

“The smell hit me hard, and I dropped” – The semantic roles of smell

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Sense perceptions, particularly smells, seem to be passive, something that a person experiences inactively without any volitional action by the perceiver and most certainly not by the sense perception. However, it is not uncommon to be hit – even hit *hard* – by a smell.

*I was driving along the freeway and was **hit hard** by the **smell*** (NOW corpus: New Your Post 2022)

The OED (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2002-) defines the verb *hit* in the following way: *to strike with aim or intent*. To do so, an agent is needed who intentionally executes the action. A prototypical agent acts with volition, is characterized by sentience and performs an action that changes the state of another participant (Dowty 1991). Smells are volatile, which does not seem to fit with the semantic role of AGENT or the idea of physical force. However, there are numerous cases that put smell into subject position, which often coincides with the semantic role of AGENT or clearly shows that it is the smell that is performing the action, and a physical one as that. Co-occurring verbs of the noun *smell* like *hit*, *strike*, *slap*, *punch* or *cut* have AGENT as a core frame element (FrameNet), going against the understanding of volatile and passive perceptions.

My study investigates the frame of smells and with that the semantic roles that smell can take. Working with COCA (Davies 2008-), the largest corpus of American English, and the NOW corpus (news across all English varieties) (Davies 2016-) it shows that smells are indeed sometimes conceptualized in terms of solidity or solid objects that can have a physical effect on the perceiver. An additional empirical study confirmed that people may actually experience a physical impact caused by a smell – the smell does indeed feel like a punch, so we verbalize it accordingly. In some cases, it is even enough reading or hearing such sentences to experience a physical effect.

I argue that smell is quite versatile regarding rigid characteristics and can be the AGENT, PATIENT, THEME (moved by action) or INSTRUMENT. It is not only characterized by volatility and passiveness. It can be concluded that the way we talk about smells clearly shows that they can have more of an impact on the perceiver than a fleeting encounter has. By looking at the way we talk about smells in English, it becomes clear that we need to extend our understanding of these sense perceptions as purely passive experiences, because we conceptualize them as more than that. The study at hand shows that a frame that describes smell as having the core frame elements SOURCE and PERCEPT is not complete. Our understanding of smells and the impact smells have on us is much more versatile than we have generally assumed so far.

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