

## Making scents: Regularity in the semantic source domains of smell words.

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*“It has been argued by some that the lack of classification [of smells] is due to the lack of distinctive linguistic terms. Quite the opposite is true. Such terms would have arisen had there been any obvious basis of grouping. The lack of them reflects the inherent difficulty of classification, which even modern science has not overcome.”* (Buck 1949: 1025)

Our sense of smell, along with its siblings touch and taste, has been drastically under-represented in research compared to the over-representation of vision then sound (Hutmacher 2019: 2–3). The Western suppression of smell has meant that our sense of smell is regarded as the most dispensable (Kant 2006: 50–51) and that smell is the sense that people are the least scared of losing (Hutmacher 2019: 2–4). For linguistics, the sense of smell has been described as “the mute sense” (Ackerman 1991: 20) or ineffable, and much has been made of its assumed inability to be encoded in language (see also, e.g., Engen 1987: 497; Sperber 1974: 115–116).

More recently, however, there has been a rise of studies on the role of smell in language showing the remarkable diversity in the linguistic resources and their use across the world (Majid 2021; Majid et al. 2018), contra Buck. So, against this recent backdrop of linguistic diversity, we can review the lexicon of English in a new light. And, as Majid (2021: 120) asks: “Are smell words more likely to lexicalize some odors than others?” On the premise that there are different groupings of smells made by people around the world, we ask how have smells been grouped by English speakers throughout history and — given the domain as a whole is relatively lacking — what is the basis to these groupings? To this end, this talk takes a diachronic approach the smell lexicon of English. We collected over 25 English smell terms and traced their etymologies and the semantic trajectories. Collating the range of source domains, we find a degree of intra-linguistic regularity. Several common domains emerged from which English smell terms are drawn: AIR, BURNING, TASTE, TOUCH, and EMISSION.

These trajectories support Traugott and Dasher’s (2002) assertion that meanings shift from the concrete to the more abstract and subjective. Importantly, they point to regularities in the sources of smell terms throughout the history of English and reveal the conceptual metaphors in the domain of smell that contribute to the basic smell lexicon. We also explore both linguistically internal (phonaesthesia) and external (synchronous cultural models) processes that motivated these shifts. Finally, we discuss the implications of the English findings in terms of potential cross-linguistic regularity; that is, the extent to which these domains are culturally specific to English (at a certain time) or occur more broadly. These potentially cross-linguistic regularities allow us to contribute part of an answer to Majid’s question and to better understand the shared communicative purpose of olfaction.

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