

Predicates of personal taste and direct experience: data from Brazilian Portuguese

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Predicates of personal taste (PPTs) are related to a certain individual's subjective personal taste, and therefore the truth value of a sentence with this type of predicate is relative (Lasersohn, 2005). The individual whose taste is relevant to judge the sentence (the judge) can be implicit, but also made explicit. One way of displaying the judge overtly is to embed the PPT under attitude verbs such as 'find' or 'think' (Stephenson 2007; Pearson 2013).

(1a) I find this cake tasty.

(1b) I think that this cake is tasty.

In (1), the person who judges the cake tasty is the subject of the attitude verbs 'find' and 'think' that embed the PPT 'tasty'. However, there is a difference between the interpretations of the sentences above: (1a) is felicitous only if the speaker has eaten the cake before uttering it, while (1b) can be uttered even if the speaker didn't try the cake:

(2a) ?? I find this cake tasty, but I haven't eaten it.

(2b) I think that this cake is tasty, but I haven't eaten it.

Stephenson (2007) and Pearson (2013) attribute this difference to the lexical semantics of 'find'. In other words, when the verb 'find' is used in contexts like those, it requires that its subject has had the relevant experience related to the PPT. Bylinina (2017), on the other hand, argues that this requirement of experience is not part of the semantics of 'find', but of the semantics of the PPT itself. According to her, the PPT would require the experiencer as an argument, and the embedding under an attitude verb such as 'find' would only make this (already existing) argument overt.

In this paper, focusing on embedded PPTs in Brazilian Portuguese (BP), we'll argue that the difference in interpretations seen in (2) relies on syntactic structure, rather than the lexical semantics of the verb or of the PPT. Consider the data in (3) (Marques, 2018, p. 65):

(3a) ?? Sam acha a ração da gata gostosa, mas ele não comeu.
Sam finds the cat food tasty, but he haven't eaten it.

(3b) Sam acha que a ração da gata é gostosa, mas ele não comeu.
Sam finds that the cat food is tasty, but he haven't eaten it.

As we can see, (3a) has a similar reading as (2a): it is not possible to utter the first part of the sentence felicitously if we deny that Sam (the subject of the attitude verb) has had an experience relevant for the PPT (i.e. has eaten the cat food). It is possible to deny that Sam had the relevant experience in (3b), as it happened with (2b). Since the attitude verb that embeds the PPT is the same in both (3a) and (3b) ('achar'), it is not possible to attribute this difference to the lexical semantics of the verb.

Even so, the sentences in (3) do not rule out the possibility presented by Bylinina (2017). If it is not the verb which carries the implication of direct experience, it could still be that the PPTs semantically require an experiencer argument. This idea is seen in other authors' works too. Ninan (2014), for example, argues that PPTs generate an inference of

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acquaintance with the item that is being evaluated, and claims that it is not possible to utter a sentence such as “This cake is tasty” without having eaten the cake before. However, let’s consider the syntactic structures of (3a) and (3b), represented in (4a) and (4b) respectively:

- (4a) [IP Sam acha [SC [DP a ração da gata] [AP gostosa]]].
 (4b) [IP Sam acha [CP que [IP a ração da gata é gostosa]]].

The structure in (4a), which contains a small clause (SC) as the complement of ‘acha’, seems to be related with epistemic inferences: for (4a) to be uttered, Sam must have had direct experience or knowledge about what is being reported. This pattern is also found in BP when we consider other perceptual verbs such as ‘ver’ (‘to see’) (Higginbotham, 1983):

- (5a) [IP Eu vi [SC [DP a Maria] [VP sair]]]. (5b) [IP Eu vi [CP que [IP a Maria saiu]]].
 [IP I saw [SC [DP Maria] [VP leave]]]. [IP I saw [CP that [IP Maria has left]]].

Sentence (5a) is parallel to (4a) in structure and interpretation: the speaker saw the act/event of Maria leaving, that is, she has direct knowledge of what is reported. Likewise, (5b) is parallel to (4b): the speaker did not necessarily see the moment when Maria left, but she knows that Maria is not there and, therefore, have indirect knowledge of what is uttered.

There are two different syntactic structures in BP that result in different implications when combined with perceptual verbs: (i) the structure [verb + SC] implies that the subject of the verb has direct knowledge about what is reported (cf. (5a)), and (ii) the structure [verb + CP] implies that there was not necessarily direct knowledge about the reported fact (cf. (5b)). The same occurs with ‘achar’ and PPTs: [achar + SC] implies that the subject of the verb has direct experience to judge the sentence with the PPT (cf. (4a)), but this is not the case for [achar + CP] (cf. (4b)). Finally, it is important to notice that we can observe this phenomenon even with other configurations of [achar + CP], such as the sentence (6), which also does not require direct experience to be uttered:

- (6) [IP Sam acha [CP ser a ração da gata gostosa]] .
 [IP Sam finds [CP the cat food to be tasty]] .

The predicate ‘sair’ is not a subjective predicate, and therefore there would be no need for it to ask for an experiencer argument, as Bylinina claims to be the case for subjective predicates. Nevertheless, the subject of the perceptual verb ‘ver’ still functions much in the same way as the subject of the attitude verb ‘achar’, i.e. it is the individual that must have experienced whatever the embedded sentence is saying. Based on the data presented, we argue that it is the syntactic structure [verb + SC] what generates the implication of direct experience/perception with perceptual verbs and subjective predicates when they are embedded.

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