

Black and green smells: Variation in synesthetic metaphors of smell

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Synesthetic metaphors are often seen as one phenomenon, generally including all phrases that contain two different sense experiences (e.g. *sweet sound* → taste&hearing). These metaphors are looked at from an all-inclusive perspective, trying to find patterns that work for all senses rather than for individual ones. However, such an all-inclusive view does not do justice to the different senses, perceptions based on them and underlying cognitive processes. Furthermore, it hides micro-variations that are specific to each individual sense and is not even accurate for all instances that contain two senses (Strik Lievers 2018).

My research focusses on the sense of smell as this particular sense seems to receive very little attention – not just in everyday life, but also in linguistic research. It has only recently been discovered as a worthwhile topic (Majid et al. 2018, Majid, Burenholt 2014, Winter 2016, 2018) and still requires a lot of further research.

My study investigates the differences in synesthetic metaphors that have *smell* in the target domain. I argue that such ADJ&*smell* constructions display diverse levels of metaphoricity from being entirely non-metaphoric all the way to transferring such a phrase onto a completely metaphorical level where no physical sense perception is involved any longer. The lowest level displays phrases that cannot be categorized as metaphors, because they only refer to two sense perceptions that coincidentally occur at the same time (1) and are only ordered in the respective way in language due to semantic restrictions that would not allow them to be reversed.

(1) *The **black smell** of smoke mixed with the strong odors of melted chocolate* (COCA 2003 FIC)

The second level contains a broad array of different expressions that rank from non-metaphorical (2) to metonymic (3) and metaphorical (4). This depends on whether the second sense impression is imagined, remembered (2), extended (3), or mapped (4). In neither case is the second sense perception an actual physical impression co-occurring at the same time.

(2) *tomato vines, bringing with it the **green smell** of their leaves* (COCA 2009 FIC)

(3) *Soon the **sweet smell** of cake baking floated from Rabbit's oven* (COCA 2011 FIC)

(4) *we went out on the pier, into a **loud fish smell*** (COCA 2005 ACAD)

The last level is rather limited and seems to be restricted to combinations of taste&smell. In those no physical sense perception is present (5), but the whole expression is extended onto a metaphorical level.

(5) *French bakery in Virginia Beach has the **sweet smell** of success* (COCA 2017 NEWS)

I argue that it is necessary to look for more individual instances within the broad field of sensory expression, especially when they center around the sense of smell. My data shows that not all instances of two co-occurring sense words qualify as metaphors, thus, such an assumption would be too superficial. It is not enough to look at synesthetic metaphors as one all-inclusive category, because we make perceptual differences and those differences can give us an inside view into underlying cognitive processes.

References

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