

FROM THE 'GENITIVE' MODALITY TO THE ATMOSPHERE: AN OSMOLOGICAL STUDY IN TO EPISTEMIC SPACE

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OLFACTION

NEUROCOGNITION

CROSS-CULTURAL LEXICON

ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

This paper foregrounds the 'genitive' modality of olfaction of olfaction –the linguistic habit of naming a smell by referring to its source– as a fundamental structure for understanding the resistance of this sense to abstraction.

Through a comparative analysis between Western lexical scarcity and the terminological granularity found in specific non-Western cultures, the study investigates the neurocognitive and philosophical reasons for this ineffability.

Starting from these foundations, the research outlines the intrinsically atmospheric character of smell, thereby analysing its connection to the concept of transition and its role as a socio-political indicator, capable of mapping and negotiating urban space.

Integrating neuroscientific evidence, phenomenological analysis and ethnography, the article proposes a polyphonic framework that elevates smell from a peripheral sense to a primary epistemic device for constructing and navigating lived atmospheres.

THE DESCRIPTIVE ISSUE

It seems that smell eludes attempts to be fixed through language, to be named and, above all, communicated and transmitted linguistically, thus circumventing any attempt at abstraction (Majid *et al.*, 2018). Think of when we are faced with the problem of verbally recounting an olfactory memory. No matter how dear the aroma described is to us, words fail us, causing us to fall into banality.

When Wittgenstein asks us to describe the aroma of coffee, it seems that words are insufficient for a correct description, and he inquires: 'Why can't we do it? Are we lacking the words? And what are we lacking them for?' Above all, he asks a fundamental question for our study: 'But where does the idea come from that such a description should be possible?' Have you ever felt the lack of such a description?" (2009, p. 610).

We can say that the essence of language is definitional, i.e. that it responds to the metaphysical need for *tì estìn*, for "what is" (Caporossi, 2013). This tendency is inherent in the structure of every type of language and arises when we arbitrarily assign a meaning to a signifier. Let us therefore try to understand why we may feel the lack of such a description, since even when an olfactory sensation is very precise, finding the words to describe it is almost impossible.

Sight and hearing work at a distance, they have a visible and audible object that can be described and shared. Smell, on the other hand, has no objects, it has the sensations of objects. Sensations that cannot be felt over time without perceiving the source itself. Smelling means entering reality chemically, a fleeting reality, often without awareness.

Analysing the neuroanatomy of the olfactory system can help us highlight the unique attributes of olfactory cognition in order to understand the reasons for its weak link with verbalisation. The olfactory system is the only sensory system whose passage of information bypasses the thalamus, that particular component of the brain, the centre for collecting and sorting sensory information to and from the cerebral

cortex, which activates conscious attention by regulating the state of consciousness (Jacobs, 2023). The thalamus works when stimuli are visual or auditory, but not with olfactory stimuli. For this reason, the main olfactory bulb acts as its own “relay station” (Howes, 2008), without the need for the intermediate action of the thalamus, sending input to the olfactory cortex, i.e. the piriform cortex. The olfactory system also has connections with the limbic structures of the amygdala, which controls emotions and moods, and the hippocampus, where memory structures are regulated; this proximity helps us understand why smells are intrinsically emotional (hedonic).

This peculiar neural circuit would explain why it is difficult to recall an olfactory memory, in contrast to visual and acoustic accuracy, which allows us to picture a memory of this nature much more effectively. Think about how the way we store a smell is influenced by our mood, the place we are in, the people we are surrounded by; this dependence of the olfactory stimulus on the variables of the context in which it is presented (presentation, identity and duration of the stimulus itself) causes an easy distortion of the input, a difficulty in consciously remembering or labelling that smell, in contrast to learning and olfactory memory, which are remarkably resistant to decay (Herz and Engen, 1996).

Odours, therefore, create a sense of phenomenological proximity to the odour source.

In these terms, smell can be a radical example of what Deleuze calls an “image-affection”, i.e. an image “that connects directly to the body”, a “motor effort on an immobilised receptive plate” (2002, p. 85). In fact, it provokes a sensation of direct physical contact and, in extreme cases, can even cause migraines or trigger involuntary reflexes, such as retching.

These notions fuel reflection on the possibility of considering smell as a memory system in its own right. One of the reasons why this question remains unanswered is that we still lack a standard model of odour perception (Sagar *et al.*, 2023). Psychological research on language highlights that it

is possible not to remember a term while still being able to recall the morpho-lexical information associated with it (e.g., whether the term was masculine or feminine). This linguistic phenomenon has been called the 'tip of the tongue' phenomenon. More recently, a similar phenomenon has been identified in the olfactory sphere, the 'tip of the nose' (Brud, 1986), i.e. an experience of great familiarity with a smell, but, unlike the 'tip of the tongue', in the 'tip of the nose' there is no lexical access, an impossibility of linguistic naming.

Much linguistic research is based on the idea that for each smell there is only one "veridical label" that identifies it based on the name of the odour source (Brud, 1986). The fact that only the names of smells that correspond to veridical labels are considered correct in experimental scientific literature risks underestimating the potential of language. People call the same smells by different names: even professionals, such as noses, olfactory analysts and sommeliers, have this difficulty. Luca Turin, who can be counted among the aforementioned experts, states that two experts can describe a similar olfactory stimulus in completely different ways. Various studies support this claim. For example, in 1986, a test was conducted in which 120 noses, i.e. olfactory experts who formulate perfumes professionally, were asked to identify the names of 20 distinct odours, resulting in a list of 507 substances (Brud, 1986).

This experiment shows that, even among experts, not only is there no reference alphabet, but perhaps even perception itself can have peculiarities that change according to experience, origin, age, etc. It is necessary that the simple 'one smell-one name' relationship, introduced in the olfactory field because it has historically worked in the visual field (think of the concept-name, colour-name, shape-name, number-name), be adjusted to reflect greater complexity, within the contours of a more layered and tortuous correspondence that can be summarised in the formula 'one smell-many names'.

Therefore, let us outline a multifaceted and polyphonic approach to olfactory verbalisation, starting with a passage from

Cassirer (2015, p. 123), where he states that: “When language attempts to indicate certain olfactory qualities, it is mostly forced to follow the indirect route of words indicating things, which it has coined on the basis of other intuitive-sensory data”.

A smell can be described as bitter, peppery or burnt, borrowing from the sphere of taste; it can be described as cold, full-bodied or velvety, referring to the tactile component; we can mention green smells or dark, monolithic, powdery nuances, using visual metaphors; and even sombre, strong, vibrant notes, borrowed from musical notation. The path of words indicating things, therefore, is taken by using verbal expressions that refer to one sense to describe another, resorting to the expressive association between words pertaining to at least two different sensory spheres, or synaesthetic metaphors. Synesthetic metaphors can enlighten us about the relationship between sensoriality and language, since metaphorical correspondences move ‘horizontally’, from one sensory realm to another, without the vertical transition from sensoriality to abstraction.

If we analyse the phenomenon from a psychophysical point of view, we discover that synaesthetic metaphors originate in the cerebral architecture underlying sensory perception, thus becoming embedded in the neural interconnections that direct sensory and motor experiences. Perceiving the same object through different sensory modalities allows us to retrace the path that, from language through linguistic apprenticeship, returns to the sensory sphere. The word is endowed with a new sensory dimension, which starts from the senses and extends to such an extent that it turns on itself, reveals itself, unfolds until it returns to the senses. It leans over the precipice of language and then returns to the den of the senses. From the senses to the senses.

Let us return to Wittgenstein with the notion of *sehen als* (1983, pp. 130, 318-321), “seeing as, grasping aspects”, in his interpretation of recognising significant aspects, bearers of meaning, in the immediacy of the moment. Wittgenstein’s *sehen als* is explained by Merleau-Ponty with the opposition

between *vor ceci* and *voir selon* (More, 2024, p. 19), i.e. seeing dominated by the frontal relationship with the object, optical seeing (*vor ceci*), or “seeing that”, which we never experience during vision, because when we see, we always do so with our experiential and cultural baggage, etc., which makes us “see according to” the filter of our perceptual habits (*voir selon*). *Voir selon* does not concern interpretation, but a lens that is placed on optical vision, and therefore takes the form of the subject’s mode of perception. *Sehen als* is *voir selon*, which allows *Aufleuchten des Aspekts* (Wittgenstein, 1983, p. 318), which we can translate as “a flash of insight”, “suddenly grasping”, detecting similarities between things piled up in the background of reality using aesthetic intelligence. Seeing what is common, recognising a strangely familiar shape in the formless, and attributing meaning to that aspect as it emerges.

In *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, there is a passage in which taste and smell are linked and then the focus returns to vision:

But now let us consider this type of explanation: if one holds the nose while eating, foods lose all flavour except sweet, bitter, salty and sour. So, we really want to say that the particular flavour of bread, for example, consists of this “flavour” in the strict sense and the aroma that is lost when we do not breathe through the nose. Why should something similar not happen when we see something as something? Something like this: the eye does not distinguish the figure as a metal wire structure from the figure as a box, etc. This is, so to speak, the aroma that the brain adds to what is seen. On the other hand, the eye also discerns distinct aspects: it almost phrases the visual image; and one phrasing is more suited to one type of interpretation, while another is more suited to another. (Wittgenstein, 1990, I, p. 22).

Like all other sensory activities, tasting is an operation enabled by *sehen als*, a perception of the taste of bread given by the flavour of bread, which must be associated with the aroma related to what is seen.

We can imagine perception as a very fine, thin fabric, in which the skilled hands of the weavers, the senses, weave tirelessly, each using a different thread. If we observe the fabric resulting from the weaving work, we would not distinguish either the weaver's hand or the colour of the thread used, because the fabric has become a single shade.

Thus, in perception, the contribution of each sense is shaped by the others, in a game of innate and structural synesthesia: in Wittgenstein's metaphor, the eye, i.e. sight itself, sees only lines, taste senses only flavour, it is the brain that adds aroma (i.e. olfactory information) and allows us to grasp the change in the appearance of the figure, to grasp the structure, *etwas als etwas sehen*, or "to see something as something" (Wittgenstein, 1983, pp. 318-321).

Excluding these "aromas" of cerebral origin, we would see only lines and junctions, not the figures as such. For Merleau-Ponty, this synergistic character is the basis for understanding bodily unity. He states that 'synaesthetic perception is the rule' (2003, p. 308), because our daily experiences are permeated by multisensory perception, as a result of a bodily unity that perceives through action in time, change and metamorphosis. In the field of neurology, synaesthesia is conceived as a rare condition and an indication of a pathological defect. Merleau-Ponty deconstructs this conception and thinks of each sense as part of a whole that collaborates with the whole. It is the synaesthetic synthesis operated by the body that creates perceptual unity.

The limited linguistic permeability of smell clashes with the natural tendency of language to struggle with the inexpressible until it can be expressed, a struggle against the ineffable that finds its end in fitting the word as deeply as possible into a particular feeling, marginalising the emptiness of the absent concept with a symbolic comment on that absence, a construction representative of the object.

We will now focus on the analyses and linguistic subdivisions that have been applied to smells and which, over time,

have gained the most credibility. Among these, the 'genitive' modality of referring to smell is dominant, as talking about smell inevitably means mentioning its source.

GENITIVE CLASSIFICATION

The classification of odours is a subject that receives considerable attention in scientific literature. The principle underlying the various attempts at cataloguing consists in identifying a fundamental organisational system on which all other olfactory sensations can subsequently be arranged. This grouping is similar to that of colours, but encounters difficulties due to the richness of olfactory stimuli and, as we have seen previously, their difficult linguistic permeability.

Aristotle distinguishes two main categories of odours (Cavalieri, 2009, p. 129). The first is the prerogative of humans and animals and is connected to the perception of the taste of food. The odours belonging to this first category have the quality of being perceived accidentally as pleasant or unpleasant. The second, on the other hand, is only perceptible to humans. These two categories are in turn divided into six others, which can be summarised as acidic, austere, unripe, sweet, foul and fatty scents. The link between scent and heat also emerges: smell is a type of heat, the diffusion of odour comes from a process of evaporation of the substance that acts as a sort of cooking of the raw material. In this way, the odour is released, which belongs to the category of 'dry' substances as a smoky or vaporous effluvium that comes from the metamorphic action of fire. Plato presents a similar approach: the scent is smelled during the transition of the substance, that intermediate passage that allows the body to burn, evaporate, melt and rot. Only the acquisition of this intermediate form allows our olfactory system to capture the smell (Cavalieri, 2009, pp. 116-117).

Linnaeus divided seven classes using hedonistic pleasure as a criterion, ranking smells from the most pleasant to the least agreeable to the nose. The two most pleasant classes

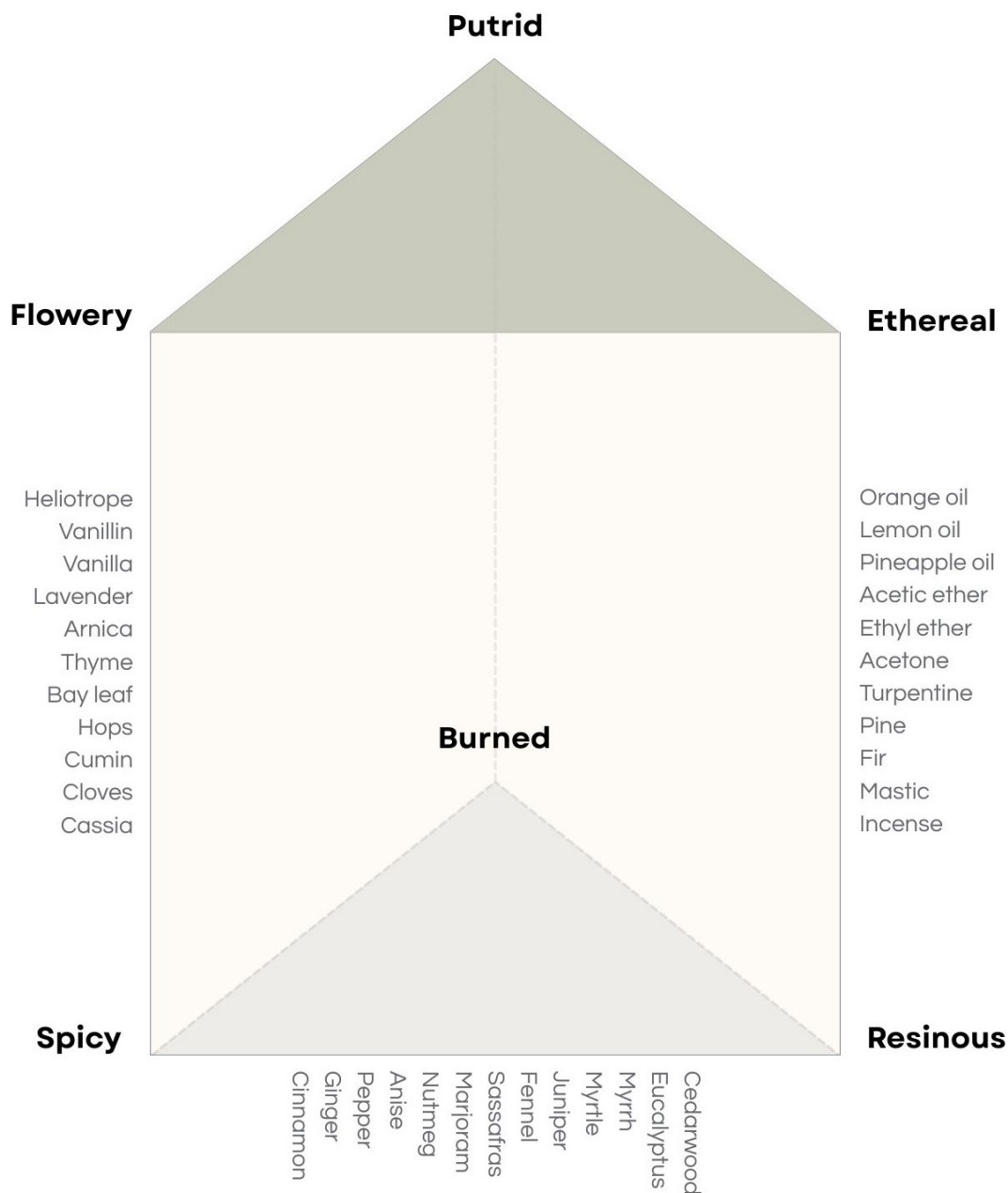


Fig. 1 Author's own work,
Henning's Smell Prism.

are aromatic and fragrant, followed by ambrosial, alliaceous and fetid, which can be relatively pleasant or unpleasant. Finally, there are poisonous and nauseating smells, which are always unpleasant. To Linnaeus' categories, physiologist Hendrik Zwaardemaker added the category of etheric odours, such as ether, acetone and chloroform; and empyreumatic odours, obtained by heating, distillation or roasting, such as tobacco smoke, tar, hot chocolate, jams, petrol and coffee (Cavaliere, 2009, p. 117). In 1916, Hans Henning developed a theory that geometrically distributed all possible odours (putrid, fragrant, spicy, resinous, burnt, fruity) on the six faces of a prism (Fig. 1). Subsequently, John Amoore published the stereochemical theory, which identifies correspondences between primary odours, which have molecules with certain chemical characteristics, and types of receptors located in the nasal mucosa. He identified seven primary odours, distinguished as mentholated, camphorated, musky, floral, ethereal, putrid, and spicy (Fullman, 1963).

Despite the variety of classification schemes proposed, the physical and chemical properties of odours are difficult to classify with certainty, making these attempts partial and overlooking the variability of characteristics in relation to individuals. In this regard, we should mention the widespread occurrence of specific anosmia for certain odours, which is comparable to colour blindness (Klyuchnikova and Voznessenskaya, 2019), on which no research has yet been conducted to understand whether these variations are systematic in nature.

Speaking of variability, it is also necessary to mention the perceptual changes that a person undergoes during their lifetime, but also in the course of a single day: if a smell is sniffed for a prolonged period, sensitivity to it decreases until habituation occurs, a phenomenon that can be observed when we become so accustomed to wearing a perfume that we forget about it until someone points it out to us.

Furthermore, basing the classification on a hedonistic liking attributable to the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the smell could be misleading. Considering the individual

experience of the subject, a smell that is not unpleasant in itself could cause rejection if it is associated with a traumatic or painful event, whereas a neutral smell can be sublime if linked to an emotionally intense experience. Imagine the intolerance we experience during childhood towards the aromas of certain foods and how this can persist throughout our lives, altering the taste of the adult (and therefore the sense of smell, given that only a quarter of taste perception belongs to taste, the rest, about 80%, is a matter of smell) (Levi, 2012, p. 3).

OLFACTORY ATMOSPHERE

Not breathing is impossible. Without the tension between inhaling and exhaling, human beings cannot survive. Our nose is the filter that maintains an ever-living contact with the outside world, allowing the world into the body and releasing the body into the world, like a gateway, a threshold that modifies the atmosphere breathed in and its inhabitants.

The literary critic Steven Connor (2010) traces the etymology of the word 'atmosphere' back to the Sanskrit *atman*, meaning breath, and notes that the first recorded use of the word in the English language is found in a 1638 treatise by Anglican cleric John Wilkins, concerning the possibility that the Moon might be habitable (Connor, 2010; 2016). Wilkins speculates that there is an *atmos-sphæra*, a sphere of vaporous air surrounding the Moon that might be capable of supporting human life (Wilkins, 1684, p. 103). In fact, modern usage of the word atmosphere denotes the conditions under which real or imagined life could flourish (Fig. 2).

We can attempt to connote the notion of atmosphere, even though it is a concept resistant to schematisation, as a tonalised space (Mancioppi and Perullo, 2020), which takes on a tone according to the objects it contains, be they people, spaces, environments, or climates (both meteorological and sentimental). It is a connective tissue, the space between objects and, at the same time, the force that holds them together. In this context,

Fig. 2 Baldwin, T., *Airopaidia: Containing the Narrative of a Balloon Excursion from Chester*, 1786, Chester, Printed for the Author by J. Fletcher. [Online] Available from: Internet Archive <https://archive.org/details/airopaidiacontaioobald> [Accessed: 26 December 2025]. The atmospheric nature of smell reflects a complexity already glimpsed in the late eighteenth century. Thomas Baldwin's *A Balloon Prospect from Above the Clouds* (1786) exemplifies this duality, capturing the atmosphere as both a physical, meteorological phenomenon and an affective, sensory experience.



we may consider odors as the most atmospheric elements of all. This characteristic is evident in the 'genitive' modality we use to call them, as talking about smell inevitably means mentioning the source of it, as we have seen in previous chapters.

The significance of the olfactory dimension clearly emerges within the ritual practices of various ethnic groups. The anthropologist David Howes (2008) asserts the existence of

a link between olfaction and transition, understood as a moment of cognitive transformation, a link that stems from the tendency of odours to constantly escape from the objects that produced them and the way they traditionally signal processes of transformation, such as cooking or putrefaction.

For these reasons, odours are used to mediate and manage transitions between important moments and social categories. Olfactory stimulation occupies a primary role in rites of passage, as it sanctions the individual's penetration into the atmosphere of the moment, uniting them with their companions and triggering strong mnemonic-affective reactions (Mancioppi, 2021).

We can therefore deduce the socio-political nature of scent, which produces dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, acceptance and rejection, recognition and aversion towards the source of the odour itself. This is a pathic character that governs collective mechanisms covertly, imposing itself with the same compelling nature as pheromones (Herz, 2008, p. 87–88). Pheromones, in fact, structure social behaviours and influence what we call aura, *Stimmung*, mood, climate, or 'ambiance', dimensions that are as sensitive as they are cognitive, creating intimate and instinctive reverberations on how we experience the nature of the space in which they are perceived (Craver, 2009).

CROSS-CULTURAL OLFACTORY LEXICON

The olfactory dimension is delineated as processual, as, being tied to breath, it represents the becoming of the being. Every living organism goes through vital phases marked by its own effluvia, culminating in the putrefaction of matter. It is no coincidence that the words *odore* (scent, presentiment) and *odio* (hatred, in the sense of keeping away, cursing) historically share a common root (Mancioppi and Perullo, 2020). Throughout history, this pathic nature has been used for discrimination: uncomfortable people, ethnic groups considered

inferior, and poorer classes have been labelled as carriers of foul smells, indicators of both social corruption and physical decay. Here, the inclusive or exclusive dynamics lead to the need for deodorisation, displacement, or ghettoisation of the reclusive individual (Majid and Burenhult, 2014, pp. 266–270).

If we turn our attention outside Western cultures, we discover that olfaction is, in some cases, held in high regard. The inhabitants of the Andaman Islands base their counting of time on the biological cycle of plants and name the different periods of the year according to the fragrant flowers that bloom at different times. Their year can be summarized as a cycle of scents (Ives, 2022). The Dassanetch group, in contrast to most people who find burnt or decomposed odours unpleasant, recognise that both bad and good odours are necessary for the rhythm of time and life, and that one olfactory season paves the way for the next (Classen et al., 1994, p. 105). The Brazilian Bororo tribe has two fundamental odours, putrid and sweet, which serve to indicate the two regulating cosmic forces, life and spirit (Classen et al., 1994, p. 102). This simple olfactory division determines the structure of the Bororo beliefs and practices concerning the body, social and natural orders, and spirituality; the olfactory code in this case reinforces social hierarchies, even at a subconscious level.

The Amazonian people of the Desana, who call themselves *wira*, the smelling people, exhibit ways of existing and managing space that are nose-oriented. They believe that every tribal group has a characteristic odour, which imbues the place where they live with a specific territorial scent. Men and women also have distinct characteristic odours. Therefore, the olfactory landscape of their environment consists of a variety of distinct olfactory zones crossed by the different olfactory traces of the people, animals, and plants living in them. Their olfactory linguistic structure is genitive, always citing the source of the odour, but it refers to a much wider range of sources and odorous objects than the Western one (Classen et al., 1994, p. 99)

These examples of non-Western groups seem to highlight how material development can contribute to a linguistic elusion of the olfactory sphere. This development points to the structural and geographical variations encountered by a group when moving from a life filled with attempts to navigate themselves in the natural environment to living surrounded by artificial structures where smelling danger is no longer necessary. In our society, no longer dominated by the hunter-gatherer binary, verifying the degree of putrefaction of matter solely with one's nose, for instance, is an activity that we can forgo (Sharma, 2023, p. 5).

These ethnolinguistic studies also highlight that the olfactory lexicon of Western languages presents a poverty that does not correspond to the richness of terminology and the potential for abstraction found in many non-Western societies. Western material development has allowed for a linguistic elusion of the olfactory sphere: in a world already marked by labels and signs, designating the odour by the name of its source proves sufficient for daily life (Sorokowski *et al.*, 2024).

It is therefore plausible to hypothesise that odours have developed a loose relationship with verbalisation because they carry a certain semiotic completeness that manifests itself in the immediacy of the impressions, memories, and emotions they elicit.

TOWARDS ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

Odours, as 'atmospheric' elements, can be used as a tool to represent a place, which can be evoked through its real or imaginary scent. The approach of olfaction and Psychogeography feels natural. Psychogeography, in the definition of Guy Debord, is the study of the precise effects of the geographical environment, which acts directly on the affective behaviour of individuals (Drobnick, J., 2002). The deeply personal associations evoked by odours and the holistic environments of the city are equally difficult to integrate into any kind of

shared vocabulary, making olfaction a perfect device for the unrepentant practice of the psychogeographical *dérive*.

Jim Drobnick (2002) identifies, in *Toposmia*, relationships between olfaction and *smellscape*s through terms such as psychic atmospheres, micro-climates, and direct emotional effects, which point to a conception of the city as a complex sensory matrix that includes the presence of olfaction. The article provides precise guidelines for artists wishing to undertake an olfactory walk, recommending that they seek out dialectical and spectacular smells. The former refer to those smells that “critically intervene into public situations and oppose overdetermining ideologies of space” (Drobnick, 2002, p. 38), for example the London Olympic Stadium, a completely deodorised place made of steel and plastic, built in an area that once housed a large number of heavy industries, including, in particular, a soap factory. It is said that when it rains, you can smell this old industrial past coming back to life, in a sort of olfactory return of the repressed. Spectacular smells, on the other hand, refer to a reality opposite to the former; they are smells developed by marketing experts that characterise shopping centres and clothing lines, accustoming consumers to depend on consumerist haze.

Olfaction thus becomes a tool for the critique of capitalism, escaping the conventionalised and commodified forms of consciousness that characterise organised domination. Marcuse argues that smell escapes the conventionalised and commodified forms of consciousness that characterise the organised domain of capitalism, and is therefore inherently transgressive (Marcuse, 2001, p. 82).

In the wake of this politically charged conception of smell, psychologist Douglas Porteous, in his essay *Smellscape* (1985), coined the concept of “olfactory walks”, defining them as “investigation and mapping of the olfactory landscape”. In this text, he condemned the sterility of modernity, stating that “the worldwide homogeneity of faceless glass buildings will be accompanied by large-scale deodorisation” (Porteous, 1985, p. 361). A prime example of this is “the american motel



Fig. 3 McLean, K., *Smells of Auld Reekie on a very breezy day in 2011* [Smell Map], 2012, available at: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Kate-McLean-Smell-Map-2012-Notes-This-unconventional-map-is-a-qualitative-and_fig8_310741254 (Accessed: 26 December 2025). Smell Map of Edinburgh, a framework for sensorial charting by Kate McLean. Her approach exemplifies how olfaction can be used as a primary epistemic device to map and navigate urban spaces.

bathroom, sanitised for protection, is the aseptic symbol of sensual death. Since not all environmental odours can be pleasant, we will have none at all” (Porteous, 1985, p. 367)

Subsequently, artists and academics such as Victoria Henshaw and Kate McLean would build on Porteous’ work by undertaking their own olfactory walks and exploring various cities in groups to produce their own smell maps (Fig. 3). Under their auspices, the olfactory walk evolved into a political practice, with the aim of sensitising participants to environmental odours and raising awareness of the importance of smell for the identity memory of a place. Jenny Marketou, Rion Willard, Nicola Twilley, Gwenn Aël Lynn and Cat Jones have worked on the Situationist legacy of mapping cities olfactorily, developing different ways of rediscovering the urban landscape through smell.

An urban space that, in these terms, is not disconnected from the notion of the body, and is therefore related to the individual and their systemic interconnections (Barwich, 2020, p. 247). From this perspective, space becomes

a practised place, whose phenomenological construction can only be understood by perceiving it as the constant and dynamic construction of a certain order, or rather a way of experiencing.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study originated in a linguistic attempt to analyse the main theories of olfactory classification. If language defines the limits of our action and thought, an analysis of the olfactory lexicon reveals the inherent resistance of this sense to linguistic permeability. Through the study of the neuroanatomy of the olfactory system, we have outlined the origins of the unique, instinctive relationship between scent and verbalisation, a connection that operates largely beyond the realms of will and conscious attention.

Having established that the descriptive and classificatory modalities of odours remain tethered to a genitive structure, we sought to investigate possible alternative forms of expression. Our analysis clarifies that the information produced by perception should not be framed in terms of classes of odours related to objects but in terms of odours that describe situations, where the odour input is integrated through synaesthetic associations with other sensory realms, lived experiences, and mnemonic traces. Only after processing various associative processes on the same odour can we identify and separate a specific pattern, and that odour can be semantically linked to others previously encountered belonging to the same semantic group, to be finally recognised.

Recognising the intrinsic intelligence of nasal perception implies a fundamental shift in our conception of knowledge, shifting the focus towards an embodied and “naturalised” cognition (Cavaliere, 2010). In this framework, the act of smelling ceases to be a passive biological reflex and emerges as an active epistemological engagement with the world.

Ultimately, this study proposes that smell carries socio-political implications, as odours constitute the connective tissue of our shared atmospheres, learning to “(re)start breathing well” constitutes an “essential aesthetic, ethical and political move” (Mancioppi and Perullo, 2020, p. 132). This approach embodies a commitment to reclaiming shared space from environmental and social indifference, therefore, fostering an educated olfactory perception becomes an essential task for navigating contemporary reality, offering a path towards more authentic, sustainable, and ethically grounded forms of human existence.

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