
Letter to the editor

A PROPOSAL FOR TRANSLATING THE ENGLISH TERM "SALIENCE" INTO SPANISH

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Dear Editor,

The term "salience" has been used with increasing frequency in clinical neuroscience since Kapur¹ proposed "aberrant salience" as the pathophysiological core of psychosis in 1993. According to Kapur's model, a cerebral hyperdopaminergic state gives rise to the aberrant assignment of "salience" to surrounding events or mental representations. This dopaminergic dysregulation is experienced as a hallucinatory phenomenon that motivates the patient to develop a delusional construct to make sense of the anomalous mental experience. Antipsychotic drugs have the specific effect of buffering this pathological phenomenon, an effect described by Kapur as "dampening salience."

In scientific debates in Spanish, no consensus exists about how "salience" should be translated into the Spanish language. Colloquially, authors use the Spanish neologism *saliencia*. In a search of Google Scholar in November 2010, the seminal article by Kapur had been cited in 459 documents. Four of these studies referred to the term "salience" in a text in Spanish. In three cases the author chose to use the Spanish neologism: *saliencia aberrante* ("aberrant salience"),² *saliencia motivacional* ("motivational salience")³ and *atribución de saliencia* ("attribution of salience").⁴ In the fourth article, the author translated "salience" as *prominencia* ("prominence"): "*La dopamina, en condiciones normales, es el mediador de la «prominencia» (salience, en inglés) de la realidad, descargándose cuando el sujeto percibe un estímulo relevante para su supervivencia*". ["Dopamine, in normal conditions, is the mediator of the 'prominence' (salience in English) of reality, being triggered when the subject perceives a stimulus relevant to his/her survival."].⁵

The translation of "salience" as *prominencia* ("prominence") seems to be a better solution than neologization. In fact, this is the translation that figures in most dictionaries. However, *prominencia* may not precisely reflect the meaning of "salience" as used in neuroscience texts in English. When we look up the word *prominencia* in

the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* [Dictionary of the Spanish Language], we are referred to *prominente*: (*del lat. prominens, -entis, part. act. de prominere, elevarse, sobresalir*). 1. *adj. Que se levanta o sobresale sobre lo que está a su inmediación o alrededores*. 2. *adj. Ilustre, famoso, destacado*. [prominent: (from the Lat. *prominens, -entis, active participle of prominere, ascend, stand out*). 1. *adj. That which rises from or stands out from what is nearby or around it*. 2. *adj. Illustrious, famous, noteworthy*.] In the first definition of *prominente*, which is the sense that interests us, the adjective *prominente* is associated more with the physical characteristics of an object rather than with the significance of the word within a symbolic system. On the other hand, it is unusual to refer to a mental representation as "prominent."

"Salience" does not refer to a perceived or represented object attribute, but to the priority that this object acquires in relation to other elements contained in consciousness. It refers to a mental process of a higher order whereby certain perceived objects or representations attract attention and are incorporated into thought and behavior. Jensen and Kapur⁶ defined the term as follows: "Salience was defined as a process whereby objects and representations, through the process of association, come to be attention-grabbing and capture thought and behavior."

Returning to the *Diccionario de la Lengua* for the word *relevancia*: 1. *f. Calidad o condición de relevante, importancia, significación*. [relevance: fem. Quality or condition of relevant, importance, significance.] We also find: *relevante*. (*Del lat. relēvans, -antis, part. act. de relevāre, levantar, alzar*). 1. *adj. Sobresaliente, destacado*. 2. *adj. Importante, significativo*. [relevant: From the Lat. *relēvans, -antis, active participle of relevāre, lift, raise*). 1. *adj. Important, significant*.] Relevant objects are objects that are merit attention due to the priority of their significance in a symbolic system. In contrast, we say that something is "irrelevant" when it has little or no importance in a given context. Mental states associated with dopaminergic dysfunction often present alterations in the assignment of relevance. Examples are the incipient experiences of schizophrenia so masterfully described by Klaus Conrad or the fascination with certain repetitive motor acts exhibited by patients with Parkinson disease and punding.

The translation of "salience" into Spanish as *asignación de relevancia* in the context of neuroscience could help to capture and better communicate the essence of the mental phenomena associated with the dopaminergic system. The hierarchical order that underlies the structuring of the perceptive field, consciousness and behavioral response lies precisely in the greater or lesser relevance assigned to perceived objects or representations. When the metacognitive organization

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regulated by dopamine fails, what is irrelevant becomes transcendental, as exemplified by this quote from a schizophrenic patient: *"Lo que ya lo sabemos, lo sabemos, el color lo dice todo, el color me ha marcado la vida"*. ["What we already know, we know; color tells us everything; color has marked my life."]

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