

THE SEMANTIC NETWORK OF “SEE” (A CORPUS-BASED STUDY)

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***Abstract:** The research presents a corpus study of the perception verb **see**, which aims at highlighting the complex behaviour of eight of the most frequent patterns drawn from the Corpus of Contemporary American English. The paper examines how the meanings of the verb change according to the relationship between human vision and cognition. The descriptions and analyses in this study are usage-based and organized according to the contexts in which the verb appears.*

***Key words:** perception verbs, shift of meaning, corpus study, see*

1. Introduction

The present analysis focuses on the different extensions in the semantic field of the visual perception verb “see” in terms of prototype and metaphor that are central to Cognitive Linguistics.

The main purpose of the research, in more general terms, is to determine, analyse and classify the realization patterns of the verb by considering its various usages. The study reveals that there is a wide range of contexts in which this verb appears and seeks to answer what it means for a person to “see” in different linguistic situations.

2. Theoretical background

“See” takes the highest position in the perception verb hierarchy, followed by “hear” and consequently it enjoys a great prominence not only in terms of its frequency of use but also in its ability to express polysemous meanings (Sweetser, 1991; Viberg, 1983; Whitt, 2010). Table 1 (see Appendix) shows the extended (metaphorical) meanings of verbs of visual and auditory perception proposed by Ibarretxe-Antuñano (2002).

Lakoff (1987) states that the basic structure of our conceptual system consists of our ability to form mental images and the kinesthetic image-schematic structure that is comprised of images. These are not specific images which we constantly recall when using a language. They are what may be considered to be

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our subconscious understanding of the world around us based on the experience we have gained.

According to Johnson (1987, p. 172) structures of imagination form our experience. Our less comprehensible experiences become clear on the basis of more directly comprehensible ones. Johnson develops the idea that embodied experience appears to become noticeable through concepts which evolve from sensory and perceptual experience from our interaction with the world.

3. Research questions

In this paper, the perception verb “see” is studied with the objective to present its lexical meanings and the types of domains it covers. These domains are considered to be “neither totally free nor totally fixed” (Langacker, 2013, p. 39) and are to be understood according to the context in which they appear. Language affects cognition and perception and reflects the experience stored in the human mind as stated by Evans (2006, p. 497), “the range of linguistic units available to the language user massively undermine the range of situations, events, states, relationships and other interpersonal functions that the language user may potentially seek to use language to express and fulfill”.

Since “see” expresses a range of human activities connected with perception and cognition, the verb is examined first by paying attention to its meaning that refers to physical visual perception, and then to cover the meanings that involve mental processes. It is important to bear in mind, however, that these distinctions are made only for the purpose of the present analysis, as the various meanings of “see” often overlap with one another.

4. Methods

The present research is a corpus-based analysis which puts an emphasis on language in use. For this research, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) was employed, using the free, online version (<https://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>). The sentences taken from the COCA are indicated by the subject word or phrase being highlighted and marked by **underlined boldface** letters followed by a citation of the section, source and its year of publication indicated in parentheses at the end. The research presents a corpus study which aims at highlighting the complex behaviour of 8 of the most frequent patterns drawn from the COCA. The whole corpus of the key word “see” includes 612386 occurrences but that is not the volume of the corpus on which the present research is based for it includes only the most applicable and frequent patterns (see Appendix, Table 2). Since the present research is based on the idea that concepts depend on context, which is of main importance when narrowing

down the meanings they convey, the cognitive linguistic approach is reliable as an instrument to carry out the analysis and to test the hypotheses of the study.

5. Data Analysis and Results

5.1. Literal meanings

Pattern 1: An animate subject sees a physical object

Meaning: An animate subject perceives or observes a physical object with his/her eyes

The following examples present the meaning of the verb “see” from the point of view of visual perception in the physical sense, i.e, how we identify specific objects in the real world. The action presented may either be completed (1) or not completed (2). Consider the following corpus lines:

1. The witness reported he **saw** the suspect **enter** a burgundy SUV, possibly a Chevrolet Tahoe or GMS Yukon, that was parked on Root and eventually drove away northbound on Root. (NEWS: *Chicago Sun-Times*, 2016)
2. Oliver Spencer, stood when he **saw** us **entering** the room and walked over to greet us. (FIC: *Scholastic Scope*, 2006)
3. “I miss them to this day. Those originals, I’ll never get to **see** them again,” he says, surrounded by the sculptures in his studio: A firefighter, a mountain man, a hard-hat worker, a cowboy.” (NEWS: *Colorado Springs Gazette*, 2017)
4. Every time you **saw** him he had a smile on his face, but when it came time to do his job, he was there (MAG: *Daily Beast*, 2017)
5. Have you **seen him** here before? (FIC: *Midnight crossing: a mystery*, 2017)

The perception verb “see” in the physical sense of vision refers to an event that ranges from “catching sight of” in the third sentence (3), which is an instantaneous event that lasts for only a second, to “recognizing” what or who the object is as in sentence (5). The primary meaning of “spotting” precedes that of duration, conveyed by “recognizing”, since “spotting” is a requirement for the act of “seeing” and “recognizing”. Moreover, “seeing” is unlikely to last for more than a few seconds if it is supposed to be continuous. When there is a time expression of an utterance that lasts for more than a moment (4), “see” presents a series of repetitive occurrences.

Even when “see” is used to actually mean “noticing” something, as in sentence (3), it still requires time, since, perceiving something involves more than just “catching sight of”.

It therefore follows that it is impossible to isolate completely one pattern from the other.

The doer of “seeing” completes the task of “seeing” when one interprets what has been captured with one’s visual organ. It is a cognitive task that has been accomplished.

Pattern 2: An animate subject sees a document or a document part

Meaning: An animate subject refers to a document or document part for further information

Not surprisingly in the search of the COCA, “see” is used in the meaning of “to refer to” in a great number of the corpus examples, often appearing in parentheses and instructing the reader to read another part of the article or another text, etc.

Consider the following examples:

6. Excluding part-time workers affects White women most (**see Table** A1 of the appendix). (**ACAD**: *American Economist*, 2017)
7. **See** Telephone Interview with Judge 2 (Mar. 8, 2016); **see also** Telephone Interview with Judge 1 (Mar. 8, 2016). (**ACAD**: *Stanford Law Review*, 2017)
8. His most recent book is *Tiny Homes on the Move* (**see Page** 64 to order). Find a list of the tools mentioned here. (**MAG**: *Mother Earth News*, 2015)

Analysing the corpus lines, it becomes clear that the search of “see” seems to have been affected by the high concentration of academic and technical texts in COCA and appears in the meaning of “refer to” mostly in academic texts.

Pattern 3: An animate subject meets someone

Meaning: An animate subject goes to and spends some time with someone, typically for social reasons

9. We hope to **see you** at the show. (**MAG**: *TechCrunch*, 2017)
10. Wary of returning to his parents, he goes to **see** his **friend** Bassam, who treats him with what hospitality he can. (**NEWS**: *Christian Science Monitor*, 2015)

In (9) and (10) the subject will not only see someone but there is an appointment to meet or visit someone. That means that further cognitive processes follow from the act of seeing.

5.2. Metaphorical meanings

Metaphorical meanings of “see” are examined to analyse how the meaning of the verb, describing one’s visual experience, is associated with its conceptual meanings. The analysis shows that the extended meanings of the verb “see” depend on the degree to which it prompts either physical perception or visual mental imagery.

Since the aim of this paper is to examine human cognition from a linguistic point of view, the relationship between vision and cognition is considered by analysing the metaphorical meanings of “see”, which primarily bear meanings different from those that refer to physical visual perception. These meanings can be further divided into two groups: meanings that are connected with physical visual perception and those that are not. The transfer in the meanings of the verb “see” appear towards either those that depend on the literal meaning of the verb or those that are more related to cognition.

5.3. Visual Perception-Dependent Meanings

In this part, the uses of the verb “see” are considered by examining the “shift” in its meaning depending on the mental activities that are involved along with physical visual perception. The meaning shifts are classified by the types of additional activities provoked, largely dependent on the characteristics of the object of “seeing”.

5.3.1. To Appreciate/Read/Interpret

The meaning of visual perception in a physical sense is implied in the use of the verb “see”. The object of seeing is physically perceived through vision. Additional cognitive processes, apart from physical perception, are necessary for accomplishing the act of “seeing” the object. Consider the following pattern and examples in an extended context:

Pattern 4 : An animate subject sees a movie/ a play, a book or information

Meaning: An animate subject watches a movie/ reads a book for entertainment

11. the same television. And business is consistently strong. #“Everyone comes to **see movies**,” she says. “Young people, old people.” (NEWS: *Christian Science Monitor*, 2009)

12. When you **see** the **book**, you’ll know what I mean. (SPOK: PBS_Tavis, 2006)

13. as we will **see below**, each mode of numerical sameness is introduced in precisely the same manner, and each is subsequently described in the material mode. (ACAD: *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 2016)

The use of “see” in the examples above naturally bears the meaning of actual visual perception. Still, all of the meanings of the verb are different from “see” as a physical process, as they refer not only to visual perception, but also to further cognitive processes that follow it. However, there is not a clear distinction between physical visual perception and visual perception implicating additional cognitive activities.

In (11) ~ (13), the visual perception is a means for completing a task. In other words, “see” in sentence (11) means to watch the film and understand the story, and enjoy it or not. Thus, the meaning of “see” in the sentences above is closely related to some kind of emotional or mental reaction and is profiled when the object is a movie, a play, or some kind of performance. The act of seeing does not only refer to obtaining visual information from the object, but it also evokes a reaction to what has been seen, either consciously or subconsciously. The same meaning of “see” is observed in the sentences:

14. We will be there. I’d love to get together, have a meal, and **see** the **play**.
(MAG: *Town and Country*, 2010 (Dec 2010))

15. I did **see** the **program** that had your sister on it, on Frontline. (SPOK: CNN_King, 1990)

On the other hand, a person who is told to “see the book” (12) would, in most cases, come to the conclusion that the utterer expects him/ her not only to visually perceive the book, but also, to read it.

The use of “see” in sentence (13) is basically the same as that in sentence (12), as it also requires as a precondition the existence of some text to be read. The activity presented in sentence (13) requires reading the information and not just “seeing” it in the literal sense as is the case with the meaning of “see”, for instance, a building as in the following sentence:

16. I couldn’t **see** the **building** at first. It looked like a gap in the skyline and one more empty lot. (FIC: *Snowblind*, 2014)

The meaning of “reading” which the verb “see” bears in sentences (12) and (13) can also include the meaning which not only involves understanding of the written texts but also “interpreting” what one has seen/ read. The following two examples present the use of “see” in similar contexts:

17. So we need to help people **see** the **data** in a way they can process. (MAG: News-Medical.net, 2017)

18. I would love to **see** any **information** that proves that otherwise. (SPOK: THE FIVE, 2017)

In (17) and (18), the aim of “seeing” the data is predetermined, with an implication of the necessity for an in-depth understanding of what is presented, as can be inferred from the phrase “in a way they can process” or “that proves”. It can be concluded that “see” has a stronger implication of “understanding” by internalizing and processing what has been captured by sight. “See” indicates the activity of “interpreting” what is being physically perceived through the visual sense organ.

Therefore, whenever the verb “see” is used in this kind of context in all of the corpus lines above, it also implies one’s reaction to the experience of “seeing”. It can be concluded that the distinction assumed at the beginning of this research between the physical and the figurative sense of the verb is not something definite, but is a matter of degree. In some cases, the verb “see” expresses more physical aspects, in others, more figurative ones. Consequently, such shifts in the meaning are not explicitly evident in the linguistic system. They are strongly dependent on the context in which they appear.

5.3.2. To Check/ Confirm

Pattern 5: An animate subject sees an object or a situation

Meaning: An animate object sees an object or a situation in order to check or confirm to verify an object.

The meaning of “check” and “confirm” is to validate the object through what has been observed or seen. The examples given in this section describing the use of “see” are based on the assumption that in these cases the meaning of physical perception of “see” has changed more towards confirmation than interpretation. This change, however, does not exclude the meaning of “appreciating,” “reading” and “interpreting” described in the previous part, as the process of checking includes these activities. It is clear that one has to “read” or “interpret” what has been seen in order to “check” or “confirm” the text. The following corpus lines present the use of “see” in this meaning:

19. I didn’t ask who was driving. I asked to see his ID. (SPOK: *Fresh Air*, 2017)
20. The guard with the dog whistled and his partner went to see what he’d found. (FIC: *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 2016)
21. His wife calls to see how he’s doing. (FIC: *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, 2016)

In the case of (19), when one is asked to show one’s passport, or any other official document for verification, one does not expect the other person to be satisfied by only “seeing” its existence. One would know that their passport will be opened and read, and probably examined in detail. Similarly, “see” in sentence (20) also implies not only the meaning of just visually perceiving

something but also carefully checking what is happening and performing other activities that are necessary.

In both (20) and (21), “seeing” does not refer only to visual perception, although it is likely that such will be included as a part of the whole process. The meaning of “see” here also expresses some of the expected activities that follow.

“See,” in the meaning of “check” or “confirm,” is also present in the construction [“see” + that] or [“see” + to it that]. The corpus lines with a longer context demonstrate this more clearly:

22. And we would want to inspect and **see that** they were safe. We go into their room. We’d want to know more about anybody who was sequestered in a room for more than 12 hours. That would be -- that would be something that would -- our people have been trained too look out for. (FIC: *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, 2016)

23. By the same token, in the State Department, you’ve got people stationed all over the world. So a big part of your job is **to see to** it that that organization works. And it’s not that difficult, but you can do it. You know how to do that. (SPOK: CBS, 2017)

While “checking” and “confirming” are activities included in the process of “seeing” in (22) and (23), there is an association that the subject will be involved in further activities that are necessary to become aware of the condition reported in the that-clause. The subject is expected to take care of the expected result².

Thus, as demonstrated in this section, the meaning of “see” connected with the concepts of “checking” or “confirming” depends not only on linguistic contexts but also to a great extent on our real knowledge of the world.

5.3.3. To Find Out

Pattern 6: See + that-clause or wh-clause

Meaning: An animate subject achieves an understanding of a proposition or a concept presented in a that-clause or a wh-clause

Another usage of “see,” which covers the meaning “check” or “confirm,” but shifts to that of “find out”, is to be found in the construction [“see” + interrogative], as in:

24. “We’ll **see what** we can do.” **See what** we can do? (NEWS: *Colorado Springs Gazette*, 2017)

2. Nedelcheva (2019) studies ‘see to’ as a verb-particle construction and compares it to the synonymous ‘look to’ in its sense “taking care of”. The difference between them depends on their structural features: ‘see to’ is followed by a noun phrase, while ‘look to’ in this particular sense precedes another verb.

25. Let's take a look back at this moment and **see who** paid the cost. (SPOK: *Fresh Air*, 2017)

26. 1:30 a.m. when he heard a knock at the window, and looked outside to **see who** was knocking, police said. (NEWS: *Baltimore Sun*, 2017)

27. I'm glad you looked to **see who** was there before you opened the door. We'd have less crime if everyone would do that. (FIC: Double fudge brownie murder: a Hannah Swensen mystery with recipes, 2017)

In sentences, such as in (26) and (27), the purpose is to "find out" something unknown, for instance, who is at the window/ door.

A person who is instructed to perform the activity in sentence (27) would not interpret it as they are expected only to see someone at the door. The act of "seeing" in the sentences above includes going to the window, looking through it and noticing the one standing outside, identifying the person, and giving an account of what one has observed. That is to say, "see", combined with an interrogative, implies the meaning of "finding out an answer".

It is important to bear in mind, however, that while physical visual perception is part of the entire process implied by "see" in (26) and (27), in the contexts given in sentences (24) and (25) "see" meaning "find out" does not necessarily require visual perception. It follows that while visual perception is the major means of accomplishing the task implied by "see" there are occurrences where visual perception in the physical sense is not necessary. That is, "see" can bear the meaning of "find out" in an abstract sense.

Lastly, the phrase "see if," presents another usage of "see" in the meaning of "find out", as in the following sentence:

28. After a few minutes, she went outside to **see if** any neighbors were hurt. That's when she saw the wounded people on top of each other. (NEWS: *Chicago Tribune*, 2017)

The phrase "see if" may be considered as a type of interrogative as it implies a search for a yes-or-no answer. In this sense, the meaning of "see" in (28) is close to that of "see" in the ["see" + interrogative] construction, with the implication of "finding out" being profiled. Visual perception again is a means of finding out the answer in the context of (28). Yet, the following corpus lines suggest that the same construction can be used to mean finding out an answer through one's senses other than vision:

29. We now need to look to **see if** this works with patients as well as ensure safety (MAG: News-Medical.net, 2017)

30. without the pressure of a trade show, and I'm truly excited to **see if** the company can make this business model work. (MAG: *Engadget*, 2017)

31. We'll **see if** that changes. (SPOK: NPR, 2017)

In these sentences vision is no longer the main means of obtaining information, thus the meaning of visual perception which the verb “see” denotes is no longer present.

6. Mental Imagery-Dependent Meanings

The meanings of the verb “see” that are described below do not require physical vision, and consequently, may be accomplished either with or without a sensory organ.

6.1. To Understand / Find Out

Pattern 7: I/ we see

Meaning: “I/ we see” expresses understanding or acceptance of the meaning or implication of some proposition

Probably the most common abstract meaning of “see” is “understand” or “find out”. The use of “see” as a synonym of either to “understand” or to “find out”, however, again depends on context. Consider the following sentence often used in spoken English conversations:

32. OK. **I see**. Got it. (SPOK: CBS FACE THE NATION 10:30 AM EST, 2017)

The verb “see” in (32) bears the meaning of “understand,” although, “I understand what you mean” sounds more formal. This meaning seems to occur most frequently in the phrase “I see” or “You see.” The Corpus of Contemporary American English contains a total of 29406 instances of the phrase “I see” or “You see”, 9119 of which are to be found in spoken language.

The examples (33) ~ (35) are just a few of the many examples found in the COCA:

33. I **see** what you **mean**. (FIC: A beeline to murder, 2017)

34. You will **see** what I **mean** after you try them (FIC: Rosalia’s bittersweet pastry shop, 2017)

35. Oh, I **see** what you **mean** (SPOK: TODAY SHOW 7:00 AM EST, 2016)

The phrase “I see what you mean” is basically used as a single sentence. There are a total of 981 collocations “see + mean” in the COCA, compared to 370 for “understand + mean”. The expression “I see what you mean” appears as a set phrase in various contexts.

6.2. To Gain impression/ Express opinion

Pattern 8: An animate subject sees a proposition or a concept

Meaning: An animate subject achieves an understanding of a proposition or a concept

Gaining a certain impression/ understanding a proposition is another mental meaning that the verb “see” conveys. The following corpus lines demonstrate that one can gain an impression of someone or an event without physically “seeing” the person or the situation.

36. His colleagues **saw him** as emblematic of a new style in baseball, part of a crop of magnetic players (many of them Latino) who’d injected a little fire into the game’s worn traditions. (MAG: *Slate Magazine*, 2017)

37. I didn’t **see anything** wrong with it. (MAG: *Fortune*, 2016)

In sentences (36) and (37) “see” denotes the meaning of knowledge and impression gained by the subject of the sentence. A possible synonym for “see” in the sentences above may be “have a sense” or “have an impression”. The performer of the action does not gain an understanding through visual perception but is sharing his/ her own impression.

It cannot be determined how much of this impression is derived from what has been seen and how much comes from other sources.

This meaning of “see”, which is associated with the act of gaining a certain impression and making judgments about what has been seen, also covers the meaning “find out” and “understand” analysed in the previous part of this research. Consider the following examples:

38. **I see** a lot of hard work and heart going into practice... (NEWS: OregonLive.com, 2017)

39. Having lived through everything **I see** life differently now, (MAG: *The Atlantic*, 2017)

40. **I see** it more as a sign of desperation (NEWS: *Chicago Tribune*, 2017)

41. **I see** this as opportunity. (NEWS: OregonLive.com, 2017)

The corpus lines demonstrate that when the verb appears in various contexts, it often has different meanings, which means that any lexical item can be ambiguous. Thus, lexical ambiguity is not an issue to be examined only on the basis of a single sentence extracted from the context of the real world.

7. Conclusion and implications

The survey of the perception verb “see” has been conducted to examine how it can be interpreted in various contexts. The analysis has shown the different meanings that the verb expresses and the ways in which they change according

to the specific context and the concepts associated with it. The elicitations from the present paper may contribute to:

- identifying and classifying the literal and metaphorical uses of the verb “see”;
- the analysis of its linguistic realizations;
- examining its various meanings using actual patterns in natural texts and the kinds of cognitive processes involved when the perception verb is used in various contexts in English.
- within the domain of Foreign Language Acquisition (FLA) the study will contribute to a better understanding of cross-cultural communication and will thus help language teachers build up effective methods to improve learners’ competence in studying perception verbs.

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Appendix

Table 1. Visual conceptual metaphors in the perceptual domain (Ibarretxe-Antuñano 2002, p. 114)

Vision:
• Understanding is seeing
• Foreseeing is seeing
• Imagining is seeing
• Considering is seeing
• Studying/ Examining is seeing
• Finding out is seeing
• Making sure is seeing
• Taking care is seeing/ Looking after
• Witnessing is seeing
• Experiencing is seeing
• Helping/ going with someone is seeing

Table 2. Literal and figurative meanings of the perception verb “see”

Physical meaning	Figurative meanings	
	Visual Perception-Dependent Meanings	Mental Imagery-Dependent Meanings
<p>Pattern 1 : An animate subject sees a physical object</p> <p>Meaning : An animate subject perceives or observes a physical object with his or her eyes</p>	<p>Pattern 4 : An animate subject sees a movie /a play, a book or information</p> <p>Meaning: An animate subject watches a movie / reads a book for entertainment</p>	<p>Pattern 7: I /we see</p> <p>Meaning: “I/ we see” expresses understanding or acceptance of the meaning or implication of some proposition</p>

Physical meaning	Figurative meanings	
<p>Pattern 2 : An animate subject sees a document or a document part</p> <p>Meaning: An animate subject refers to a document or document part for further information</p>	<p>Pattern 5: An animate subject sees an object or a situation</p> <p>Meaning: An animate object sees an object or a situation in order to check or confirm to verify an object</p>	<p>Pattern 8: An animate subject sees a proposition or a concept</p> <p>Meaning: An animate subject achieves an understanding of a proposition or a concept</p>
<p>Pattern 3 : An animate subject meets someone</p> <p>Meaning: An animate subject goes to and spends some time with someone, typically for social reasons</p>	<p>Pattern 6: See + that-clause or wh-clause</p> <p>Meaning: An animate subject achieves an understanding of a proposition or a concept embodied in that-clause or wh-clause</p>	

Abbreviations:

ACAD – Academic

FIC – Fiction

MAG – Magazine

SPOK – Spoken