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**Datasheet for the decision
of 16 July 2013**

Case Number: T 1977/11 - 3.3.09
Application Number: 06837991.6
Publication Number: 1959762
IPC: A23L 1/236, A23L 1/30,
A23L 1/303, A23L 2/38,
A23L 2/60, A61P 37/00
Language of the proceedings: EN

Title of invention:

High-potency sweetener composition for treatment and/or prevention of autoimmune disorders, compositions and beverages sweetened therewith

Applicant:

THE COCA-COLA COMPANY

Headword:

-

Relevant legal provisions:

EPC Art. 56

Keyword:

"Inventive step: yes: unexpected improvement"

Decisions cited:

T 1964/11

Catchword:

-



Case Number: T 1977/11 - 3.3.09

D E C I S I O N
of the Technical Board of Appeal 3.3.09
of 16 July 2013

Appellant:
(Applicant)

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Patents
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Decision under appeal:

**Decision of the Examining Division of the
European Patent Office posted 21 April 2011
refusing European patent application
No. 06837991.6 pursuant to Article 97(2) EPC.**

Composition of the Board:

Chairman: W. Sieber
Members: J. Jardón Álvarez
F. Blumer

Summary of Facts and Submissions

I. This appeal lies from the decision of the examining division posted on 21 April 2011 refusing European patent application No. 06 837 991.6.

The decision was based on a request filed on 28 February 2011. The examining division held that the amended claims did not meet the requirements of Article 123(2) EPC, as they introduced subject-matter which extended beyond the content of the application as originally filed.

The examining division further stated as *obiter dictum* that, in case the claims were amended to overcome the objections under Article 123(2) EPC and novelty would be established, the prior art documents D3, D9, D13 and D15 would be relevant for inventive step assessment. In their opinion an inventive step for the combination of rebaudioside A and a sweet taste improving polyol additive, such as erythritol, would have to be denied, because no experimental evidence had been provided that such a combination resulted in an improved sweetness profile.

D3: CN 1 644 109 A (English abstract);

D9: JP 60 075252 A (English abstract);

D13: JP 2000 236842 A (English abstract); and

D15: JP 63 304 964 (English abstract).

II. On 8 June 2011 the applicant (in the following: the appellant) filed a notice of appeal and on the same day paid the appeal fee. On 23 August 2011 the appellant filed the statement setting out the grounds of appeal including a new main request and the following documents:

D13': Full-text English translation of D13;

D16: Reference to comparative data in WO 2007/061795 A1 (pages 108 to 110 and 205 to 208); and

D17: I. Prakash *et al.*, "Development of rebiana, a natural, non-caloric sweetener", Food and Chemical Toxicology, 46, (2008), pages S75 to S82.

[D16, a parallel application of the same corporate applicant, was referred to by the appellant to support its inventive step arguments.]

III. On 8 February 2013 the board dispatched a summons to oral proceedings. In the annexed communication the board indicated the points to be discussed during the oral proceedings.

IV. With its letter dated 13 June 2013, the appellant filed a main and an auxiliary request to replace its previous request and submitted further arguments in support of inventive step.

V. On 16 July 2013 the appellant withdrew the request for oral proceedings and filed a new main request.

Claim 1 of the main request reads as follows:

"1. A functional sweetener composition comprising at least one functional ingredient, rebaudioside A having a purity of 50% to 100% rebaudioside A by weight on a dry basis and erythritol, wherein:

the rebaudioside A is present in an amount ranging from 100 ppm to 3,000 ppm of the functional sweetener composition;

the erythritol is present in an amount ranging from 5,000 ppm to 40,000 ppm of the functional sweetener composition; and

the at least one functional ingredient comprises at least one agent for the treatment and/or prevention of autoimmune disorders."

Claim 2 is directed to a functional sweetened composition comprising the components as set out in claim 1; claim 3 is directed to a method for imparting a more sugar-like temporal/flavour profile to a functional sweetener/sweetened composition by using the components as set out in claim 1; claims 4 to 6 are dependent claims and claim 7 is directed to a functional beverage comprising the functional sweetener composition of claim 1.

VI. On 16 July 2013 the board cancelled the oral proceedings.

VII. The relevant arguments presented by the appellant may be summarised as follows:

- The claims of the present request were based on a similar combination of features as the claims of the

second auxiliary request in the parallel case EP 06 837 845.4 (T 1964/11). The allowability under Article 123(2) EPC for such claims had been acknowledged by the examining division. Additionally, claim 1 had been further amended to specify the purity of rebaudioside A in accordance with the disclosure in the first full paragraph of page 16 of the application as filed.

- Concerning inventive step, the appellant saw the teaching of D13 as representing the closest prior art document. The objective technical problem underlying the invention was the provision of a functional sweetener composition having a more sugar-like temporal/flavour profile overcoming the prior-art drawbacks of unpleasant aftertaste (bitterness and sweetness linger). The solution according to claim 1 resulted in a sweetener composition with superior taste properties as demonstrated by the new experimental evidence. Taking account of the unpredictability in the sweetener art, the skilled person could not have foreseen that the claimed sweetener compositions would provide the desired flavour and/or taste profile.

VIII. The appellant requested that the decision under appeal be set aside and that a patent be granted on the basis of the main request (claims 1 to 7) as filed with letter dated 16 July 2013, or, alternatively, on the basis of the auxiliary request (claims 1 to 11) as filed with letter dated 13 June 2013.

Reasons for the Decision

1. The appeal is admissible.

MAIN REQUEST

2. *Amendments*

- 2.1 Claim 1 is directed to the functional sweetener composition of claim 1 as originally filed wherein:

- the "at least one-high potency sweetener" has been limited to rebaudioside A (supported, for instance, by claim 14 and page 14, line 9); and
- the "at least one sweet taste improving composition" has been limited to erythritol (supported, for instance, by claim 16 and page 26, line 19).

It has been further limited to the preferred embodiment disclosed on page 90, lines 25 to 28, namely that rebaudioside A is present in an amount from 100 ppm to 3,000 ppm and erythritol in an amount from 5,000 ppm to 40,000 ppm. Finally, it has been specified that the rebaudioside A has "a purity of 50% to 100% by weight on a dry basis" as disclosed in the first full paragraph of page 16 of the application as filed. It is clear that the purity referred in this passage applies to particular embodiments, i.e. also the embodiment of page 90 (see also page 90, line 20).

- 2.2 Claims 2 and 3 are respectively based on claim 41 as filed and on the disclosure of page 3, lines 20 to 22 as filed, including the amendments made to claim 1.

- 2.3 Claim 4 finds support on page 16, lines 12 to 15 and claim 5 on page 90, lines 28 to 31.
- 2.4 Finally, claim 6 incorporates the substances recited in claims 2 to 6 as filed and claim 7 is based on the disclosure of claims 82 to 96 as filed.
- 2.5 Thus, the amendments are supported by the application as filed and fulfil the requirements of Article 123(2) EPC.

3. *Inventive step*

- 3.1 The application relates to a sweetener composition comprising a non-caloric high-potency sweetener, namely rebaudioside A, and a carbohydrate sweetener, namely erythritol, to improve the taste of ingestible compositions.
- 3.2 The use of high-potency sweeteners to replace natural sweeteners such as sucrose is already known. Sweetener compositions comprising a sweetener of high sweetness and a sugar alcohol are also disclosed in the prior-art documents D3, D9, D13 and D15 cited in the appealed decision.
- 3.3 The board agrees with the appellant that document D13 represents the closest prior art, essentially because it is the only document relating to rebaudioside A.

Rebaudioside A presents, like other high-potency sweeteners, a taste problem that limits its use: it has an unpleasant "aftertaste" or, more specifically, a

- bitterness and sweetness linger worse than other known sugar substitutes, including sucralose and aspartame.
- 3.4 D13 aims to provide a stevia sweetener wherein the bitter and sweet aftertaste of stevia sweeteners is improved. Specifically, D13 teaches that the taste properties of α -glucosylated steviol glycoside sweeteners can be improved by purifying the stevia-extract starting material to contain a high (>90%) rebaudioside A concentration followed by enzymatic modification to produce functionalised α -glucosylated steviol glycosides, which are then combined with a polyol such as erythritol to produce a more complex synthetic sweetener composition with fewer taste problems due to the stevia extract starting material (see paragraphs [0011] to [0014] and [0042] of D13').
- 3.5 According to the appellant the problem to be solved by the application in view of this prior art can be seen in the provision of a further sweetener composition having an improved, more sugar-like temporal/flavour profile (cf. page 3, line 20 to page 4, line 2 of the description). In particular, the application aims to provide compositions having improved taste properties such as decreased unpleasant bitterness and sweetness linger.
- 3.6 As a solution to this problem the application proposes the compositions of claim 1 comprising rebaudioside A in combination with erythritol in the amounts specified therein.
- 3.7 The appellant has referred to experimental evidence (D16) in the grounds of appeal to show that erythritol

at the claimed amounts is necessary to modulate the flavour and temporal profile of rebaudioside A to obtain a sweetener composition with reduced aftertaste.

3.8 These experiments show that the claimed compositions provide superior taste properties over compositions containing only rebaudioside A.

3.8.1 In particular, it was found that a control sample containing sucrose had a sweetness linger of 0 (no sweetness linger) whereas a sample containing rebaudioside A in a quantity to give the equivalent sweetness had a sweetness linger of 5 (high sweetness linger). The addition of erythritol to rebaudioside A gave a sweetened composition having a sweetness linger of 1 (D16, Example B1), showing that the incorporation of erythritol decreased the sweetness linger of rebaudioside A from high to very low.

3.8.2 Moreover, comparative taste tests of certain sweetened compositions comprising rebaudioside A, erythritol and certain additional sweet taste-improving compositions exhibit less sweetness linger than compositions comprising just rebaudioside A and the sweet taste-improving composition (*i.e.* in the absence of erythritol), as shown in the following examples of D16:

- Example F132 describes that a sweetened composition containing rebaudioside A, sucrose, erythritol and D-tagatose had a sweetness linger of 0. In contrast, Example F133 describes that, in the absence of erythritol, the composition had a sweetness linger of 2.

- Example F134 describes that a sweetened composition containing sucrose, erythritol and D-tagatose had a sweetness linger of 1. In contrast, Example F135 describes that, in the absence of erythritol, the composition had a sweetness linger of 2.
- Example F136 describes that a sweetened composition containing rebaudioside A, sucrose and erythritol had a sweetness linger of 0. Example F137 describes that, in the absence of erythritol, the composition had a sweetness linger of 2.
- Example F142 describes that a sweetened composition containing rebaudioside A, erythritol, fructose, KCl and KH_2PO_4 had a sweetness linger of 2. Example F143 describes that, in the absence of erythritol, the composition had a sweetness linger of 3.
- Example F144 describes that a sweetened composition containing rebaudioside A, erythritol and gum acacia Senegal had a sweetness linger of 2. Example F145 describes that, in the absence of erythritol, the composition had a sweetness linger of 3.
- Example F146 describes that a sample containing rebaudioside A, erythritol, glycine, KCl, KH_2PO_4 and D-alanine had a sweetness linger of 1. Example F147 describes that, in the absence of erythritol, the composition had a sweetness linger of 3.

3.8.3 Finally, concerning examples H37 to H41 in the present application which disclose compositions falling within the scope of claim 1 but having a rather high sweetness linger, the appellant stated during the oral

proceedings in the parallel case T 1964/11 that the same compositions without erythritol showed still higher sweetness linger. Consequently, H37 to H41 do not cast doubts on whether the alleged effect associated with the combination of rebaudioside A and erythritol is achieved.

3.8.4 In view of these results, the board is satisfied that the above technical problem is solved by the claimed combination of rebaudioside A and erythritol.

3.9 It remains to be decided whether, in view of the available prior-art documents, it would have been obvious for the skilled person to solve this problem by the means claimed.

3.9.1 Document D13 itself does not provide any hint to the claimed invention. In fact D13 teaches away from sweetened compositions comprising rebaudioside A. As indicated in point 3.4 above, D13 teaches that, to produce a sweetener product with an acceptable sweet-taste profile, rebaudioside A must be enzymatically modified by α -glucosylation to produce an α -glucosylated steviol glycoside and then combined with a polyol. If it had been obvious that the aftertaste of rebaudioside A could be modified by combining it with erythritol, the inventors of D13 would not have glycosylated the rebaudioside A before combining it with erythritol. Moreover, D13 also shows that not every combination of erythritol and a high-potency sweetener improves the aftertaste derived from the sweetener (see [0008]), confirming the arguments of the appellant concerning unpredictability in the sweetener field.

- 3.9.2 Documents D3, D9 and D15 likewise do not suggest adding erythritol to rebaudioside A to solve the above problem.
- 3.9.3 D3 is directed to a sea buckthorn fruit juice containing, amongst others, "rebaudioside", xylitol and citric acid. There is no mention in D3 neither of rebaudioside A nor of erythritol and therefore there can be no suggestion in D3 to the now claimed compositions of rebaudioside A and erythritol.
- 3.9.4 D9 discloses a sweetener composition comprising maltitol, a saccharide and purified stevia rebaudiana extract containing more than 30 wt.% of rebaudioside A. However D9 does not teach or suggest the combination of rebaudioside A with erythritol, which is not even mentioned in D9.
- 3.9.5 Finally, D15 describes sweetener compositions which contain (A) a L-aspartic acid derivative dipeptide compound and/or a stevioside analogue (preferably stevioside, rebaudioside-A, -C, -D, -E, dulcoside-A, rubusoside or glycolstevioside) and (B) erythritol. However, D15 does not disclose rebaudioside A having a purity of 50% to 100% by weight on a dry basis and erythritol in the amounts specified in claim 1. Moreover, stevioside analogue is not equivalent to rebaudioside A and, as would be understood by the skilled person, the particular properties of one sweetener cannot be transferred to another.
- 3.9.6 Faced with the technical problem identified above, the skilled person could not have deduced from these documents that the combination of rebaudioside A and

erythritol would yield a sweetener composition with improved taste properties.

- 3.10 The examining division refused the application because the amendments made to the claims did not fulfil the requirements of Article 123(2) EPC. The request before the examining division has been replaced by a new request that fulfils the requirements of Article 123(2) EPC as explained under point 2 above.

The examining division further denied an inventive step essentially because the application did not provide any unexpected effect linked to the claimed sweeteners.

As set out above, this argument no longer applies in view of the experimental evidence filed during the appeal proceedings.

- 3.11 For these reasons, the board considers that the subject-matter of claim 1 and, by the same token, of claims 2 to 7 (see above point V) involves an inventive step within the meaning of Article 56 EPC.

4. As the main request is allowable, there is no need for the board to deal with the auxiliary request.

Order

For these reasons it is decided that:

1. The decision under appeal is set aside.

2. The case is remitted to the examining division with the order to grant a patent on the basis of the main request (claims 1 to 7) as filed with letter dated 16 July 2013 and a description/figures to be adapted.

The Registrar:

The Chairman:

M. Cañueto Carbajo

W. Sieber