

As part of a Roman conception of the nose and nostrils as socially knowing and of scent as socially revealing, language itself could be said ‘to give off a smell’ (*olere*). This seeming synaesthesia shows that scent, like the other senses, is not a biological given but a cultural product embedded in social practice.

In general, “[o]dours were not simply a matter of aesthetic preference in the ancient world, but also a means by which different classes of people were categorized” (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1995, 33; generally 33-38). This is easily enough understood for typical odorants including natural and artificial fragrances, and body odors like good or bad breath. Like those more common odorants, however, language as well could reveal, by some quality of its scent, one’s origins and position in a social hierarchy.

Spoken language is most often described in Latin, as in other languages, in terms of its sound (with even written language mostly read aloud; Saenger 2000). But to educated Roman ears, foreign languages, and both foreign and rustic accents in Latin, could be said ‘to give off a smell’ (*olere*) displeasingly different from the ideally educated and properly pronounced Latin of the city. The difference is not simply (syn)aesthetic: through its odor, such non-standard speech may ‘reek of’ (also *olere*) the unpleasant social inferiority of its speakers.

Examples of scented language are found in Cicero (*De orat.* 3.44), Varro (*L.L.* 5.74), and Quintilian (*Inst.* 8.1.3). Also discussed is the phenomenology of scent-perception and its possible connections with that of texture (with reference to Lucretius and Aristotle). The idea of the nose and nostrils as socially knowing is explored via Plautus (*Mil.*) and especially Horace (*Sat.* 1.3). As a final example of how spoken language may be perceived olfactorily, special attention is paid to Cicero’s famous explanation of the form *nobiscum* as avoiding *cum nobis*, whose pronunciation Cicero judged too close to the vulgar and apparently malodorous *cunnius* (*Orat.* 154).

The surprising involvement of spoken language in a scented social hierarchy emphasizes how sensation alone is not perception: both the organization of sensations into perceptions, and the connotations attached to perceptions, are specific to cultures and to literary traditions (Goldstein 1999; Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1995; Classen 1993). In order to raise further questions along these lines, I consider from a sensorial anthropological perspective the larger issue of intersense analogy or literary synaesthesia (Catrein 2003, Gross 2002, Paissa 1995, Marks 1978, Hadermann 1992, Tempesti 1991, O’Malley 1957, and Ullmann 1957). Just as language could reveal the social status of its speakers to synaesthetic Roman ears and/or noses, so too may synaesthesia itself, especially in cross-cultural or comparative literary studies, reveal how sense-, and scents-, perception is culturally constructed.