Experience matters: A psycholinguistic investigation of predicates of personal taste

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There exists a range of linguistic expressions that make reference to the subjective perspective of an individual, including epithets (the idiot) and predicates of personal taste (fun, tasty). These expressions have been analyzed as making reference to a ‘judge’ or ‘evaluator’ (e.g. Lasersohn 2005, Potts 2007, Stephenson 2007, Patel-Grosz 2012, Harris 2012). Who thinks X is an idiot? Who thinks that Y is fun? Much of the current research builds on Lasersohn’s (2005) judge parameter j, such that the truth of sentences containing predicates of personal taste is interpreted relative to the particular individual who is the judge (e.g. [[fun]]^w_{t,j} = [\lambda x_\ldots x \text{ is fun for } j \text{ in } w \text{ at } t]).

Another case of judge-dependence involves multidimensional adjectives (e.g. Sassoon 2013). Multidimensional adjectives (e.g. healthy, ugly, beautiful, stupid) involve multiple criteria for ordering individuals with the property (e.g. for healthy: cardiovascular system and immune system). McNally and Stojanovic (2014) note that people can disagree regarding the weight/significance of each dimension, which results in judge dependence (see also Bylinina 2014).

The claim that there are (at least) two classes of judge-dependent adjectives – PPTs and non-PPT multidimensions – raises the question of how they differ in their semantics. One fundamental claim that has been made in prior theoretical literature is that predicates of personal taste (which can also be multidimensional) crucially involve an experiencer argument, whereas multidimensional adjectives that are not PPTs (e.g. intelligent, healthy) do not have an experiencer argument (e.g. Bylinina 2014, McNally & Stojanovic 2014). In essence, for something to be ‘tasty’, someone must have the experience of tasting it – but for someone to be ‘healthy’, no such experiencing is necessary (e.g. McNally & Stojanovic 2014).

However, intuitions regarding the role/contribution/presence of experiencers are often murky, and existing tests that have been suggested as means of identifying adjectives with experiencers – e.g. evaluative use of the find-construction – are controversial and do not always provide a reliable diagnostic (e.g. McNally & Stojanovic 2014, Szébo 2009, Kennedy 2013, Bylinina 2014 for discussion).

**Experiment:** Our study approaches the general question of how to identify adjectives with experiencers from a psycholinguistic/experimental perspective. We conducted an experiment that tests the claim that PPTs entail experiencers whereas merely multidimensional adjectives do not, by means of manipulating verb argument structure – in particular, we compare contexts containing verbs that introduce experiencer arguments vs. verbs that do not. When comprehenders encounter a PPT, we predict that a recently-mentioned experiencer argument would be an ideal judge candidate. McNally and Stojanovic (2014) note that a number of PPTs are derived from experiencer verbs (e.g. to disgust: disgusting, to bore: boring). Thus, we hypothesize that an experiencer verb is well-suited for providing an experiencer judge for a PPT. The experiencer argument is predicted to be more likely to be chosen as the judge of a PPT than is a non-experiencer argument of another verb. Crucially, if regular (non-PPT) multidimensional adjectives (e.g. intelligent) do not have experiencer judges, they are not predicted to show this asymmetry.

**Method and design:** Native English speaking adults (n=60) were asked to read excerpts (ex.1-2) that were told are from narratives, and were asked questions about them (ex.3), probing participants’ judge interpretations. We manipulated (i) the nature of the adjective in the second sentence (PPT/multidimensional, ex.2) and (ii) the verb in the first sentence (Experiencer-Theme/Agent-Patient, ex.1). Experiencer-Theme verbs like see/hear/look at are analyzed as having an experiencer subject (Ambridge et al. 2015), unlike Agent-Patient verbs. Thus, whether the verb is Experiencer-Theme or Agent-Patient allows us to manipulate whether the context contains an experiencer argument that can fulfill the role of judge. We compare PPTs – whose judge is hypothesized to be an experiencer – to multidimensional adjectives which are hypothesized to not be
sensitive to the notion of experiencer. (We also tested non-judge-dependent nongradable adjectives, but omit them here for space reasons). The PPTs and multidimensional adjectives were selected on the basis of prior published papers. Similarly, the Experiencer-Theme and Agent-Patient verbs were selected based on Ambridge et al. 2015 and other published papers. This yielded 24 targets.

(1a) First sentence (experiencer-theme verb): Lisa looked at Kate.  

(1b) First sentence (agent-patient verb): Lisa nudged Kate.

(2a) Second sentence: She was irritating. [Predicate of personal taste]  

(2b) Second sentence: She was smart. [Multidimensional adjective]

(3) Whose opinion is it that the other person is {irritating/smart}? Lisa / Kate / Narrator

For each narratives, participants were asked the question shown in (3), which is essentially asking ‘who is the judge’ for the PPT or multidimensional adjective.

**Predictions:** We assume that Experiencer-Theme verbs provide an available experiencer argument – the subject, e.g. Lisa – whereas Agent-Patient verbs do not. Thus, if PPTs entail an experiencer judge and ‘regular’ multidimensional adjectives do not, we predict that people’s interpretations of who the judge is should show sensitivity to verb type in the case of PPTs but not in the case of regular multidimensional adjectives:

If the presence of an experiencer verb in the preceding sentence renders its experiencer argument (the subject) especially well-suited for being the judge of a subsequent PPT, the rate of subject-opinion answers to question (3) should be higher with verbs like ‘look at’ (Experiencer-Theme verb) than with ‘nudge’ (Agent-Patient verb). Crucially, we do not expect this asymmetry with non-experiencer-entailing multidimensional adjectives: If these adjectives do not involve experiencer judges, people’s answers to the judge question (3) should not depend on whether the preceding subject is an experiencer. Thus, the Agent-Patient_PPT and the Agent-Patient_Multidim conditions are predicted to yield similar proportions of subject-opinion responses.

**Results:** As shown in the figure, the rate of subject-opinion responses is highest in the ExpTheme_PPT condition. Statistical analyses (lmer, using R) reveal a main effect of verb type (p<.03; more subject-opinion responses with Experiencer-Theme verbs than Agent-Patient verbs), no main effect of adjective type, and crucially a significant verb-type by adjective-type interaction (p<.001). Indeed, planned comparisons confirm that (i) with PPTs, Experiencer-Theme verbs result in a significantly higher rate of subject-opinion responses than Agent-Patient verbs (p<.001), but (ii) with non-PPT multidimensional adjectives, both verb types yield comparable rates of subject-opinion responses (p>.6, i.e. no significant difference).

Thus, the patterns with Experiencer-Theme verbs show that in contexts where an experiencer is available, it is indeed a highly preferred choice as the judge of PPTs (ExpThe_PPT condition). Additional analyses show that in conditions with Experience-Theme verbs, the rate of subject-opinion responses is significantly lower with multidimensional adjectives than with PPTs (ExpThe_MultiDim vs. ExpThe_PPT, p<.001), indicating that multidimensional adjectives do not ‘seek out’ experiencer judges as strongly as PPTs. Our results provide experimental support for the claim that a key property of PPTs – but not of regular multidimensional adjectives – is that they involve experiencer judges.
Selected references: