

Putting smell into words: A sociolinguistic study of how we verbalize the sense of smell

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Human olfaction or the sense of smell is considered very difficult to verbalize in words. Ackerman (1991) rightly states that the sense of smell is a “mute sense.” Nevertheless, we talk about smells all the time. For example, the perfume industry heavily relies on our ability to express certain smells in words. How do we accomplish the challenging task of putting smell into words? The present study is a sociolinguistic analysis of the language pertaining to perfumes in Japanese and English. One of the findings is that we use other senses (e.g., taste) to put smell into words. Furthermore, a story-telling strategy lets the addressee be involved in making sense of the smell. This suggests that the language of smell is a “joint production” of meaning between a sender and an addressee.