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Working Paper no 77, 2004

Linguistic and Social Constructions of Fragrance:  
Some Preliminary Thoughts on Entering the Field

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# Linguistic and Social Constructions of Fragrance: Some Preliminary Thoughts on Entering the Field

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## **Preamble**

The theoretical discourses devoted to smell reflect a maze of fascinating taboos and mysterious attractions. In present-day Western societies, the sense of smell is undervalued. Scents are highly elusive and often cannot be directly named. Many languages have virtually no vocabulary to describe them, except in terms of the *other senses* of sight, sound, touch and taste. Scents are communicated primarily through metaphors. What are these linguistic and visual metaphors, and what do they tell us about the societies and cultures in which they are used?

How do we know what scents 'mean'? Is smell a universal form of semiotic communication (as global advertising campaigns suggest), or does it vary in different social and cultural contexts (as anthropological and other literature asserts)? Are there specific 'scent cultures'? If so, in what do they consist? And how do these affect the creation, appraisal and use of fragrances in the three countries – Japan, France and the USA – in which I intend to conduct my research?

## A Comparative Study of Smell

Smell is many things: boundary marker, status symbol, distance-maintainer, impression management technique, danger signal, and sign of protest. Smell mediates social action; yet it is the least valued, and least researched, of all the senses.

Every society has its own hierarchy of senses, or sensory order. This ranking differs from one society to the next, and between different social groups within the same society, as well as from one historical period to another. Smell is used to mark social categories of race, class, gender, and age, as well as to make symbolic distinctions relating to purity, pollution, sexuality, and so on. Advertising plays to these social and symbolic categories and so reinforces different societies' moral constructions of reality.

As well as differing with regard to the importance they attribute to smell, societies also differ in the qualities that they ascribe to it. However, available historical and sociological literature suggests that there exists a fundamental hypothesis in almost all societies: that what smells good is good, and that what smells bad is bad. The problem with this hypothesis is twofold: firstly, what smells "good" or "bad" in one society or group of people does not necessarily smell the same for others – either in other societies, or among other groups of people living in the same society; and secondly, "good" and "bad" need to be defined before we proceed to analyse smells further. In short, to paraphrase Hamlet: "there is nothing foul nor fragrant, but thinking makes it so." We need to find out *why* Japanese, French, or Americans regard one thing as "fragrant" and another as "foul," and what the *social repercussions* of such classifications might be.

- ▶ *Japan* has been selected for comparative study because of the recorded importance of smell in its *cultural history* and because it represents a *non-Western* olfactory tradition. From classical literature to a very recent theory of globalisation, smell has been used to classify social-cultural symbols and relationships. It also boasts two among the world's ten largest fragrance corporations.
- ▶ *France* has also been selected for comparative study because of its *Western* (specifically European) cultural history, but also because the southern region of Grasse is the *production* centre of many of the world's fragrances and perfumes.
- ▶ *The United States* has been selected because it produces a large number of (synthetic) fragrances, but primarily because it boasts the greatest *consumption*, and most varied number of brands of, fragrances and perfumes.

## The Fragrance Industry

The fragrance industry exemplifies that fact that smell is both an emanation of *material culture* and part of the *empire of the senses*. The fragrance market as a whole is divided into: (1) soaps and detergents (in which scents are not intrinsic but are added in an obvious way) (34%); (2) cosmetics and toiletries (including perfumes, which are by definition scented) (25%); and (3) other (air fresheners, polishes, foods, and a variety of products including car interiors and Nike shoes, which have no obvious or functionally intrinsic

scent, but which are designed to convey an unconscious scent experience) (41%). The market is more or less equally divided between flavours (51%) and fragrances (49%).

Fragrances, perfumes and deodorants are part of a global beauty business that has been estimated to be worth \$160 billion a year in total and to be growing at an annual rate of 7% – more than twice the rate of the developed world's GDP. The global market for perfumes and fragrances alone is estimated at \$15 billion. Of which the Japanese market is worth about \$4.5 billion (Fuji Keizai, 2002, "Fragrance," p. 145). 20-25% of overall revenues is spent on advertising and promotion. A good fragrance launch usually brings in an income of \$30 million during the first quarter of sales. Smell is a serious business.

Fragrances are the profitable part of the business done by the *haute couture* houses, and are thus closely connected to fashion images in general. Indeed, they provide consumers with an entry point to high fashion. Future wearers of a Chanel 'little black dress,' a Ralph Lauren suit, or an Yves Saint Laurent evening gown start by wearing *Coco*, *Romance* or *Rive Gauche*. (They then move on to fashion accessories: belts, eyewear, handbags, shoes, and so on.) Fragrances are the most affordable item in the fashion industry and each fashion house produces (or licenses under its name) a *series* of perfumes, each of which is targeted at different groups of consumers: *Youth Dew*, *Estée*, *White Linen*, *Beautiful*, *Knowing*, *Spellbound*, *Tuscany per donna*, and *Pleasures*, for example, by Estée Lauder. Individual fragrances should therefore be seen as part of a single product range, on the one hand, and as positioned against a range of competing brands (Chanel, Givenchy, Christian Dior, Shiseido and so on), on the other. Precisely because of these sets of oppositions, there may be shifts in marketing strategies over time to take account of new entries in the fragrance market. In this respect, the marketing of fragrances (as of all other goods) follows the principles laid down by de Saussure in his analysis of syntagmatic and paradigmatic (associative) relations in language.

New fragrances used to be created rather irregularly. For example, Christian Dior Perfumes initiated its product range with *Miss Dior* in 1947. This was followed by new fragrances approximately every ten years: *Diorissimo* in 1956, *Eau Sauvage* in 1966, and *Dioressence* in 1979. From the mid-1980s, however, there was a distinct increase in tempo as new fragrances were introduced every three years: *Poison* (1985), *Fahrenheit* (1988), *Dune* (1991), *Tendre Poison* (1994), *Dolce Vita* (1996), *j'adore* (2000) and *Lily* (2001). Similar trajectories of new fragrance products can be found for Chanel, Estée Lauder, L'Oréal and other major fragrance manufacturers. Marketing data from Japan suggest that this tendency is, at least in part, related to the fact that there is little brand loyalty among perfume users who follow trends and fashions. New scents will be tried simultaneously and, if liked, used in rotation, depending on feeling and TPO (time place occasion), in the first six to twelve months after launch, before being dropped in favour of a newer product. This has led to the introduction of smaller 15ml and 20ml spray-type bottles (Fuji Keizai, 2002: 154).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is a chicken-and-egg manufacturing-consumption cycle, of course, so that it is hard to tell whether consumers are basically fickle and so force manufacturers to come up with a new fragrance, or whether manufacturers keep producing new fragrances in order to prevent consumers from developing loyalty to a – possibly competing – brand.

This rapid turnover of new fragrances may be seen as part of the incorporation of the fragrance industry into the fashion system that now characterises creative industries in general. Both *trends*, and the *concept of time* itself, have become basic and essential components of fragrance production and consumption. Moreover, like other creative industries, the fragrance industry makes use of celebrities to link otherwise separate fields of organisations, markets and networks in the entertainment industries. By naming perfume brands after fashion designers (Giorgio Armani, Nina Ricci, Coco Chanel, Hanae Mori, and so on), artists (Salvador Dali), models (Naomi Campbell), film stars (Grace Kelley, Isabella Rossellini, Liz Taylor, Alain Delon), opera singers (Luciano Pavarotti) and sports heroes (Gabriela Sabatini), the fragrance industry integrates itself into a *name economy*.

Like the fashion industry with which it is so closely allied, the fragrance industry appears to be extremely fragmented. For example, there are at present approximately 1,480 perfumes, fragrances, and colognes on sale in retail outlets in the United States. At the same time, though, there is a growing concentration of the ever-increasing number of brands under the control of particular fragrance manufacturers. Besides its own 23 perfume brands, for example, Estée Lauder Companies manufactures and markets the Aramis, Clinique, Prescriptives, Bobbi Brown Professional Cosmetics and Donna Karan Cosmetics ranges. Similarly, L'Oréal USA subsumes all perfumes made under the name of Lancôme and Ralph Lauren, as well as those of a variety of European designers like Giorgio Armani, Jean Cacharel, and Guy Laroche.

### Japan's 'Smell Culture'

Japanese "smell culture" goes back a long way. One of the country's earliest chronicles, the *Nihon Shoki*, records that in 562 AD, a large piece of driftwood was washed up on the shore of Awaji Island on the Inland Sea near Osaka. Local villagers discovered on burning it that the wood gave off a remarkable and pleasing smell, so they sent the remainder to the Imperial Court as tribute (*Kaori no Hikaku Bunka-shi*, Hokuju Shuppan, Tokyo, 2001: 19-20).

The main force for the development of a "smell culture," however, was the introduction of Buddhism which made frequent use of incense in its rituals.<sup>2</sup> This was incorporated into the everyday practices of the Heian court aristocracy, and by the 10<sup>th</sup> century that latter had developed an extremely detailed and elaborate set of rules regarding clothing, colours and related fragrances (cf. Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince*, Peregrine 1964). These emerge most clearly in the famous novel *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*) written by Murasaki Shikibu, who constructed almost the entire work around the concept of smell. Besides its olfactory structure, the novel contains numerous scenes in which smell is crucial to social interaction and plot development. The hero, Hikaru Genji, is renowned for his beauty which is described as 'scent' (*nioi*; in modern day Japanese 'smell') (and there is a contrast here between the two senses of sight [in that

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<sup>2</sup> We should note that the origin of the word "perfume" in English is to be found in the Latin *fumere*, meaning burn, and *per* right through or thoroughly.

Hikaru means *Light*] and scent). Like many other Heian courtiers, he is much admired for the skill with which he mixes perfumes. Moreover, his two sons are called Kaoru (Lord Fragrance) and Nio (Prince Scent). As Ivan Morris (1969: 157) says:

Nothing more symbolizes the ideals of this period, and contrasts it with the subsequent age of military heroes, than the fact that two of Murasaki's most respected male characters should be named 'Lord Fragrance' and 'Prince Scent'.

The blending of perfumes was seen to be an art, and the methods used by each individual were carefully guarded secrets (as they are now in the contemporary fragrance industry). The scent worn by a gentleman was deemed to be almost as important as his clothes (whose frequently unwashed state it was designed to overwhelm by a more pleasing smell).<sup>3</sup>

But a fictional description of smell usage in 10<sup>th</sup> century Japanese court society, while revealing many of the classic social distinctions enabled by smell found in other societies (i.e. the elite smell 'better' than the lower classes), does not necessarily represent faithfully the place of smell in everyday life among contemporary Japanese although the latter – like people in other parts of Asia – will invariably point to their noses when asking whether another is referring to their selves. A relatively recent study carried out by the research arm of Japan's second largest advertising agency reveals a number of points of interest with regard to how smell is perceived in Japanese society (Hakuhōdō Seikatsu Sōgō Kenkyūjo [HILL], 1994, "*Gokan*" no Jidai: *Me, mimi, hana, aji, shoku no shōhi shakaigaku*. Tōkyō: President-sha). Based on a survey of 2000 respondents equally distributed between the two sexes and six age groups, this study suggests that:

- ▶ In general Japanese are quite perceptive sensually (over 50% for each of the senses apart from touch). Smell was ranked both highest and lowest among the five senses in terms of "being sensitive" (17%) or of being "not sensitive at all" (2.6%). Women are particularly sensitive to smell (18.7%), followed by hearing (16.8%), taste (15.5%), and then sight (15%). For men, on the other hand, smell ranks lower (15.4%) in sense perception than sight (17.7%), hearing (16.9%) and taste (15.9%) (p. 60).
- ▶ Taking four different criteria into account (importance [*jūyōdo*], expressiveness [*hyōgendo*], pleasure [*kairakudo*], and impression [*inshōdo*]), the survey revealed that:
  - Sight was the sense that more than 80% (83.7%) of respondents did not want to lose, and smell 1%. At the other extreme, smell was the sense that people were most prepared to lose if they had to (55%) (compared with 2% for sight).
  - When asked which of the senses was easiest to express through language, sight came out on top with 75.7% and smell ranked last with 1.9%. Smell

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<sup>3</sup> The same was true of medieval European courts (cf. Classen, Howes and Synnott, *Aroma: The cultural history of smell*. Routledge, 1994).

ranked highest in terms of respondents' perceptions of its difficulty in expressing by means of language (35.8%, with touch next at 23.2%).

- When asked which of the senses was most effective in memory recall, most people thought sight (74.3%), while smell and taste (4.6%), along with touch (4.8%), ranked last. As to which of the senses most effective in expressing feelings, the answer was 72.6% for sight and just 0.5% for smell (pp. 56-57).

What is noticeable about these four tests of sense perception is that sight and smell always come out as opposed extremes.

The HILL study also revealed that, in general, Japanese prefer either "faint" (*honoka*) fragrances or no fragrance at all.<sup>4</sup> As the Director of HILL confirmed several years later:

"Japanese have been concerned to get rid of smell, rather than add it in the way that Westerners do... There was a period earlier when Japanese added things to stop smells – as in lavatories, for example – but nowadays the idea is to produce things that do not smell in the first place. Cosmetics are a good example of this, of course, and Shiseido has been working on non-perfumed products like the *Lucido* range which now sell rather well. So there is a distinction in Japan between 'extinguishing smell' (*nioi o kesu*) and 'adding smell' (*nioi o tsukeru*).

"But there are occasions when Japanese purposely make smells. Like *yakitoriya* barbecued chicken places, for example. If you go round the Yamanote line in Tokyo, you get special food smells marking different areas of the city – the smell of *yakitori* means you've reached Shinbashi, the smell of curry hits you in Kanda. But this is unusual, I think. For the most part, hotels and places like that are trying to get rid of the smells of people. By using floral fragrances and so on...

I think lifestyle can affect people's sense of smell, too. Compact living styles in close quarters encourage either milder forms of smell or the removal of all smell. The Japanese experience would seem to be spreading now to Taiwan in an intriguing extension of globalisation."<sup>5</sup>

## Classifying Perfumes

If Japan is marked by a smell culture that is based more on "odourlessness" than "odour," we may wonder how Japanese themselves react to modern – primarily Western – perfumes and the use thereof. In the early 1990s, it was pointed out that the Japanese fragrance market constituted a mere 3% of the total cosmetics market, as compared with 30% in Europe (Wilk 1993: 52). The later HILL study affirmed that there is an overall

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting in this respect that the Japanese cultural studies scholar, Kōichi Iwabuchi, has chosen the metaphor of "culturally odourless" to describe the marketing of Japanese popular culture in Asia.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Hidehiko Sekizawa, October 29, 2002.

resistance to the use of perfumes in Japanese society (a resistance echoed in marketing data that show a gradual decline in perfume sales in Japan over the past decade [Fuji Keizai, 2000: 146]), and that only 8% of respondents said that they used scents and colognes more or less every day. It transpired that a large majority of this group consisted of men in their 30s ("*Gokan*" *no Jidai*, p. 169). For the most part, however, fragrance users are in their teens and 20s (Fuji Keizai, 2000: 154). Consumers have generally preferred light, clean and fresh products and equated imported fragrances in their minds with (French) elegance (Wilk 1993: 53).

Nevertheless, perfumes *are* actively produced and marketed in Japan<sup>6</sup> and how they are described in advertising, promotional and other literature should tell us something about Japanese perceptions and classifications of smell. Various kinds of classifications are used to define the particular characteristic of a scent which in the perfumery industry is itself defined by proportion of oil essentials it contains and resulting staying power:

- ▶ *Perfume*: 15-30% oil essences; 5-7 hours.
- ▶ *Eau de Parfum*: 10-25%; 5 hours.
- ▶ *Eau de Toilette*: 5-10%; 3-4 hours.

Most classifications rely on Western perfumery's discourse of fragrance, although the latter is itself not used consistently. For example, in *The Book of Perfumes*, a broad distinction is made between:

- ▶ *Floral*: flowers;
- ▶ *Green*: the chypre family of resins, mosses, and ferns, plus the 'purer' green family of leaves, grasses and buds;
- ▶ *Woody*: sandalwood, etc. plus ferns, bark, lichen, roots, etc.;
- ▶ *Fruity*: blackcurrant, grape, mango etc.; and
- ▶ *Oriental*: musk, patchouli, amber, vetyver grass, etc. (John Oakes, 1996, *The Book of Perfumes*, Sydney: Harper-Collins.)

For its part, *The World of Perfume* (by Fabianne Pavia. Now York: Knickerbockers Press, 1995) classifies perfumes into the following "families" as classified by the technical department of the *Société française des parfumeurs*:

- ▶ *Citrus* (Citrus, floral chypre citrus, spicy citrus, woody citrus, aromatic citrus);
- ▶ *Floral* (Single-fragrance floral, lavender, floral bouquet, green floral, aldehydic floral, woody floral, fruity woody floral);
- ▶ *Fern* (Fern, sweet oriental fern, flowery oriental fern, spicy fern, aromatic fern);
- ▶ *Chypre* (Chypre, flowery chypre, aldehydic flowery chypre, fruity chypre, green chypre, aromatic chypre, leather chypre);

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<sup>6</sup> They are also marketed internationally. In June 1992, Shiseido launched its first international fragrance, *Fémininité de Bois*, what was made in Gien, France. Shiseido's \$18 million investment was at the time equal to the company's annual sales of all its products in France (Robert J. Wilk 1993 "Fragrance in Japan: kirei is beautiful," in the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ed.) *Consumer Research in the Fragrance Business*. Amsterdam: ESOMAR, p. 54).



- ▶ *Woody* (Woody, citrus conifer woody, aromatic woody, spicy woody, leather spicy woody, oriental woody);
- ▶ *Oriental* (Woody flowery oriental, spicy flowery oriental, sweet oriental, citrus oriental, flowery semi-oriental);
- ▶ *Leather* (Leather, flowery leather, leather tobacco).

This classification adds useful descriptions:

- ▶ The *citrus family* “features the essential oils obtained by the expression method from the zest of fruits such as lemon, bergamot, orange and grapefruit.”
- ▶ The *floral family* contains “perfumes whose principal theme is a flower – rose, jasmine, violet, lilac, lily of the valley, narcissus, tuberose, etc.”
- ▶ The name of the *fern family* “is purely notional, with no attempt made to reproduce the smell of ferns. These perfumes feature blends usually composed of notes of lavender, wood, oak moss, coumarin, bergamot, etc.”
- ▶ *Chypre* is “named after the perfume created in 1917 by François Coty, which was so successful that it became the principal fragrance in a family of its own. The perfumes featured are mainly based on blends of oak moss, labdanum, patchouli, bergamot, etc.”
- ▶ The *woody family* “comprises perfumes with *warm* notes, such as sandalwood and patchouli, as well as *dry* notes like cedar and vetiver, whose base notes are often citrus and lavender blends.”
- ▶ The *oriental family* “groups together compositions with *sweet, powdery*, vanilla, labdanum and pronounced *animal* notes. The sub-category of the sweet Orientals is the most representative of the family.”
- ▶ The *leather family* is “something of a special case in perfume manufacture.” It “comprises perfumes featuring *dry* notes which attempt to reproduce the characteristic smell of leather (smoke, burnt wood, tobacco, etc.) and top notes with *floral* overtones.”

Japanese marketers, for their part, keep matters simpler and suggest the following:

- ▶ *Floral*: smells based on flowers and amounting to 70% of the perfume, and 60% of the total fragrance, market in Japan. For example, *Chanel No 5*, *Lancôme’s Miracle*, and *Clinique’s Happy*.
- ▶ *Green*: blended smells from leaves and grasses (14% of the perfume market). For example, *Shiseido’s Chant de Coeur* and *L’Eau d’Issey*.
- ▶ *Chypre*: mossy smells added to create mysterious depth and a feeling of composure (3.7% of the perfume market). For example, *Miss Dior* and *Cabochard*.
- ▶ *Oriental*: amber and animal smells, for a darker sweetness (8.1% of the perfume market). For example, *Chanel’s Coco* and *Shiseido’s Angelique*.
- ▶ *Other*: Smells from sweet cakes and other foods (2.1% of the perfume market) (Nihon Keizai, 2000: 155, 160).

These fragrance groups are blended in such a way that a perfume emanates different smells on the skin over time. This development of a fragrance is classified in terms of “notes” – “top notes” for the immediate effect upon application, “middle notes” for a second set of smells that emerges after the initial burst, and “base notes” or “drydown” (in Japanese “last”) for the long-term fragrance effect after several hours.

Finding consistency in Japanese (or English) language fragrance-related writing is extremely difficult. A popular book devoted to describing perfumes in general (mainly designed to stimulate the Japanese market, I suspect) limits its initial classification to three groups of smells, but then subdivides these into various sub-types. Thus:

- ▶ *Floral*: subdivided into green, fruity, fresh, floral, aldehyde and sweet sub-types;
- ▶ *Oriental*: amber and spicy sub-types; and
- ▶ *Chypre*: fruity, floral, fresh and green sub-types (*Kōsui*, Fujin Gahōsha, Tokyo, 1992).

The same book proceeds to rank individual perfumes on a five star scale on what are clearly two opposed pairs of categories: *sweetness* and *acidity* or *tangyness* (*karasa*), on the one hand, and *freshness* and *sexiness*, on the other.<sup>7</sup> This kind of classification brings to mind distinctions made in the appreciation of wine, although the *balance* sought in the latter is replaced in perfume by *development* as the three layers of notes unfold on the skin (cf. Adrienne Lehrer, *Wine and Conversation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

Another book (*Kōsui Jiten*, Fujin Gahōsha, Tokyo, 1996) categorises perfumes into 20 different types, based on image rather than ingredient. These may be broadly grouped, perhaps, in the following way:

- ▶ Seasonal Nature (Living Floral; Watery; Summer; Tasty);
- ▶ Life Stages (Baby; Mother’s; Madame; For Bride);
- ▶ Emotions (New Sexy; Love; Happiness; Relaxation);
- ▶ TPO (Formal; Career; Night);
- ▶ Gender Distinctions (Men’s Fragrance; Shared);
- ▶ Perfume *per se* (Classic; Precious; For Beginners).

The same book proceeds to classify individual perfumes on a series of two-dimensional scales, overwhelmingly pervaded by combinations of *freshness* (*sawayakasa*) and *sweetness* (*amasa*) (in line with the fact that almost three quarters of the perfumes marketed in Japan are floral based):

- ▶ *Sweetness* and -freshness, -sexiness (*sekushīsa*), -softness (*yawarakasa*), -spiciness (*supaisīsa*), -sweetness, -tangyness (*karasa*, or acidity);
- ▶ *Freshness* and -coolness (*kūrusa*), -sexiness, -softness, -spiciness, -tangyness;
- ▶ *Gorgeousness* (*gōjyasusa*) and -softness;
- ▶ *Sexiness* and -freshness, -spiciness, and -sweetness;
- ▶ *Sharpness* (*shāpusa*) and -freshness, and -sexiness;
- ▶ *Spiciness* and -freshness, and -sweetness;

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<sup>7</sup> During the early feudal period in Japan (Muromachi Period, 1182-1333), smell was categorized according to sweetness, tangyness, saltiness, and acidity (*Gokan no Jidai*, p. 171).

- ▶ *Warmth* (*atatakasa*) and –sweetness.

What emerges from these various different classifications, apart from a marked sense of confusion on my part, is that through perfume descriptives, smells – and thus the women who apply them to parts of their bodies – are defined in numerous different ways that are more often than not simultaneously *evaluative* (echoing Lehrer’s findings with regard to wine vocabulary).<sup>8</sup> Tentative findings are briefly:

- ▶ As has been generally noted, Japanese words describing smell often depend on other senses of taste (*amai* [sweet], *karai* [tangy]); touch (*yawarakai* [soft]); and taste and touch (*floral, sharp, spicy, woody*), rather than smell *per se*.
- ▶ Other lexical fields that contribute to the vocabulary of smell include:
  - Clarity (*akarui* [bright], *azayaka* [vivid], *mizumizushii* [watery], *tōmei* [transparent]);
  - Appearance (which includes colour – both hue and depth [*okufukai*]);
  - Weight (*karoyaka* [light], *omoi* [heavy]);
  - Strength (*rich, odayaka* [gentle]);
  - Shape (*maroyaka* [rounded]);
  - Age (*wakawakashii* [youthful], *otona no* [adult]);
  - Class or breeding (*kihin aru* [high class], *jōhin* [refined], *kifujin no* [high class woman’s]);
  - Personality (*elegant, hanayaka* [gorgeous], *kashikoi* [clever], *kawaii* [charming], *koseiteki* [personal], *miriyokuteki* [wonderful], *mysterious, romantic, sexy, shimpiteki* [mysterious], *zeitaku* [extravagant]);
  - Character (*classical, modern, natural, rekishi aru* [historical], *oriental, tōyōteki /-chō* [eastern]).
- ▶ *Sweet* seems to apply only to the floral notes; and, in much more limited occurrence, *mysterious* to the chypre, and *eastern* (*tōyōteki*) to oriental perfume notes. Otherwise,
- ▶ There appears to be no hard and fast rule linking such descriptives exclusively to a perfume’s classification and main ingredient. For example, *romantic* and *classy* (*kihin aru*) are used of both floral and chypre types, while other common adjectives like *fresh* (*sawayaka*), *passionate* (*jōnetsuteki*) and *mysterious* (*shimpiteki*) are used across the ingredient board. Notwithstanding this,
- ▶ The words used to describe fragrances are in general very similar to those used to describe fashion clothing (cf. Moeran, 2004, “A Japanese discourse of fashion and taste,” *Fashion Theory* 8: 2): for example, *azayaka, elegant, gorgeous, hanayaka, karoyaka, kawaii, koseiteki, otona no, romantic, senren sareta, yūga*, and so on. The dominant fragrance descriptives, however, revolve around two – possibly redundant – pairs of opposites: freshness (*sawayaka*), and elegance (*kihin no aru*), on the one hand, and passion (*jōnetsuteki*) and beauty (*utsukushii*), on the other.

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<sup>8</sup> Preliminary research has produced 52 different adjectives, ranging from *new* (*atarashii*) and *exotic*, to *beautiful* and *mysterious* (*shimpiteki*).

These in part parallel, in part contrast with, the emphasis on femininity, elegance, classical taste, charm, and so on found in the language of fashion. Fragrance descriptives are in particular marked by elements of sensuality, mystery and passion not found in the latter discourse.

- ▶ While both Japanese and English loan words are used to describe smells of different kinds, the most commonly used words are Japanese, not loan words. This contrasts markedly with the language of fashion, and suggests that the sense of smell and its communication is somehow still specifically 'Japanese', rather than 'Western' (in spite of the fact that the majority of perfumes marketed in Japan are European and American in origin). Commonly used descriptives in order of frequency across fragrance families were: *sawayaka* (fresh); *kihin no aru* (elegant, refined); *utsukushii* (beautiful) and *jōnetsuteki* (passionate); *shimpiteki* (mysterious), *amai* (sweet) and *romantic*; *dokusōteki* (original, creative), *hanayaka* (gorgeous), *jōhin* (high class), *kannōteki* (sensual) and *yūga* (graceful, elegant, urbane).
- ▶ Descriptives of particular fragrances often result from the name, speciality or style of a particular fashion house, designer, or celebrity, as well as from their own brand names (although the ingredients and descriptives here form a chicken-and-egg relation that merely serve to brand a perfume). Thus,
  - *KL* is described as a "Karl Lagerfeld-like modern, semi-oriental" fragrance, hinting at the folding fan that is that designer's public trademark. Another perfume, *Fendi*, is described as "a chypre group fragrance to be worn with a rich fur coat," and so alludes to the fashion house's history as a furrier. *Montana* reflects "top designer Claude Montana's purity (*senren*) in its fragrance." *Passion* has a "gorgeous (*hanayaka*) fragrance redolent of Liz (Taylor's) numerous passionate love affairs."
  - *Christalle* has a "transparent fragrance," while *Knowing* has a "fragrance appropriate for a woman of intelligence who knows herself, who knows elegance, and who knows the real thing." In similar vein, *Vent Vert* is "light and fresh like its name." Occasionally, ingredients are given a 'Japanese twist', as in the following description of *Sacré* by Caron: "A stern fragrance redolent of eastern mystery, as implied in its name 'a sacred thing'."

Overall, one of the comments made by HILL researchers seems particularly apt:

"Amongst the five senses, that of smell is extremely primitive and most difficult to express in language. The normal person's vocabulary realm for describing fragrance is less developed than the overall expressive ability of a three to four year old child."

("Gokan" no Jidai, p. 172)

## Gender Constructions

It has been remarked that in most male-centred societies particular smells are ascribed to women, and that these differ according to a particular society's cultural preoccupations. Generally, a tripartite classification is made of women as: (1) sluts or prostitutes; (2) maidens, wives, or mothers; and (3) seductresses; and this classification has a corresponding olfactory symbolism (Constance Classens, 1992, "The odor of the other: Olfactory symbolism and cultural categories," *Ethos* 20: 20: 142ff.).

Unlike some European languages, in which a direct connection exists between bad smell and slovenly women (e.g. putrid and *puta* or prostitute), Japanese does not, so far as I know, make any such symbolic association.<sup>9</sup> In European and American societies, the discourse of modern perfumes would seem to make a clear distinction between the 'maiden' and the 'seductress'. This may be seen most readily in the naming of products.

- ▶ A number of perfumes symbolize the 'maiden', in particular those associated with a floral bouquet, both in their names (*Angel (Innocent)*, *Miss Dior*, *Venus*) and in their associations (*Amour Amour*, *Eternity*, *J'Adore*, *Youth Dew*). Similarly,
- ▶ The seductress appears in *Animale*, *Flirt*, *Libertine*, *Panthère*,<sup>10</sup> and *Sirene*, with associated desires like *Allure*, *Desire*, *Envy*, *Fetish*, *L'Interdit*, *Magie Noire*, *Passion*, *Rapture*, and *Tabu*.

Some perfume houses manufacture and market both types: *Eternity* and *Obsession* (Calvin Klein Cosmetics); *Baby Doll* and *Opium* (Yves Saint Laurent Parfums); *Amarige* and *Fleur d'Interdit* (Parfums Givenchy).

As Classens (1992: 143) notes, maidens are generally – universally – associated with fragrance (in this context, read floral notes), while "seductresses are associated with heavily sweet and spicy odors; the sweetness of the scent signifying their beauty and attraction, and the spiciness and heaviness, their exotic status and overwhelming powers of fascination." Certainly, such characterizations would appear to hold in English-language books describing individual perfumes, where phrases like "sexual explicitness," "unbridled suggestiveness," "persistent sensuality," "tropical charmer," "sheer tigress," and so on are used (cf. John Oakes, *The Book of Perfumes*).

Japanese words, however, are less sexually explicit. Of perfumes graded five stars in terms of sexyness in *Kōsui*, for example, only a very few imitate English language descriptions and even these are, by comparison, quite mild. For example:

- ▶ *Parfum d'Hermès* is for "passionate feelings;"
- ▶ *Saso* is for "the developed, adult woman;"
- ▶ *Obsession* is "a fragrance that makes tigers out of men;"

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the *Genji Monogatari* suggests that both positive 'fragrance' (*kaori*) and – the now more negatively perceived – 'smell' (*nioi*) were used in the masculine, rather than feminine, symbolic realm.

<sup>10</sup> Classens (1992: 144) notes that one Elizabethan English clergyman compared sexual sorceresses to panthers, which were believed in ancient times to attract other animals by the sweetness of their breath. The House of Cartier is virtually synonymous with the reclining panther as its logo. The woman who wears this scent is described in one book as an "ultra-sophisticated huntress... a strong, sensual creature... poised and elegant, but not over 50" (John Oakes, 1996, *The Book of Perfumes*, Sydney: Harper-Collins, p. 215).



- ▶ *Luciano Soprani* is “a fragrance for the adult woman who would stimulate men;”
- ▶ *Armani* is “for a woman of atmosphere” (*Kōsui*, 1992).

The remainder are described in generally mild terms (as in *Cabotine* for the “innocent woman” [*mujaki na onna*]), where the fragrance of a perfume and thus the character of the woman wearing it is usually limited to such simplicities as *sexy* and two variations on *mystery* (*shimpiteki* and *mysterious*). This is not to suggest that the woman who wears a perfume like *Opium* or *Obsession* is a pure ‘maiden’; rather that the contemporary Japanese version of a ‘seductress’ is a much milder version than that found in the West – primarily because most Japanese women are not, as yet, ready to make the move from ‘maiden’ to raunchy ‘seductress’.

But what of men and their fragrances? Traditionally, it is the dry, spicy, woody category that has dominated the male end of the fragrance market, so that there is an immediate contrast between:

- ▶ Women’s fragrances defined by sweetness (*amakuchi*) based primarily on flowers and fruit, giving rise to a ‘femininity’ (*onnarashisa*); and
- ▶ Men’s fragrances defined by tangyness (*karakuchi*) based primarily on spices and green chypre, giving rise to a ‘masculinity’ (*otokorashisa*).

In each case, the common descriptive is ‘fresh’ (*sawayaka na*) which would seem to express both sexes in their ‘natural’ state.

But descriptions of men’s fragrances suggest that this traditional distinction is not so cut and dried and that, contrary to what Classens suggests, men are also coming to be categorised in different ways.

- ▶ *The Gentle Man*: For a start, there are now numerous men’s floral scents in which sweetness becomes a defining character. From these emerges the image of a “gentle man” (*yasashii otoko*) who is *chic, elegant, modern, and urban*.
- ▶ *The Natural Man*: This type of man contrasts with the more traditional tones conveyed by tangy, woody and spicy colognes: *dry, pure, simple, and transparent* – the more or less odourless, “natural man” (*shizen na otoko*).
- ▶ *The Dandy*: At the same time, thanks to the introduction of brands like *Opium Pour Homme* and *Obsession For Men*, a third type of man – the “dandy” – is coming to be defined in Japanese writings which focus on the “tangy” and “mysterious” sexiness he needs to cope with the “one rank up, mature woman.”

## Summary

This paper has presented some very preliminary observations about the place of smell in Japanese society and the marketing of fragrances there. It has focused in particular on the importance, or lack of importance, attributed to smell *vis-à-vis* sight, and examined the use of language in describing different kinds of fragrances, before moving on to examine how men and women are type classified according to perfume in Japan.

Preliminary findings suggest the following for further research:

- ▶ Japanese smell culture may be defined as one in which smell is extinguished rather than added, and is in this way differentiated from European and American smell cultures.
- ▶ The Japanese vocabulary of smell is as undeveloped as smell vocabularies in other languages, although it would seem to prefer to use “pure” Japanese rather than foreign loanwords in its main classifications. The use of “sexiness” is the exception here and suggests a strong Western influence, although the exact definition of “sexiness” remains vague and imprecise. It may be possible to pursue the analysis of the vocabulary of smell with reference to Adrienne Lehrer’s study of the vocabulary of wine appreciation.
- ▶ The discourse of fragrance in Japan follows a near universal pattern in distinguishing between two types of woman – the “maiden” and the “seductress” – but the latter is phrased more in terms of “mysteriousness” than of “seduction” or “eroticism.” At the same time, it has created a tripartite classification of *men* – provisionally called the “Gentle Man,” the “Natural Man,” and the “Dandy” – which hitherto has not been noted in anthropological discussions of the male sex. In this respect, market research conducted in Europe during the late 1980s, suggests a similar tripartite division in men’s aesthetic preferences. First, there is the “cultivated gentleman” who constitutes 38% of the market and is described as an “elegant and yet unobtrusive personality who is oriented towards traditional values.” His fragrance should be “classic,” “elegant,” and “harmonious” (Schmidt 1991: 152). Then there is the “dynamic optimist” constituting 37% of the market and described as “active” and with a desire for “stimulation and accomplishment.” He wants his fragrance to be “fresh,” “modern,” and “stimulating.” Finally, there is the “emotional individualist” who has a “sensitive and introverted personality with a tendency towards stimulation.” His ideal fragrance notes should be “natural,” “sensuous,” and yet “masculine” (p. 153) (Hans-Otto Schmidt 1991 “The ‘new man’ and his fragrance: A psychology-oriented analysis of target groups among male fragrance users in Europe,” pp. 149-155 in ESOMAR (ed.) *Fine Fragrances and Fragrances in Consumer Products*. Amsterdam: ESOMAR).

## Note

And why is it important to study smell at all?

For two reasons really. Firstly, Alfie Gell long ago suggested (in a provocative article titled “Magic, Perfume, Dream...”) that there is a complementary relationship between spells and magical substances and that as one moves away from spells in magical systems, smell will start to take on increasing importance. It is smell (rather than a spell) that can give an object or substance its efficacy.

Gell went on to point out that the only way we can discover the meaning of a particular smell is by distinguishing a *context* in which that smell is typically found and valued. We do *not* discover meaning by distinguishing one smell from other smells

according to its properties. In other words, the meanings of smell are determined by contexts which have little or nothing to do with the smell itself. Moreover, the pleasures that we associate with certain smells tend to be retrospective or anticipatory, rather than what Gell calls “climactic.” They thus tend to be recognised at the beginnings or ends of events (such as a meal).<sup>11</sup>

Gell also argues – I think a little misleadingly – that people do *not* wear perfume in order to communicate something about themselves. Rather, it is the *act of putting on* a fragrance which is important. In this respect, perfume is closely allied with transcendence and the wearing of perfume is a magical act. Such ideas need to be reflected upon and developed in the light of further research.

Secondly, the study of smell is important because technology is bringing smell back into our everyday lives. We are all of us very aware of the smell of our after-shaves, soaps, and clothes after being washed with a particular washing powder. We also take more or less conscious note of the smells of food and drink, and other products with which we come into daily contact. But smell is being used more and more in marketing – as when an item of furniture from Ikea, for example, will be impregnated with a special “freshly cut wood” smell, or the plastic dashboard of a Mercedes will be impregnated with a special fragrance to make consumers aware that they are sitting in a Mercedes, and not an Audi, Volvo or Volkswagen. Similarly, airline companies have been known to impregnate their tickets with a particular perfume, capsules of which they will also sprinkle in their aircraft so that boarding passengers will crush them with their feet and cause an identical smell to pervade the environment. In other words, smell is being used subtly to brand companies, as well as products.

But the uses of smell are likely to become even more pervasive. Already, some people are talking about how the development of broad band technology in cell phones, for example, will enable users to transmit smells as well as visual images to those with whom they are communicating. It is being suggested, too, that it will not be too long before the cinematic experience will include smell in its visual repertoire. In other words, as we see a man cooking a delicious meal in a film like *Eat Drink, Man Woman*, so will we be able to simultaneously smell that food. Similarly with other (possibly less pleasant) smells – like the exhaust fumes from the car driven furiously by the hero, the perfume worn by the heroine to seduce her man, and the vomit that seems to be *de rigueur* among actors who come across a dead body in the woods.

In other words, after being more or less banished from “civilization” during the development of modernity, smell is making a comeback into our everyday lives. It’s time we learned to talk about it a little bit more coherently than three to four year old children!

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<sup>11</sup> In this respect, we might note how fragrance advertising often refers to the beginning of love, romance, personality change, and so on.