NON-FINITE COMPLEMENTS OF PERCEPTION VERBS

Mihaela Manasia, Assist, Prof., PhD, "Constantin Brâncuși" University of Târgu-Jiu

Abstract: This paper focuses on the non-finite verbal complements of perception verbs from a cross-linguistic perspective. It is known that verbs of perception are likely to receive different types of interpretations partly determined by the very choice of the verb, syntax of its complements and context. Due to space limitations, the main objective of our study is to identify the correlation between the semantic types of complements and their syntactic forms.

Keywords: non-finite complements, verbal complements, verbs of perception, cross-linguistic analysis.

Non-finite verbal complements of perception verbs represent an important type of complementation for this class of verbs. The non-finite clause is formed by a noun phrase functioning as a subject and a non-finite verb (an infinitive, an *-ing* form). In English non-finite clauses are of three types: the full infinitive, bare infinitive and *-ing* forms.

The construction with a full infinitive is specific to English and is also called the ***to-infinitive.*** According to Helle (2006 qtd Schule 2000: 51), this construction consists of an accusative logical subject followed by the infinitive marker *to*, the verb in the infinitive and – if transitive – an accusative object.

It is used only with passive verbs:

(1) "a. It was followed by the entrance of a young man whom I at once *saw to be* a foreigner. (Miller 2003a qtd James)

b. He looked back and *saw* it *to belong* to Videl. (Miller 2003a)

c. The wind was gentler than he remembered, the rocks somehow less harsh, and when he had risen above the level of the land, he *saw* it *to have become* greener, more fertile, more welcoming. (Miller 2003a)"

Example (1a) is typical given that the verbal phrase contains the term *be*. The second one includes the purely stative verb *belong*. The sentences would be ungrammatical if *to* were removed without further modification. On the other hand, they all allow a reasonable paraphrase by a *that*-clause. The impossibility of direct perception is confirmed by a potential difference between the time of the perceived event and time of perception like in (340c), because of the incompatibility of direct perception and perfect infinitive (*to have become*). Declerck (1982) observes that the *to-infinitive* complement is impossible with the verb '*watch'*, given its incompatibility with indirect perception. These uses of perception verbs are similar to those of the cognitive verbs '*know'* and '*believe'*, which confirms once again the connection between indirect perception and cognition.

Romanian and French do not have at their disposal any non-finite complementation corresponding to the above examples.

The association verb of perception and bare infinitive prototypically reproduces an act of direct perception of an event. Besides the experiencer subject, there is also the perceived

BDD-V631 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-11-08 22:55:24 UTC)

participant (for instance *her, people*) who is responsible for the process expressed by the infinitive:

(2) a. Engl. I *saw* her close the door.

Fr. Je l'*ai vu* claquer la porte.

b. Eng. You *hear* people accuse the government of ruining the country economy.

Fr. Vous *entendez* les gens accuser le gouvernement de ruiner l'économie du pays.

"In most Indo-European languages, the direct perception of an event is represented by the construction [perceiver NP1 + perception verb + perceived participant NP2 + infinitive]. In French, the position of the perceived participant varies: it can be anteposed or postposed to the infinitive." (Enghels 2009: 763). However, linguists have demonstrated that the opposition between direct and indirect perception is a continuum, and that the boundary between the two categories is not very clear. It is therefore appropriate to consider, based on examples, whether the infinitive construction is only a direct perception process. Declerck (1983) examines the hypothesis according to which this construction potentially contains deductive elements and thus denotes processes of indirect perception. In '*I see Peter run to his house'* some prior knowledge would allow me to conclude that Peter runs to his house and not somewhere else. We know where Peter lives and we conclude based on our observation that he is running in a certain direction in order to go home.

Similarly to Declerck (1982), in the above examples we do not offer an interpretation in terms of indirect perception given that the deduction process is not a prolonged reflection as in the real acts of indirect perception:

(3) I *see* what you mean.

Indeed, '*I see Peter run to his house'* represents a process of physical and concrete direct perception. Thus, the infinitive construction appears to be confined to the field of direct perception.

Cornilescu (2012:19) also highlights the fact that the characteristics of the infinitive construction derive from the semantics of physical perception and insists upon the simultaneity between the events in the main and subordinate clauses. The presence of a time adverbial would necessarily affect both events: 'I saw the boy arrive *yesterday'*.

Other properties mentioned refer to the impossibility of negating the infinitive clause (**I heard him not enter*) and its incompatibility with "any other sentence-level adverbs, such as speaker-oriented or modal adverbs" (Cornilescu 2012 qtd Bennis and Hoeckstra 1989)

This complementation structure is only specific to English and French while its presence in Romanian would be ungrammatical:

(4) Engl. I heard the boy *leave*.

Ro. –

Fr. J'ai entendu le garçon *partir*.

The *–ing* form complement[1] represents the next important non-finite complementizer which fully deserves our attention. It can be found in a significant number of languages and corresponds to a process of direct perception.

[1] As we shall further see, various linguists also refer to *–ing forms* as gerunds or participles. We accept all this terminology but we shall only use that of *–ing forms* because we view it as having a larger sphere, including the other two terms as well.

BDD-V631 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-11-08 22:55:24 UTC)

In English, cases where perception verbs are followed by a sequence made up of a noun phrase (NP) and an *–ing* form are quite frequent. Opinions differ regarding the status of this construction. Although many envisage it as a unified unit, other scholars (Kortmann 1995, Quirk 1985, Langacker 1991, etc.) consider that there are sufficient semantic, syntactic and cognitive reasons for treating it as a unit composed of two separate constituents. "The treatment of this construction (NP and an *–ing* form) as two different constituents implies that the *–ing* form functions as a participle, where the NP is the direct object of the main verb and the *–ing* form is an adjunct depictive of the NP; whereas the interpretation of this construction as a single unit functions as a direct object of the main verb". (Gomez Castejon, 2007: 36)

From a semantic point a view, the construction with the NP and the *–ing* form expresses an event interpreted as the direct object of the main perception verb. According to Duffley (1999: 227), the direct object behaves as the element 'that which is/was [verb]ed'. For instance, in '*They hear the dog barking' 'that which is heard'* is both the noun phrase *the dog* and the action denoted by the *–ing* form - '*barking'* and not only one of these elements. This would be an argument in favour of the treatment as a whole unit.

To this semantic argument, others of a syntactical nature are added:

- the use of a genitive or possessive pronoun:

They hear the dog's barking/the barking of the dog / its barking.

- the compatibility with pseudo-cleft sentences:

What they heard was the dog barking/the dog's barking.

- the use of the pronoun *it* or *that*:

We heard it/that.

Nevertheless, the analysis of this structure as a whole is incompatible with the passive:

*The dog barking was heard. (by us)

The dog was heard.

We shall no longer insist upon the interpretation of this structure either as a unified or separate unit because it is not an essential aspect in our research. The same sequence of a noun phrase and the equivalent of the *–ing* is also characteristic of the Romance languages under investigation:

(5) Engl. I see *Ann doing* the dishes.

Ro. O văd pe *Ana spălând* vasele.

Fr. Je vois *Anne faisant* la vaisselle.

The common characteristic of this structure is the fact that in all three examples the noun phrase functions as a direct object while the gerund is an "adjunct depictive" (Borgonovo, 1996: 3).

Similarly to the infinitive construction, the *–ing* form complement is characterized by compulsory temporal simultaneousness of the main and subordinated events. However, differences still exist at the level of aspectual relationships. The perceived event begins either before, continues and ends (or not) simultaneously with the moment of perception, or begins and ends with the act of perception. The first scenario describes the development of the events in '*I see Mary preparing dinner'* while the second corresponds to '*I see Mary prepare dinner'*. The first fundamental difference between the *–ing* form and the infinitive complement consists, of an aspectual contrast between progressive and non-progressive. Therefore, the opposition *–ing form* vs. *infinitive* is usually described in terms of

BDD-V631 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-11-08 22:55:24 UTC)

imperfectivity and *perfectivity*. The *–ing* form denotes any moment in the development of a process without regard to its beginning or end, while the use of the infinitive implies a total and perfective consideration of the perceived event. Examples such as '*He saw the woman drown'* and '*I saw my dog die'* show the subordinated event in its totality: '*the woman drowned'* and '*the dog is dead'*. On the contrary, examples with the gerund '*He saw the woman drowning (but she was rescued)'* and '*I saw my dog dying'* do not imply the achievement of a final point: the woman was drowning but they were able to save her and my dog is not necessarily dead.

-Ing forms express a non-accomplished process while the infinitive construction represents a completed event.

Recently, it has been argued that the infinitive is rather neutral in aspect than perfective. The infinitive is aspectually and temporally unmarked because it focuses both on the culmination of the event but also on its beginning and development. Nevertheless, this distinction was not accepted by all linguists. After identifying two types of progressives in Spanish, namely, real and pseudo progressives, Porras (1984:282) considers *–ing* forms following verbs of perception to be a pseudo-progressive imposing a static perspective: "[…] the situation reported by the speaker in a gerundial perception verb complement is said to be statively interpreted because it is conceived as the perception of just a portion of the whole, situation which is supposed to be expanded backwards as well as forwards and thus there are previous and subsequent segments of the same situation which are not captured by the experiencer because of the nondurative condition of the perception." Thus, the *–ing* form and infinitive complement impose both a static and dynamic perspective on the perceived event.

The same idea is endorsed by Van der Meer (1994: 477-479) when referring to the English *'-ing'* structure: "[…] the construction with *–ing* gives a static, frozen picture, whereas that with bare infinitive gives a dynamic picture. […] After verbs of perception *-ing* participles as object complements, in the construction under discussion, refer to situations the object is perceived in."

Nevertheless, Souesme (1990) does not accept the distinction between the *–ing* form and infinitive complements only in terms of aspectual interpretation. On the contrary, the author believes that the variation between these two non-finite forms of the verb fundamentally changes the interpretation of the phrase. The use of the *–ing* form would imply that the identified event is prior to perception and that the speaker recognizes the existence of previous occurrences of the process. By using the infinitive in (6a), for example, the speaker let the others know that s/he does not steal and never will, while the use of the *–ing* form in (6b) only allows her / him to say that s/he has never been seen performing the process of stealing, although s/he steals:

(6) a. You have never seen me *steal*.

b. You have never seen me *stealing*.

These two types of constructions differ not only in terms of aspectual relationships but also from a syntactic point of view. On the one hand, the possible coordination of an infinitive and an *–ing* form points to a structural similarity of the two complements.

(7) I heard the child *enter* the house and his mother *yelling* at him.

On the other hand, the absence of corresponding sentences has led several authors to conclude that there are structural differences between the two complements:

BDD-V631 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-11-08 22:55:24 UTC)

(8) I saw my hope *die / dying*.

While waiting, they saw a man *feeding / feed* the dog.

The class of perception verbs which accepts both *ing* and infinitive complements appears to be an interesting one as these syntactic differences are sometimes correlated with differences in the semantic features of the two constructions. Based on a series of tests, Di Tullio (1998) proves that the *–ing* form complement differs from the infinitive complement according to the number of the constituents it contains: always one in the case of the infinitive construction and often two for the *–ing* form. Some of the tests he proposes refer to the autonomy of the *–ing* form complement relative to the main clause, which allows for its displacement towards the beginning of the sentence comparatively with the infinitive complement which does not admit such a dislocation; the compatibility of the passive with the *–ing* form and incompatibility with the infinitive (*Mary was seen reading a novel /*read a novel).* We shall not insist upon the exhaustive presentation of the tests because it is not within the scope of our research given that some of them do not apply in the case of the languages under investigation.

Fernandez Lagunilla (2003:93) states that the use of the infinitive construction implies that what is perceived is always the event, whereas with the *–ing* form, there is a possible ambiguity between the perception of an event and that of an entity. Indeed, in (a), we see the event of Peter leaving home while (b) is interpreted either as '*We see Peter who is leaving home'*, or as '*Leaving home, we ourselves see Peter':*

(9) a. We saw Peter *leave* home.

b. We saw Peter *leaving* home.

Even though the above observations reveal the interesting possibility of a more complex contrastive study of the *–ing* form and the infinitival one, because of space limitations we shall not go in-depth.

Bibliography

1. Borgonovo, C. (1996), 'Gerunds and Perception Verbs'. *Langues et linguistique, no. 22,* pp. 1-19.
2. Cornilescu, Al. (2012), *Complementation in English. A Minimalist Approach*. București: Editura Universității București.
3. Declerck, R. (1982). 'The triple origin of participial perception verb complements', *Linguistic Analysis* 10: pp. 1-26.
4. Di Tullio, Ángela (1998): 'Complementos no flexivos de verbos de percepción física en español', *Verba* 24, Santiago de Compostela, pp 197-221.
5. Duffley P. J. (1999). 'The use of the Infinitive and the –Ing after verbs denoting the Beginning', Folia Linguistica XXXIII/3-4. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
6. Enghels, R. (2009), 'The syntactic position of the perceived participant as indicator of the internal structure of the Spanish and French infinitival complement', in *Linguistics: an interdisciplinary journal of the language sciences* 47: 3, pp. 759-791.
7. Fernández Lagunilla, M. (2003): 'Aproximación aspectual a la gramática de *ver*', in Girón Alconchel, J. L., Herrero Ruiz de Loizaga, F. J., Iglesias Recuero, S. and Narbona Jiménez,

BDD-V631 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-11-08 22:55:24 UTC)

A. (eds.), *Estudios ofrecidos al profesor José Jesús de Bustos Tovar*, Madrid: Editorial Complutense.
8. Gomez Castejon, A. (2007), 'Syntactic and Semantic Interaction in the Description of the English Gerund-Participle with Physical Perception Verbs', *International Journal of English Studies*. Universidad de Murcia, pp. 35-45.
9. Helle, P. (2006), *A contrastive analysis of perception verbs in English and German*, GRIN Verlag.
10. Kortmann, B. (1995), *Adverbial participial clauses in English*. *Converbs in Cross--linguistic perspective. Structure and meaning of adverbial verb forms – adverbial participles, gerunds.* Eds. M. Haspelmath and E. Konig. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
11. Miller, P. and Lowrey, B. (2003a), 'La complémentation des verbes de perception en français et en anglais' in Miller, P. and Zribi-Hertz, A. (eds.), *Essais sur la grammaire comparée du français et de l'anglais*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes.
12. Porras, J. E., (1984), *Nonfinite verbs and the stativity hypothesis in Spanish. A semantic approach to aspect*, Thesis (PhD), Texas: University Microfilms International.
13. Souesme, J-C. (1990), 'Un autre regard sur le Present Perfect', *Sigma: Linguistique Anglaise-Linguistique Générale*, *14*, pp. 157-191.
14. Van der Meer, G. (1994), 'Verbs of perception and their complementation', *English Studies 5*, pp. 468-480.

BDD-V631 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-11-08 22:55:24 UTC)