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Sweet, sweet love: from wild honey to semantic prototypes.

Research in cognitive linguistics suggests that Sweet is the prototypical concept in the semantic domain of Taste (Bagli *forthcoming*, Bagli *in preparation*). Furthermore, when Sweet is used metaphorically it generally has a positive meaning and is one of the taste terms with the highest number of occurrences in English corpora (Bagli, *under review*). Moreover, human beings seem to have an almost universal penchant towards sweet foods (Allsop and Miller 1996). The aim of the present research is to provide a theoretical background to these linguistic results from an evolutionary perspective.

For millennia, the main sweetener accessible to primates was honey. Honey is one of the most energy-dense foods in nature (Skinner 1991), and allegedly played a crucial role in hominin diets and in human evolution (McGrew 2001, Crittenden 2011, Wrangham 2011, McLennan 2015). Although the quantity consumed by hominins is still a matter of debate, modern hunter-gatherer tribes adopt some foraging methods that could be reminiscent of those by early hominin tribes (Crittenden 2011, Marlowe et al. 2014). Particularly Boran people from Kenya, among others, developed a symbiotic relationship with a bird, the honeyguide (*indicator indicator*) that literally guides them to the honeycomb in change of some wax (Isack and Reyer 1989). The most ancient archaeological evidence of honey foraging comes from the Toghwana Dam in Zimbabwe, and dates back 10,000 years (Orians 2014). However, early hominins may have been exploiting wild beehives long before this. Chimpanzees use stick tools to extract both honey and larvae, and Hadza people from Tanzania do the same, to the point that “one is struck by how similar the honey pursuit is for chimpanzees and humans” (Marlowe et al 2014: 126). Other archaeological findings from Egypt and Crete also show the centrality of honey in Ancient societies.

The present research links together different disciplines to account for a linguistic phenomenon observed in previous research, namely the prototypicality of the concept “sweet” in the domain of Taste. To do so, it considers the role of honey consumption in primates’ evolution: from its energy input to the techniques employed to forage it. I argue that the special linguistic status of the concept “sweet” is biologically motivated, and derives from an embodied experience: the importance and the craving for honey in our diets as primates (Orians 2014).

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