

The senses at the intersection of language, culture, and biology

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Cognitive linguistics aims to ground theories of meaning in facts about cognition. We know that language recruits at least some of the same representations used in action and perception. Auditory, gustatory, tactile and visual semantic processing triggers brain regions responsible for encoding those self-same percepts. Hearing the words kick, pick and lick activates corresponding regions of motor cortex, while verbs of running, cutting and speaking engage regions associated with the relevant body-parts making those movements. However, the fact that language is constrained and shaped—to some extent—by our bodily experiences does not entail that languages are, therefore, the same. Perception underdetermines the possibilities for semantics. In this talk, I review evidence from sensorial vocabularies across the world and argue that we must go beyond cognition and embrace culture in order to fully account for language use. For example, in contrast to English people, speakers of the Jahai language talk about odours as easily as colours. This fact is intimately tied to the fact that the Jahai are a hunter-gatherer community with cultural and ritual practices closely tied to their sensory ecology, while English speakers live in a “deodorized environment” with olfaction relegated to the fringes. Such evidence suggests that integrating the cultural dimension into discussions of cognitive linguistics is essential.