

**Title:** Sensory representation in Semai

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How does language represent related sensory events? How is similarity between two smell experiences expressed linguistically? In Semai, spoken on Peninsular Malaysia, related sensory experiences receive related linguistic forms. This is a phenomenon similar to that in the English words ‘glimmer’, ‘glisten’, ‘glitter’, ‘glow’ and ‘gloom’, which all carry a notion of shine or light. In Semai, the larger part of the sensory vocabulary displays such pattern, so that related sensory experiences bundle together in networks of related terms. These terms display a diagrammatic iconic pattern in their systematic form-meaning mapping (cf. Peirce 1955). Various studies illustrate how diagrammatic structures are found in cultural practice and in the way humans represent the world, e.g., in material culture and ritual performances (e.g. Becker 1979, Feld 1982 and Roseman 1984). The present study investigates such structures in the linguistic representation of the sensory world.

The language of focus is Semai, a Mon-Khmer language spoken by a minority culture in the interior parts of the Malaysian peninsula. In this language, sensory perception is encoded with words called *expressives*. These words are exceptionally rich in meaning and often capture multiple aspects of a sensory event (cf. Diffloth 1976). Their meaning is typically composed by two separate parts, which together constitute the basis for the diagrammatic structure: 1) a string of consonants which provides information on *type* of perception (e.g. a reddish type of color, a type of pungent smell or a type of crispy sound), and: 2) an alternating vowel with which speakers specify various aspects of the already set type of perception (e.g. a specific hue for colors, the level of intensity for a particular smell, or pitch level for a particular sound). This is illustrated in the following examples where the consonant string refers to a reddish color, and the alternating vowels correspond to change in hue; *ch r* ‘pink-red’, *cheer* ‘orange-red’ and *chiir* ‘brown-red’. Through this type of form-meaning mapping, gradient relationships in the perceptual world receive gradient linguistic representations.

This work discusses such gradience, and shows how speakers draw on structural attributes in their sensory vocabulary to distinguish types and sub-types of perceptions when navigating through the sensory landscape.