

Describing odors in Formosan languages: grammatical strategies and cognition

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Most psychological experiments and studies on odor identification and recognition conclude that there is a rather poor linguistic repertoire when it comes to describing a perceived odor. This paper presents a preliminary result of an ongoing project on the relationship between language and olfaction with Formosan (Austronesian) languages—the endangered indigenous languages spoken in Taiwan—as the main subject for investigation. It is also a follow-up study of Lee (2010), which discusses reduplication as the common means for describing odor in four of these languages. In this paper a broader scale of the investigation is taken, along with smell experiments, showing that native speakers may differ in their olfactory conceptualization which leads to a diversity of linguistic expressions regarding odors. Given that both specific olfactory terms and the corresponding morphological expressions coexist, the properties of SMELL and the other senses come into play, determining the grammatical strategies for describing a perceived odor. The choices of different grammatical strategies reflect the native speaker's cognition towards the olfactory experiences. Apart from being a cross-linguistic study on olfactory expressions, this paper also intends to seek universality and variations in terms of grammatical strategies and their association with cognition.

References:

- Lee, Amy Pei-jung. 2010. Reduplication and odor in four Formosan languages. *Language and Linguistics* 11.1: 99-126.