“Hunter-gatherers and wine-experts: What do they have in common?”
by Asifa Majid

It is widely-held that people find it difficult, if not impossible, to put smells into words. For a psycholinguist, this begs the question: what does it mean to be able to "put something into language"?

Are all experiences equally amenable to linguistic description, or are some thoughts more intangible? We, in the Meaning, Culture, and Cognition Research Group are investigating these questions by exploring how speakers from different communities express perceptual experiences, particularly experiences of smell and flavour. We present the latest results from our Smell Lab with wine- and coffee-experts, and illustrate the cross-cultural variation in smell language from hunter-gatherer communities in the Malay Peninsula to small-scale agriculturalists in Nigeria. Taken together the results show there is considerable variation in the strategies different groups and sub-groups use to talk about smell. This means that the relationship between language and perception must be a function of our (linguistic) experience, rather than simply a matter of our biological heritage.

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Erasmus building 2.53

More information: http://www.ru.nl/cls/colloquium