



Structural approach of social representation: Application to the concept of wine minerality in experts and consumers



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ABSTRACT

In recent years the sensory evaluation field has been moving from the traditional sensory descriptive methodologies towards consumer based methodologies. Sensory descriptions are not confined to sensory evaluation. In everyday life, people use also descriptions to communicate about products sensory properties. The theory of social representation offers a new approach for studying the meaning of the terminology used in these everyday life descriptions. One implication of this theory is that meaning is created through a system of social negotiations rather than being a fixed and finite code. The goal of the present study was to understand the meaning of the concept of wine minerality in different social groups, through the social representation theory. For this purpose, we worked with 40 winemakers from Chablis, France, and 47 wine consumers from burgundy. We used a verbal association task with the word *minerality* as a prompt. Participants had to write down all the words that came to their mind when they heard the word minerality and to rate both the importance and the valence of these words. Data were subjected to a prototypical analysis to identify the core and peripheral areas of experts' and consumers' social representation. Results showed that winemakers and wine consumers have a different way to represent and conceptualize minerality. The central core of winemakers' social representation is formed by terms that give an idea of minerality coming from "a place" (*Chablis*, *geology* and *terroir*) and having a specific sensory characteristics (*Shellfish*, *chalky* and *freshness*) linked to this place. This representation is comforted by the elements of the first periphery (*stone*, *acidity*, *gunflint* and *salty*). For wine consumers, both the central core and the first periphery consist of only one term each (*terroir* and *stone* respectively). Sensory characteristics linked to this idea of *terroir* appear only in the third and fourth peripheries indicating that they are neither shared nor stable as it was observed by winemakers. Finally, the valence results showed that minerality have a positive connotation in both groups, which results in a sensory descriptor denoting quality.

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1. Introduction

In traditional sensory sciences, product descriptions are obtained from the perceptions of a group of qualified judges (Stone, Bleibaum, & Thomas, 2012) and involve the detection and discrimination of both the qualitative and quantitative sensory components of a product (Meilgaard, Civille, & Carr, 1991). The most classical method is the "Quantitative Descriptive Analysis"

or "QDA[®]" (Stone, Sidel, Oliver, Woolsey, & Singleton, 1974). QDA provides good quality data however as a counterpart of this quality, it requires extensive training before the panel can be used as a reliable sensory instrument to ensure that the vocabulary and evaluation scales are used consistently, and that the judges present consensus, ability to discriminate samples and repeatability (Da Silva et al., 2013).

Yet, sensory descriptions are not confined to sensory evaluation. In everyday life, people use also descriptions to communicate about products sensory properties. For example, sensory descriptions made by wine critics play an important role in guiding consumer's purchases. Consumers have rarely the opportunity to

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taste the wine they are about to purchase in a store. They have to rely on either written comments on the bottle back labels or written reviews from wine critics. Those sensory descriptions are quite different from descriptions obtained from traditional descriptive tests. The attributes they use tend to be multidimensional and not always consensual (Lesschaeve, 2006) but does that mean that they do not convey any important meanings?

Analytical sensory evaluations such as QDA provide objective description of the product whereas consumer or expert descriptions are influenced by potential interactions of sensory properties and other factors such as beliefs or representations. An illustration of this phenomenon is the recent apparition of the term *minerality* in wine description: The use of this term skyrocketed in the last 10 years in all kind of supports (wine critics and marketing materials) while no satisfactory definition exists. The first attempt to define *minerality* was made by the linguist Martine Coutier (2007) in her “Dictionnaire de la langue du vin”. The definition was simply “related to the taste of rocks and minerals”. The limits and the lack of precision of this definition have been proven by recent literature (Ballester, Mihnea, Peyron, & Valentin, 2013; Deneulin, Le Bras, Le Fur, & Gautier, 2014; Peynaud & Blouin, 2013). To date, wine *minerality* lacks a precise and complete definition (Coutier & Marchand, 2011; Peynaud & Blouin, 2013) and its use is such that it appears to be a fad (Deneulin et al., 2014). Usually wine *minerality* is associated with several descriptors including taste such as acid or salt and aroma such as flint, stone, iodine, chalk, fresh or smoked (Ballester et al., 2013; Deneulin et al., 2014; Heymann, Hopfer, & Bershaw, 2014; Lund et al., 2009; Parr, Ballester, Peyron, Grose, & Valentin, 2015; Parr, Valentin, Green, & Dacremont, 2010).

In recent years the sensory evaluation field has been moving from the traditional sensory descriptive methodologies towards consumer based methodologies. And currently, a large number of qualitative methods used in psychology and marketing food research have been shown to be effective and innovative tools for the sensory evaluation field (Stone et al., 2012). Among those methods, projective techniques, originally developed for clinical use (Donoghue, 2000), have been introduced in food research (Ares & Deliza, 2010; Ares, Giménez, & Gámbaro, 2008; Dean et al., 2006; Guerrero et al., 2010; Kooijmans & Flores-Palacios, 2014; Rozin, Kurzer, & Cohen, 2002; Son et al., 2014). Among the projective techniques, the association tasks are the most commonly employed (Donoghue, 2000), more specifically, the free word association task. This task “provide verbal or visual stimuli which, through their information, their indirection, and concealed intent, encourages respondents to reveal their unconscious feelings and attitudes without being aware that they are doing so” (Will, Eadie, & Macaskill, 1996, p. 38). The free word association task besides having utility in describing attitudes towards food (Rozin et al., 2002) also permits to reveal consumers’ mental representations (Son et al., 2014) by accessing the cognems underlying these representations (Lahlou & Abric, 2011). This task can also be an indicator of socially shared knowledge and as such can reveal social representations.

According to Moscovici and Herzlich (1973) social representations enable “... communication to take place amongst members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously various aspects of their world and their individual and group history ...” (p. 13). The implication of this theory is that meaning is created through a system of social negotiations rather than being a fixed and finite code. Language is thus socially embedded and words are given special meaning within particular social groups. In this framework concepts can be understood as “a form of knowledge socially developed and shared with practical designs and contributing to the construction of a reality common to a social group” (Jodelet, 1989, p. 36).

The theory of social representation offers a new approach for studying the meaning of ill-defined concepts in food science such as the concept of *minerality* in wine. This approach began to be widely used in the last decade to approach new foods (Bartels & Reinders, 2010; Bäckström, Pirttilä-Backman, & Tuorila, 2003, 2004; Huotilainen & Tuorila, 2005; Onwezen & Bartels, 2013). To explore this approach we will use wine as an example as wine description by winemakers and wine consumers plays an important role in wine choice and purchase. We hypothesize that wine descriptions might reflect the implicit imaginary and beliefs about wine characteristics and that the social representation perspective might provide a framework for understanding the thinking of wine professionals and wine consumers. Previous work showed that wine can be considered as an object of social representations. For example, Simonnet-Toussaint, Lecigne, and Keller (2005) showed the existence of a social consensual representation of wine among young adults structured around the ideas of pleasures of the table and conviviality. This consensual representation of wine seems, however, to be dependent on the origin and the level of knowledge of the respondents. Other factors such as expertise level (Lo Monaco & Guimelli, 2008), consumption practice, variations in position-taking in different normative contexts (Lo Monaco & Guimelli, 2011), wine consumption and social construction of normality (Lo Monaco, Gausson, & Guimelli, 2009), wine marketing application (Guimelli, Brel, Piermattéo, & Lo Monaco, 2012) and cultural environment (Mouret, Lo Monaco, Urdapilleta, & Parr, 2013) seem to be critical for the construction of wine social representations.

On a different line, Parr, Mouret, Blackmore, Pelquest-Hunt, and Urdapilleta (2011) showed the interest of using the social representation framework to investigate the meaning of ill-defined concepts. They were interested in what is meant by the term “complexity” as applied to wine by wine professionals and consumers. They showed that wine professionals’ social representation of complexity was associated to extrinsic factors such as oenological process and terroir variables, whereas wine consumers’ representation was related to their experience of consuming wine and were personalized and subjective. The goal of the present study was to extend Parr et al. (2011) approach to understand the meaning of the concept of wine *minerality* in winemakers and wine consumers.

Since the concept of social representation was first proposed by Moscovici, 1961, several methods have been developed to investigate social representations content. The present work follows the structural approach of social representation developed by Abric (1976). According to this approach, social representations, regardless of content, are composed of elements linked together by relations. These elements do not have the same status and the same function. Some form a central system. They generate a sense of representation, are stable and consensual, shared by all, have associative and symbolic properties and are not negotiable. These central elements have the status of evidence and help provide a framework for interpreting and categorizing new information (Abric, 1987). Other elements form a peripheral system that supports the heterogeneity of the group, are flexible, scalable and have the function of allowing adaptation to reality, differentiation of content and protect the central system (Abric, 1994). Thereby, a representation has a “content” (i.e., information, opinions, beliefs, attitudes) also called the “elements” of the representation and a “structure” (Lo Monaco & Lheureux, 2007).

The structure of social representations can be analyzed using the so-called prototypical approach proposed by Vergès (1992). This method analyzes both the frequency and the evocation rank of the elements generated during a word association task. The intersection of these two criteria constitutes an indicator of the centrality of an element (Abric, 1994) with central elements being

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