

## **Olfactory metaphors in the online environment**

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### **Abstract**

The main objective of this paper is to analyze the main aspects of the olfactory metaphor in online perfume reviews and to identify its main characteristics in the non-specialized perfume discourse. Using as a starting point the approach whose overall view is guided by conceptual metaphor theory, we will identify, analyze and classify the main elements of the metaphorical schema associated with the olfactory metaphor related to fragrance perception and description. We will illustrate this category by examples taken from a corpus of excerpts of online non-specialized perfume discourse.

Managing the issue of perception and description of fragrance in the online environment allows us an orientation of the research by multiple approaches of the semantics of perfume-speak: the recognition of essential aspects of perfume imaginary, with a focus on the olfactory metaphor in our research corpus; the analysis of sensory impressions and representations in online non-specialized discourse about fragrance.

Our main aim is to organize conceptualizations of perfume notes into several categories, following the model inspired by the research of Lakoff and Johnson (*Metaphors we live by*, 1980).

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphors, description, odour, online perfume reviews, olfactory metaphor, perception, senses.

## 1 Introduction

One of the main tendencies of the current semantic research at international level is represented by the focus on cognitive semantics, following the model inspired by the conceptual metaphor theory, as it was conceived by Lakoff and Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980/2003).

The cognitive conceptualization of metaphor suggested by Lakoff and Johnson lays its foundation on the premise that metaphors are not mere linguistic expressions or simple figures of speech whose aim is to illustrate vivid poetic images, but conceptual structures or metaphorical concepts that can be identified and pinpointed at a level “prior to their manifestation in language” (Faur, 2004: 340).

Lakoff and Johnson’s theory provides an extension of the use of the concept of metaphor outside the literary and rhetorical domain since for them metaphor is conceived as a cognitive category of thought by which new cognitive contents within the framework of mental spaces are created and these conceptual domains of thought are “prior and independent to language functioning” (Faur, 2004: 341):

“Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, [...], is fundamentally metaphorical in nature”. (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980: 2-3)

On the basis of exemplifications with current expressions, certainly metaphorical, but which, by continuous use have become routine and have been deprived of the novelty that characterizes metaphors in literary context, the two authors contend that it is possible to reconstruct a “pattern” of thinking, situated at the origin of these expressions, everything being integrated into a coherent and systematic structure.

Metaphor proves to be a creation of new imagistic semantic contents, a verbal materialization of certain mental processes into everyday language, of mechanisms of thinking that permit the representation, the expression and the organization of abstract cognitive contents. Thus, conceptual metaphors allow the structuring and restructuring of our common conceptual system and their study

making use of current semantic theories allows the orientation of research based on the approach of the metaphor as problem of thought, while the favorite framework of analysis is the cognitive one, since the “metaphor is a major and indispensable part of our ordinary, conventional way of conceptualizing the world”, and since “our everyday behavior reflects our metaphorical understanding of experience” (Lakoff: 1993: 203-204 following Reddy, 1979: 286-287). The understanding of everyday language as locus of manifestation of the metaphor began at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the study of the metaphor focused, starting from this new perspective, on specialty languages: medical language, juridical language, winespeak, language of perfumery and fragrance and so on.

The conceptual metaphor is a surface manifestation of latent, underlying conceptual relationships which is materialized at the level of speech, and represents a projection of the way in which the speaker can operate with abstract concepts, hardly cognoscible, by comparison to the empiric world, through direct experience.

The corpus chosen for the study of figurative language used by non-specialists in online discourse and online reviews about perfume and fragrance is analyzed starting from an approach whose perspective is directed by conceptual metaphor theory. The main objective is to analyze the main aspects of the olfactory metaphor in non-specialized perfume discourse. We will illustrate this category by examples taken from a corpus of excerpts of online perfume discourse and online perfume reviews such as: [www.fragrantica.com](http://www.fragrantica.com), [www.nstperfume.com](http://www.nstperfume.com), [www.basenotes.net](http://www.basenotes.net) and [boisdejasmin.com](http://boisdejasmin.com)<sup>1</sup>.

Tackling the issue of perception and description of perfume in online fragrance reviews allows us an orientation of the research by several approaches of the semantics of perfume-speak: the recognition of essential aspects of perfume imaginary, with a focus on the olfactory metaphor in our research corpus; the analysis of sensory impressions and representations in online non-specialized discourse about fragrance.

Several authors and researchers (Howes: 2002, Velasco-Sacristán and Fuertes Olivera: 2006) have contended that conceptual metaphors are pervasive in perfumery and fragrance discourse. In order to explain the wide range of sensations and perceptions in perfumery and fragrance discourse, several

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<sup>1</sup> Within the corpus of examples we will use the following abbreviations: FGR for [www.fragrantica.com](http://www.fragrantica.com), NST for [www.nstperfume.com](http://www.nstperfume.com), BSN for [www.basenotes.net](http://www.basenotes.net) and BDJ for [www.boisdejasmin.com](http://www.boisdejasmin.com).

metaphorical extensions are used and these depend on different source domains such as human fingerprint, light and so on.

Velasco-Sacristán and Fuertes Olivera (2006: 218-220) assert that olfactory metaphors do not appear alone in print ads for perfume, but that the advertiser manages to use olfactory and olfactory-mixed metaphors, as part of the overall underlying advertising communication.

We selected the media genre of online perfume reviewing as primary source of information about sensory perceptions related to olfactory cognition since almost all the excerpts of online fragrance reviews in our corpus provide descriptions of all sensory experiences - that is smell, taste, vision and touch, which permit holistic remarks on the understanding and perception of the experience of perfume on the basis of all four.

## **2 Olfactory metaphors in online English perfume discourse**

Particular conceptual metaphors have been recognized as characteristic of specialized discourses (Lungu Ștefan, 2012: 4). Starting from primary categories of conceptual metaphors identified in the language of perfume reviewing in English – 1) PERFUMES ARE LIVING BEINGS, 2) PERFUMES ARE CLOTHES, 3) PERFUMES ARE BUILDINGS, – our corpus-based research aims to check whether or not evidence is given of a main category of conceptual metaphor related to perfume (the organicist-animist metaphor) in online English perfume discourse.

The metaphorical expressions in English are not to be considered as mere figures of speech, but rather as terms with a referential function, terms which belong to a specialized language and vocabulary. This lexicon is reflected in both specialized and non-specialized websites whose target-public is represented by perfumists, as well as non-specialist perfume lovers. That is why our data sources are represented by perfume reviews and articles published in English online blogs and reviews. Most of the metaphorical expressions in our corpus are conveyed by adjectives followed by nouns and by verbal collocations.

The organicist-animist metaphor PERFUME IS A HUMAN BEING is reflected in our corpus by a wide range of instantiations:

(1) Marc Jacob's Daisy Eau So fresh perfume review 2011: "That anyone on earth would smell Daisy and think 'wow, that's just too *mature...*' (NST)

(2) Britney Spears Fantasy 2007: “If you like *young* and *sweet*, you just might like Fantasy, if not, for the antidote, try Cumming- The fragrance (quite possibly the only celebrity fragrance with a sense of humor) or Sarah Jessica Parker’s Lovely or Covet (quite possibly the only fragrance line from a celebrity who was known to care about perfume before she came up with her own). (NST)

(3) Aqua Sextius by Jul et Mad - review by Darvant 2014: “This new generation « *fleshy* » aquatic ransoms the previous infamous genre giving it definitely back its previously (and too much often yet currently) lost dignity”. (BSN)

(4) Vol de Nuit by Guerlain –perfume review by Darvant 2015: “A classic landmark opening with a sort of *fleshy* classically chypre mossy (oakmoss-galbanum) vibe combined with luxuriant hesperides and with a traditional Guerlain’s smooth “*edible-silky*” amber not so far in consistency from the one we are historically used to admire in Shalimar and L’Heure Bleue [...]Oakmoss adds *character*, but it is not the inky, *bitter* blackness that provides other chypres with their backbone - here it is a sprinkling of woodiness and salt in the *gentle green*”.

(5) Tango by Aftelier, review by Way off Scenter, 2014: “It’s quite some time before the floral notes emerge, and when they do they’re sweet, potent, and exotic. I soon recognize the champaca flower from Ayala Sender’s wonderful Rebellius, with its *fleshy, sweet-smoky* aura, and it’s this, along with leather and spices, that forms the heart of Tango. The whole effect is indeed strangely Latin in its steamy, smoky extravagance”.

The organicist-animist metaphor triggers an intricate metaphorical schema which emphasizes different aspects of fragrance and scent, such as physical qualities: *full-bodied, sexy, sensual, fleshy* and personal qualities: *balanced, bright, intelligent, full of surprises*.

(6) Dyptique 34 Blvd Saint-Germain, review by Victoria 2011: “For a niche launch, it especially seems too safe and traditional: a *soft-spoken* fougère that would not be out of place on the *masculine* side of the fragrance bar at Macy’s”. (BDJ)

(7) Soft Musk Avon, review: “[...] an *intimate* and *warm* musk fragrance with additional notes of jasmine, rose, spices and vanilla. *Sexy* and *deep* [...]”. (FGR)

(8) Love’s Baby Soft by Love’s, review by JackTwist: “[...]it is quite *pleasant, soft* and *powdery* [...]” (BSN)

(9) Chanel pour Monsieur Eau concentrée, review by Chanel 1 2015: “*unpleasant* and slightly *harsh* [...]”. (BSN)

(10) Chanel pour Monsieur Eau concentrée, review by Landshark 2015: “I like it to Ralph Lauren’s Safari in this respect: it’s *sophisticated* and *classic*, being just enough “*old man*” but also *fresh* to create a fragrance that can really be a *signature* [...] it’s a decently *strong* but not *overwhelming* [...]”. (BSN)

(11) Guerlain Mitsouko: “Nor do I like the Youth Dew and Opiums of the world that are so *overtly, heavily sensual, so obvious*”. (BDJ)

(12) Jennifer Lopez Live: “Molasses-sweetness with a *savoury* undertone. Weird, I know”. (FGR)

(13) Etat libre d’Orange: “I really like it and I think that if you are someone who likes *exotic* smells (or food) and likes *savoury* fragrances, with a hint of *sweetness*, then you will like this”. (FGR)

(14) French Lavender and Honey, review by Suhaesa: “oh wait a minute the lavender is coming ever so softly after a while it turns a bit mellow a bit soft with a hot heart though it’s *full bodied* it’s clean, crisp, *bright, intelligent, dewy*, full of surprises.” (FGR)

The organicist metaphor can be subdivided into a five-patterned design which highlights olfactory, visual, tactile and gustatory facets of fragrance:

| Metaphorical design                  | Perfume element   | Linguistic metaphor  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Age within human lifecycle           | Perfume’s evolutive state   | <i>mature, very young, timeless</i>  |
| Physical traits/anatomy              | Structure<br>Body and balance   | <i>fleshy, soft, edible</i><br><i>full-bodied, sensual, sexy, masculine, voluptuous</i>  |
| Personality and temperament features | Notes’ level<br>Composition, balance, ingredients/notes and flavours<br>Intensity and persistence of scent /sillage (vapour trail) or range | <i>corpulent, warm, overwhelming</i><br><i>savoury, full-bodied, balanced, strong, fresh, soft, pleasant, gentle, obvious, intelligent, exotic, full of surprises, soft-spoken</i><br><i>austere, bright, dewy, hard-edged</i> |
| General appearance                   | General appearance  | <i>sophisticated, classic</i>  |

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|                 |                |             |
|-----------------|----------------|-------------|
| Economic status | Perfume wealth | <i>rich</i> |
|-----------------|----------------|-------------|

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(15) Hermès Hermessence Vetiver Tonka: “Pure, earthy and resembling Encre Noire from Lalique (in a matter of fact this entirely fragrance seems to be a *corpulent* version of this designer fragrance)” (FGR)

(16) “[...] *Soft* and *pleasant* scent of exotic woods harmonizes with *warm, bitter* spices such as pepper, cloves, nutmeg or cinnamon.” (FGR)

(17) L’Artisan Parfumeur Couer de Vetiver Sacré: “A *hard-edged, bitter, austere*, herbal mixture of aggressive, peppery spices in a similar style to Malle’s French Lover and the Ormande Jayne masculines” (FGR)

(18) Review by Kewart 2015: “I have come to the conclusion, after years of experimenting with samples and purchases of all kinds that I am, at heart, totally enamored with those wonderfully, *rich* orientals so magnificently created by the likes of Christine Nagel (Mauboussin) and Alberto Morillas (Le Baiser du Dragon)” (BSN)

(19) Serge Lutens Chergui: “As long as it is *balanced* out in some way, I do not mind it” (BDJ)

(20) Serge Lutens Fleur d’Oranger: “[...] just too *buttery* without the *balancing luminosity* that FdO or TC have”. (BDJ)

(21) Dries van Noten par Frédéric Malle: “The sweetness of vanilla and toasted almond is *balanced* out by the citrus and earthy violet notes. The hint of something *savory* is an accent that shouldn’t work but does [...]”. (BDJ)

If we pay attention to the subdivisions in the metaphorical schema - physical appearance and personality - temperament, we discover that at the core of them we come upon a large number of metaphors describing fragrance ingredients bearing upon two senses – vision and smell (*austere, bright, dewy*), accompanied by the intensity of flavours or scent/aroma compounds (odour and taste) (*austere*), which is defined in correlation with composition (*warm, corpulent, overwhelming*), as well as with balance (i.e. balanced blend of notes) and general appearance (*balanced, sophisticated*). Perfume balance and composition are metaphorically conceived in terms of physical strength (*full-bodied, strong, corpulent*), physical attractiveness (*sensual, sexy, exotic, voluptuous*), as well as by an inner quality – that is distinction in terms of style and behaviour (*sophisticated and classic*).

We also observe that metaphorical expressions built around the perfume’s body and its balance refer to a human being’s physical structure and gender role (masculine or feminine, see example no 6). Gender metaphors assign a sexual role

to a perfume as well as male or female properties, but they could also convey sexual ambiguity or unveil a combination of feminine and masculine characteristics, as in the example below:

(22) Bond no 9 The Oud: “Enter New York Oud, which launches in time for Valentine’s Day 2011. Though we chose to retain the *androgynous* nature of the Old World oud, there is otherwise nothing traditional or incense-laden about our new version”. (FGR)

With the animist metaphor PERFUME IS AN INDIVIDUAL, linguistic terms referring to the metaphorical design domains personality and temperament are appraising and critical, while terms related to age and anatomical structure are, in general, depictive and illustrative.

We also discover some metonymical implications of the body-part of the body based expressions in English: associated with palm’s fingers or with hand writing, perfume is referred to as an (olfactory) *fingerprint* or as an (olfactory) *signature*:

(23) “Perfume is meant to be smelled on the body, not in the air, and there is no other way to get a sense of its *fingerprint*, its individual characteristics, as they will develop on the wearer’s skin” (De Mandy, 2004)

(24) Empreinte de Courrèges: “(as the human fingerprint on the Moon in 1969) [...] the moving *fingerprint* of a woman’s (fragrance) trail, a woman who reveals her warm and sensual presence”.

(25) Guerlian L’Heure Bleue: “Guerlain L’Heure Bleue is the embodiment of refinement. When I read that Catherine Deneuve wore it for many years as her *signature* fragrance, I was not at all surprised. Its luminous orange blossom is beautifully contrasted with the rich plushness of vanilla, iris and incense. L’Heure Bleue’s *sillage* is among the most beautiful of great classics—bright, radiant, enveloping” (BDJ)

The second category of conceptual metaphors illustrated in the language of online perfume reviewing in English – PERFUMES ARE CLOTHES is based upon features of scent conveyed through visual, gustative, tactile and olfactory perception. We can organize the metaphorical schema into a four-patterned metaphorical design containing the following sub-divisions:

|                     |                 |                        |
|---------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| Metaphorical design | Perfume element | Linguistic metaphor    |
| Article of clothing | Visual trait    | <i>veil, soft veil</i> |



|                     |   |   |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Material            | Type of material/perfume's anatomy                                  | <i>laced</i>  |
|                     | The touch and feel of cloth   | <i>velvety</i>  |
|                     | Properties: shading, specularity, reflectivity, color, transparency | <i>opaque, bright, shadowy, viscous, translucent, radiant, dark, opalescent</i> |
| Texture             | Type and structure  | <i>silky</i>  |
|                     | Physical feel   | <i>smooth, rough</i>  |
| Exterior appearance | Exterior appearance   | <i>elegant, classic, sophisticated, luxurious</i>                               |

(26) “[...] the best perfumes in the world – they’re all *laced* with something nasty and foul” (BSN)

(27) Aoud velvet by Montale: “It is rich, not overwhelming but very *smooth* and, *velvety!* [...]”

(28) Alien by Thierry Mugler: “It would be pleasant if the sweetness didn’t make the construction so *opaque* [...]”. (BSN)

(29) Lampblack by Bruno Fazzolari: “There is also a synthetic dustiness all around providing (bright/*shadowy*) *translucent* modernity and atmosphere”. (BSN)

(30) Patchouli Leaves by Montale, review by Way off Scenter 2014: “The amber and patchouli sit on a base of *viscous* vanilla, and the whole composition unfolds in a gratifyingly warm, *smooth* manner”. (BSN)

(31) Vetiver by Santa Maria Novella: “The vetiver itself is solid and *strong, bitter* and *pungent*, but the *soapy powdery* potpourri smell rounds off the *rough* edges, leaving it more perfumey than many vetivers” (BSN)

(32) Hermès Voyage d’Hermès: “*Elegant, luxurious* and *timeless*, like most Hermès merchandise. [...] After all, it is *elegant, radiant*, and streamlined in the best of Jean-Claude Ellena’s style. [...]” (BDJ)

(33) Serge Lutens Chergui: “The floral accord folded into the smoky layers of Chergui lightens density and sweetness, lending a *voluptuous silky* quality [...]”. (BDJ)

(34) Opium by Yves Saint-Laurent: “What you have is a voluptuous

scent contrasting the richness of resins and woods with *creamy* jasmine. The subtle crunch of peppercorns is enough to give *texture* to the *soft veil* of Opium. Except for a *flirtation* with orange and pale carnation, the perfume hits one *dark* note after another—incense, amber, patchouli. Nevertheless, there is an *opalescent, radiant* sensation to Opium, and it doesn't feel heavy and oppressive". (BDJ)

The metaphor PERFUMES ARE PIECES OF GARMENT incorporates four schemata: the article of clothing schema, the material schema, the texture schema, and the exterior appearance schema. While texture conveys the physical feel of perfume on one's skin – *silky, smooth, rough* –, the material conveys basic properties of a fragrance body and composition such as shading, specularity, reflectivity, color and transparency (*opaque, bright, shadowy, viscous, translucent and radiant*). In expressing feelings associated with sensing a scent on someone else's skin or on one's own skin, olfactory metaphors don't stand alone, on the contrary, non-specialist fragrance reviewers use olfactory-mixed metaphors or metaphors bearing at the same time upon several senses: taste, smell and feel (as in the example 31 above).

The third category of metaphorical expressions PERFUMES ARE BUILDINGS refers to a perfume's body, composition and structure in terms of properties and actions of building and of architectural traits. The architectural representation of fragrances is suggested by reference to the action of building a structure (the perfume's structure (*built*) –

(35) Perfectly Marvelous by Diana Vreeland: "The end result is an unforgettable fragrance, *built around* a lacquered red sandalwood pimento accord, draped in a daring Jasmine bouquet". (BSN)

or to the type of building (a *blockbuster* building):

(36) Voyage d'Hermès review by Alfarom 2014: "I've to admit that I miss the point of releasing a perfume version of such a simple fragrance such as Voyage and, more generally, I miss the point of this new tendency of releasing perfume versions of basically every *masculine blockbuster*". (BSN)

as well as by reference to the properties of the building (*sumptuous*):

(37) Acqua di Parma: "*Smooth, sensuous, and sumptuous* are words that come to mind whenever I wear this [...]". (BSN)

We can conceive the metaphorical schema of PERFUMES ARE BUILDINGS as a four-patterned metaphorical design containing the next architectural sub-divisions:

|                          |  |  |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Metaphorical design      | Perfume element                                  | Linguistic metaphor  |
| Structure                | Perfume's structure                              | <i>a perfume's foundation and base, roof and top or top and base</i> |
| Material                 | Type of material/ ingredients                    | <i>woody, spicy, earthy</i>  |
| Texture and shape        | Type of texture and textures of perfume building | <i>polished, varnished, rough,</i>                                   |
| Composition and function | Perfume construction                             | <i>good structured</i>   |

(38) Reihan by Madini: “Some green tea, some rose and something plastic that felt like it was coating the *roof* of my mouth” (BSN).

(39) Idole de Lubin: “All wrapped up in a *golden, warm, spicy-resinous* amber aura. In short, a warm, brownish *spicy-woody* bomb with *boozy, earthy, balsamic* nuances.

(40) Touch for Men by Burberry: “It’s woody in a *polished, varnished* wood sense rather than anything having to do with the original trees, and is rather sweet but avoids being candy-like” (BSN)

(41) Chrome by Azzaro: “It is is *heavy, synthetic* with a harsh *metallic* note [...]”. (BSN)

(42) Rock Crystal by Olivier Durban: “dry cedar, boggy patchouli, warm musk, milky sandalwood and foresty oakmoss, all combine to conjure a *cavernous* illusion”. (BSN)

In the example 42 above we notice the language used to describe a physically tangible natural environment and we understand how it overlaps with the language referring to the sense of place and space (*cavernous* as with an underground cellar).

(43) Armani Privé Myrrhe Impériale: “This perfume benefits from floating in the air as a consistent cloud of abstract oriental happiness because it lacks a *good structured* and evolving blending, it somehow lacks a smooth transmission from *top to base*.

If good structured, a perfume undergoes a long journey as odour molecules merge and evolve on someone’s skin so as to unveil its character and its secret or it will take the wearer on a long journey or on a “pleasant trip down the memory lane”:

(44) Roger et Gallet Eau de Thé Vert: “There are perfume novels and

perfume short stories. Guerlain Mitsouko will take you on a *long journey* with many subplots and supporting characters, while Estée Lauder White Linen will reveal it all within the first few musk and rose lines of its composition.

(45) Love's Baby Soft: "Its soft powdery scent is a pleasant *trip* down memory lane". (BSN)

### 3 Conclusions

In conclusion, we assert that the organicist-animist and the architectural metaphors illustrated in online perfume discourse and non-specialized perfume reviews do not only uncover the way non-specialists (perfume lovers and perfume wearers) conceptualize scent and fragrance, but that they also function as effective means for rendering the intricate sensory experience of sensing and smelling perfume.

The current research consists in a systematic corpus analysis of the range and occurrences of olfactory metaphor associated with perfume and sensing perfume in English online discourse. This analysis reveals the lexical richness in English and it also makes us become aware that the metaphoric configuration of perfume and perfume perception in online English reviews emphasizes the high frequency and centrality of the organicist-anthropomorphic metaphor and of the architectural metaphor, without excluding other mental images of fragrance, peculiar images, such as that of perfume as a fingerprint or signature, that rather rely upon the conceptualization of perfume smelling and sensing as a system of complex experiences and sensations, involving the mastership of visual, olfactory, gustative and tactile mental imagery.

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