

Talking about smells in Cantonese

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Sinitic Languages (“Chinese Dialects”)



(Lang atlas of China 1986)

Yue (e.g. Cantonese)
粵語

Perception verbs

Cantonese	Activity (active perception; durative)	Experience (achievement of perception; accomplishment)	Copulative (passive perception)
smell	聞 man4	聞倒 man4-dou2	

聞

耳 ‘ear’; 門 ‘door’

Perception verbs

Cantonese	Activity (active perception; durative)	Experience (achievement of perception; accomplishment)	Copulative (passive perception)
hearing	聽 teng1	聽倒 teng1-dou2 (arch.: 聽見 teng1 gin3)	
smell	聞 man4	聞倒 man4-dou2	

Old
Chinese

聽 ‘listen’

聞 ‘hear’ → ‘knowledge/info’

Most [?]

modern
Sinitic

languages

聽 ‘listen’

→ 聞 ‘smell’

Perception verbs

Cantonese	Activity (active perception; durative)	Experience (achievement of perception; accomplishment)	Copulative (passive perception)
sight	睇 tai2 望 mong6	見倒 gin3-dou2 (arch.: [睇/望]見 [tai2/mong6] gin3)	[...]
hearing	聽 teng1	聽倒 teng1-dou2 (arch.: 聽見 teng1 gin3)	[...]
touch	掂 tim3 摩 mo2	掂倒 tim3-dou2 摩倒 mo2-dou2	[...]
taste	試 si3 ‘try’	食倒 sik6-ceot1 (eat-achieve)	有味 jau5 mei6
smell	聞 man4	聞倒 man4-dou2	有味 jau5 mei6 (Viberg 1984)

Table 4. Vietnamese

Table 5. Chinese [Mandarin]

	Activity	Experience	Copulative		Activity	Experience	Copulative
sight	xem	xem look	thấy perceive	trông	sight	kàn	kàn-jiàn look-perceive
hearing	nghe	nghe listen	thấy perceive	có have	giọng	ting	yǒu yàngzi have appearance
touch	sờ	cảm	thấy			ting-dào listen-reach	paraphrase
	touch	feel	perceive			mó	—
taste	nếm	nêm	thấy	có	vị	gǎn-jué-dào feel-think-reach	—
		taste	perceive	have	taste (N)	cháng-dào taste-reach	yǒu weidao have taste (N)
smell	ngửi	ngửi	thᾶy	có	mùi	wén	—
		smell	perceive	have	smell (N)	wén-dào smell-reach	yǒu wèr have smell

Abstract smell terms

rough translations

hoeng1	fragrant
cau3	stinky
no2	unknown overheating smell
jyun1	1. strong rotting stink; 2. strongly unpleasant BO
suk1	1. sour smell of non-dry food going off slightly; 2. sweaty BO
ngaat3	urine/ ammonia smell
jik1	expired oil/fat smell
hong2	old dry grain/wood smell
sou1	1. goat/ strong dairy smell 2. not too unpleasant BO
seng1	1. fishy smell; 2. metallic/blood smell
ngap1	damp/ not dried in time smell
cing1/ cing1hoeng1	light flowery fragrance

Experiments on Cantonese speakers in Macau in March 2014

(Pilot studies conducted in Hong Kong)

(Cantonese in urban Macau and Hong Kong are minimally different)



Participants

Native speakers of Cantonese in Macau

- fluent in Cantonese before puberty
- lived in Macau most of their lives (including most of their teenage years)

n	female (F)	male (M)
junior (J)	6	6
senior (S)	6	7

average age	female (F)	male (M)	
junior (J)	24.28	25.01	24.65
senior (S)	56.35	60.18	58



Four tasks in Macau

- Free listing task
- Exemplar listing and semantic judgement task
- Sniffin' Sticks naming task
- Munsell colour chips naming task

Free listing task

- Body parts
- Shapes
- Colours
- Odours

	rough translations	junior	senior
(nung1)	visible/known burnt (smell)	3	4
no3	unknown overheating smell	1	1
jyun1	1. strong rotting stink; 2. strongly unpleasant BO	0	1
suk1	1. sour smell of non-dry food going off slightly; 2. sweaty BO	3	1
ngaat3	urine/ ammonia smell	2	2
jik1	expired oil/fat smell	0	1
hong2	old dry grain/wood smell	0	2
sou1	1. goat/ strong dairy smell 2. not too unpleasant BO	1	0
seng1	1. fishy smell; 2. metalic/blood smell	5	3
ngap1	damp/ not dried in time smell	4	1
cing1/ cing1hoeng1	light flowery fragrance	0	4

Free-listing Odours

- Junior: average 18.25 responses
- Senior: average 19.08 responses

Junior group

11

odour
terms

given by
3 or more

(>20%)

participants

responses	N	%	gloss
cau3	7	58.33	stinky, stink
hoeng1	6	50	fragrant, fragrance
syun1	6	50	sour
faa1hoeng1	4	33.33	flower fragrance
ngap1	4	33.33	not dried in time smell
			fishy smell, metalic
seng1	4	33.33	smell
tim4	4	33.33	sweet
hoeng1seo12	3	25	perfume
hoi2seo12	3	25	sea water
ling4mung1	3	25	lemon
nung1	3	25	visible burnt

Senior group

18

odour terms

given by

3 or more (>20%)

participants

responses	N	%	gloss
cau3	11	84.62	stinky, stink
hoeng1	10	76.92	fragrant, fragrance
laat6	6	46.15	piquance
hoeng1ziu1	5	38.46	banana
syun1	5	38.46	sour
tim4	5	38.46	sweet
			light flowery
cing1hoeng1	4	30.77	fragrance
fu2	4	30.77	bitter
ping4gwo2	4	30.77	apple
bo1lo4	3	23.08	pineapple
faa1hoeng1	3	23.08	flower fragrance
hoeng1seoi2	3	23.08	sea water
lau4lin4	3	23.08	durian
ling4mung1	3	23.08	lemon
mui4gwai3faa13	3	23.08	rose flower
naai5	3	23.08	milk
nung1	3	23.08	visible burnt
			fishy smell, metalic smell
seng1	3	23.08	smell

	Body parts	Shapes	Colours	Odours
junior average n response	32.08	12.53	20.92	18.25
senior average n response	22.08	14.08 (10.58) [!]	18.54	19.08
junior terms given by >20% of part.	46	13	15	11
senior terms given by >20% of part.	28	9	12	18

[!]: Excluding one outlier.

Exemplar listing and semantic judgement task

10 ‘possible’ odour terms:

- do they use them to describe odour
- give exemplars
- (explain)

(nung1)
no3
jyun1
suk1
ngaat3
jik1
hong2
sou1
seng1
ngap1
cing1/
cing1hoeng1

	rough translations	junior	senior		
		% use	% gv exmpl	% use	% gv exmpl
(nung1)	visible/known burnt (smell)	100	100	100	100
no3	unknown overheating smell	83.33	83.33	100	100
jyun1	1. strong rotting stink; 2. strongly unpleasant BO	16.67	50	58.33	66.67
suk1	1. sour smell of non-dry food going off slightly; 2. sweaty BO	91.67	100	100	100
ngaat3	urine/ ammonia smell	83.33	91.67	100	100
jik1	expired oil/fat smell	25	50	100	100
hong2	old dry grain/wood smell	0	0	83.33	91.67
sou1	1. goat/ strong dairy smell 2. not too unpleasant BO	83.33	91.67	91.67	91.67
seng1	1. fishy smell; 2. metalic/blood smell	100	100	100	100
ngap1	damp/ not dried in time smell	75	83.33	91.67	100
cing1/ cing1hoeng1	light flowery fragrance	91.67	91.67	91.67	100
		68.18	76.52	92.42	95

junior		senior		N	gloss
response	N	gloss	response		
nung1	je5sik6	2 food	siu1ziu1	5	burn-burnt
	siu1ziu1	2 burn-burnt	bou1 nung1 faan6	3	cook burnt rice
			MORE INTS no3	3	more intense than no3
			bou1 nung1 zuk1	2	cook burnt congee
no3	bou1 gon1 seoi2	2 cook dry water	din6hei3 dyun2lou6	3	electric-appliance short-circuit
	din6hei3	2 electric-appliance	din6zai3	2	electric-switch
			gaau1	2	plastic
			siu1zoek6 gaau1	2	burn-achieve plastic
jyun1	cau3	3 stink	cau3	3	stink
			fu6laan6	2	decompose
			hon6	2	sweat
			LESS PLSN suk1	2	less pleasant than suk1
			sei2lou2syu2	2	dead mouse
			syun1	2	sour
suk1	hon6	4 sweat	hon6	6	sweat
	sik6mat6	4 food	syun1	5	sour
	syun1	4 sour	sung3 waa16	2	dish_food bad
	bin3waa16	2 turn bad			
	cyu4jyu4	2 kitchen-waist			

junior			senior			
	response	N	gloss	response	N	gloss
ngaat3	niu6	9	urine	niu6	7	urine
	MORE INTS	suk1	2 more intense than suk1	siu2bin6	3	urine
				aa3mo1nei4aa32	2	amonia
				ci3so2	2	toilet
				gau2niu6	2	dog urine
				niu6jik6	2	urine
jik1	faa1sang1	4	peanut	jau4	4	oil
	jau4	2	oil	faa1sang1	3	peanut
				gwo2jan4	2	nut
				hap6tou4	2	walnut
				sik6mat6	2	food
hong2	(none)			bin3	2	change
				gon1	2	dry
				gon1cou2	2	dry
				gon1hon2	2	dry
				mai5	2	dried_rice
				mai5 noi6	2	rice long_time
sou1	joeng4juk6	10	goat/sheep meat	joeng4juk6	10	goat/sheep meat
	bi4bi1	2	baby	ngau4juk6	4	beef
	joeng4	2	goat/sheep	joeng4	3	goat/sheep
	ngau4juk6	2	beaf	bi4bi1	2	baby
				joeng4naai5	2	goat/sheep milk
				naai5	2	milk

	junior response	N	gloss	senior response	N	gloss
seng1	jyu2	11	fish	jyu2	13	fish
	hyut3	7	blood	hyut3	4	blood
	hoi2sin1	5	seafood	cou2ceng1	2	grass_fresh
ngap1	ciu4sap1	3	humid	ciu4sap1	8	humid
	N tung1fung1	2	not flow-air	faat3 mui4	3	grow mould
	saam1	2	clothes	saam1 N gon1	3	clothes not dry
	sap1	2	wet	mou1	2	mould
cing1/ cing1hoeng1				saam1	2	clothes
	faa1	5	flower	faa1	8	flower
	caa4	2	tea	N nung4	4	not concentrated/intense
	hoeng1seoi2	2	perfume	syu1fuk6	4	comfortable
	mut6lei2	2	jasmin	hoeng1seoi2	3	perfume
	N nung4	2	not intense	jau1ngaa5	2	elegant
	sik6mat6	2	food	N nung4lit6	2	not concentrated/intense

Sniffin' Sticks naming task

participants asked to describe the odour of 38
Sniffin' Sticks

Sniffin' Sticks naming task: Junior

S: 60.3%

E: 1.82%

A: 24.2%

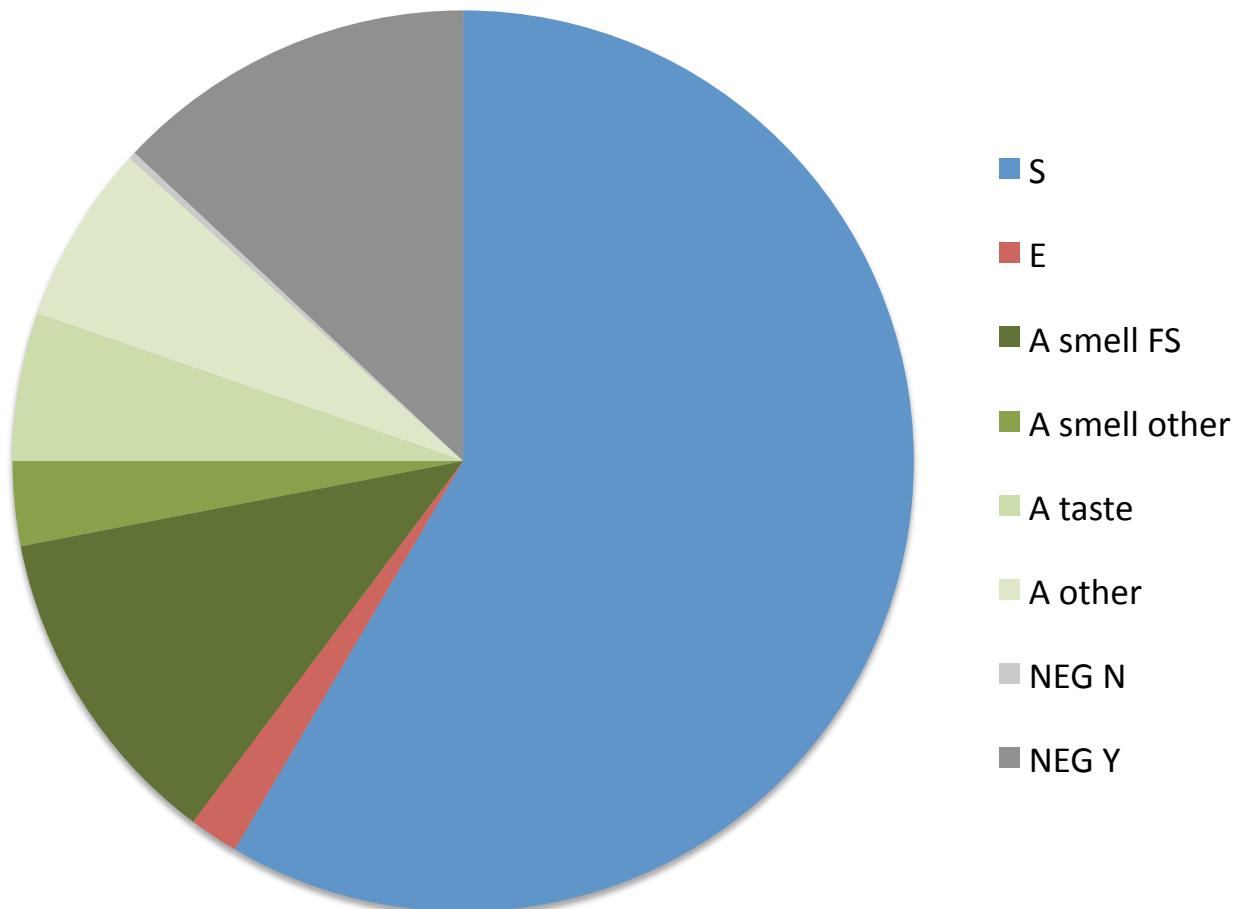
- AS FS: 8.98%
- **AS o: 3.13%**

• AT: 5.47%

• Ao: 6.64%

NEG N: 0.26%

NEG Y: 13.4%



Sniffin' Sticks naming task: Senior

S: 50.4%

E: 1.56%

A: %

- AS FS: 6.78%

- **AS o: 2.22%**

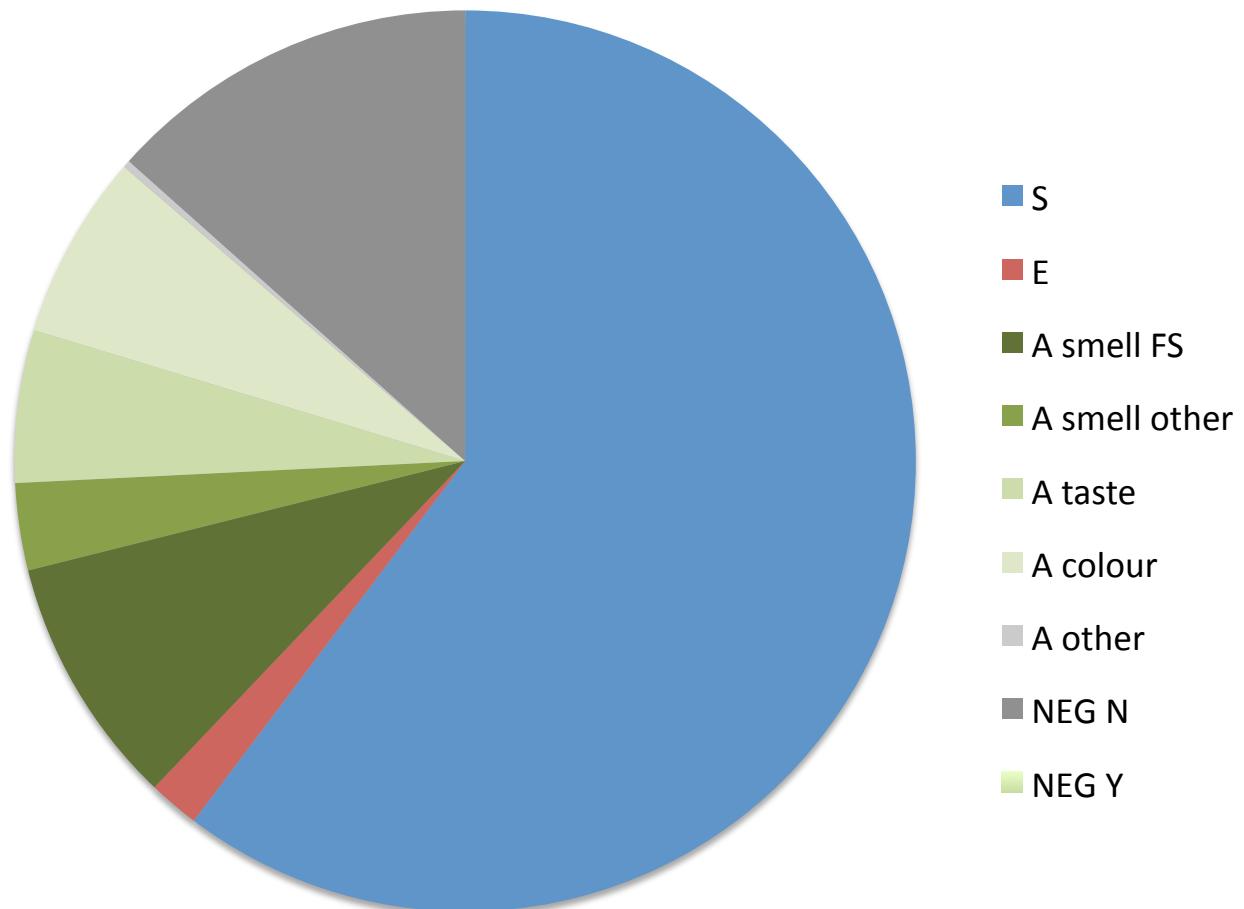
- AT: 4.67%

- AC: 0.11%

- Ao: 11.6%

NEG N: 0.44%

NEG Y: 22.2%



Sniffin' Sticks naming task

Abstract smell responses:

- use of other abstract smell terms infrequent:
 - most Sniffin' Sticks were of *hoeng1* ‘fragrant’-type, and most abstract smell terms describe unpleasant smells

Simpson's diversity index

Odour:

Junior 0.0675

Senior 0.0636

(Colour:

Junior 0.662

Senior 0.647)

[Statistics by Asifa Majid]

Summary

Cantonese verb ‘smell’ < Old Chinese ‘hear’

Cantonese noun ‘smell’ < Old Chinese ‘taste’

Abstract smell terms in Cantonese:

- Mostly for malodours
- Knowledge of them is poor amongst younger speakers