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My two-year-old daughter has two words with which to describe food: yummy and yucky. For sound, she can distinguish between “big noise” and “very quiet.” She has a significantly broader vocabulary when it comes to sight: big and small, green, blue, or red, and the capacious description

that may apply to anything from the moon in the sky to a puddle of water on the sidewalk: “wanna touch it.” when she does touch something, it may be wet, or hot, or soft, or sticky.

Despite this amazing descriptive variety, she currently has no words for smell. And while it is very probable that her sensory vocabulary will continuously expand over the next few years, a recently published article in *Cognitive Science* points out that when it comes to odors, descriptive limitation is the norm—not only for toddlers but for adult speakers as well. According to the authors, three psychologists from Stockholm University, “the sense of smell, olfaction, differs from other senses in that it lacks a designated vocabulary across the world’s languages” (Hörberg et al. 2)

The lack of a dedicated olfactory vocabulary, the article continues, means that speakers who wish to describe odors must rely on one or another form of metaphorical borrowing, describing smell in terms of its source, or in terms of abstract and “cross-modal” qualities, or in terms of its effect on the smeller. So, if I describe a new fragrance as “citrusy, fresh, kind of light and pleasant” I borrow language from the source emitting the smell (citrus) and from other senses (light); I use an abstract quality (fresh), and I express my own feeling of pleasure when smelling it (pleasant).

Linguistic creatures that we humans are, it would seem that this absence of a varied, specific vocabulary to describe olfactory experience means that of the five senses, we value it least. If it was important, we would talk about it more, and thus develop a more robust vocabulary. The universality of this lack, pointed out by the Stockholm researches, further suggests that this apathy towards discussing smells is inherent to human experience, rather than, say, a quirk of the English language. Is it possible that as language developed, and as civilization developed, reliance on hearing and sight has increased to the point that smell became less important? Or that underlying this phenomenon is a more biological explanation, “a lack of precise mappings from olfactory representations to the language network in the brain”? (Hörberg et al. 2)

Traditional hierarchies of the senses offer an alternative pathway into this problem. Starting with Aristotle’s *De Sensu*—though not undisputed since, as sense historian Robert Jutte reminds us (61)—such hierarchies posit the sense of smell in the middle position, between the “high” senses of sight and hearing, and the “low” ones of touch and taste:

*The number of the senses is uneven and the sense of smell, since an uneven number has a middle term, seems itself to occupy the intermediate position between the senses which require contact, viz. touch and taste, and those where the perception is mediated by something else, to wit, sight and hearing. For this reason also odour is a quality both of that which is nutritive (which falls within the class of things tangible) and of the audible and the visible, and hence the sense of smell is exercised both in air and in water. Thus the object of smell is something common to both of these and is found in things tangible, things audible and things transparent. (81)*

Both direct and indirect, embodied and disembodied, tangible and abstract: smell is at once a fully embodied experience and a complicatedly cognitive one, activating associations of thought and

memory. The sense of smell, as described by Aristotle, seems to encapsulate the human experience of uncomfortable embodiment, the toggle between our idealization of abstractions—mind and soul—and the grounded realities of embodied existence.

If the sense of smell is associated with the human ambivalence regarding our being—or being in—a body, it makes sense (hah) that out of the five senses, smell has no dedicated vocabulary. Language does not do well with ambivalence, however rich it may be with nuance, and olfactory experience is ambivalent all the way.

But at the same time, the ineffability of smell is also a source of poetic potential, the lack of a dedicated olfactory language itself an opportunity for engaging in linguistic play. From William Shakespeare’s “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day” to Emily Dickinson’s “Hope is a thing with feathers,” metaphorical transference across domains is the hallmark of poetic language. Or, as Twitter user @shutupmikeginn has succinctly put it, “we get it poets: things are like other things.” Because smell is ineffable, we are called to make poetry whenever we describe it.

Perfume commercials, notorious for their cryptic auro-visual world-making, are perhaps the best example of the creative possibilities afforded by the limitations of olfactory description. The strangeness of these commercials is often explained through the uselessness of the product: perfume is a luxury commodity that doesn’t actually do anything, elaborates an article on Quartz, and therefore the easiest route for representing it—i.e. showing what it does—is not a possibility. Other explanations cite association with celebrity figures, crafting a fantasy of luxury, and sheer weirdness as a way of promoting brand awareness. But at heart, the purpose of a perfume commercial is to represent, through the senses of hearing and sight, an experience of smell. And what is synesthesia if not metaphorical transference?

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Image credit: Richard Houston. Smelling. B1970.3.959 – Yale Center for British Art. *Wikimedia Commons*.

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