

Encoding perception across languages: New insights and new methods

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Workshop description

Languages differ in the way they encode sensory perception and in how systematically they do it for particular senses (San Roque et al. 2015; Majid et al. 2018). Some encode perception mode through dedicated means for the grammatical expression of information source, known as ‘evidentiality’ markers (Aikhenvald 2004), while others adhere to lexical strategies or employ ‘depictive’ devices such as onomatopoeias and ideophones associated with specific sensory meaning (Dingemanse 2011, 2012; Dingemanse & Majid 2012). Perceptual meanings are also sometimes expressed by demonstratives, e.g. Dyirbal *ngala-* ‘not visible; either audible or remembered’ (Evans & Wilkins 2000: 583), or by specialized morphemes, e.g. the Tundra Nenets odorative suffix *xal’a-yə-* ‘smell of fish’ [*xal’a* ‘fish’] (Nikolaeva 2014: 47; also Sutrop 2001). This list of expression types associated with perceptual experience is hardly exhaustive and yet awaits a comprehensive typological investigation that would shed light on what strategies are universal or at least cross-linguistically common and which, on the contrary, are rare.

As pointed out repeatedly in the anthropological literature, “sensory perception is a cultural, as well as a physical act” (Classen 1997: 401). Prominence of some senses in particular languages is often explained with reference to cultural peculiarities (Majid & Levinson 2011; Levinson & Majid 2014; Majid 2015). Limited eye contact is the norm in some aboriginal communities, leading to a greater prominence of hearing (Evans & Wilkins 2000; Aikhenvald & Storch 2013). According to Majid et al. (2018), speakers from hunter-gatherer communities exhibit higher codability of smell than non-hunter-gatherers, while sound receives higher codability in communities with specialist musicians. Ecological and genetic factors are discussed in connection with more complex classifications of odors in some cultures (Majid 2021). Prominence of auditory perception is also observed in narratives from cultures with developed singing traditions. For instance, in West African folklore, the story is commonly structured around a song serving as a driving force behind the events in the narrative, consistent with recurring reference to hearing in traditional storytelling (Teptiuk & Nikitina 2023).

The availability of different strategies for encoding perception mode has not been systematically explored. A vast amount of typological literature (Chafe & Nichols 1986; Johanson & Utas 2000; Aikhenvald & Dixon 2003; Aikhenvald 2004, 2018; among many others) focuses on how information source and perception modes are expressed with grammatical means. Even though such studies cover a variety of languages, they tend to leave lexical expressions out of the discussion. In turn, studies focusing on semantic extensions of perception verbs meaning ‘see’ and ‘hear’ (Viberg 1984; Sweetser 1990; Evans & Wilkins 2000; San Roque et al. 2015) and ideophones depicting sensory imagery (Dingemanse & Majid 2012) provide accounts of how languages organize the semantic space of perceptual experience but do not consider developments in the evidential system beyond these categories. In addition, studies examining lexical and grammatical reflexes of perception have mostly focused on the basic five senses, ignoring no less prominent senses such as the sense of balance and

perception of internal neurological and muscle states. Exploring the full range of human perception in relation to language opens up new perspectives on well-attested pragmaticalization paths from external perception to internal states (e.g. from SEEING to BELIEVING) and potentially implicates grammar beyond evidentiality, such as modality. This workshop aims to bridge the gap between the various strands of research by addressing these and several further questions that have not as yet been confronted.

One of the issues that remain unexplored is the interaction of lexical and grammatical evidentials with other strategies associated with sensory perception. To our knowledge, no attempt has been made to test whether the availability of grammatical evidentials or ideophones associated with a particular sense correlates with overall prominence of reference to the corresponding sense in discourse. Such investigations could help explain the exceptionality of languages with complex systems of grammatical evidentials or ideophones, and the consequences on cognition such systems might have. Furthermore, they help elaborate the description of evidential systems in the light of other expressions associated with perceptual experience.

We also need a comprehensive understanding of what happens in languages with poly-/heterosemy of perception verbs. Do these languages encode various senses as often as languages with a variety of verbs? Do they avoid referring to some senses or encode them with other strategies? Do perception verbs in such languages acquire more meanings in the cognitive domain compared to languages without the poly-/heterosemy? What other semantic domains do perception meanings interact with?

The possibility of combining information from multiple modalities is another understudied direction in the research on perceptual language. So far, we only observe reports of individual cases in the literature (e.g. ideophones in Siwu, cf. Dingemans & Majid 2012). Linguistic expression of synesthesia (Strik Lievers 2015) and mixture of modalities in perceptual metaphors (Caballero & Paradis 2015, and references therein) is another topic that would require more intra- and cross-linguistic attention. Obviously, we need more descriptions of such phenomena to fully grasp how the organization of senses happens linguistically, what variations and mixtures of senses are attested, and whether perceptual language stays within the boundaries of the five basic senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, or requires recalibration of typological labels and inclusion of intermediate categories. The status of interoception, i.e. sensitivity to inner physiological conditions, and proprioception, i.e. sense of balance and body posture, in the typology of senses expressed linguistically, is another topic that requires more scholarly attention.

Following previous attempts at crosslinguistic investigation of perceptual language, this workshop aims to bring together scholars addressing topics related to the linguistic expression of sensory perception. We invite submissions based on data from previously underdescribed or poorly documented languages, as well as typological studies. Submissions on major languages are also welcome, provided that they are based on solid empirical evidence (such as quantitative comparison of styles or genres). Topics include but are not limited to:

- the typology of perception expressions;
- semantic extensions/polysemy of perception verbs and perceptual metaphors;
- universals and *rara* in the expression of sensory perception, including grammar (e.g., argument realization, the use of complementizers), lexis, pragmatics etc.;
- perceptual language beyond the five senses and multimodal perceptual expressions;
- methodological challenges and advances in research on perceptual language, including experimental approaches;
- extralinguistic (ecological, cultural, stylistic, generic...) factors behind the encoding of sensory perception.

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