

A scent is not easily put into words

What's the smell of beach like, actually?



The language of scents is often said to be subjective. Although it seems to be a difficult task to remember a scent, the powers of imagination connected with the memory of a scent are immense.

For most of us, a smell remains disordered and diffuse, since our mind has not developed a framework for perceiving the real object "smell". The description of the "small piece of Madeleine" by Marcel Proust very well shows the personal and special character of the olfactory memory. In his description, Proust compares the visual memory with the memory of smell: "And then, all of a sudden, the memory was there. The taste was that of the small piece of Madeleine my aunt Léonie offered me on Sunday morning in Combray... after she had dipped it into her black or lime blossom tea. The sight of that Madeleine had not meant anything to me until I tasted it; perhaps that was because I had often seen this kind of pastries at the baker's since then without eating it and in this way, its picture might have detached itself from those days in Combray and combined with other, later ones..."

Smell remains in one's memory

Using the terms of experimental psychology today, the text by Marcel Proust can be interpreted to the effect that seeing is defined as a "cognitive" sense which has developed strategies and analysis frames for the perception of reality, whereas the sense of smell always perceives the unique, the momentary. The memory of a smell actually remains closely attached to its context and, better than any other sense, the perception of a smell stored up in memory can revive the details of a moment, of feelings, voices, noises, faces, etc. In the meantime, numerous scientists have proven that – even if



the powers of imagination connected with smells may be rather strong – it is still a difficult task for the human being to remember and describe smells.

The Terminology of smells

In France, sixty consumers were invited some years ago to describe scents in a communicative test the only purpose of which was to distinguish smells. The vocabulary resulting from this was divided into six categories: specific terms



which often describe the source of the smell (e.g. lemon, sweet, etc., 50% of the words given); terms borrowed from the sense of touch or from kinaesthesia (e.g. heavy, warm, etc., 19% of the words given); terms borrowed from the sense of taste (e.g. sweet, salty, etc., 15% of the words); words describing the intensity (e.g. strong, powerful, etc., 8% of the words); terms for judging the acceptance (e.g. stinking, disgusting, etc., 4% of the words) and finally diverse terms (e.g. expensive, cheap, feminine, etc., 4% of the words).

A comparable test which, however, was carried out by thirty experts and perfumers showed that the terms connected with acceptance and intensity as well as the diverse terms disappear. The terms borrowed from the sense of taste decrease to 3% of the words given, the vocabulary related to the sense of touch and kinaesthesia is reduced to 11%, whereas the specific vocabulary increases to 86%. The smell-specific vocabulary used by the experts is made up of sources of smell (e.g.

names of flowers, chemical molecules, existing perfumes, etc.) and of historical descriptions (e.g. chypre, etc.).

But what distinguishes experts from consumers even more than the peculiarity of the vocabulary is the choice of common references which, due to the development of the perfumery theories (e.g. the H&R genealogies) and to the frequent verbal exchange which is being cultivated among experts right around the perfume, are increasingly based on agreements.

For the expert, jasmine, rose, chypre, wood, leather, vetiver, etc. are terms describing the smell and not the visual object causing it. A rose might be described as "jasminy" just as this is possible in case of a perfume, a detergent, etc. The terminology of smells does therefore not refer to the picture of the source any more, but to an intellectual idea of the smell. The expert thus invents the object of his knowledge, he invents the type of smell.

This reminds us of the appearance of the language of colour, from the so-called primitive cultures to the industrial societies. Some primitive people in Guinea, for example, have not developed a specific language for colours: They categorize their world around the terms "light" and "dark". In these cultures, colour perceptions are described by using words which are borrowed from other sensory perceptions or derived from another coloured object. Whereas in our industrial societies, there seems to be an increase in the use of colours for the distinction of objects, making colour not the only but the most obvious feature for distinguishing objects (e.g. the colour of cars in case of certain brands. Example: Ferrari red).

Lemon scent in the waiting booth

Will this also happen with regard to smells? It is quite likely that the consumers, in order to create smelling objects, will also be able to agree on an arbitrary vocabulary which will nevertheless be based on a general understanding. The smell of beach does already exist - in France thanks to the brand Ambre Solaire and in the



USA due to Copertone. In London, some waiting booths at bus stops were perfumed with lemon scent for several weeks in order to advertise a new lemon drink. In New York, the guidebook "New York Smells 96" makes it possible to discover the smells of the city. In France, a manufacturer of footwear offers shoes made of rubber which are perfumed with vetiver for men, with vanilla for women and with the scent of fruit for children. After having developed the language of colour, our societies are thus inventing the first words of the language of smells now.