

Complement of the SOUND-class Verb Construction

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Abstract

This paper examines the semantic constraint on the complement in the SOUND-class verb construction. The construction represents the evaluation of the subject reference via particular experience through perceptual modality designated by the verb of the construction, as shown in (i).

(i) a. Jane sounds nice to Peter.

b. Peter looks stupid.

(Gisborne 2010: 239)

In previous studies, the complement in this construction has to be gradable. This paper, nonetheless, will demonstrate that some SOUND-class verb constructions occur with the non-gradable complement. Furthermore, it will claim that the constructions can be classified into the following two types of the perceptual expressions. One — that the construction is felicitous if the non-gradable complements can be coerced into a gradable reading by virtue of a prototypical characteristic of the construction, and two — that the expressions encode not only evidentiality but also probability for the proposition. This means that the former type has the gradable restriction, whereas the latter is irrelevant to it. The solution implies that the perceptual construction can be polysemously divided into two different semantic classes: thus, the gradable constraint discussed in previous studies is partially imposed on the construction, that is, the former type of the construction.

Keywords: SOUND-class verb, Coercion, Gradability

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the complement of SOUND-class verb constructions. The constructions represent certain experience through perceptual modality designated by the verb of the construction, as exemplified below:

(1) a. Jane sounds nice to Peter.

b. Peter looks stupid.

c. The custard feels lumpy.

(Gisborne 2010: 239)

In English, the agent or the perceiver is usually taken as the grammatical subject unless it occurs with syntactic or morphological markers, such as passives (i.e., John broke a cup into pieces. > The cup was broken.). However, this category of the perceptual construction above has peculiar syntactic and semantic properties in which the constructions do not take the perceiver as their subject. Rather, as Levin (1993: 188) points out, these constructions take the stimulus as their subject and express the perceiver in a to prepositional phrase. Jane in (1a), for example, is not the experiencer but the object of auditory experience, while Peter undertakes the experiencer.

Another property of this category concerns an obligatory complement. As Rogers (1972: 214), or Taniguchi (1997: 272) indicates, the complement of the category cannot be dropped without a change in meaning. (Note1) Therefore, the examples in (2) are infelicitous, whereas a depictive construction in (3) is unproblematic even though the secondary predicate, poor, is left out.

(2) a. *John looks. (John cannot be the perceptual object)

b. *That sounds.

(Taniguchi 1997: 272)

(3) Joe died (poor).

(Horton 1996: 327)

Previous studies argue that the meaning designated by the complement has to be gradable. However, the current paper will demonstrate that some SOUND-class verb constructions occur with the non-gradable complement. It will also claim that the constructions can be classified into two types of perceptual expressions.

2. Previous Studies

Traditionally, it is said that the construction in question does not have a rigorous complement constraint. Rogers (1974) suggests that the following sentences as shown in (4) are odd simply because it is difficult to imagine the relation between sensory modality and the proposition expressed by the complement.

(4) a. ? Harry smells fuzzy to me.

b. ? Jane tastes tall to me.

(Rogers 1974: 125)

However, more recently, a complement restriction to this construction has been observed. Gisborne (2010) and Nakamura (2010) argue that the (adjectival) complement of the

construction has to be gradable. Nakamura (2010: 228) explains that gradable adjectives are distinguished from others “(i) in that they can be used in comparative and superlative and (ii) in that some intensifiers such as *very* can be added to them,” such as (5) to (6).^(Note 2)

- (5) a. *very present, *quite dead, *very dead,
b. very nice, quite good, so delicious (Nakamura 2010: 228)
- (6) a. *more present, *most dead, *less dead,
b. nicer, better, more delicious (ibid: 229)

Using the corpus based survey method in the British National Corpus (BNC), Nakamura shows that these gradable predicates are typical instances in the construction.

Gisborne (2010) also describes the restriction to the complement. This is shown in (7).

- (7) a. *Jane sounds a woman.
b. Peter looks a fool.
c. Jane sounds a nice woman. (Gisborne 2010: 242)

According to Gisborne (2010: 242), (7a) is not acceptable, whereas (7b) is, because the former example is not gradable, whereas the latter *a fool* is. Here, the important point is that (7c) is acceptable. He claims that the example in (7c) is possible because *nice* makes *a woman* gradable, and, therefore, available for a degree-of-commitment evaluation.

3. Problems

The proposal made by the literature does not account for the overall expressions of the SOUND-class verb construction. In fact, although they may appear with less frequency, some non-gradable predicates are acceptable in the construction, as illustrated in (8).^(Note3)

- (8)a. ...Holmes had spoken very seriously and his words sounded true.
(BNC, H7V: 1344, underlines mine)
- b. That looks impossible to me. (Rogers 1974: 119)
- c. The tea tasted horrible but at least it gave me the chance to have a little think.
(BNC, A0F: 2299)
- d. He wished the train would start. When the train had started he wouldn't be able to go up there. It felt dead, marooned, abandoned, as if it would never move.
(BNC, EDN: 2274-2276)
- e. She began frying bacon and eggs, then filled the kettle and sliced bread for toast. She put cutlery and napkins on two trays, then went to the door. 'It's nearly ready.' He got up, dusting off his hands. 'Thank you. It smells marvelous. Have I time to wash?'
(BNC, JYC 2189-2195)

The adjectival complements above, *true*, *impossible*, *horrible*, *dead*, and *marvelous*, respectively, may be accepted in the construction despite of the non-gradable predicates defined by Nakamura (2010). Moreover, we can find the utterance in (9). It is quite similar to the example (8a), which Gisborne regards as ungrammatical. These data straightforwardly lead to the problem with the proposal of previous studies.

(9) ‘What’s that Belle look like these days?’ he had asked Violet a few years ago, and Violet hadn’t answered at first. Then apparently she’d said: ‘Belle still looks a girl.’

(William Trevor: *The Piano Tuner’s Wives*)

Furthermore, Nakamura’s argument does not function well as the basis for the restriction in which the complement has to be gradable. His explanation is that because gradable predicates occurs frequently in this construction, the construction bears the restriction. Certainly, it is true that gradable predicates (for example, *good*, *nice*, *delicious*, and *bad*) are preferred to non-gradable predicates in this construction. This explanation, however, does not seem to indicate the conclusion that the complement must be gradable. It provides evidence that there is a semantic prototype of the complement in the construction, not the constraint of the complement.

4. Two Types of the SOUND-class Verb Construction

The previous section has shown that it is not appropriate for the construction to require gradable complements. Although the non-gradable complements in the construction in question are relatively peripheral, we have to recognize them. This section will consider and present two types of acceptable conditions where these complements can occur in the construction.

4.1 SOUND-class Verb Construction as Coercion

In one of the conditions, the construction is acceptable when the non-gradable complements can be coerced into gradable predicates. Let us consider the example in (9), repeated below in (10).

(10) ‘What’s that Belle look like these days?’ he had asked Violet a few years ago, and Violet hadn’t answered at first. Then apparently she’d said: ‘Belle still looks a girl.’

(William Trevor: *The Piano Tuner’s Wives*)

In the context of (10), a man asks his wife, *Violet*, how another woman, *Belle*, is, and then the wife replies to the question. The reply includes a non-gradable predicate, *a girl*. Here, we argue that the predicate is reinterpreted as gradable predicates owing to a prototypical characteristic of the construction. In other words, we interpret the complement in (10) as the gradable attributes such as [AGE] or [STUPIDITY], in lieu of the non-gradable character, *a girl*. Hence, the sentence underlined in (10) could be paraphrased into sentence (11).

(11) Judging from her behavior, it looks as if Belle was young and stupid.

The reinterpretation corresponds with the linguistic system, *coercion* (and related notions

such as *accommodation* (Goldberg 1995), *enriched composition* (Jackendoff 1997), or *override* (Michaelis 2004)). In coercion, the sentence favors or enforces a particular reading of a word. To provide a brief outline of the system, consider the example in (12) below, which is given by Lauwers and Willems (2011).

(12) I began a book. (Lauwers and Willems 2011: 1219)

According to Lauwers and Willems, the noun *book* ordinarily refers to a physical object: however, in the context above, it refers to reading or writing a book. Since this reading lies outside the usual semantic range of the noun, there is a mismatch between the semantic properties of a selector — the verbal complement taken prototypically by the verb *begin* (*began to read/write a book*) — and the inherent semantic properties of a selected element — the noun, *book* that normally designates a physical object. The mismatch is clearly settled by the coercion effect, which causes the noun to be flexibly coerced into the expected semantic properties (*to read/write a book*). Therefore, as mentioned by Audring and Booij (2016: 618), coercion is a repair strategy, a bridge between a phrase and an incompatible word appearing in it. From a construction grammar perspective, coercion is an accommodation mechanism in which constructional semantics overrides the meaning of the lexical item embedded in this construction (see *the override principle* proposed by Michaelis (2004: 51)).

Coercion from the non-gradable into the gradable reading can be found in other phenomena of the English language, one of which is the *too ADJ to V construction*. This construction is, in general, said to allow only gradable adjectives in the ADJ-position like the following sentence in (13). However, some non-gradable adjectives appear in this construction, as exemplified in (14).

(13) That talent gap was simply too wide to overcome. (Jensen 2014: 2)

(14)a. All I'm saying is, if you're me, and you can't reach a gas pump, pay phone, or ATM, and your arms and legs are disproportionately short, and your mouth is too impossible to kiss without it becoming a public carnival, then you don't get to be included in anything but the now obsolete, original meaning of the stupid word normal.

(ibid: 14)

b. I knew myself to be tenacious, aggressive, and stubborn. The racing world saw me as reserved and feminine, yet competent — and I worked hard for it. But the bottom line, to the good old boys of the racing world, was that I was too female to be ruthless.

(ibid: 18)

Although both examples in (14) also give rise to semantic incompatibility between the absolute semantics of the non-gradable adjectives *impossible* or *female* and the construction itself, the sentences are well-formed. Jensen (2014) claims that these non-scalar adjectives are assigned scalar meanings by virtue of the construction. According to him, the adjective *impossible* in (14a), for instance, does not designate [IMPOSSIBILITY], but rather a very high degree of [DIFFICULTY], so that the readings of the adjective indicate a sort of a scalar interpretation of *impossible* similar to gradable adjectives such as *difficult*, *awkward*, and

uncomfortable. Similarly, *female* in (14b) does not refer to the non-scalar nature of [BIOLOGICAL SEX]. It focuses on the behavioral aspect of gender stereotypes involving scalarity. Consequently, the adjective is interpreted as expressing [WEAKNESS] and [POWERLESS-NESS], to which scalarity can easily be applied. The *too ADJ to V construction*, thus, can instantiate these sentences in spite of semantic incompatibility taken place by deviation from the basic meaning of the word.

Returning to the SOUND-class verb construction, this perceptual construction is also able to force the non-scalar properties to be reinterpreted as the characteristics, including scalarity. The predicate *a girl* in (10) does not encode [BIOLOGICAL SEX]; instead, it refers to aspects of some cultural [GIRL] stereotypes, namely [AGE] or [STUPIDITY], easily invoking scalar reading. The reading comes from a semantic compromise by which the meaning of the complement conforms to the meaning of the construction. As with the *too ADJ to V construction*, the perceptual construction contributes reinterpretation of the non-gradable complement as involving scalar properties.

A similar analysis is attempted by Aurdin and Booij (2016), who demonstrate a semantic shift with the example shown in (15).

(15) This building looks very American. (Aurdin and Booij 2016: 633)

According to Aurdin and Booij, the utterance contains a semantic shift because a very American building does not have to be American or in America. Instead of the basic meaning of *American*, Aurdin and Booij (2016: 633) present two kinds of semantic shifts as follows:

(16) On the one hand, the geographical reference of American and Dutch are wrapped with a function roughly meaning ‘characteristic of’. On the other hand, the lexical meaning of the words is jeopardized, and in [(15)] there is a type shift from relational to qualifying adjective, which appears to be a consequence of override.

Their analysis shares many of the characteristics with this current paper. However, their analysis provides little evidence about the semantic shift of this sort, further scarcely explaining why the shift takes place. This paper supports their analysis, and stepping forward, it claims that it is the SOUND-class verb construction that allows us to shift the basic meaning of the complement toward the expected one that conforms to the constructional meaning.

There are further examples of this sort as follows in (17).

(17)a. He looked a man at last, not a school student. (BNC: CDN; 1014)

b. A 3.5 m tiger I hooked the next day from Kanimbla looked a baby by comparison.

(<http://jgharris.com/gweston/N01Saumarez.htm>)

c. One moment the lily looks female and the next moment, male.

(COCA/The Bloody Chamber. ACAD. 1995)

d. She began frying bacon and eggs, then filled the kettle and sliced bread for toast. She

put cutlery and napkins on two trays, then went to the door. ‘It’s nearly ready.’ He got up, dusting off his hands. ‘Thank you. It smells marvelous. Have I time to wash?’

(BNC, JYC 2189-2195)

The complements in these expressions — *a man*, *a baby*, *female*, *male*, and *marvelous* — do not refer to the basic meaning designated by the lexical items. *A man* in (17a) and *a baby* in (17b) refer to [AGE] and [SIZE], respectively. These concepts can readily invoke some aspects of gender [WOMEN vs. MEN] stereotypes. Therefore, these examples satisfactorily prove that by means of coercion, the SOUND-class verb construction can sanction even some instances comprising semantic incompatibility.

In sum, the construction is acceptable when the non-gradable complement could be coerced into another reading involving gradable properties.

4.2 SOUND-class Verb Construction as Probability

Nonetheless, there are other SOUND-class verb constructions in which the complement does not have a scale, nor the complement meaning is modified for scalar reading at all. These are shown in the example below (18).

(18)a. ...Holmes had spoken very seriously and his words sounded true.

(BNC, H7V: 1344)

b. Maybe Ethan had passed out. Maybe he merely looked dead. She prayed the girl was mistaken.

(COCA/Murder simply brewed. FIC. 2014)

In (18), the complements *true* and *dead* are not necessarily shifted into a particular scalar reading. In other words, *true* in (18a) does accurately designate an absolute [TRUE] value, and *dead* does a [DEAD] attribute. Instead of reinterpretation into the scalar reading, these utterances encode the presumption/probability for the proposition as well as evidentiality. ^{(Note}

⁴⁾ Namely, the adjective *true* in (18a) can be realized if the speaker or the hearer presumes from her auditory evidence that *his words are true*. Likewise, in (18b), *dead* can be realized if she presumes from her visual evidence that *he is dead*. As we will discuss in 4.3 in more detail, it may be possible to roughly paraphrase sentences of this type into the following sentences, respectively, and thus, they are semantically different from the usage in 4.1.

(19)a. It sounded probable that his words were true.

b. It looked probable that he was dead.

What is important here is that this usage represents the presumption/probability for the proposition itself and does not require the gradability or scalarity on the attribute encoded by the complement in the construction. Therefore, this usage does not get involved in a gradable restriction on the construction to begin with, and thus, it is not problematic for the construction that the non-gradable predicates appear in the complement-position.

English provides further examples for this usage of the SOUND-class verb construction, as demonstrated in (20).

(20)a. A woman, naked except for an unbuttoned faded red blouse, tumbles out. She looks pregnant, youngish, with long black hair.

(BNC, ARB: 2279-2280)

b. It was the taste of death in his mouth that preoccupied him. He staggered out of bed and cleaned his teeth, but the taste was still there. He put his hands on the marine blue wash-basin and his body sagged forward. The face in the mirror of the marine blue bathroom cabinet looked terrified and ill.

(BNC, GUF: 3430-3433)

These examples in (20) contain some non-gradable adjectives — *pregnant*, *terrified*, and *ill*. The adjectives refer to each attribute of a subject reference presumed by certain evidence of the subject. The adjective *pregnant* in (20a) designates a physical attribute that can be presumed by visual evidence of the naked woman. *Terrified* and *ill* in (20b) also portray a physical or psychological attribute evoked from the situation where the man sees himself in a mirror. The utterances, of course, could be paraphrased as follows:

(21)a. It looks probable that she is pregnant.

b. It looked probable that he is terrified and ill.

4.3 The Semantic Differences between the Two Types of the Construction

Section 4.1 and 4.2 have discussed the semantic distribution of the acceptable SOUND-class verb constructions comprising a non-gradable predicate and proposed that there are two types of the acceptable constructions. However, the two classes seem difficult to be divided because they are seemingly ambiguous regarding semantics. Therefore, we will now consider how expressions such as (10) in Section 4.1 differ from the expressions mentioned in Section 4.2. This section presents a clearer illustration that discusses the difference between the two classes, with relying on Cognitive Grammar proposed by Langueker (2008).

In Cognitive Grammar, a composite structure consisting of a noun modified by a scalar adjective, for example *tall giraffe*, is roughly sketched in Figure 1. In the scalar adjective *tall*, the arrow represents a scale measuring degree of extension along the vertical axis. Along the scale, the labeled *n*, which signifies *norm*, comprises the range of values considered normal.

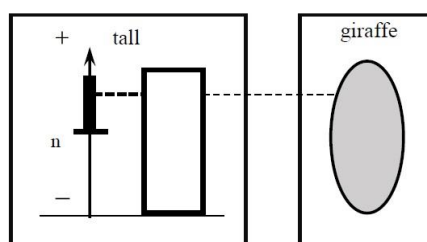


Figure 1. — *tall giraffe*

The scalar property influences the SOUND-class verb construction. The perceptual construction in Section 4.1 conveys an evaluation designated by the complement via a particular perceptual experience. The prototypical sentence sanctioned by the construction, such as *John looks happy*, can be portrayed in Figure 2:

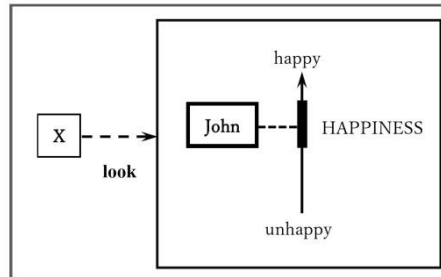


Figure 2. — *John looks happy*.

In Figure 2, the verb *look* is represented with a dashed arrow, and the complement *happy* signifies an attribute of a subject reference underlying a [HAPPINESS] scale. The mark X surrounded in a square corresponds to a perceptual experiencer. The experiencer is unspecified since s/he is mostly considered generic, as discussed by Kemmer (1993), or Jackendoff (2007). As Figure 2 depicts, the composite structure in this diagram presupposes that the complement in this construction requires certain scalar properties. In this sense, the proposal of previous studies that the gradable restriction is imposed on this construction may be valid. ^(Note5)

As shown in Section 4.1, this construction, nonetheless, can also appear when it involves a non-gradable predicate. We offer the coercion analysis that the non-gradable predicate, like *a girl* in *She looks a girl*, is coerced into other scalar readings by means of the construction. That is, as the lexical item *a girl* is not semantically compatible with the SOUND-class verb construction, the meaning of the item conforms to the semantics of the construction, which desires its complement to entail some scalar properties. The sentence is, in turn, reinterpreted as an evaluation for the subject reference rather than on the basis of an absolute attribute [GIRL], as on the basis of the scalar properties, such as [AGE] or [STUPIDITY]. The representative example is illustrated in Figure 3:

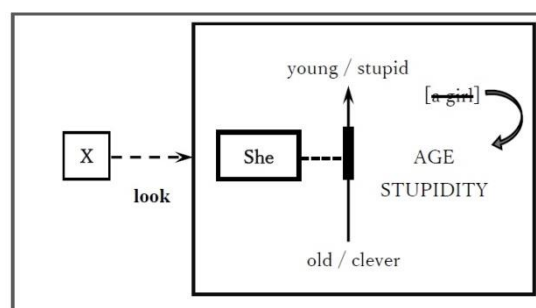


Figure 3. — *She looks a girl*.

On the contrary, the other usage is that there are no gradable constraints since this usage merely conveys the probability for the proposition. Consequently, even though the

complement-position of the construction is inserted by a predicate not entailing any gradable properties, the predicate is not coerced into a gradable reading since the basic meaning of the predicate is compatible with the structural meaning realized by this usage of the construction. The sentence *she looked dead* discussed in Section 4.2 is sketched in Figure 4 below:

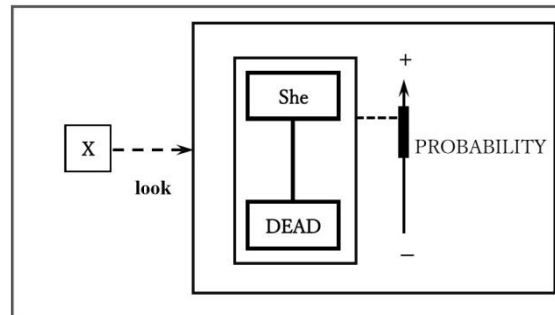


Figure 4. — *She looked dead.*

As demonstrated by the diagram, scalar properties in this usage refer to the probability of the proposition represented by the construction. Therefore, this sentence, on the basis of the usage, expresses the condition of probability for “She is dead” evaluated by visual experience. This figure suggests, again, that the acceptability of the construction is irrelevant to gradability or scalarity of the complement in this construction. Thus, the usage of this construction is not restricted to the gradability of the complement, unlike in the literature.

5. Conclusion

This paper has presented some SOUND-class verb constructions appearing with the non-gradable complement, which previous studies regarded as unacceptable. It presented the two classes of the construction, one of which coerces the non-gradable meaning of the predicate into a scalar reading, such as the stereotypical reading that invokes the gradability. The other class conveys the situation of probability of the proposition designated by the sentence, and thus, we argue that the class is unrelated with a gradable restriction. These classes are summarized below in Figure 5.

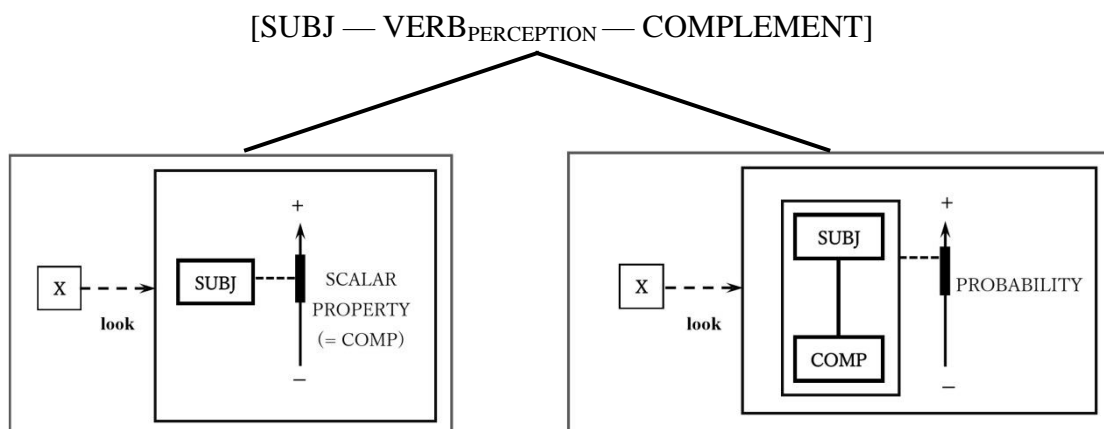


Figure 5. The two classes of the SOUND-class verb construction.

As shown in Figure 5, this conclusion implies that we can polysemously divide this perceptual construction into two different semantic subschemas. Furthermore, the gradable restriction discussed in the literature is partially imposed on the construction, that is, on the former type of the construction.

Notes

Note 1. Rogers (1972, 1974) describes the verbs in the constructions in question as *flip physical verbs*, and Taniguchi (1997) names them as *Copulative Perception Verbs* (CPVs).

Note 2. The gradable definition by Nakamura (2010) seems to differ from scalar definition proposed by other literature (cf. Paradis (2001), Kennedy and McNally (2005)). Paradis (2001), for example, categorizes gradable adjectives into the following three groups:

(i). Scalar adjectives: *long, good, nasty*

(ii). Extreme adjectives: *terrible, brilliant, disastrous*

(iii). Limit adjectives: *dead, true, identical*. (Paradis 2001: 51)

Indeed, those categories contains “non-gradable adjectives” defined by Nakamura (2010). That is, the scope of gradable adjectives defined by Nakamura is narrower than that by Paradis. On the contrary, the scope of non-gradable adjectives by Nakamura is wider than that by Paradis. This paper complies with Nakamura’s definition because of the clear discussion.

Note 3. There are a few examples including the adjective *classical*, which even Paradis (2001) regards as a non-gradable. Here is one of the examples:

(i). Hopkins, who could see everything, seems not to have seen an advertisement in a newspaper. Hardy, in his poem about the Titanic, never mentioned the ship’s name, though you might have thought that it sounded classical enough. But then suddenly, only a little further into the twentieth century, poets in the English language were pulling words off billboards the way that late nineteenth-century French painters had put billboards in their paintings, and probably for the same reasons.

(COCA/Product Placement in Modern Poetry. ACAD. 2011)

Note 4. Evidentiality is broadly defined as the linguistic realization of a speaker or writer’s evidence for a particular proposition (Whitt 2011: 347).

Note 5. The semantic compatibility between the SOUND-class verb construction and the gradability designated by the complement is theoretically supported by Paradis’s comment that “Scalar construals are suitable for evaluative-attributive properties such as judgements... (Paradis 2001: 57).”

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Corpora

BNC: The British National Corpus.

COCA: The Corpus of Contemporary American English. (<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>)

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