

Seeing or Saying?

Alex Byrne

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Correspondence

Alex Byrne, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Email: abyrne@mit.edu

Brit Brogaard's provocative and insightful book brings language to bear on a central debate in the philosophy of perception, between the representationalist and the relationalist. Here is how she summarizes the overall argument:

One of the main disputes in the current perception literature concerns the question of whether visual experience is fundamentally a matter of being related to an external object and its visually perceptible property instances or is rather a matter of representing the world in a particular way. In this book, I have argued that the semantics of 'look', 'seem', and 'see' can be used to settle the dispute in favor of the representational view. (Brogaard, 2018: 180; all references to this book unless otherwise noted)

Although formulations of the representational view differ, for present purposes we can take it to be the idea that perception is, or constitutively involves, a kind of propositional attitude, which we can call *exing* (Byrne, 2009). Brogaard broadens the focus from seeing to other perceptual modalities in the last chapter; here we can concentrate on seeing. According to the representationalist, when one opens one's eyes, one exes a proposition concerning one's environment—that proposition being the visual system's "best guess" as to the distal scene, given the proximal retinal stimulation. When one "takes one's experience at face value", one forms a judgement or belief with this proposition as its content, or perhaps some weaker proposition. Illusions are cases where one exes a false proposition. (Hallucinations we can leave as an unsolved problem.)

If the postulated propositional attitude of *exing* were simply *seeing* (or, more generally, *perceiving*), then the representational view would be no more controversial than the parallel thesis about believing or knowing. Belief and knowledge wear their relations to propositions on their sleeves; at the very least language strongly suggests that to believe and know that Brogaard wrote *Seeing and Saying* is to stand in the relation expressed by 'believes' (and 'knows') to the (true) proposition that Brogaard wrote *Seeing and Saying*. But seeing is not *exing*: one can see that Brogaard wrote *Seeing and Saying* by picking up a copy and noting that Brit's name is on the cover, as the author's name invariably is. Even though one gains this piece of knowledge by vision, typical proponents of the representational view would not want to say that the "content of experience" is (or entails) the

proposition that Brogaard wrote *Seeing and Saying*: the visual system has no information about conventions in the book publishing industry. Brogaard's route from semantics to the representational view is considerably more subtle and indirect. 'Look' and (to a lesser extent) 'seem' will be the focus of this comment; unfortunately Brogaard's fascinating and instructive chapter about 'see' will have to be passed over for reasons of space.

What is the rival relational view? As Brogaard in effect notes, it is not a straightforward matter to distinguish relationalism from representationalism, but perceptual illusions provide the clearest illustration. If a red tomato is viewed in green light, it looks black, and one might naively take it to be black. On the relationalist view, this is not to be explained because one expresses a proposition that entails the false proposition that the object is black. Instead, one is perceptually presented with the red tomato as it is, but in a way that is somehow misleading.

It is worth pointing out that the back cover blurb seems to saddle the representationalist with some undesirable (and unnecessary) commitments. The relationalist is described as holding that "the visual experience that makes up your seeing is a direct 'perceptual' relation to an external, mind-independent object", and the representationalist as holding that "visual experience has a representational content that mediates between you and your environment when you visually perceive". The example given is that of seeing "a blue coffee mug", so the blurb is naturally read as suggesting that, according to the relationalist, you directly see the mug, whereas, according to the representationalist, you see it only indirectly or mediately, because your experience has representational content. However, as I understand it, the representationalist does not deny that we see mugs, and that object-seeing is a "direct" perceptual relation (whatever this comes to) between perceivers and "external mind-independent objects". Neither does the representationalist assert that content "mediates" (in any interesting sense) between the perceiver and her environment.

1 | RAISING VERBS

(1a) and (1b) are equivalent:

- 1a. It seems/appears (to me) that the tomato is red.
- 1b. The tomato seems/appears red (to me).

(1a) has a dummy subject, 'it', which is absent in (1b). The noun phrase 'the tomato' is "raised" out of its subordinate clause position in (1a) to its subject position in (1b). 'Seem' and 'appear' are *raising verbs*; as Brogaard informally explains, they are "so-called because the true subject of the sentence can move to the front... without any change in meaning" (12).¹

To sketch Brogaard's argument, the equivalence of (1a) and (1b) is supposed to show that "seemings are representational mental states" (77). (This should be distinguished from the claim that there are *mental representations*, symbols of some sort in the brain. *Seeing and Saying* has nothing to say about those.) The linguistic expression of the state of believing that the tomato is red indicates that being in the state involves bearing the relation expressed by 'believes' to the proposition that the tomato is red. Similarly, equivalences of the sort in (1) indicate that states of seeming involves relations to propositions. Further, those states can be perceptual, because 'The tomato seems red (to me)' can be used to describe my perceptual state. More on that shortly.

¹ The contrast is with control verbs like 'try' and 'want': see, e.g., Radford (1998: 334-41).

Although it is not controversial that ‘seem’ and ‘appear’ are raising verbs, ‘look’, as Brogaard notes, is a trickier case. On the one hand, (2a) and (2b) may seem equivalent:

- 2a. It looks (to me) as if the tomato is red.
- 2b. The tomato looks red (to me).

However, unlike ‘seem’ and ‘appear’, ‘look’ does not (clearly) take a ‘that’-clause complement:

- 2c. It looks (to me) that the tomato is red.

Brogaard, though, argues that this is “an irregularity of the verb”, and does not spoil the desired conclusion, that the verb ‘look’ “operate[s] semantically on propositions” (44). Granted the equivalence of (3a) and (3b), that is reasonable. But it is not clear to me that they are equivalent. Consider (to switch examples):

- 3a. It looked (to me) as if Zeus was angry.
- 3b. Zeus looked angry (to me).

Assume the existence of the Greek pantheon, and that I have previously seen lightning, a sign of Zeus’s wrath. (3a) is appropriate, but (3b) is doubtful, given that I did not see Zeus himself.

In any event, we can closely approximate ‘look’ with ‘visually appear’, which may be enough for Brogaard’s purposes (cf. 45).

2 | PHENOMENAL AND EPISTEMIC USES

Another plank in Brogaard’s argument is that ‘seem’, ‘appear’, and ‘look’ have “phenomenal uses”, in Frank Jackson’s familiar terminology (26).² Imagine seeing a red tomato in daylight, and uttering (1b), ‘The tomato seems/appears red’. This is a paradigm example of the phenomenal use of ‘seem’ and ‘appear’. ‘The tomato looks red’, uttered in the same situation, is a paradigm example of the phenomenal use of ‘look’.

The main contrast is (supposedly) with “epistemic uses”, which Brogaard initially characterizes as uses that “comment on aspects of things or events that we are not directly aware of in experience”. She gives the following example:

If you see a person park a 1963 Ferrari 250 GTO racer in a driveway, the sentence ‘he looks filthy rich’ may be true in the context. As this use of ‘look’ does not reveal anything about what you are directly aware of in perception, the use is epistemic. (14)

You are “directly aware” of the driver, since you see him. Presumably Brogaard has in mind that you are not directly aware of the property *being filthy rich*, unlike in the tomato-in-daylight case, where (it is natural to think) you are directly aware of the tomato’s color.

Consider a variant on the tomato example, where the lighting is green. The tomato looks black, and you are not “directly aware” of the tomato’s color, in some intuitive sense. However, assuming you know about the lighting, the tomato’s appearance tells you that it is likely red, and uttering

² Jackson (1977: 30).

(1b), ‘The tomato seems/appears red’ would be appropriate, at least given some contextual stage-setting. I think Brogaard would classify this as an “epistemic use” of ‘seems/appears’.

In ‘The tomato looks black’ three sentences back, ‘look’ is used phenomenally, but it could also be used epistemically in the sentence ‘The tomato looks red’ to make much the same claim as ‘The tomato seems red’, although ‘The tomato looks *as if* it is red’ sounds a bit better. Unlike phenomenal uses of appear-words, epistemic uses, Brogaard says, “imply that the speaker believes or is inclined to believe that things are as they appear, in the absence of a defeater” (22).

There is no need to linger on the epistemic use here, but Brogaard’s characterization of it is questionable. I say that the tomato in green light seems red, or seems as if it is red; that is an epistemic use of appear-words, according to Brogaard. We may further suppose that I have seen many other tomatoes in this condition, and they have all turned out to be red. But if Brit knows that the tomato is a genetic freak, and is actually black, that doesn’t prevent her from agreeing with me. ‘You’re right, it does seem red’, she might say, ‘but by some fluke it’s actually black’. Despite using ‘seem’ epistemically, Brit neither believes nor is inclined to believe that the tomato is red.

Concentrating on ‘look’, consider some more examples:

4. That watch looks expensive.
5. Maria looks Swedish.

There is a visual appearance or look distinctive of many luxury watches—a perceptual gestalt comprising details like subdials, jewels, a bezel, elaborate markings, and so on. There is a visual appearance distinctive of many people from Sweden—a perceptual gestalt comprising pale skin, blonde hair, and so on. Note that a cheap replica Breitling can have that distinctive expensive look without being expensive, and Maria can look Swedish despite being from Brazil, with no ancestral ties to Sweden at all.

Although I and my audience know that Maria is from Brazil, I may utter ‘She looks Swedish’, commenting on her distinctive appearance. This can’t be an epistemic use of ‘look’. Neither does it fit Brogaard’s characterization of the phenomenal use, which “is supposed to reflect directly how things are presented in visual experience” (25); the property *being Swedish* is not, we may safely say, “presented in visual experience”. No trouble for Brogaard yet, since her classification scheme of uses (taken from Chisholm, 1957: ch. 4) also includes “comparative”, which she thinks cross-cuts the epistemic/non-epistemic distinction:

Strictly speaking, [Chisholm’s] “three” uses amount to four: non-comparative non-epistemic, non-comparative epistemic, comparative non-epistemic, and comparative epistemic uses. (13)

The phenomenal use is the non-comparative non-epistemic use (25), so ‘look’ in ‘She looks Swedish’ must be used comparatively and non-epistemically. I am saying that Maria looks *like* (stereotypical) Swedes—she looks the way Swedes look, whatever that is. Or, to put it slightly differently, Maria has the visual appearance distinctive of Swedes. Discussing this example, Brogaard says “it is most naturally *analyzed semantically* in a comparative way, comparing the looks of one person to the prototypical looks of Swedish people” (181, emphasis added). That seems plausible, but is ‘looks red’, said of a tomato in daylight, any different? Surely there is no *semantic* difference between ‘looks red’ and ‘looks Swedish’, in which case ‘The tomato looks

red' can be roughly paraphrased as 'The tomato has the visual appearance distinctive of red things'.³

To support the case for a uniform semantic account, imagine that Maria has a rare skin condition that gives her the color of a ripe tomato. Maria and the tomato both look red; Maria, but not the tomato, looks Swedish (skin color aside). 'Maria looks red and Swedish' is perfectly fine. This is an application of the coordination test for polysemy (mentioned by Brogaard in connection with 'see' (145)), and the result suggests that 'look' is univocal in 'looks red' and 'looks Swedish'.⁴

In fact, Brogaard seems to agree. Early on, she explicitly says that the epistemic/non-epistemic distinction "is not a case of lexical ambiguity... or polysemy" (14). On the other hand, in the first quotation in this comment, she says that "the semantics of 'look', 'seem', and 'see' can be used to settle the dispute in favor of the representational view", and at least where 'see' is concerned, her premises *do* concern the semantics of that verb.

Some confirmation that the "phenomenal use" is at the level of pragmatics, not semantics, can be found in an argument Brogaard gives for a "non-comparative, non-epistemic use of 'look'":

Even before she started studying neuroscience and physics, Frank Jackson's Mary knew that in daylight red things look the way red things look. But she didn't know that red things looked non-comparatively red. This argument offers some support for the existence of a semantically non-comparative, non-epistemic use of 'look' and other 'appear' words. (25-6, changing 'yellow' to 'red')

(Admittedly Brogaard does say that the use is "*semantically* non-comparative", but that may be loose talk.) Let us grant that Mary, the knowledgeable scientist confined to a black-and-white cell, has some gaps in her knowledge (Jackson, 1982). Mary knows that tomatoes and strawberries look alike; specifically, they both look the way red things look. But there is some way tomatoes look such that Mary doesn't know that they look that way. She can fill that gap by seeing a tomato. Then, Brogaard concludes, Mary will know that the tomato looks "non-comparatively red".

Since Mary understands 'red' and 'look' when in her black-and-white cell, nothing prevents her from knowing, in advance of seeing the tomato, that it is red, and that it looks red: she can read an authoritative textbook to that effect. So we should not conclude that Mary's new piece of knowledge is that the tomato looks red, in some sense of 'look'—she knew that already, in every sense of 'look'. Rather, what Mary discovers is something she can express by saying 'The tomato looks *that way*', demonstrating to her audience the distinctive way the tomato looks.

Although this piece of new knowledge is not *semantically* expressed by 'The tomato looks red', it can be conveyed by uttering that sentence, if the speaker and hearer know that red things look that distinctive way. Similarly, I can convey Maria's distinctive appearance to Brit by saying that Maria looks Swedish. We could call this a phenomenal use of 'look', although Brogaard might not. Since Brit is acquainted with the distinctive appearance of Swedes, she gets more out of my utterance than Bart, who is not so acquainted. Bart understands my words perfectly well, though: trusting my testimony, he knows that Maria has the distinctive appearance of Swedes, whatever that is.

³ Brogaard's 'He looks filthy rich' example (above) is also plausibly comparative. Ferraris have that expensive-car look, and Ferrari drivers when parking their cars thereby have a (relational) visual appearance distinctive of (some of) the filthy rich.

⁴ See Thau (2002: 230).

Where does this leave us? At the semantic level, a rough paraphrase of ‘That looks F’ (red/Swedish/expensive/...) is ‘That has the visual appearance distinctive of F-things’. The relevant F-things may vary by context: ‘That looks red’ said of the tomato under green light compares the appearance of the tomato to the appearance of red things under green light.⁵ And Brogaard’s “phenomenal use” points towards a real phenomenon, albeit not a semantic one.

3 | THE OPERATOR ARGUMENT

Chapter 2 contains

...an argument for the conclusion that looks and seemings are representational mental states. In a nutshell, the argument runs as follows: because looks and seemings are expressed by uses of sentences containing hyperintensional operators that operate on representational content, looks and seemings have representational content. (77)

We can call this the *operator argument*, which in the case of ‘look’ Brogaard sets out as follows:

- P1. ‘Look’ is a hyperintensional mental-state operator.
- P2. Hyperintensional mental-state operators operate on representational content.
- C1. So, ‘look’ operates on representational content.
- P3. If ‘look’ operates on representational content, then looks are representational states.
- Hence:
- C2. Looks are representational states. (9, lines renumbered)

(The argument in the case of ‘seem’ is exactly parallel.) According to Brogaard, in order to reach the desired conclusion that “visual experience is representational”, we need an extra premise:

- P4. “[P]erceptual phenomenal seemings and looks just are visual experiences” (60).

For reasons we need not go into, she has some reservations about P4 (see 60–77).

With the addition of P4, does the operator argument establish that visual experiences are representational? Something must have gone wrong somewhere, because the argument proves too much by Brogaard’s own lights. The “representational content” associated with ‘*o* looks/seems red’ is the proposition that *o* is red, and the representational content associated with ‘*o* looks/seems Swedish’ is the proposition that *o* is Swedish. At least, that is what Brogaard’s discussion of raising verbs is supposed to establish. If the operator argument works, then it shows that the proposition that *o* is Swedish is the content of someone’s experience when *o* looks Swedish to them. (The representational content operated on by ‘look’ is supposed to be the content of the corresponding perceptual state.⁶) And although Brogaard thinks that “gestalt properties that

⁵ A similar point goes for ‘looks Swedish’. At an international soccer match where the Swedes in the crowd paint their faces with the blue and yellow colors of the Swedish flag, someone with black hair and dark skin may “look Swedish”. See also Martin (2010: 175-6).

⁶ But see (60) for a minor qualification.

emerge from configurations of low-level and intermediate-level features” (74) can be represented in visual experience, in an instructive discussion she argues that properties like *being Swedish* are not.⁷

If the semantics of ‘looks red’ and ‘looks Swedish’ are the same, then the operator argument treats them alike. Granted, if I say that the tomato looks red (to me), then I am saying something about my visual perceptual state; but I am making a parallel claim if I say that Maria looks Swedish. If the proposition that Maria is Swedish is *not* included in the content of perceptual experience, then the operator argument cannot show that the proposition that the tomato is red is included. Which premise is false? Brogaard’s discussion of P4 shows that it is not the culprit; rather, the problem is with P3. Suppose that ‘It looks (to me) as if Maria is Swedish’ is true, and that ‘looks’ in that sentence operates on the proposition that Maria is Swedish; nonetheless, my perceptual state does not represent that Maria is Swedish.

4 | THE REFLECTION ARGUMENT

Brogaard’s central argument for representationalism is in chapter 3, succinctly presented as follows:

Reflection Argument

1. True phenomenal ‘look’-reports reflect representational phenomenal properties of experience.
2. If (1), then visual experience is representational.

Conclusion: Visual experience is representational. (79)

Let us unpack (1), starting with “reflection”:

A report that describes...experience *e* reflects a representational phenomenal property *F* iff:

necessarily, the report is true iff *F* is a representational phenomenal property of *e*. (79, emphasis added)

A “representational phenomenal property” is the property of (visually/perceptually) representing such-and-such (84). The notion of phenomenally looking a certain way is clearly supposed to be cashed out in terms of the phenomenal use of ‘looks’: if ‘*o* looks *F*’ is true, where ‘looks’ is used phenomenally, then *o* phenomenally looks *F*. We may then rewrite the reflection argument more perspicuously as follows:

1*. If ‘*o* looks *F* to *S*’ is true, where ‘looks’ is used phenomenally, then *S*’s visual experience represents something as being *F*.

2*. ‘*o* looks *F* to *S*’ is true, where ‘looks’ is used phenomenally.

Conclusion: *S*’s visual experience represents something as being *F*, and so *S*’s visual experience is representational.

⁷ See (67-76). Brogaard does say that “being a tiger” can be “presented in experience”, but by that she simply means that the gestalt common to tigers and convincing fake tigers can be presented in experience (74).

(This formulation basically drops (2) and parcels out (1) into (1*) and (2*.) The reflection argument has a similar problem to the operator argument. Brogaard will presumably deny that ‘look’ can be used phenomenally in ‘Maria looks Swedish’, otherwise we get the unwanted result that visual experience can represent Maria as being Swedish. But she certainly thinks that ‘look’ can be used phenomenally in ‘The tomato looks red’, so let us fill in the schematic premises with that example. All the work is done, not by the semantics of ‘looks red’, but by the restriction that ‘look’ is used phenomenally, which is intended to point us to red-tomato-in-daylight cases. Accordingly, premises (1*) and (2*) amount to this: in tomato-in-daylight cases, the subject’s visual experience represents something as being red. That may well be true, and *Seeing and Saying* contains much valuable material relevant to assessing it. But that material is all about seeing, not saying.⁸

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⁸ Thanks to E.J. Green for discussion.