

# A study of Subject – Object Inversion in English

## Abstract

This study examines the Rorsenbaum -Postal attempt to derive the stative verbs from their active cognates. The researcher examines some syntactic and semantic evidence and tries to argue that the Rorsenbaum –Postal analysis fails to account for the syntactic as well as the semantic evidence . He tries to show that if the stative perceptual verbs are derived from relativized nouns then the syntactic peculiarities can be accounted for without violating the semantic requirement.

### 1- Preliminaries

The general consensus in TG treatments of sentences like (1) and (2) below is that they are truncated forms of sentences (3) and (4) respectively :

- 1- The soup tastes delicious
- 2- The milk smells good
- 3- The soup tastes delicious to me
- 4- The milk smells good to me

(See Rosenbaum , 1967 : 98 and Postal , 1971 : 42 )

Both Postal and Rosenbaum go on to suggest that both the sets (1) and (2) on the one hand and (3) and (4) on the other hand should be derived from "remote " structures like(5) and (6)

- (5) I taste the soup delicious .
- (6) I smell the milk good .

by transformation called subject – object – Inversion ( Rosenbaum ) or Psych – Movement ( Postal ) , Postal takes note of the fact that the verbs in (5) and ( 6) are active verbs whereas those in (1) ,(2) ,(3) and (4) are statives and that the selectional restrictions for the two sets with the reference to adjectives and adverbs are not uniform .That is , the stative verbs in ( 1) and (2) take adjectives (**delicious** and **good** ) but cannot co-occur with a certain kind of adverbs :

- (7) \* The soup tastes carefully .
- (8) \* The milk smells carefully .

Conversely, the stative perceptual verbs co-occur with this kind of adverbs but not with adjectives:

- (9) I tasted the soup carefully.
- (10) I smelled the milk carefully.
- (11) \* I tasted the soup delicious.
- (12) \* I smelled the milk good.

In spite of this kind of evidence <sup>(2)</sup> of which he did not seem to be unaware, Postal chose to persevere with Psych-Movement Transformation so as to be able to establish the cross - over phenomena.

The researcher likes to argue here that if we cease from glossing over this embarrassing and take a closer look at it , we can arrive at a formulation which seems to be more satisfactory.

The researcher proposes to extend Rosenbaum – Postal analysis and to look at fresh evidence , both syntactic and semantic ,before he proposes an alternative formulation .

## 2- Extension

Rosenbaum – Postal analysis , presumably , can not only be extended to other perceptual verbs ( **sound** , **feel** , **look** etc.) but also to those verbs like **seem** , where Extra position must apply obligatorily .

- (13) (a) The girl looks beautiful .  
(b) The girl looks beautiful to me.  
(c) I look the girl beautiful.
  
- (14) (a) The girl seems beautiful .  
(b) The girl seems beautiful to me .  
(c) I seem the girl beautiful.

## 3- Syntactic Evidence

Syntactically, however, seem appears to belong to a different class from the perceptual verbs.

- (15) (a) He looks a gentleman .  
(b) \* He seems a gentleman.  
(c) \* He looks to be a gentleman.  
(d) \* He seems to be a gentleman.

A major difference is that **seem** is a neg-raiser but not **look**.

- (16) It seems that he won't come.
- (17) It doesn't seem that he would come.
- (18)\*It looks that he won't come.
- (19)\* It doesn't look that he would come.

As Lindholm (1969) , Cushing ( 1982) and Per Lsvag ( 1975) have pointed out , all neg – raisers allow sentence pronominalization by SD and NOT .

- (20) It seems so.
- (21) It seems not.
- (22) \* It looks so.
- (23) \*It looks not .

Another point should be briefly noted before passing on to the semantic difference between **seem** and **look** (and the perceptual verbs in general) is that though **look** is not a neg-raiser it seems to become so when it is followed by as if .

- (24) It looks as if he isn't happy.
- (25) It doesn't look as if he is happy.

#### 4- Semantic Evidence

Sentences (24) and (25) above seem to suggest that **seem** is closer to **look as if** rather than to **look**. The evidence in (15) above would seem to suggest that there is a significant distinction between (13a) and (14a) which is sometimes overlooked.

The researcher wishes to preserve with this difference a bit further so as to be able to show that it is extremely unwise to relate (13a) to (13b) in the way it has been done in the Rosenbaum-Postal formulation . The researcher should like to argue that the relationship between the (a) sentences and the (b) sentences in (13-14) is not that of synonymy but entailment.

Concerning the difference between **seem** and **look**, Austin (1962:42) forcefully argues that " **the descriptions of looks are neither 'incorrigible' nor 'subjective'; It is, perhaps, just as much a fact of the world, just as open to confirmation and challenge as things are .The researcher is not disclosing a fact about himself but petrol, when he says Petrol is like a water"**. That is to say that when one says:

- (26) Parallel lines look convergent.
- (27) The stick looks bent in water. there is no subjective element involved at all; a photograph would bear this out. That is to say they do have an appearance of this kind under optimum physical conditions.

There is, therefore, no necessity or justification (at least semantically) for appending a sentence like (28): 28. It looks good

With a subjective element like "to me"

(29) It looks good to me.

And then deriving it from a "remote" structure

(30) I look it good.

But is there a tendency to treat (28) and (29) as being synonymous?

This is perhaps because (28) entails (29) . This is to say that if it is true that (31) expresses a "fact about the world, just as open to confirmation or challenges as the way things are"

(31) The sky looks blue.

Then it is not surprising that it should appear so to me too.

(32) The sky looks blue to me.

Unless, of course , something is wrong with my visual sense .

The evidence in (24) and (25) we have already noted suggests that **seem** and **look as if** are closer to each other than **seem** and **look** Price (1941:282) makes the distinction succinctly "**seeming** has reference to judgments of a wholly spontaneous and unconsidered kind ,while **looking** has a reference to sensation " <sup>(3)</sup>Quinton (1955:33) indicates that whereas the perceptual verbs describe a basic sensation verbs like **seem** serve " to indicate that these conclusions are drawn with less than full confidence ".Sibley (1971:89) also indicates that in **seem the opinion indicator** is at a larger premium than in **look**. Cushing (1982) is hinting at something similar when he says that verbs like **seem** ( and neg-raiser in general are (-stance ) verbs . That is when the speaker prefaces a statement with what Prince (1976) calls a "metastatement" hedge like **seem** – he is reluctant to take a stand or to use Austin's terminology , one is not in position to " stake one's reputation "about the truth of the complement clause .That is to say when someone says

(33) It seems good.

He is only saying that it is his opinion that (33) is true. It is quite natural therefore to assume that (33) is a truncated form of (34)

(34) It seems good to me.

And if there is a reason to believe that the perceptual verbs are not Psych-Movement verbs – the motivation for this transformation becomes suspect and cannot be allowed to be incorporated in the grammar just to account for a verb or two like **seem** and that too with the use of "remote " structures of dubious validity .

The foregoing discussion would seem to suggest that (35) should be derived from (36):

- (35) It looks good.  
(36) It looks good to everyone.

where the Indefinite Object Rule (Lakoff,1970: 127) converts it to (35). If we accept this formulation we seem to have met the semantic requirement without providing any explanation for the selectional restrictions on these verbs with respect to adverbs and adjectives. If, however, we derive these sentences from an entirely different source we can meet the semantic requirement as well as provide an explanation for these syntactic peculiarities.

- (37) It has a look which is good → It looks good  
(38) It has a taste which is delicious → It tastes delicious.  
(39) It has smell which is good → it smells good.

The major transformation that is necessary are WHIZ, adjective propose and one which converts a noun into a verb. The nominal form being converted into a verbal one, perhaps, has independent necessity in the grammar of English:

- (40) He has had a bath.  
(41) He has bathed.  
(42) He has had a sleep.  
(43) He has slept.

The advantage of this formulation is that it explains the syntactic peculiarity of these verbs without violating the semantic requirement. To borrow Vendler's (1971) picturesque terminology – the nouns have been converted into verbs but they have not been tamed: they retain their love for adjectives and aversion of adverbs. That is to say there is a genitive construction involved just as in (37-39).

Deriving sentences with the stative perceptual verbs from relativized nouns sets them off from the verb **seem**. (33) cannot be derived in a similar way simply because the verb **seem** has no corresponding noun **seem**. Even the lexical evidence seems to indicate that the present formulation is the correct one.

### Notes

- 1- Jackendoff (1972) persuasively argues against taking recourse to "remote" structures of the kind Postal proposes.

2-It is for reasons like these that both Rogers(1991)and Scovel (1971) scoff at Postal's attempt to derive the stative perceptual verbs from their active cognates .

3-To confuse between the sensation and subjective responses would amount to perpetuating the "sense-datum fallacy" with vengeance.

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# Diala , Jour , Volume , 30 , 2008

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