasses on the table, we recognize the existence of the glasses. On the other hand, when we wear them, we are not conscious of their existence anymore. Such a phenomenon is called subjectification. To take another example, when we look at a certain object, we cannot see our whole body or our face itself, which is looking at the object. Those experiences are reflected in language. Therefore, when the subjectification process occurs, the conceptualizer is not usually expressed explicitly. For example, we do not usually express ourselves by encoding ourselves as the conceptualizer, such as with *to me* or *to us*, in such a context.

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