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How specific wine tasting descriptors are?

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Abstract

Although wine tasting notes are a specialized genre in the field of Oenology, with their own rhetoric and language, some of the elements describing the language of wine are by no means as specialized as that of most other specialized genres such as technical notes, auditor reports or abstracts. In this study, we will explore how wine literature attempts to analyze such adjectives used in wine tasting notes. We will then, based on a comparable corpus of 700 tasting notes per language, study a number of common wine descriptors in English and Spanish in the context of the nouns that they collocate. Our purpose is to determine their specificity or generality in their use and meaning. On the basis of their collocability, we will categorize the descriptors and analyze the meaning components of the descriptors falling in the most general category.

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1. Introduction

Wine tasting notes constitute a specialized genre in the field of Oenology, with their own rhetoric and language. However, the language of wine tasting notes is by no means as specialized as that of most other specialized genres such as abstracts, technical sheets, reports.... Indeed, while there are dozens of terms used to describe and evaluate wines, there are only a limited number of words that are used exclusively or primarily for describing taste.

Based on the wine literature of the 1970s, Lehrer has listed 238 wine descriptors, which are the “commonest words” (2009, 4) that she found attested. Examples are *astringent*, *fresh*, *meaty*, and *spicy*. But when one says that a

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wine *fresh*, what aspect of the wine is being referred to: its aroma or its taste? And what dimension of aroma or taste is being alluded to?

In this study, after examining how wine literature attempts to analyze such adjectives used in wine tasting notes, we are going to study a number of common wine descriptors in English and Spanish in the context of the nouns that they collocate with in order to determine how specific or general these descriptors are in their use and meaning.

2. Literature on wine descriptors

Many efforts have been made over the years, both by wine experts and by linguists, to categorize and organize the many adjectives used to describe wines.

In 1972, in their *Essai sur la Dégustation des Vins*, Vedel et al. proposed a red wine structure, the so-called “triangle de Vedel”, which represents the balance between the three components to be assessed in tasting a red wine: *acidity*, *astringency* and *sweetness*. Pertinent adjectival descriptors are provided for each of the three components, allowing for identification of the qualities and weaknesses of a red wine on the basis of supposedly objective criteria.

In the 1980s, Noble developed a system for the description of the smells of wines, which has become widely known as the Aroma Wheel. The Aroma Wheel organizes the descriptors of aroma into three categories based on their specificity. The most general descriptors, which are found in the inner circle, are adjectives like *floral*, *fruity*, *woody* and *nutty*. These general descriptors are subdivided and made more specific in the next circle: *fruity*, for example, is subdivided into *citrus*, *berry*, *tree fruit*, *melon*, *tropical fruit*, and *cooked fruit*. Finally, each of the more specific fields designated by the latter is further subdivided in the outer circle: *citrus*, for example, is divided into *orange*, *grapefruit*, *lemon* and *lime*. While the general descriptors are primarily adjectives, many of the more specific ones are nouns.

Another descriptors wheel, this one for mouthfeel perceptions, was developed by Gawel et al. (2000). The mouthfeel wheel terminology was partially intended to be a starting point for sensory panels to allow the rating of the intensity of defined characteristics of a set of samples, to provide a profile of the mouthfeel characteristics. The innermost layer of the wheel divides the *mouthfeel* terms into two categories: *feel* and *astringency*. The second tier presents groups of terms that are subordinate to these categories, such as for instance *weight*, *harsh*, *surface-smoothness*. In the outermost tier, these categories are further subdivided. The terms *viscous*, *full*, *thin*, *watery* are thereby categorized as descriptors of weight, *hard*, *aggressive*, *abrasive* as descriptors of *harsh*, and *furry*, *fine emery*, *velvet*, *suede*, *silk*, *chamois*, *satín* as descriptors of *surface-smoothness*. The descriptors, which are primarily adjectives, are grouped as terms along a scale in the case of *weight*, although other groupings of terms (e.g. those describing *surface-smoothness*) are less relatable to points on a scale. Each of the terms on the wheel are defined, either by written definitions or by use of finger touch standards, so that each taster knows what is meant by the term.

The British organization Wine and Spirit Education Trust has proposed a wine tasting template that provides wine descriptors organized in scales for the following properties of the wine (in Herdenstam 2004, 58):

- Appearance
- Intensity: *pale – medium – deep – opaque*
- Color: *purple – ruby – garnet* etc.
- Nose
- Condition: *clean – unclean*
- Intensity: *weak – medium – pronounced*
- Development: *youthful – grape aromas – aged bouquet – tired – oxidized*
- Fruit character: *fruity, floral, vegetal, spicy, woods, smoky, animals* etc.
- Palate
- Sweetness: *dry – off-dry – medium dry – medium sweet – sweet – luscious*
- Acidity: *flabby – low – balanced – crisp – acidic*
- Tannin: *astringent – hard – balanced – soft*
- Body: *thin – light – medium – full – heavy*
- Fruit intensity: *weak – medium – pronounced*

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