Deriving direct experience effects from adjectival lexical semantics

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Researchers studying adjectival predicates of personal taste (fun, tasty) have noted that these expressions give rise to certain presuppositions of direct experience when embedded beneath the subjective attitude verb find in small clauses (1-a), and when occurring with dativus iudicantis PPs (1-b) (cf. Hirvonen 2014 for find, Pearson 2013 for PPs).

(1) a. Alfonse finds the soup tasty.
   b. The soup is tasty {to / for} Alfonse.
   ⇝ Alfonse has tasted the soup.

In this talk, I present a method of deriving direct experience presuppositions arising in these grammatical contexts from the lexical semantics of the relevant adjective, rather than by stipulating constraints in the semantics of attitude verb or PP, as proposed e.g. in Stephenson (2007) and Hirvonen (2014).

I take as a case study a robust class of English adjectives, exemplified by frightening, which have the following features in common: (i) they are deverbal, being derived from object-experiencer psych verbs by means of the suffix -ing (frighten); (ii) their verbal counterparts are themselves morphologically related to nominals denoting experiential kinds (fright); (iii) like PPTs, they occur felicitously in find-embedding and dativus iudicantis constructions (2-a)-(2-b); (iv) their verbal counterparts appear with internal arguments to form constructions synonymous with these latter two (2-c), which also give rise to such presuppositions.

(2) a. Alfonse finds Halloween frightening.
   b. Halloween is frightening {to / for} Alfonse.
   c. Halloween frightens Alfonse.
   ⇝ Alfonse has experienced Halloween (in such a way that it could cause fright in him).

Frightening-type adjectives reveal their semantic connection with experiential kinds in virtue of their transparent morphological relation with nominals denoting those kinds, and I propose that their lexical semantics, in virtue of containing reference to these kinds, give rise to direct experience presuppositions in the above three contexts.

Such an account has three benefits. First, it allows us to account compositionally for the deep relations between such adjectives and their related experiential kind-denoting nominal counterparts, which can shed light on how the grammar of such adjectives is sensitive to the experience of individuals. Second, it allows for an explanation of direct experience
presuppositions in terms of more basic and independently required suppositions, without
stipulation, and derives the effect for a new grammatical construction (2-c). Finally, placing
the source of the direct experience presupposition in the adjective helps account for why not
all adjectives in contexts like (1-a)-(1-b) obviously give rise to such presuppositions (or at
least not in the same way), such as easy, useful, and likely: these plausibly do not contain
reference to experiential kinds in their semantics.¹

For concreteness, I adopt the framework in Lasersohn (2005), according to which all
extensions are given relative to a judge parameter \( j \); I also treat all extensions as being
evaluated relative to a standard of evaluation \( s \), similar to Kennedy (2007), relevant for
determining the cutoff point for the extension of positive-form adjectives (I omit worlds for
simplicity).

Let fright denote the experiential kind FRIGHT, treating kinds for simplicity as an inde-
pendent type.

(3)  \([\text{fright}]^{j,s} = \text{FRIGHT}\)

The verbalizing suffix -en then combines with an experiential kind \( k \) to produce a transitive
degree function \( \mathcal{K}_k \), which maps two individuals \( x, y \) to the degree (i.e., the quantity) of \( k \)
that \( y \) engenders in \( x \). Frighten-type verbs must denote degree functions because they are
gradable, as shown by their compatibility with degree morphology (5-a) and quantitative
how-questions (5-b).

(4)  a. \([\text{-en}]^{j,s} = \lambda k.\lambda x_e.\lambda y_e.\mathcal{K}_k(x)(y)\)
b. \([\text{frighten}]^{j,s} = \lambda x_e.\lambda y_e.\mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(x)(y)\)

(5)  a. Halloween frightens Alfonse \{a lot / more than it frightens Bethany\}.
b. How much does Halloween frighten Alfonse?

The adjectivizing suffix -ing then converts such a verb into a one-place gradable adjective
by forcing the first argument of the transitive measure function to be provided by the judge
parameter: thus frightening denotes a function from individuals to the quantity of fright
engendered in the relevant judge or standard by that individual,² making its denotation
similar to that of a Lasersohnian PPT, where its verbal counterpart was purely ‘descriptive,’
i.e. judge-insensitive.

(6)  a. \([\text{-ing}]^{j,s} = \lambda H_{e,ed}.\lambda x_e.\mathcal{H}(j)(x)\)
b. \([\text{frightening}]^{j,s} = \lambda x_e.\mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(j)(x)\)

The silent morpheme POS then converts intransitive degree functions into properties, which
map individuals to true just in case the degree function outputs a degree for that individual
at least as great as the degree determined by the standard \( s \).

¹Bylinina (2016) also discusses a number of evaluative adjectives that are find-embeddable, many of
which do not obviously enforce direct experience requirements.

²This makes no commitment as to how the value of this judge is supplied, and is consistent with nonin-
dexical contextualist, assessment-sensitive, early Lasersohnian relativist, and objectivist views. The proposal
can further be trivially altered so that judges are treated not as individuals but as standards, adopting a
functional mapping from individuals to such standards.
(7)  a. \([\text{POS}]^{j,s} = \lambda G_{ed}. \lambda x_e. G(x) \geq s(G)\)
    b. \([\text{POS frightens Alfonse}]^{j,s} = \lambda x_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(a)(x) \geq s(\lambda y_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(a)(y))\)
    c. \([\text{POS frightening}]^{j,s} = \lambda x_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(j)(x) \geq s(\lambda y_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(j)(y))\)

It follows that (8-a) makes crucial reference in its semantics to the degree of fright produced in Alfonse by Halloween \((\mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(a)(h))\); but if Alfonse has not had an experience of Halloween of the appropriate type, such that it could cause some degree of fright, there is no such degree, and the derivation crashes, resulting in presupposition failure in the absence of such experience. This experience requirement is preserved in presupposition holes like sentential negation (8-b).

(8)  a. \([\text{Halloween POS frightens Alfonse}]^{j,s} = 1 \text{ iff } \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(a)(h) \geq s(\lambda y_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(a)(y))\)
    b. \([\text{Halloween doesn’t POS frighten Alfonse}]^{j,s} = 1 \text{ iff } \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(a)(h) \not\geq s(\lambda y_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(a)(y))\)

Treating \textit{find} as in the relativist proposal in Sæbø (2009), and \textit{dativus iudicantus} PPs as in Lasersohn (2005) and MacFarlane (2014), as ‘radical judge shifters’ that serve merely to set the value of \(j\), an analogous result can be derived to secure the experiential presuppositions for these constructions, and the synonymy of (2-a)-(2-c): cf. (8-a), (9-c), (10-c).

(9)  a. \([\text{find}]^{j,s} = \lambda \phi_{e,t}. \lambda x_e. \phi(x)\)
    b. \([\text{find } \wedge \text{[Halloween POS frighteningness}]^{j,s} = \lambda x_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(x)(h) \geq s(\lambda y_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(x)(y))\)
    c. \([\text{Alfonse finds } \wedge \text{[Halloween POS frighteningness}]^{j,s} = 1 \text{ iff } \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(a)(h) \geq s(\lambda y_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(a)(y))\)

(10)  a. \([\text{to}]^{j,s} = \lambda x_e. \lambda G_{ed}. [\lambda y_e. G](x)\)
    b. \([\text{frightening to Alfonse}]^{j,s} = \lambda x_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(a)(x)\)
    c. \([\text{Halloween is POS frightening to Alfonse}]^{j,s} = 1 \text{ iff } \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(a)(h) \geq s(\lambda y_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{FRIGHT}}(a)(y))\)

This analysis then promises to apply to canonical PPTs: for \textit{fun} this application is straightforward, since plausibly \textit{fun} is an experiential kind that the nominal \textit{fun} denotes, making the adjective analogous to \textit{frightening} in denotation, albeit with less morphological transparency. \textit{Tasty} may instead measure the quantity of the experiential kind \textit{pleasure} engendered by the taste of an individual (where \textit{taste} is a relational noun denoting the relation of being a taste of something).

(11)  a. \([\text{taste}]^{j,s} = \lambda x_e. \lambda y_e. \text{taste'}(x)(y)\)
    b. \([\text{-y}]^{j,s} = \lambda R_{e,t}. \lambda x_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{PLEASURE}}(j)(\lambda y[R(x)(y)])\)
    c. \([\text{tasty}]^{j,s} = \lambda x_e. \mathcal{K}_{\text{PLEASURE}}(j)(\lambda y[\text{taste'}(x)(y)])\)

Thus a number of diverse experiential effects can plausibly be traced to adjectival lexical semantics and their reference to experiential kinds.

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\textsuperscript{3}Where \(\wedge\) is the intensionalizing operator over judges, i.e. for any expression \(\alpha\), \([\wedge \alpha]^{j,s} = \lambda x_e. [\alpha]^{x,s}\).
References


