
Evaluative adjectives in different sensory domains: Comparing sight, smell and taste

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Subjective adjectives (e.g. *fun*, *tasty*) have received considerable attention, but (to the best of our knowledge) current linguistic theories do not make distinctions based on sensory modality, although the senses are known to differ in their biological and social-communicative aspects.

We tested experimentally whether interpretation of subjective evaluative adjectives depends on whether they refer to the *visual* vs. *olfactory* (smell) vs. *gustatory* (taste) domains. Does people's interpretation of who is the attitude holder/judge of an adjective depend on whether the situation involves seeing, smelling or tasting? We manipulated verbs (ex.1) and asked people to indicate whose opinion the adjective (e.g. *disgusting*) reflects (ex.2), in contexts with two potential attitude-holders.

- (1) When I came into the room, Eliza {saw/smelled/tasted/put_{baseline}} the muffin on the platter. It {looked/smelled/tasted/was_{baseline}} disgusting. [*example item*]
- (2) Whose opinion is it that the muffin {looked/smelled/tasted/was} disgusting? The narrator's / Eliza's

Sensory modality has a significant effect: There are more first-person/narrator interpretations of the adjectives with *see* than *taste* or *smell*. If subjectivity is context-dependent, we can derive these results from the biological and social properties of sight, taste and smell, without adjusting the lexical entries of individual adjectives.