

An odour lexicon: A group of nomadic hunter-gatherers in Thailand have multiple words for smells

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Odours play a central role in the everyday life of the Maniq. The language researcher Ewelina Wnuk visited the Maniq over several years and compiled a lexicon of olfactory language of this hunter-gatherer tribe in the Thai tropical rainforest. Credit: E. Wnuk

"A sweet, flowery and oriental composition of scents with jasmine and May rose absolute" – this is how a well-known cosmetics manufacturer describes one of its most successful women's perfumes. A very sophisticated means of expression, one might think. Far from it: Western languages appear to lack vocabulary devoted to express the variety of existing smells. They rely on metaphors and similes. According to linguists at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen in the Netherlands, however, there are languages that have a specific vocabulary for odours. The Maniq, a group of hunter-gatherers in southern Thailand, can describe smells using at least 15 different abstract expressions. They categorise odours according to their pleasantness and dangerousness. The linguists' results show that human language is perfectly capable of expressing the variety of smells in our environment. This probably reflects how important a sense of smell was for survival over the course of human history, something that is greatly underestimated today.

Faced with the choice of having to do without one of their five senses, most people consider the sense of smell dispensable. Many scientists believe that the sense of smell is a relic of evolution and attribute little importance to it. This belief is reflected in the fact that many languages do not have a dedicated repertoire for describing smells.

Flowery, earthy, vanilla or musky – most languages in the Western world use objects that have particular smells as the basis for expressions to describe [odours](#); they do not have abstract terms to describe the smells. On the other hand, in the world of colours, for example, words like red or green do not refer to specific objects.

Other cultures clearly have more options for describing smells: the Maniq, for example, a population of a few hundred hunter-gatherers in southern Thailand, whose language has been largely unexplored. Two linguists, Ewelina Wnuk and Asifa Majid, have drawn up a list of 15

abstract terms that the Maniq use to describe odours – more than in almost any other known language. The expressions do not belong to a single word class. They include nouns and so-called stative verbs, the closest translation of which would be "smell like X, Y, Z, ...", e.g. "smell like a mushroom, old shelter, rotten wood, etc."

Unlike other languages, such as German or English, these expressions are not derived from one single specific object. Instead, the Maniq language contains terms that represent a smell that can originate from several sources. Thus, the Maniq have an expression for the smell of the sun, but the same expression also refers to the air or smoke coming from the sun. The word for the smell of an old shelter is also the same word used for the smell of mushrooms, the skin of a dead animal or drinking from a bamboo tube. "Their language encompasses a rich vocabulary with which they can describe smells. These terms express only smells and are not applicable across other sensory domains," explains Ewelina Wnuk, who visited the Maniq over several years in the Thai tropical rainforest and studied their olfactory language.

According to the researchers' results, the Maniq lexicon of smells has a two-dimensional structure. Odours are differentiated along two dimensions: pleasantness and dangerousness. "It thus has a structure that is quite similar to the lexicon for expressions of feelings, in which a distinction is also made between pleasant/unpleasant and exciting/calming. This correlation probably expresses the close connection between smells and feelings," says Wnuk.

The extensive vocabulary and structure of the lexicon indicates the importance of odours for the Maniq. They evaluate their surroundings through their nose; after all, in an environment that is still largely untouched by humans, they are surrounded by smells at all times. They use their sense of smell to identify animals that they can hunt, and to recognise objects or events, such as spoiled food, that can pose a danger.

Odours are also very important to the Maniq from a medical perspective. Many of their medicinal herbs have an intense aroma, on which the healing success is based: the pleasant scent of the plant penetrates into the body and drives out disease. Jewellery therefore frequently consists of necklaces, headbands and wristbands made of fragrant-smelling herbs. The Maniq also make sure that they are surrounded by positive smells and avoid negative odours.

These findings are not only interesting for linguists, neuroscientists can also draw valuable conclusions from the information. The structure of the Maniq lexicon of smells could indicate, for example, that pleasant and dangerous smells are processed differently in the brain.

In addition to Maniq, researchers have also analysed a second [language](#) – Jahai, spoken by a neighbouring hunter-gatherer population – in which odours also play a key role. It is certainly no coincidence that in both cases the languages are spoken by populations in tropical rainforest regions with a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, as smells are vital in order to survive in nature. "People in Western societies have demoted olfaction. Fruit and flowers, for example, are cultivated for their appearance, not their fragrance," says Asifa Majid, a professor at the Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen, who compares how different cultures express smells in their languages. It can even be an absolute taboo in some cases to talk about [bad smells](#). "The world of odours was perhaps more significant earlier in human history, but today there do not appear to be any remnants of it in Western languages," says Majid.

More information: Ewelina Wnuk, Asifa Majid. "Revisiting the limits of language: The odor lexicon of Maniq." *Cognition* (2014) Band 131, Seite 125–138. [DOI: 10.1016/j.cognition.2013.12.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2013.12.008). Epub 2014 Jan 23.

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