Object-experiencer verbs (OEVs) are often divided into two classes—agentive OEVs (*amuse, frighten, surprise*) and non-agentive OEVs (*amaze, fascinate, horrify*)—based on evidence such as (1).

(1) a. The magician deliberately amused/frightened/#amazed/#fascinated the children.

   b. Mary persuaded the magician to amuse/frighten/#amaze/#fascinate the children.

I present experimental and naturalistic evidence showing that the acceptability patterns of OEVs in agentive constructions are more gradient than assumed, and that acceptability improves with additional context. Additionally, I present results from an antecedent-naming task (Scherer et al. 1986; Wright 2001: Ch 6) showing that antecedents of emotions denoted by non-agentive verbs more commonly involve entities/events beyond deliberate control (e.g. natural phenomena), while antecedents of agentive verbs more frequently describe human activities.

Events denoted by OEVs are typically analyzed as complex causal events in which the central event is distinguished from the antecedent, i.e. causing, event (Talmy 1985; Jackendoff 1990; Croft 1991; Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1994; Wunderlich 1997). It has been argued by some (e.g. Bouchard 1995; DiDesidero 1999; Malle 2002) that the source of agentivity differences among OEVs lies in the nature of their antecedent events: Agentive OEVs involve physical antecedent events, which can be volitionally controlled, while non-agentive OEVs select only conceptual antecedent events, which prohibit external control. However, this is contradicted by evidence from usage in naturalistic contexts (i.e. corpus data) as in (2).

(2) a. He wanted to play another one but we convinced him to amaze us with his “hand trick” (Google).

   b. Slick male foreigners talk funny to deliberately fascinate older women who don’t know any better (Google).

In addition, little has been said about the range of variability in acceptability across verbs, or about the ways in which additional context seems to amerliriate the acceptability of non-agentive OEVs, as in (3).

(3) a. The magician deliberately amazed the children (with his magic tricks).

   b. Mary persuaded the magician to amaze the children (with his magic tricks).

This study offers evidence from corpora, along with results from judgment surveys, which suggest that the acceptability of OEVs in agentive constructions is dependent to how readily a reader/listener can imagine a scenario in which an agent might purposely evoke the emotion in question. Results from a antecedent-naming survey suggest that folk conceptions of the emotions denoted by OEVs can differentially affect the likelihood of inferring such scenarios, especially in the absence of context. I argue this evidence points to an account of OEVs that attributes differences in acceptability not to differences in verbs’ event structures, but to the nature of the emotions the verbs denote, and the way in which knowledge about those emotions combines with contextual information to facilitate inferences regarding the agency of OEV subjects.
References


