

Please cite as:

Le Guen, O., Senft, G., & Sicoli, M. A. (2008). Language of perception: Views from anthropology. In A. Majid (Ed.), *Field Manual Volume 11* (pp. 29-36). Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. doi:[10.17617/2.446079](https://doi.org/10.17617/2.446079).

REGULATIONS ON USE

Stephen C. Levinson and Asifa Majid

This website and the materials herewith supplied have been developed by members of the Language and Cognition Department of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (formerly the Cognitive Anthropology Research Group). In a number of cases materials were designed in collaboration with staff from other MPI departments.

Proper citation and attribution

Any use of the materials should be acknowledged in publications, presentations and other public materials. Entries have been developed by different individuals. Please cite authors as indicated on the webpage and front page of the pdf entry. Use of associated stimuli should also be cited by acknowledging the field manual entry. Intellectual property rights are hereby asserted.

Creative Commons license

This material is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike license (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). This means you are free to share (copy, redistribute) the material in any medium or format, and you are free to adapt (remix, transform, build upon) the material, under the following terms: you must give appropriate credit in the form of a citation to the original material; you may not use the material for commercial purposes; and if you adapt the material, you must distribute your contribution under the same license as the original.

Background

The field manuals were originally intended as working documents for internal use only. They were supplemented by verbal instructions and additional guidelines in many cases. If you have questions about using the materials, or comments on the viability in various field situations, feel free to get in touch with the authors.

Contact

Email us via library@mpi.nl

Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

P.O. Box 310, 6500 AH, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

**LANGUAGE OF PERCEPTION:
VIEWS FROM ANTHROPOLOGY
Olivier Le Guen, Gunter Senft & Mark Sicoli**

Project	Categories and concepts across language and cognition
Task	Ethnographic guidelines
Goals	To explore and describe sociocultural patterns relating language of perception, ideologies of perception, and perceptual practice in our speech communities.
Prerequisites	Language of the senses stimuli (see Field Manual 2007)

Introduction: Why does culture matter for the language of perception?

To understand the underlying principles of categorisation and classification of sensory input semantic analyses must be based on both language and culture. The senses are not only physiological phenomena, but they are also linguistic, cultural, and social. Firstly, a variety of sensory experiences with cultural value are expressed through linguistic forms. Here we may find direct associations between the elaboration of material cultural and the elaboration of perceptual language. The anthropology of the senses has – among other things – explored how, and for what purposes, the senses are used in everyday life and how senses are attributed with specific social values (to differentiate social classes for instance). Secondly, culture may also present means for dealing with what is ineffable, or inexpressible in language and give some justification for that limitation. Thirdly, knowledge of, and practice with, perception can be distributed unequally across the social actors of a speech community. We are interested in all these sociocultural dimensions as they relate to our questions about the language of perception.

In what follows we first give some methodological recommendations for how to collect ethnographic data and then present research questions that are illustrated by examples. With all questions we want to know not only how the issues raised are expressed verbally (in everyday speech, expert varieties, figures of speech, metaphors, colloquial expressions, etc.) but also how they find expression in the practice of the speech community and its general belief system.

Brief notes on ethnographic methodology.

This field manual entry does not propose specific tasks to run with a number of consultants. Rather guidelines are provided to explore a range of possibilities, the exact nature of which can only emerge in your fieldwork. The types of data that enter into an ethnographic perspective include language, ideology, practice, and knowledge of structural relationships: thus we are interested in the categories and formal properties of the linguistic expression of sensory experience; how people describe and make sense of their sensory experience; and how people act in patterned ways that reveal both tacit and active knowledge of perception.

Data on language are produced through elicitation tasks, semi-structured interviews, observation of natural speech scenes, and participant-observation in learning and speaking a language. Ideologies (beliefs circulated among a group that are grounded in the social order) can be expressed in explicit descriptions of behaviour, through corrections people give about the behaviour of others, or in non-linguistically expressed behaviour itself. It is important to use combined methods of elicitation, participant-observation, informal discussions, and observations of a variety of activities and to aim to have each illuminate the others.

These are just a few rough and ready guidelines for ethnography:

- Always have a notebook (and pencil!) with you for jotting down observations you may need recollection of for later questioning.
- It can also be a good idea to have a sound recorder with you at all times because you cannot know when a good interview or moment of dialogue will occur.
- Take notes as soon as possible of striking observations. The more time that passes, the harder it is to reconstruct.
- Keep a diary/log for the purpose of preserving and working through your thoughts on matters that arise in your fieldwork.
- Talk about the information you have received from one person with another, think about where they agree and how and why they may differ. Some people will clearly be more knowledgeable of certain domains of social life than others, especially in being able to observe, and speak about their culture in the abstract. This is quite useful, but be sure to diversify your contacts as much as possible and cover many of the same questions with a variety of people as relevant themes become apparent. Ethnographic information is structured and relevant to elucidating patterns, it is not anecdotal.

Questions

1. **Does your speech community have any theories about the human mind**, its existence, its activities? are these theories combined with specific physical features or conditions of individuals?
Does your speech community have any theories (e.g., mythical stories) that explain the **origin of sense**? of senses? are these theories different for children vs. adults, men vs. women? Does your speech community have any theories about the origin of human beings? the conception of children? the gaining (or losing) of status within one's lifetime during and after different rites of passage (like, e.g., baptism, marriage, etc.)? a kind of "life" after death?

Example:

In the creation myth of the Kashinawa (a group from the Pano ethnolinguistic family living at the frontier with Peru and Brazil), at the beginning of time, all entities (human, animals, supernatural entities) could change form at will, "slipping into the skin of another entity." This metamorphosis allowed entities to change their perceptual access. The process allowed temporary convergence of perception and different kinds of entities could thus eat the same things, have intercourse and reproduce but above all,

communicate. After a dramatic incident, different kinds of entities were differentiated and could not communicate anymore. Visible and invisible, the material and the immaterial, time and space became distinct levels of realities (Keifenheim 2002). This myth is interesting in culturally justifying the universal limitations we can observe in human kind.

2. **How many senses are differentiated by your speech community?** How is the sensorium culturally constructed? How does the speech community describe and explain these sensations? Do the senses differentiated by your speech community interact?

Example: For the Anlo-Ewe speaking people in Southeastern Ghana, much of perception falls into the category of *seselelame* (literally, feel-REDUP-at-flesh-inside), in which what might be considered sensory input, including the Western sixth-sense notion of ‘intuition’, comes from bodily feeling and the interior milieu. The notions of *agbagbaɔɔ* (a vestibular sense), *azɔlizɔɔ* (kinesthesia, a movement sense), and *nufɔfo* (orality, vocality, talking) are as much part of the Anlo-Ewe conception of sensing as the more familiar *nusese* (hearing), *nulele* (tactility, touch), *nuvevese* (smell) and *nukpɔkpɔ* (sight). The mind/body and perception/emotion dichotomies that pervade SAE cultural traditions and philosophical thought are absent (Geurts 2002).

3. **Are the senses hierarchically structured**, are specific senses more important than others, and are there specific cultural values on which this hierarchic evaluation is based? Does this evaluation find its expression in specific behaviour patterns? Does your speech community evaluate sensory perceptions and if so, how? Does the evaluation of this input change for different contexts? by different people of different status/age/sex? by people with different degrees of knowledge and expertise within one or more of the sensory domains? What about the social-cultural evaluation of extreme sensations? What is the local notion for ‘comfort temperatures’? What kind of connotations do extreme temperature terms convey?

Example: The Anlo-Ewe sensorium privileges balance, kinesthesia, and sound. This can be seen in four areas, each of which affect the others: (a) the use of language to describe the sensorium; (b) moral values embedded in child-rearing and social development; (c) the Anlo-Ewe conception of personhood; (d) ideas about illness and health (Geurts 2002:227ff.).

Example:

In their article about semantics, Coleman and Kay (1981) give an example about the moral implications of terms such as ‘kill’ and ‘murder’. Murder implies a moral condemnation so we can say: *When is it okay to kill?* but an utterance like *When is it okay to murder?* is more problematic. The same goes for temperature terms in English, compare e.g.: *Is it a nice warm day?* in opposition to *Is it a nice freezing day?* In some languages, this kind of semantic implication is either intrinsically implied in sensory terms or would need a modifier.

Are such sensations intertwined with specific connotations in one or more domains? Are the senses / sensations associated with body-parts / sensory organs? Do some people claim to have more and/or better senses than others? On what basis are such claims made? Do their “additional” or special(ised) senses allow them to perceive things / beings / worlds that are beyond the reach of other members of the community? Do these people talk about such experiences in everyday life? in rituals? or is this secret knowledge of a small group of acknowledged experts? Is there a difference between the perception of “the

natural” versus “the supernatural”? Do sensory experiences play a role for your speech community’s cosmology?

Example:

Among the Yucatec Maya supernatural entities are said to live in the same reality as humans but have different perceptual access to it. This means that, under normal conditions, a human is not able to visually perceive the soul of a dead. But dreamlike experience or illness can change the limitations of perceptual access (i.e. the limitation of the physiology of the human body), and allow access to the plane of reality where the souls of the dead operate. During the dream, the person is liberated from the physiological limits of his/her body and perceives the reality differently. Among the Yucatec Maya, supernatural entities have a different access to the reality and do not consume the physical offering but only the odour or the vapour of the food, meaning that their perceptual access to the human plane is enabled through smell. The same goes for how humans perceive these entities. Usually, among the Yucatec Maya, sound is a privileged sense to perceive the presence of supernatural entities.

Example:

The Tzeltal of Cancuc in Chiapas (Mexico) consider that they have different kinds of souls, some of which are directly related to other natural entities (animals) or even meteorological phenomena. This means that they can have perceptual access to the world through ‘un-bodied senses’. They can feel for instance the pain their counterpart animal (*nahual*) is also feeling. The belief in *Nahuales*, companion souls shared between human and animals, is widespread and attested as early as ca 162 CE from inscriptions on the Epi-Olmec Tuxtla Statuette deciphered by Justeson & Kaufman (1993). As each person comes to life, so does an animal who will accompany the person through life, usually at a distance, except in the case of shamans who may have special relationships with their *nahual*. Here the soul is dualistic, partly internal and external. People are said to have characteristics of the animal companion and are bound to them: if the animal feels pain, so will the person, if the animal is killed (as by a hunter) the person will die. Among the Zapotec of Oaxaca, people have reported that in dreams they experience the body of their *nahual* and can sense the world through their perspective (Sicoli 2007).

4. **Is the source of the perceived sensation more important than the experiencer or vice versa?** Are all sources of sensations perceived as entities of their own or only animate ones? Is a specific sense, like e.g., smell, perceived as an entity of its own? Does your language code for activity or agency and does this play any role in the expression and conceptualisation of senses?
5. **Do sensory perceptions of your speech community play a role in different domains?** for cooking? for their ethnobiological knowledge? for their ethnomedical (shamanic, magic) expertise and practices? What signs are sensed by lay people that give clues to body states and what signs are used by specialists (curers, healers, magicians, shamans) that give clues to body states?

Example:

Among Zapotecs of Oaxaca food shape, texture, and colour is important. The process of making tortillas, for example involves changing the texture of corn to corn dough, producing spheres, and pressing them to flat disks that are round. Certain ritual tortillas are rather in the shapes of triangles, traditionally having been offered to *Bezihyyo*, the god associated with lightning, who happens to like angled things. Triangles also become important around the time of the Day of the Dead, when people build adorned altars for their ancestors to return. Triangular *tamales* are made at this time for offering to the dead; mundane *tamales* are generally rectangular or oblong in shape.

Is food a varied domain or is it a rather homogeneous experience? What sensory experience enters into how it can be poorly prepared? What cultural domains in your community are important foci for sensory contrasts? Is there a more natural way to elicit shape information than the shape booklet we used last year, which had the tendency to evoke book knowledge of geometry in many of the researchers' experience?

6. How do sensory categories of your speech community influence the speech community's categorisation in other domains? Are categories like e.g., “hot-cold”, “raw-cooked”, “wet-dry”, “soft-hard”, etc. present in domains that are not prototypically “sensory”? Are there sense oppositions (not necessarily binary ones! there may also be terms for neutral as well as for extreme states) that are used to classify across domains of humans, animals, plants, supernatural beings? What are variable qualities of humans, animals, plants, supernatural beings?

Example:

‘Hot’ and ‘cold’ in Mesoamerica is a classification system into which elements of the natural world are categorised. As a system of classification it can be compared with grammatical gender systems. The system is covert linguistically, while grammatical gender systems are generally overt, but both are similar in that the world is classified into categories and one salient opposition becomes prototypical and can influence behaviour with regard to the categories. In a ternary gender system (masculine, feminine, neuter) the world is categorised and this includes male and female, which linguists and sometimes speakers use to name the categories. But it is not that items in the world are feminine or masculine (where man and women would be considered as a source base) but rather they belong to two classes, which also includes female and male. The robust sexual opposition is taken as primary and can in turn influence the perception of objects in the same categories like a Whorfian cryptotype. The ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ categories in Mesoamerica behave in a similar way. They are not only part of a language structure but also convey meaning and influence language use, practices and cultural believes.

Example:

In the **Language structure** of Yucatec Maya there exist terms for ‘hot’ *k’ūinal* (based on the root *k’ūin*, ‘sun’) and a term for ‘cold’ *sūs*. The range of entities that can be qualified with these adjectives is large (hot: water, human body after sleep, salt, etc.; cold: orange, unripe fruits, etc.) but do not rely on difference between body contact and comfort of body temperature. It is not an anthropocentric classification. These categories are reflected in the **language use (everyday speech)** where utterances such as “the water is hot”, “don’t drink (cold) water because your body is hot!” or “you should put some salt on your orange because orange is cold” are common.

Example:

The ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ division is particularly relevant and people take great care of respecting it in their **practices**, especially practices related to well-being or illness. Among the Zapotecs of Oaxaca, pregnant women avoid food that is classified as cold, as well as drinks that are cold in temperature. At birth the child is bathed in warm water and wrapped in blankets to prevent loss of heat. The mother is also wrapped in blankets because she has just expelled the fetus, which is classified as hot (see also Foster 1994). Over the next three days after the birth, the mother and child will spend time in a warm sauna each day and receive massages from the midwife. The ideological importance of the relationship between classificational hot-cold and tactile hot-cold is clear in consideration of a birth story told by a father of 14 children to Sicoli. Thirteen of this man’s children had been born with Zapotec midwives, but one was born in the government medical clinic in the next town. He described how the room was cold and that the child was not covered in blankets at birth and was washed in cold water in a sink. He believes that these were the moments when cold grabbed the child and for this reason the child has had health problems throughout her life.

In terms of a **belief system**, ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ and ‘neutral’ in Mesoamerica is a basic ternary system that orders the world. Extreme states are considered dangerous and should be avoided, neutral being the desired state. But ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ do not refer only to actual temperature but also to ontological states of entities (but it is not metaphorical use). This means that when one person’s body is considered ‘hot’ the person should avoid drinking or eating items that are categorically ‘cold’ or actually ‘cold’. Temperature shocks between actual or intrinsic entities are a cause of disorder or imbalance, of which illness is probably the most salient example. The same goes with the supernatural world, where spirits are considered cold and only consume cold offering.

7. Does your speech community use specific lexical terms that refer to specific senses to express specific cognitive processes and emotions and if so, is there anything like, e.g. evidentiality, specific argument structure, etc. involved? Is there any hierarchy involved?

Example:

In English, seeing and hearing can be considered as the hierarchically most relevant sources for validating information, especially in inferential processes (see Cooper in Viberg 1984). Metaphoric use of sensory verbs reflects this hierarchy.

- (1). I see what you mean
- (2). I hear you
- (3). *I smell/touch/taste you

Example:

In Yucatec Maya, there is a division in sensory verbs between ‘see’ (*il*) and the others senses ‘feel’ (*u’uy*). This division also reflects a degree of relevance or security of information. If someone has seen an event with his/her own eyes, no evidentials are required. On the other hand, hearsay or other sensory perception will need evidential marking to be correctly communicated to another person.

Example:

In the hot-cold classification system in Zapotec, spirits are cold. Contact with them is dangerous, because contact with the cold entity will draw the heat out of a healthy person. They will fall ill and eventually die. The domain of ‘contact’ is one of touch. There is a name for this disease when caused by a particular spirit *wahcchi* who inhabits forests in Zapotec country. The illness is called the ‘touched by the *wahcchi*’, and is caused by physical contact or by being frightened or deceived by the forest spirit. An interesting linguistic fact of the use of the verb for touch *-na7ttze* is that when used in this sense it has a different argument structure than in prototypical use in the sensory domain.

Ona7ttze béttoh méxxa.
CMP-touch Peter table.
Peter touched the table.

vs

Ona7ttze iccha wahcchi li7i zxah.
CMP-touch sickness Chanéque PRO-Base-person
The wahcchi illness touched him/her.

The presence of the pronominal base *li7i* in the second example codes the pronoun *zxah* as being in an oblique NP where as in the previous example the verb rather has a direct object argument *méxxa*.

8. How is the knowledge of perception distributed across the various members of your speech community? Can variation in responses across the subjects with whom the language of perception stimuli were run be attributable to cultural patterns, or social differentiation? Are some people believed to have better sensory perception

than others? Are some people, or entities, believed to have more or less senses than others? Can a shaman or another individual sense a world that is beyond reach of others or normally not available? Are there terms for an experience of heightened sensitivity (either qualitative or quantitative)? Are there associations between perceptual categories and social categories (such as gender, class, rank, clan...)? Do people explicitly acknowledge or explain these relationships? Or are they apparent in social or linguistic practice but not tacitly recognised?

These particular questions interact directly with our goals of exploring the relative codability of the senses. Everyone who has applied the stimuli for the language of perception has found some variation in different individual's responses. To come at this topic as both a question of psychology and a question of culture we must be able to contextualise variable responses to stimuli in social fields where such knowledge may be differentially distributed as cultural pattern. Both sociolinguistics and sociocultural anthropology have argued that social differentiation can be both functional in maintaining systems of language and culture, and can be a sign of change in process. Thus, it is important to describe social differentiation based on evidence of language, ideology, and practice.

There are several ways in which knowledge is distributed among social groups: one is through a different mastery of knowledge.

Example:

Different life experiences, such as professional specialisation, can tune a person's senses and refine their vocabulary. Culinary professionals could be expected to have greater knowledge of taste; phoneticians, greater knowledge of sound; weavers, of colours and patterns, etc.

A second way knowledge is distributed is the ideological association of categories of knowledge with categories of persons where some sense is indexical of social category.

Example:

In "The Witch's Senses", Classen (2005) described European association of the so-called "lower senses" (touch, taste, smell) with femininity and the so-called "higher senses" (sight, sound) with masculinity. The lower senses were the senses of domestic life, of cooking and housework. The higher senses were associated with public life and rhetoric. The higher senses came to be seen as the rational senses and the lower senses as irrational. The higher-lower metaphor in this sense terminology is illustrative of their relative valuation in standard average European language and culture. Touch, taste, and smell were gendered feminine and ranked lower; sight and sound were gendered masculine and ranked higher.

This morally charged social distribution was important in cultural change. The European witch hunts were taking place at the same time that medicine was transforming from a home centred domain of practice that was women's mastery to an institution centred domain of practice that was to be men's mastery. Medical knowledge of body states whose signs could be sensed through the proximal senses became negatively valued primarily in favour of sight-based knowledge, such as that gained by dissection and vivisection.

A third way knowledge is distributed is that persons can be attributed certain types of smells, appearances, tastes, sounds (voice qualities, etc), or qualities drawn from the tactile domain, like hot or cold, wet or dry.

Example:

In “The odour of the other”, Classen (1993) takes up the question of how categories such as social class and ethnicity are associated with different smells. The question being how people are categorised through attributes they are believed to possess, such as odour, colour, voice quality, tactile qualities, etc. In “The witch’s senses”, Classen (2005) considers European’s association of the senses with social categories of gender and associations with morality. Europeans projected the touch domain contrasts of hot-cold, wet-dry, soft-hard onto gender where women were seen as damp, cool and soft, and men hot, dry, and hard. For witches who were prototypically constructed as feminine in European folklore, dampness was, for example, associated with negatively evaluated traits like gluttony.

References

- Classen, C. (1993). The odour of the other: Olfactory codes and cultural categories. In C. Clausen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History across Cultures*. London: Routledge.
- Classen, C. (2005). The witch's senses: Sensory ideologies and transgressive femininities from the renaissance to modernity. In D. Howes, *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*. New York: Berg.
- Foster, G. M. (1994). *Hippocrates' Latin American legacy: Humoral medicine in the New World*. Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach.
- Geurts, K. L. (2002). *Culture and the Senses: Bodily ways of knowing in an African community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Justeson, J. & T. Kaufman. (1993). A decipherment of Epi-Olmec hieroglyphic writing. *Science* 193: 1703-1711.
- Sicoli, M.A. (2007). *Tono: A linguistic ethnography of tone and voice in a Zapotec region*. University of Michigan, Ph.D. Dissertation.
- Keifenheim, B. (2002). Suicide « à la kashinawa ». Le désir de l’au-delà ou la séduction olfactive et auditive par les esprits des morts. *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, 91-110.
- Viberg, A. (1984). The verbs of perception: a typological study. In B. Butterworth, C. Bernard, and D. Östen (Eds.), *Explanations for language universals*, 123-162. Berlin: Mouton.