Wylie Breckenridge, *Visual Experience: A Semantic Approach*

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Consider the color character of your visual experience of a gray patch. We communicate about this character with the following 'looks' sentence:

(1) The patch looks gray to you.

Perhaps, then, we can better understand what it is to have a visual experience with this character by examining the meaning of (1). And if this method extends to other characters of visual experience, then we can learn about visual experience in general through the study of 'looks' sentences. This is the "semantic approach" to visual experience promised in the title of Wylie Breckenridge's thought-provoking monograph. It leads him to two key theses: first, the character of a visual experience is the *way* that experience is occurring (i.e., adverbialism is true); second, visual experience does not have representational content (i.e., representationalism is false).

After the introductory chapter 1, Breckenridge turns, in chapter 2, to show that with (1) we communicate something about a *way*. Evidence for this comes, for instance, from echo questions, as in (2), and anaphora, as in (3).

(2) A: The patch looks gray to me.

B: The patch looks <u>how</u> to you?

(3) The patch looks gray to me, and it looks <u>that way</u> to you too.

The same pattern is displayed by sentences about ways of occurring for other sorts of events, like walking events, as in (4)–(5).

(4) A: Mary walks proud.

B: Mary walks <u>how</u>?

(5) Mary walks proud, and John walks <u>that way</u> too.

In chapter 3, Breckenridge discusses how we should think about ways of looking as particular examples of ways of occurring for events more generally.

When we say (1), then, what exactly is the way we are claiming your visual experience occurs? Breckenridge's answer is: "the maximally specific way w such that it is generically true that looking events whose stimulus is grey occur in way w" (68).[1] Analogously, when we say 'Mary walks proud', we mean that Mary walks in the maximally specific way such that it is generically true that walking events with proud agents occur in that way. There is a general mechanism, Breckenridge claims in chapter 4, that allows us to use adjectives to talk about ways all kinds of events occur. This mechanism is captured by a function, which takes two arguments, a property and an event kind, and returns the maximally specific way such that events of that kind with a participant with that property occur in that way. This same function is at work in both (1) and (4). Breckenridge's unification here of 'looks' talk with talk about other kinds of events is compelling, and I will return to it towards the end.

In chapter 5, Breckenridge considers the linguistic implementation of this function,[2] and in chapter 6, he incorporates implicit domain restriction into the account — something

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[1] "Maximally specific" because it is generically true that grey things look colored, but that is not all we communicate with (1). For conciseness, I will sometimes omit this qualification.

[2] He recognizes two options here. Considering the example in (1), the first possibility is that we could use 'gray' to mean *both* the property of being gray, and a way of looking. This is the way Breckenridge prefers to talk. But he also recognizes the option, more respectable

I'll also discuss more below. In chapter 7, he argues that his approach does not imply that visual experience requires conceptual capacities. He then extends his account — first in chapter 8 to other forms of 'looks' sentences, and then in chapter 9 to other characters of visual experience. This concludes Breckenridge's positive support for adverbialism.

In chapter 10, Breckenridge provides a new solution to the "many properties problem" facing adverbialism, and in chapter 11, he discusses how his theory deals with a variety of phenomena, from illusion and hallucination, to our ability to gain knowledge of the external world through experience. The book closes, in section 11.7, with an argument that the semantic approach undermines representationalism.

I would like now to consider whether the positive picture on offer can capture the meaning of all 'looks' sentences that we use to talk about the character of visual experience. Consider the character of the visual experience in (6).

(6) The cake looks good to you.

If Breckenridge is right, having a visual experience with this character is to have a visual experience that is occurring in a certain way. But what way? According to the semantic approach outlined above, it will be: the maximally specific way such that it is generically true that looking events whose stimulus is good occur in that way. On the face of it, this is an odd result. One source of oddness is that with (6) we don't seem to be saying that the cake looks to you the way good things in general look (good people? good books?), but

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from the point of view of compositionality, that a silent expression with this function as its meaning has a place in the logical form of (1), composing with 'gray', whose meaning is simply, as would be expected, the property of being gray.

rather, the way good cakes do. This issue Breckenridge does account for (chap. 6). His semantics involves quantification over events, and where there is quantification, we expect to find implicit domain restriction: the phenomenon whereby a sentence like 'Every chair is broken' is used to communicate not that absolutely every chair is broken but, say, that every chair *that is in this office* is broken. Similarly, then, (6) may communicate not about the way visual experiences with good stimuli occur, but rather about the way visual experiences with good stimuli *that are cakes* occur.

Some oddness remains, however. Consider a situation where we know that the best cakes are the worst decorated, and vice versa. It seems, still, that upon observing a beautifully-decorated cake, we can express something true with (6). But it's false that your visual experience is occurring in the way that visual experiences generally do when their stimulus is a good cake. Those, after all, look like messes, under the current stipulation.[3] Granted, there may be a way of using (6) in this scenario to express something false: something that could be paraphrased by 'The cake looks like it's good'. But my point is that it can also be used to speak truly, conveying something about the character of your visual experience that is not clearly captured by Breckenridge's semantics.

Could some further implicit domain restriction help? Perhaps with (6) we can talk about the way visual experiences generally occur when their stimulus is a cake that is good-*looking*? Perhaps. But then it just remains to clarify how this qualification works, and in a non-circular way.

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[3] For related discussion, see Martin 2010.

This issue also arises with other cases, including some Breckenridge himself mentions later in the book. In section 11.3, he discusses the transparency of visual experience: the fact that we sometimes attend to the character of our visual experience by attending to the things it is experience *of*. Along the way to his (very reasonable) explanation of how adverbialism can make sense of transparency, he brings up blurry vision. What does Breckenridge's theory have to say about the character of such an experience? We should presumably consider a sentence like (7).

(7) The scene looks blurry to you.

Does this mean that your visual experience is occurring in the way of experiences with blurry stimuli? It's not entirely clear what this amounts to.

Note that this line doesn't cast doubt on adverbialism itself, but rather on the particular way the character of a visual experience ends up being specified on Breckenridge's semantics. A convincing package combining adverbialism about all kinds of characters of visual experience with semantics for corresponding 'looks' sentences should pay more attention to examples like (6) and (7). And Breckenridge does claim to be covering *all* characters of visual experience: "Take any character c. What is it to have a visual experience with character c? […] There is a proposition p such that we can ask this question using the following 'look' sentence: 'What is it for it to look to you as if p?'" (123).[4] Granted, he later backs off from this universal claim, citing (8) as a challenge.

(8) Molly looks to John the same as Mary feels.

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[4] Note that by this point, Breckenridge has introduced a variant of the function I mentioned above, that takes a proposition as its first argument rather than a property. This function takes an event kind and a proposition and returns the maximally specific way such that events of that kind where that proposition is true occur in that way (110-111).

He notes that the most plausible proposition would be *that Molly is the same as Mary feels*,
but that it's not clear this is right (153–154). It's fair enough if Breckenridge's approach
doesn't yet cover all examples of visual experience. Let this, then, just be a plea for further
work on the semantics of a greater variety of 'looks' sentences — semantics that,
Breckenridge has convinced me, will likely be congenial to adverbialism about visual
experience.

The semantic approach not only supports adverbialism, but also undermines
representationalism (sec. 11.7). One might think that representationalism can best explain
certain features of visual experience. For instance, if a visual experience has
representational content, then we can easily explain why the experience is assessible for
accuracy: it's accurate just in case what it represents is true. But Breckenridge has
proposed that 'looks' sentences, like (9a), are about ways visual experiences occur, in just
the same way as 'walks' sentences, like (9b), are about ways walking events occur.
(9) a. Mary looks proud to you.

    b. Mary walks proud.

Just as we can say that the visual experience in (9a) is accurate just in case Mary is proud,
so too, we might say that the walking event in (9b) is accurate under that same condition. It
would thus be preferable, Breckenridge holds, to have a unified account.
Representationalism is not well-suited to this, as it's implausible that Mary's walking has
representational content. But Breckenridge's adverbialism can do better. The visual
experience in (9a) is occurring in the way that visual experiences with proud stimuli occur.
Thus, we can say that it is accurate just in case its stimulus *is* proud. Analogously, the

walking event in (9b) is occurring in the way that walking events with proud agents occur. And so *it* is accurate just in case *its* agent is proud. Breckenridge gives similar lines of reasoning for other features of visual experience, and he concludes that adverbialism is most promising, as it can explain them all in a way that unifies visual experience with other sorts of events.

While I am sympathetic to this conclusion, I would like to point out a striking contrast between 'looks' sentences and the others that Breckenridge unifies them with. A 'looks' sentence obligatorily contains a complement specifying a way of looking. A 'walks' sentence has no such requirement. To see this, notice that (10b) still means that there is a walking event with Mary as agent, whereas (10a) does not mean that you are having a visual experience with Mary as stimulus.

(10) a. *Mary looks to you.[5]

    b. Mary walks.

Does this signal an interesting non-linguistic difference between the events in question? I'm not sure. But the obligatoriness of the complement in (10a) leaves room for the view that visual experience is essentially representational, in a way that would be extremely implausible for walking events — at least taking language as a guide.

Breckenridge's book will surely be of interest to readers in philosophy of perception and philosophy of language. But its potential audience is also broader, given that it is an intriguing case study in a philosophical methodology that takes seriously the potential for

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[5] Here, '*' denotes ungrammaticality on the intended reading. This sentence is grammatical if it is instead parsed to mean that Mary looked to you, e.g., for advice. This reading is not relevant to the point I'm making.

language to be a window into substantive issues about the domain that that language is about.

Acknowledgments

References

Martin, M. G. F. 2010. "What's in a Look?" In *Perceiving the World*, edited by Bence Nanay, 160–225. Oxford: Oxford University Press.