

We don't talk much about smell here: A preliminary study of the semantics of olfaction in Estonian and German

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Humans can distinguish more than one trillion different olfactory stimuli (Bushdid et al., 2014). Yet people struggle when asked to name specific smells, and the description of odors remains elusive. A number of studies have confirmed that in urbanized Western societies smells are not particularly codable in languages (de Val, Huisman, Wnuk, & Majid, 2017; Majid, 2015; Majid & Burenhult, 2014). It has been reported that in some non-Western cultures odors play a larger role and the participants of indigenous hunter-gatherer communities have a greater variety of lexical items in their disposal to speak about smells (e.g. Burenhult & Majid, 2011; Wnuk & Majid, 2012; Majid & Burenhult, 2014).

Our empirical study provides evidence that odors are difficult to express both in Estonian and in German. The data was collected from 20 Estonian native speakers (7 male, mean age 37,62) and 20 German native speakers (10 male, mean age 28,49). The field method of Davies and Corbett (1995) was adapted from a similar empirical study carried out on Estonian some decades ago (Sutrop 2002). We report on commonalities and distinctions in odor naming in Estonian and German and identify whether there are basic odor terms by applying basic colour criteria to olfactory domain (Berlin & Kay 1969). We hypothesise that there is only one basic word in olfaction domain for both languages — Estonian *lõhn* 'odor' and German *Geruch* 'odor'. In addition, native speakers of both Estonian and German are creative in describing odors more comprehensively than expected. This might be due to cultural similarities between Estonian and German or other factors. In both languages native speakers tend to use basic descriptive adjectives (e.g. in Estonian *meeldiv* 'pleasant', *ebameeldiv* 'unpleasant', in German *angenehm* 'pleasant', *unangenehm* 'unpleasant') and adjectives from taste domain (e.g. in Estonian *magus* 'sweet', *soolane* 'salty', in German *süß* 'sweet', *salzig* 'salty') and temperature domain (e.g. in German *feucht* 'humid').

Thanks to Sutrop's study, we are able to add diachronic perspective to our study. This reveals that presently the speakers are prone to use more adjectives from the taste domain as nearly 20 years ago (e.g. in Estonian 20 years ago the smell were described as: *magus* 'sweet', *terav* 'spicy', *imal* 'tasteless', and in 2017: *magus* 'sweet', *kirbe* 'rank', *terav* 'spicy', *kibe* 'acerbic' *hapu* 'sour'). It can be only conjectured that cuisine and gastronomic culture have become an inseparable part of everyday life in both language communities and tends to play its part on odor naming.

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