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One in 1,000 have cross-wired senses

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A new study has examined a strange sensory condition, which causes people to taste music or see colours in words.

The condition, known as synaesthesia, causes two or more human senses to act as if they are interconnected, and is believed to affect up to one in a thousand people worldwide.

"It is common for a synaesthete to see colours when listening to words," University of Granada researcher Alicia Callejas Sevilla said.

"There are also cases, although fewer, where people can see colours in flavours, others perceive flavours or experience touch sensations when listening to different sounds, and some link flavours to touch sensations."

Ms Callejas, who looked into the most common type of synaesthesia known as grapheme-colour, in which letters, words and numbers evoke colours, has published her findings in the journal Cortex.

She said most people aren't aware they have the condition, and become disappointed when they realise it is something that is not quite right.

"When a person with grapheme-colour synaesthesia indicates that the word 'table' is blue, it is quite probable that if he or she ever sees the same word written in a colour other than blue, this word will appear to him or her as wrong and consider it a mistake," Ms Callejas said.

"The synaesthete might even point out that the word is ugly or that he or she does not like it because it is not correct."

She suggested that synaesthesia can affect an individual's choices or transform how they perceive certain events.

The survey also found that synaesthetes always experience the same result for a given stimulus (for example, the word "lion" always appears red) and that the experience was different for each person.

Ms Callejas believes synaesthesia research is coming of age more researchers turn their attention to the condition, which may result in the development of effective strategies for synaesthesia sufferers.

"We are starting to approach questions of major theoretical importance, and to develop adequate study strategies," Ms Callejas said.

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