

The language of perception across cultures

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How are the senses structured by the languages we speak, the cultures we inhabit? To what extent is the encoding of perceptual experiences in languages a matter of how the mind/brain is “wired-up” and to what extent is it a question of local cultural preoccupation? The “Language of Perception” project tests the hypothesis that some perceptual domains may be more “ineffable” – i.e. difficult or impossible to put into words – than others. While cognitive scientists have assumed that proximate senses (olfaction, taste, touch) are more ineffable than distal senses (vision, hearing), anthropologists have illustrated the exquisite variation and elaboration the senses achieve in different cultural milieus.

The project is designed to test whether the proximate senses are universally ineffable – suggesting an architectural constraint on cognition – or whether they are just accidentally so in Indo-European languages, so expanding the role of cultural interests and pre-occupations.

To address this question, a standardized set of stimuli of color patches, geometric shapes, simple sounds, tactile textures, smells and tastes have been used to elicit descriptions from speakers of more than twenty languages—including three sign languages. The languages are typologically, genetically and geographically diverse, representing a wide-range of cultures. The communities sampled vary in subsistence modes (hunter-gatherer to industrial), ecological zones (rainforest jungle to desert), dwelling types (rural and urban), and various other parameters. We examine how codable the different sensory modalities are by comparing how consistent speakers are in how they describe the materials in each

modality. Our current analyses suggest that taste may, in fact, be the most codable sensorial domain across languages. Moreover, we have identified exquisite elaboration in the olfactory domains in some cultural settings, contrary to some contemporary predictions within the cognitive sciences. These results suggest that differential codability may be at least partly the result of cultural preoccupation. This shows that the senses are not just physiological phenomena but are constructed through linguistic, cultural and social practices.