
Revealing The Meaning Of Term Synesthesia

This is an extract from 'A Mango Shaped Space,' a novel written by Wendy Mass that excellently captures and explores the reality of synesthetes (patients of synesthesia.) Synesthesia is the term commonly used to account for a rare neurological condition in which one sense can elicit another involuntary sensory phenomenon, even if there is no direct cause or input towards it. The most common case of synesthesia is grapheme-colour association, a condition in which one associates letters, symbols or numeric values with particular colours (a is most commonly red.) However rarer cases exist, where lexical-gustatory synesthesia may evoke certain tastes due to certain words. Or, a man could only delineate his future through the figure in Source 1.

Before now, synesthesia was largely attributed to miscellaneous connections between sensory networks, however a leading amount of empirical and even philosophical evidence suggests that this is simply untrue. Rather that this condition is a semantic-sensory phenomenon, meaning that these sensory experiences are an association between senses and concepts. What's particularly interesting, is that this condition may be far more common than originally thought.

This new theory has been coined as 'ideesthesia.' The term comes from the Greek word 'idea,' meaning concepts, and 'aesthesia,' meaning sensation. Thus combining to a translation of 'sensing concepts.' Ideesthesia defines the activation of ideas or semantic networks to produce a sensory phenomenon. In other words, ideesthesia is where someone interprets a sense's semantic properties in order to produce a separate sensory experience. For example, synesthetes may have different responses to the same stimuli depending on their interpretation of it.

There has been much research to support this theory, however the most implicative is research conducted by Aleksandra Mroczko-Wasowicz in 2009. The theory of ideesthesia suggested that synesthetes should make grapheme-colour associations with unfamiliar symbols after learning what they represent. So when exposed to the unfamiliar graphemes, the synesthetes were able to make synesthetic associations to the values only once they had learnt their meaning. For example, the new 'B' would be associated with the same colour as the 'B' they understood. These results cannot be explained by sensory connections, only that the concept of the letter 'B' was activated and provided a new concurrent (colour association.) I decided to test these results myself on a synesthetic friend (who makes grapheme-colour associations.) I showed her the hieroglyphs in Source 2 and asked if she could establish any connections between the symbols and a colour. She was unable to at first, however after learning their meanings she was able to establish some. For example, the Egyptian 'R' was a similar colour to the English 'R.' Afterwards she noted that as she learns hiragana symbols in school, she associates new colours with them. For example '?' is beige.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this theory is that it can be extended to everyday perception, and that perhaps all humans have ideesthesia to some degree. In 2014, psychologist Milan researched which personality traits would be assigned to two shapes named 'Kiki' and 'Bouba.' First it was established that an overwhelming amount of participants would

associate ‘Kiki’ to a spiky star, while ‘Bouba’ would be a rounded blob. However there were more consistent and complex associations concerning the shape’s personality. ‘Kiki’ would be described as nervous and high-class, while ‘Bouba’ would be lazy and easy going. This is the first proposal of ideesthesia outside of synesthesia as we are all able to make strong semantic and sensory connections in a way that one could apply the theory of ideesthesia.