

A Note on the Sematic Role “Stimulus” of *Like* and *Please**

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1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the semantic roles of psychological verbs (henceforth, psych-verbs) in English and the patterns of argument realization they display. Some pairs of psych-verbs apparently have the same semantic roles, which are assigned to different arguments of the verbs. Let us observe the following psych-verb pair:

- (1) a. Ed fears the police.
 b. The police frighten Ed.

(Croft (1993:56))

The sentences in (1) refer to the same situation where Ed is afraid of the police. In terms of semantic role assignment, the experiencer in (1a) is mapped to the subject position, whereas that in (1b) is mapped to the object position. The observation that the same semantic role is not assigned to the identical argument position poses a puzzle for linguistic theories adopting Baker’s (1988) Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis.

There are two possible approaches to this puzzle; namely, syntactic and semantic approaches. Some researchers such as Belletti and Rizzi (1988) argue that the pair has similar underlying configurations where a semantic role is mapped to the uniform syntactic position. In this approach, the discrepancy in the realization patterns of a semantic role is attributed to the difference in the derivational processes involved. Other researchers, on the other hand, take a non-syntactic approach and argue that the two verbs do not have arguments sharing strictly the same semantic roles. For example, Dowty (1991) and Croft (1993), among others, propose that the experiencer found with *fear* is semantically different from that found with *frighten* with respect to their causal and aspectual structure. Additionally, Levin and Grafmiller (2013) argue that the stimulus of *fear* is also different from that of *frighten*, in terms of the causation.

The purpose of this paper is to support the semantic approach by showing that Levin and Grafmiller’s (2013) analysis can be applied to another psych-verb pair, namely, *like* and *please*, as exemplified in (2).

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- (2) a. I like this solution to the problem.
 b. This solution to the problem pleases me.
 (Levin and Rappaport Hovav (2005:14))

As with the pair in (1), the stimulus is mapped to the object position of *like* in (2a), and to the subject position of *please* in (2b). Examining the semantic nature of these stimuli through a corpus study of *like* and *please*, we will see that the stimulus found with *like* is not exactly the same as that found with *please* and show that our discussion is in favor of the plausibility of the semantic approach to the puzzle of psych-verb pairs.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 overviews Levin and Grafmiller (2013). Section 3 suggests that the stimuli found with *like* is semantically different from those found with *please* by showing the results of a corpus based study. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. An Overview of Levin and Grafmiller (2013)

Levin and Grafmiller (2013) argue that the psych-verbs *fear* and *frighten* have distinct meanings and therefore the stimuli found with *fear* is semantically different from those found with *frighten*. They provide three pieces of evidence for their argument. First, they point out the paucity of doublets like *fear* and *frighten*. If the experiencer or stimulus argument were freely mapped to the subject of one verb, and to the object of the other, such doublets should be productive and be found more easily. In fact, Levin and Grafmiller refer to the pairs in (3) as other possible candidates.

- (3) *like vs. please; abhor or detest vs. disgust or revolt; dislike vs. bother, bug, or annoy; love or enjoy vs. delight* (Levin and Grafmiller (2013:23))

The paucity of doublets like those in (3) seems to lead Levin and Grafmiller to suggest that *fear* and *frighten* express different types of psychological events.

Second, Levin and Grafmiller (2013) show that paraphrasing the sentence *X fears Y* into *Y frightens X* does affect acceptability. Consider the following examples:

- (4) a. Did you fear a negative response from fans?
 b. ??Did a negative response from fans frighten you?
 (Levin and Grafmiller (2013:24))

The literature has assumed that *X fears Y* is changed to *Y frightens X*, because these sentences describe the same situation. However, this is not the case. According to Levin and Grafmiller, the sentence in (4b) is not a felicitous counterpart of (4a), because it requires the presupposition that the fans have given a negative response to the referent of the object, while the sentence in (4a) carries no such presupposition. (4a) can be used when the experiencer is afraid of the possibility of something happening. The discrepancy between the two sentences in (4) suggests that *fear* and *frighten* have fundamentally different meanings.

Third, Levin and Grafmiller (2013) reveal that preferences of stimulus types differ between *fear* and *frighten*. According to their corpus study, the sentences with *fear* clearly have a strong bias toward abstract entities (e.g. *the number, her need, disapproval*, etc. (Levin and Grafmiller (2013:26)) and propositions (e.g., *that North Korea could collapse, I couldn't feel him breathing*, etc. (ibid.)) among the stimulus types. The sentences with *frighten*, on the other hand, have their stimuli classified into more concrete entities, such as human, animate, and physical objects (e.g. *the police, God, chemical weapons*, etc. (ibid.)). The results of the corpus study are summarized in (5) below:¹

(5) Distribution of stimulus types

	<i>Fear</i>		<i>Frighten</i>	
	N	%	N	%
Concrete	67	18.3	243	53.5
Event	31	8.5	80	14.8
Abstract	267	73.2	372	31.9
Total	365	100	695	100

(Levin and Grafmiller (2013:27), with modification)

In addition to the observation that the abstract stimuli are favored on the part of the sentences with *fear*, the stimuli of the sentences with *fear* also demonstrate that they are characterized as expressing situations to which fruition has not come yet, as shown in (6):

(6) a. The authorities fear a possible destabilization ...

¹ The category “concrete” includes what Levin and Grafmiller refer to as “animate” and “concrete object”; the category “event” includes “event or activity”; and the category “abstract” includes “abstract entity” and “proposition.”

- b. Space scientists fear that the manned space station ... will divert funds from space science in '90s.

(Levin and Grafmiller (2013:26-27))

In contrast to the sentences with *frighten*, which realize canonical causative relations as noted in Levin and Grafmiller (2013), the sentences with *fear* are inherently have the future-oriented and evaluative nature.

Another interesting difference of the sentences of *fear* and *frighten* is found in the imbalance of power between the experiencer and the stimulus, when both the experiencer and the stimulus are human, as in (7):

- (7) a. ??King Henry is feared by his enemies - and his family.

(Levin and Grafmiller (2013:24))

- b. Another man looked thin and angry and frightened me as though he carried a knife although he was full of easy compliments.

(Levin and Grafmiller (2013:29), with modification)

The human stimulus frequently finds itself as being located in a higher position in social or institutional settings, as in (7a). In (7a) the stimulus is King Henry, who has much authority than the experiencers, namely, his enemies and his family. Such imbalance of power is also found in the sentences with *frighten*, as in (7b), but a closer examination tells that it is rather the actions of a human stimulus that trigger an emotion, not his or her inherent nature of authority.

In short, Levin and Grafmiller (2013) argue that the stimulus of *fear* is semantically different from that of *frighten*. In addition to the observation that there are only a several doublets consisting of experiencer-subject verbs and experiencer-object verbs referring to the same emotion, they show that each verb of *fear* and *frighten* rejects the paraphrases of one another without affecting acceptability. They also explicate that each psych-verbs of *fear* and *frighten* has its different preference regarding the stimulus types, in that the former prefers abstract entities and propositions, while the preference of the latter is more evenly distributed. A further examination into the stimulus types shows that the sentences with *fear* tend to have future-oriented and evaluative semantic properties that allow stative reading. When the experiencer and the stimulus are human, the inherent nature of authority is vested in the stimulus in the sentences with *fear*.

3. Finding Stimulus Types for *Like* and *Please*

This section is concerned with the sentences with the psych-verbs of *like* and

please, one of the handful doublets like *fear* and *frighten*, as shown in (3), in an attempt to clarify semantic differences entailed by the stimuli found with each verb. To follow the approach taken in Levin and Grafmiller (2013), we will first see the way in which the sentences with *like* and *please* cannot be rephrased by alternating the experiencer and the stimulus without changing their semantic properties. Then, we will consult COCA, from which the relevant sentences with *like* and *please* are drawn to examine their stimuli.² The stimuli are coded and annotated to analyze the stimulus types and the nature of stimulus. Our attention will be placed on the different preference of the stimulus types found in the sentences with *like* and *please* and an aspectual difference in the propositional stimuli, although Levin and Grafmiller (2013) give their attention also to the future-oriented and evaluative nature shown by the stimuli of the sentences with *fear*, and to the imbalanced authority inherited in the human stimuli in relation to the human experiencer in the sentences with *fear*. This is because the stimuli of the sentences with *like* at large were ambiguous in terms of determining whether or not they were characterized as having future-oriented semantic properties or not;³ and because the imbalanced authority between the human stimulus and the human experiencer seems to be specific to the sentences with *fear*. Instead, the aspectual difference found in the propositional stimuli in the sentences with *like* and *please* is considered to show that the stimulus of *like* tends to be semantically different from that of *frighten*.

Let us first see the paraphrasability with regard to the sentences with *like* and those with *please*. The paired sentences in (8) show that the semantic relations described by *like* and *please* do not share the same presupposition regarding the stimulus.

- (8) a. I liked a cold beverage, but I didn't like a bunch of ice.
(COCA, with modification)
 b. ?? A cold beverage pleased me, but a bunch of ice did not please me.

² The data collection was carried out on 20 August 2016. To obtain the sentences with all possible inflected forms of the verbs *like* and *please*, lemma searches were employed. Initially 500 examples for each verb was obtained, and then, those that lacked either the explicit experiencer or the stimulus, as well as those that did not involve *like* and *please* as verbs, were excluded from the analysis.

³ The sentences with the verb *like* frequently appear with the preposition *to*, as in (i):

- (i) Pocha Pea, who sees herself as a cultural activist, likes to see people from different backgrounds get together. (COCA)

As (i) shows, the sentences with *like to* often have future-oriented semantic properties, denoting yet to be realized events. With regard to the sentences with *like*, not the ones with *like to*, however, the obtained data seem to suggest that the sentences do not necessarily have future-oriented semantic properties.

According to my informant, the sentence in (8b) presupposes that the cold beverage has in fact served. The sentence in (8a), on the other hand, does not have such presupposition, as it simply states the preferred type of beverage.

The corpus-based examination into the types of stimuli selected by the sentences with *like* and those with *please* showed that the verbs have differentiated preference. The sentences with *like* preferred *to*-infinitives (e.g. *to watch BBC News*), amounting to 44 percent of the total number of encoded stimuli in the *like* sentences. Abstract entity (e.g. *his stance*) and concrete object (e.g. *butter cake*) came to the next ranks. As for the sentences with *please*, proposition (e.g., *he had friends she could meet*) was the most favored, amount to 50 percent.

(9) Distribution of stimulus types⁴

	<i>Like</i>		<i>Please</i>	
	N	%	N	%
Concrete	89	28.8	40	31.3
Event	22	7.1	19	14.8
Abstract	198	64.0	69	53.9
Total	309	100	128	100

Though the tendency may not be clear-cut as in the case of the sentences with *fear* and *frighten* as shown in (5), the sentences with *like* are frequently found with abstract stimuli, while the stimuli of the sentences with *please* were more evenly distributed among the stimulus type than the stimuli of the sentences with *like*.

With regard to the aspectual difference in the propositional stimuli, the verbs in the propositions in the sentences with *like* were the simple present tense or the simple past tense, as in (10a). Although, in the examined data, only five sentences with *like* had propositional stimuli, all the verbs in propositions were stative verbs, such as *be*, *have* and *happen*. As for the verbs in the propositions in the sentences with *please*, the verbs which most frequently appeared were the perfective verbs as in (10b). The verbs that can be characterized as accomplishment, as in (10c), were also found with the sentences with *please* in addition to the verbs of the simple present and the simple past.

- (10) a. So it's just a great story and I liked that it was not a typical war story.
 b. Not everyone was pleased that I had come at it in an entirely different way and succeeded.

⁴ The category "abstract" includes abstract entities, propositions, and *to*-infinitives.

- c. I think he'd be pleased that I finished the book.

(COCA)

The observation that the preference of verbs in the promotional stimuli differed between the sentences with *like* and *please* suggests that the stimuli between the two have different semantic nature.

In addition to the linguistic data in (8), which shows that it is hard to paraphrase *like* sentences as *please* sentences without affecting acceptability, the data extracted from the corpus suggested that the preferred stimuli type denoted by the sentence with *like* is semantically distinguishable from that denoted by the sentences with *please*. In line with the sentences with *fear* in Levin and Grafmiller (2013), the sentences with *like* prefer the stimuli encoded as abstract. The different tendency was also found in the aspectual types of the verbs in the propositional stimuli, which agrees with the claim that the preferred types of the stimuli of the sentences with *like* and those with *please* differ from each other.

4. Concluding Remarks

This paper has taken a close look at the stimuli in *like* sentences and *please* sentences. Based on Levin and Grafmiller (2013), which clarifies different semantic natures of stimuli in *fear* and *frighten* sentences, we have tried to elucidate a semantic difference between stimuli of *like* and *please*. One of our findings is that *fear* and *like*, both of which take an experiencer as the subject, are parallel to each other in having the similar type of stimulus, i.e., abstract entity, in their favor. In perspective of realization of arguments and their semantic roles, this is compatible with the observation that *fear* and *like* allow stative readings. In this way, this paper supports the semantic approach to the puzzle of so-called psych-verb pairs, where the two verbs do not have arguments sharing strictly the same semantic roles. Further study is needed, however, to confirm that our findings hold for the other psych-verbs pairs.

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CORPUS

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

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