

# Odors are perceived the same way by hunter-gatherers and Westerners

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Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

Previous research has shown the hunter-gatherer Jahai are much better at naming odors than Westerners. They even have a more elaborate lexicon for it. New research by language scientist Asifa Majid of Radboud University shows that despite these linguistic differences, the Jahai and Dutch find the same odors pleasant and unpleasant.

Scholars have for centuries pointed out that [smell](#) is impossible to put into words. Dutch, like English, seems to support this view. Perhaps the only really clear example of a smell word in Dutch is "muf." The Jahai, a group of hunter-gatherers living in the Malay Peninsula, appear to be special in that they have developed an exquisite lexicon of words for smell, like other hunter-gatherers. Earlier work of Majid and colleagues already showed that hunter-gatherers seem to be especially good at talking about smell.

In a new study, the researchers tested 30 Jahai speakers and 30 Dutch speakers and asked them to name odors. At the same time they also videoed their faces so they could measure their facial expressions to the different odors after the experiment. The researchers replicated the finding that Jahai speakers use special [odor](#) words to talk about smells (e.g., *cɲɛs* used to refer to stinging sorts of smells associated with petrol, smoke, and various insects and plants, *plʔeŋ* used for bloody, fishy, meaty sorts of smells), while Dutch speakers referred to concrete sources (e.g., 'if you ride along or stand behind a garbage truck, but not right on top of it').

In comparison to the Dutch, Jahai speakers also agree more with each other in how to describe odors, they give shorter responses, and also respond faster (Jahai 2 seconds; Dutch 13 seconds). The Dutch seem to struggle to come up with a way to describe smells because they do not have dedicated vocabulary. On the other hand, the rapid responses of the Jahai show that their words come to mind easily.

Despite these differences in language use, both Jahai and Dutch responded emotionally in the same way to smells: they found the same sorts of odors disgusting (as reflected in their faces by a nose wrinkle and lowered brow). This suggests that although culture shapes language, odors are perceived in the same way across the globe in diverse cultures.

**More information:** Asifa Majid et al. Olfactory language and abstraction across cultures, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (2018). [DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2017.0139](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2017.0139)

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