

Recenzió

Ádám Galac

Ł. Jędrzejowski & P. Staniewski (eds.): The Linguistics of Olfaction

Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2021, 481 pp.

The *Linguistics of Olfaction*, published by the John Benjamins Publishing Company as volume 131 of the series *Typological Studies in Language (TSL)*, is an ambitious undertaking. With the aim of surveying (research on) how the world's languages model olfactory perception, it presents different approaches by some of the field's leading scholars, dealing with languages from all over the world. Thus, it sets the standards for future investigations of olfactory language and is an important contribution to the exploration of perception and of the embodied mind.

In this review, I will first outline the chapters of the book one by one, then I will conclude with some overall remarks on its possible implications for olfactory research.

Chapter 1, written by the two editors, Łukasz Jędrzejowski from the University of Cologne and Przemysław Staniewski from the University of Wrocław, is devoted to the introduction of the topic and the volume. The first half of the chapter provides an overview of the relations between olfaction and language, with special focus on the different linguistic ways to encode this sensory modality. Besides lexical and morphological strategies, it also discusses the potential figurative and evidential uses of olfactory language, as well as some of its diachronic aspects (e.g. pejoration of meaning), and points out that more research is needed in order to give a unified cross-linguistic account of the majority of the questions. The second half presents the contributions that feature in the volume.

Chapter 2 is written by Åke Viberg (Uppsala University), one of the pioneers of sensory linguistics (cf. Viberg 1983, a paper that laid the foundations for the examination of perception verbs). After an introductory overview of perception verbs and other sensory words, of the neurophysiology and psychology of smell, and of the ways olfaction is coded in the world's languages, Viberg looks at Swedish with the aim of describing a language with a "poor" olfactory lexicon. He carries out a corpus study of the words *lukt* 'smell', *lukta* 'to smell', *stinka* 'to stink', *dofta* 'to smell good', and *osa* 'to smell of burnt fat', and also looks at word sketches to examine how people usually talk about odours in Swedish. He observes that smell is different from sight and hearing in that (1) it is typically referred to with phenomenon-based expressions rather than experience-based ones, and (2) speakers tend to conceptualise olfactory experiences not as objective properties of their sources but as sensations that have an effect on their perceiver.

Ádám Galac:

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Argumentum 17 (2021), 871-877

Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó

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In Chapter 3, Iraide Ibarretxe-Antuñano (University of Zaragoza) explores the olfactory repertoire of Basque, a language isolate spoken in the Western Pyrenees. After summarising her previous work on smell verbs in Basque, this chapter turns to the nominal domain: 17 nouns are analysed on the basis of two dictionaries and two corpora regarding their physical meanings, the verbal constructions they typically appear in, and their figurative meaning extensions. Concerning the latter, Basque does not seem to differ substantially from a large number of other languages, as source-based olfactory perception is conceptually related to general characteristics (atmosphere), whereas experiencer-based expressions can refer to searching, getting information, or suspecting something. From a diachronic perspective, however, smell words in Basque have not undergone a pejoration of meaning typical to many other languages: both positive and negative specifications can be observed.

Chapter 4, by Manana Kobaidze, Revaz Tchantouria and Karina Vamling from Malmö University, treats olfactory terminology in Georgian, Megrelian, and Kartvelian languages in general. The analysis is based on corpus examples, which are classified according to Viberg's (1983) three categories of subject activeness: activity, experience, and source-based conceptualisation. Most expressions are centered around the neutral noun *suni* 'smell' and are biased towards one pole of the hedonic axis – on the other hand, there is an originally negative root (*q'ar-*) that shifted towards a neutral meaning in some dialects, contrary to the widespread tendency of pejoration of neutral olfactory words. The authors also observe that many sensory expressions can refer to general perception, to understanding and knowledge, and to other perceptual modalities.

Chapter 5 leaves the realm of Europe and focuses on Purépecha, an isolate spoken by about 140,000 indigenous people in Mexico. Kate Bellamy, a researcher of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (LACITO–CNRS), gives an overview of “smell languages” around the world, then presents the three main strategies to talk about olfactory events and experiences in Purépecha: abstract (15 olfactory roots with spatial location suffixes); descriptive (non-olfactory roots like *kurhi-* ‘to burn’ with the same spatial location suffixes); and source-based (a noun referring to the source of the smell, introduced by the existential smell predicate *ja-*). She also looks at historical sources and concludes that the olfactory terminology in Purépecha has proved to be relatively stable over time, despite the strong influence of bilingualism with Spanish.

In Chapter 6, Martine Vanhove (LLACAN–CNRS) and Mohamed-Tahir Hamid Ahmed (Sudan University of Science and Technology) examine Beja, an Afroasiatic language spoken in Eastern Sudan by approx. 1,100,000 speakers. This is the only chapter that is not limited to olfaction, as it investigates all three of the so-called “lower senses”: smell, taste, and touch. The lexicon of the lower senses is not very elaborate in Beja, which cannot be counted as a “smell language” like Purépecha, though the lexicon of olfaction is the most varied among the three modalities. As to the findings of the examination, I would like to highlight the following: smell and taste are primarily conceptualised through source-based constructions, touch through experiencer-based ones; olfaction generates the lowest number of metaphors, taste the highest (even in cases where olfaction is used in most languages, like guessing and suspicion); ‘smell’ is colexified with ‘kiss’, which is a Southeast Asian rather than African feature.

Chapter 7 is concerned with Fon, a Kwa language of the Niger-Congo phylum mainly spoken in Benin. The author, Renée Lambert-Brétière (University of Maryland), first gives a grammatical outline of the language – an isolating type in which ideophones, reduplication, and composition play an important role –, then turns to the strategies it uses to cope with the lack

Ádám Galac:

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 Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó
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of a verb meaning ‘to smell’: phenomenon-based constructions primarily rely on support verbs, while experiencer-based ones use a general perception verb that can also refer to other sensory modalities and knowing. The chapter also presents some interesting metaphorical extensions of smell, in which odours are conceived of as a reflection of their carrier’s identity and function as source domains for various emotions: love, charity, hate, injustice, or shame.

In Chapter 8, Anthony E. Backhouse (Hokkaido University) explores how olfaction is generally talked about in Japanese colloquial speech on the basis of examples drawn from the Japanese web corpus (JpWaC, accessed via Sketch Engine). He first looks at the core lexicon of smell and observes that it is characterised by a strong evaluative dimension. Then he expands the scope of analysis and presents three further aspects of Japanese smell language: collocations of the core lexicon; compounds with the core smell adjective, *-kusai* (some of which do not refer to olfaction anymore); and mimetics (i.e. sound-symbolic words that play an important role in Japanese). Fundamentally, two mimetic roots are used in the domain of olfactory perception: *pun-*, referring to strong and enveloping smells (both pleasant and unpleasant), and *tsun-*, denoting strong sharp and pungent smells (typically localised ones, in contrast to the enveloping conceptualisation of *pun*, cf. Hamano 1998: 91). There is also *kunkun* that depicts the action of sniffing. Finally, the author presents some olfactory words that belong to formal registers, and concludes that evaluation is widely present here as well.

Chapter 9 is dedicated to the Formosan languages, a highly diversified group of the Austronesian language family, spoken in Taiwan (which is actually considered as the origin of the Austronesian dispersal). After an introductory overview of the distribution and the main characteristics of these languages, Amy Pei-jung Lee (National Dong Hwa University) reports on the olfactory data she has collected on continual fieldwork trips since 2009. She describes three strategies that characterise the olfactory discourse in the Formosan languages: generic and specific abstract smell terms (lexical strategy); a source-oriented construction consisting of a prefix/proclitic plus a reduplicated noun referring to the source of the smell (morphological strategy); another source-oriented construction consisting of a verb such as ‘to be like’ or ‘to exist’ plus a noun referring to the source of the smell (analytical strategy). She also points out that the semantic factors [\pm human], [\pm polite], and [\pm visible] influence the selection between the ways to talk about olfaction, and that when referring to unpleasant odours, the use of specific abstract terms is considered polite, whereas source-based constructions are felt to be too direct and thus impolite.

Chapter 10 is also based on fieldwork data, but focuses on the Oceanic languages spoken in northern Vanuatu. Alexandre François (LaTTiCe–CNRS–ENS) has built an impressive corpus of over 4000 pages of handwritten notes¹ and audio recordings² through participant-observer immersion, and now he presents what pertains to olfaction in his data. The languages spoken in the Torres and Banks Islands do not exhibit a large number of olfactory words: smells are primarily expressed with the help of one central root, which is reconstructed at the level of Proto Torres-Banks as **mbuna*. However, the author emphasises that his findings might have been influenced by his way of data collection, which – unlike the systematic elicitation method of Majid and Burenhult (2014) – aimed at documenting natural discourse in everyday contexts, where specific smells are rarely talked about. A more direct method may uncover a specific olfactory lexicon that has so far remained under the radar, as data from an 1896 dictionary

¹ Archived at https://www.odsas.net/index.php?action=set_category&cat=aut&value=44 (27.9.2021).

² Archived at <http://tiny.cc/Francois-archives> (27.9.2021).

Ádám Galac:

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Argumentum 17 (2021), 871-877

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(Codrington & Palmer 1896) of Mota, one of the languages of northern Vanuatu, suggest. Nevertheless, odours in northern Vanuatu have interesting cultural connotations, as they are associated with the contrast between life and death, with nature and the environment, and with the act of kissing (see also Chapter 6).

In Chapter 11, Bar Avineri from The Hebrew University of Jerusalem examines the relations between form and meaning in the domain of perception verbs in Modern Hebrew, in particular the verb *le-hariax* ‘to smell’ in positions where it is followed by a clausal complement. She discusses four constructions – active voice with a non-finite small clause, active voice with a finite clause, middle voice with a non-finite small clause, and middle voice with a finite clause – and four semantic properties – factivity, belief formation, indirect perception, and non-literal uses –, and shows how they are associated with each other. Then she introduces two new concepts which, she argues, offer a simpler explanation of the selection between these four syntactic constructions: *abduction* (cf. Peirce 1934: 94–131; Krawczyk 2012: 199–207) and *perceiver*. This is followed by a description of other smell and taste verbs in Modern Hebrew, and finally by a diachronic analysis of the morphosyntactic behaviour of *le-hariax* since Biblical Hebrew that points to the influence of European languages, especially Yiddish.

In Chapter 12, Virginia Hill (University of New Brunswick) looks at olfactory verbs in Romanian, with special focus on the syntactic differences between their direct (perceptual) and indirect (cognitive, inferential) uses. Based on Noam Chomsky’s minimalist approach, she argues that these readings should not be treated as different lexical entries because their CP complements undergo a different syntactic processing: only indirect readings (with human subjects) allow what she terms as subject to object raising (SOR). In this construction, the subject of the subordinate clause is spelled out as a direct object in the main clause (in English it would be something like “I saw Maria that wants to leave”, meaning ‘I saw that Maria wanted to leave’). Further, since SOR with perception verbs also occurs in Bulgarian and Greek but not in other Romance or Slavic languages, it can be regarded as a Balkan Sprachbund feature.

While nearly every contribution in the volume touches upon diachronic issues to some extent, Chapter 13 is substantially centred around language change and its cultural motivations. Francesca Strik Lievers from the University of Genoa addresses the question whether olfactory language has changed from Latin to Italian in connection with an assumable “deodorisation” in Western societies, and if so, in what respect. As a starting point, she discusses some highly relevant issues like the difficulty of assessing the cultural significance of a sensory modality, or the inequality of items within the olfactory lexicon and the disputable existence of basic odour terms (cf. also Staniewski 2016, Ch. 4). Her analysis encompasses verbs, nouns, and adjectives, which are distinguished according to their hedonic value (pleasant – neutral – unpleasant); as to verbs, she follows Viberg’s (1983) classification but expands it with a new category: that of causative verbs (e.g. *she scented her handkerchief with cologne*). She finds that the number of lexemes pertaining to the olfactory domain has remained approximately the same over time (though she warns that we do not know anything about the frequency of these lexical items in real-life language use), but also that the olfactory lexicon has shifted toward the negative pole of the evaluative dimension.

Chapter 14, written by Przemysław Staniewski and Adam Gołębiowski (University of Wrocław), adopts a more theoretical approach and asks whether the widespread practice of labelling source-based verbs as “copulative” is appropriate. The authors first look at prototypical copulas (above all, the German and Polish equivalents of *to be*) and highlight three important characteristics of this verb type (after Lang 1999): syntactic underdetermination of

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possible complements, multipurpose functions, and semantic emptiness. Then they outline the main structural and semantic features of perception verbs along with some attempts to classify them, before turning to less prototypical copulas, some of which have been termed as semi-copulas or pseudo-copulas in the heterogeneous literature. This is followed by an analysis based on four construction types with source-based perception verbs: subject + verb + adjective/adverb; subject + verb; subject + verb + prepositional phrase (German *nach*) / instrumental noun phrase (in Polish); impersonal construction. The conclusion of the chapter is that olfactory verbs can only be regarded as copulas when they have an evidential reading and do not refer to smell sensations – otherwise they are semantically too complex to be interpreted as such.

Finally, in Chapter 15, Magdalena Zawisławska and Marta Falkowska examine the Polish perfumery discourse on the basis of Synamet, a Polish corpus of synesthetic metaphors. This corpus is annotated according to a combination of cognitive metaphor theory and Fillmorean frame semantics, and describes metaphors using the notion “frame” instead of “domain”. The authors show interesting data concerning the frequency of the different synesthetic mappings: smell is unique in that it is the only frame that can be the target of all other perceptual frames, moreover, it is never used as a source frame in Synamet. Then they point out that the perfumery discourse abounds in atypical, multiple metaphors, of which they distinguish three kinds: mixed metaphors (metaphors with several source frames); entangled metaphors (metaphors with a complicated and compressed structure); and narrative metaphors (metaphors that exceed the boundaries of one sentence). They also emphasise that linguistic synesthesia is a far more complex phenomenon than previously assumed.

All in all, *The Linguistics of Olfaction* is an important step towards a general typology of olfactory language, and its impact on the research community is unquestionable. Even if its language sample is somewhat biased towards Europe, it covers all continents (at least with one language) and treats seven language families plus two isolates besides Indo-European (cf. Table 1). It also tries to encompass all possible aspects of the language of smell: synchrony and diachrony, lexicon and grammar, literal and figurative uses, as well as the cultural significance of this sensory modality, which is inseparable from its linguistic expression.

Chapter	Language	Language family	Continent
1	(various languages are touched upon)	(miscellaneous)	(misc.)
2	Swedish	Indo-European, Germanic	Europe
3	Basque	(isolate)	Europe
4	Georgian (and other Kartvelian languages)	Kartvelian	Europe
5	Purépecha	(isolate)	America
6	Beja	Afroasiatic	Africa
7	Fon	Niger-Congo	Africa
8	Japanese	Japonic	Asia
9	Formosan languages	Austronesian	Asia–Oceania
10	languages of northern Vanuatu	Oceanic	Oceania
11	Hebrew	Semitic	Asia
12	Romanian	Indo-European, Romance	Europe
13	Latin and Italian	Indo-European, Romance	Europe
14	German	Indo-European, Germanic	Europe
14-15	Polish	Indo-European, Slavic	Europe

Table 1. The languages studied in the volume

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However, as also admitted by the editors in Chapter 1, a unified account of the linguistic interface of olfactory perception has not been reached yet. The contributions of the volume represent different approaches and work with different methodologies, which puts a limit on the comparability of their results. This is also indicated by Alexandre François in Chapter 10, who warns that his findings might differ from those of Majid and Burenhult (2014) because of his different way of data collection, and not necessarily because of linguistic dissimilarities.

On the other hand, this variety of approaches has great advantages as well. First, it broadens the scope of investigation in general and stimulates further research by showing different viewpoints and pointing to unresolved issues. Second, it highlights the fact that even if there are important differences in the conceptualisation of olfactory perception across languages, one can also observe some recurrent traits that seem to be fundamentally linked to this sensory modality: (1) the hedonic value is a highly relevant semantic component of olfactory words; (2) diachronically, smell terms are prone to pejoration of meaning; (3) smell as a source of figurative conceptualisations usually refers to general characteristics that are not evident, but nonetheless important (general atmosphere in the case of phenomenon-based expressions, and suspicion and finding out in the case of experiencer-based expressions). Besides a number of other peculiarities, the major cross-linguistic difference resides in the fact that some languages have abstract smell terms that refer to specific odours, similarly to words that refer to colours – Kate Bellamy in Chapter 5 calls these languages “smell languages” (cf. also Majid & Burenhult 2014; Majid et al. 2018).

In light of the above, *The Linguistics of Olfaction* can be seen as a benchmark in the exploration of olfactory language, and thus of olfaction itself, an often downplayed sensory modality that is deeply connected with our cognitive activities (Holley 1999: 180–181), emotions (Soundry et al. 2011), and memories (Strauch et al. 2019). Consequently, it contributes to the expanding field of sensory linguistics (cf. Winter 2019) and to a deeper understanding of how we perceive and make sense of the world around us.

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Ádám Galac:

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Argumentum 17 (2021), 871-877
 Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó
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