

Describing taste: A comparative study of taste terms in Estonian and German

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Keywords: language, perception, taste terms, naming strategies, cultural factors

A taste sensation is a deeply subjective perception which can be shared with others only via language. A taste experience is a multimodal sense perception, influenced by other modalities like touch and smell (e.g. Bagli 2021). Furthermore, cultural and collective aspects of a taste sensation determine perceptual behaviour of a speaker in a great extent (Bieler & Runte 2010). Since food consumption, eating behaviour and related preferences are a part of everyday customs, it gives rise to the premise of a rich gustatory lexicon in all languages. But taste vocabulary is not universal, as many recent studies has shown. (Rhee & Koo 2017)

The objective of this work is to present a comparative analysis about actively used taste terms, and give an overview of lexical strategies in Estonian and German which are genetically unrelated, but culturally close, since Estonian has developed under the German influence during the period of establishing the Estonian literary language (Ross 2016).

The study is based on taste terms collected from 43 native speakers of Estonian and German using two field experiments: list and description task (Davies & Corbett 1995; see Sutrop 2002). The comparative approach has been chosen to characterize the similarities and differences in taste naming in Estonian and German in order to determine the relevant cognitive and cultural aspects of the active taste vocabulary of both languages.

The speakers of both languages prefer to use basic taste terms (see Berlin & Kay 1968; Bieler & Runte 2010), such as *magus/süß* 'sweet', *soolane/salzig* 'salty', *hapu/sauer* 'sour', *kibe/bitter* 'bitter'. The basic taste terms are followed by adjectives related to subjective evaluation (e.g. *hea/gut* 'good'), food intensity (e.g., *terav/scharf* 'sharp', *vürtsikas/würzig* 'spicy'), food conditions which refer to temperature, consistency and texture (e.g. *külm/kalt* 'cold', *vedel/flüssig* 'liquid', *kuiv/trocken* 'dry'). In addition, some source-based descriptors were listed in both languages which differed to a great extent (e.g. *piprane* 'peppery', *rasvane* 'fatty'; *mehlig* 'floury, starchy', *fruchtig* 'fruity'). According to the results, the loan word *umami* show a distinct occurrence in the idiolects of both language speakers. This reflects a recent inclusion of the lexical item in the active taste vocabulary of Estonian and German.

Although there are some cultural differences in taste naming, the results of the current study indicate that there are more similarities than differences in the active taste term use in both languages. This might be due to cultural and habitual commonalities between the two language communities.

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