

The problem of naming is not just any philosophical problem but rather central to classical ontology. The latter depends on the notion of names (*onomata*) as latching onto things (*pragmata*) in their essential being. As such, the name has traditionally been tied to the concept of truth as *adequatio* or correspondence between knowledge and being, intellect and thing, or proposition and reality. The author proposes to cast a side-glance at this massive philosophical problem, approaching it from the singular point of view of smells and their striking relationship to language.

Keywords: smell, odour, language, anomia, ontology, psychoanalysis, truth, name

Simon Hajdini is an assistant professor and senior research associate in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Arts. He is the author of two books in Slovene and numerous research articles in contemporary philosophy, social theory, German idealism and psychoanalysis. His book *Smell: Ontology of Everything Else* is forthcoming with MIT Press (2022).

shajdini@ff.uni-lj.si

Names at the Tip of the Nose

Simon Hajdini

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, Department of Philosophy

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“What’s in a name?” Juliet asks, immediately putting us on the scent: “That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet” (Shakespeare 58). It is no coincidence that Juliet expands on her initial question by relating names to the anomic realm of smells. In Indo-European languages, at least, smells notoriously lack proper names, in turn acquiring roundabout names such as “smell of rose”. Smells are eponymous: to name them is to relate them to their sources, to the names of objects that emit them, rather than naming the objects, or qualities, that they themselves are. Their essential being eludes signification such that we can only ever speak of them without speaking them out. Smells are metonymical: to name them is to speak of them as if they were unwanted guests at our dinner table whom we could only address in the third person, slandering them in their presence. Metonymically named, smells strike us as essentially euphemistic. But unlike euphemisms proper that – in providing indirect expressions substituted for those considered too disagreeable – make out the vast and ever-shifting socio-cultural lexicon of embarrassment, smells are reflectively euphemistic and therefore indicative of the embarrassment of language itself. In her adage, Juliet moves, in a single speculative stroke, from a name to a smell, that is: *from naming to a void of naming*.

Two typical instances of this metonymicity of smell, singular among the physical senses, are found in Juliet’s passage. First, there’s “a rose”, “the smell of rose”, uttering a smell’s missing proper name as its descriptive source-name. Here, the smell-name is voiced with reference to an object (“a rose”) with which the particular subjective sensation of smell (the unnamed “X”) is correlated. And second, there’s “sweetness”,

“the sweet smell”, where the unnamed “X” is named not in relation to its source, or objective correlate, but by being step-named, that is, by borrowing its name from the register of taste as the other of the two chemical senses. In the absence of first names, smells only have second names. However, they only acquire these *nomina impropria* either as *orphans*, structurally abandoned by their linguistic parents who are always already dead and unknowable, or as sensuous *bastards*, as illegitimate children of a foreign household of sense.

When step-named, smells typically borrow their names from the vocabulary of gustatory perception. However, one also speaks of smell “faces” and “palettes”, relating smells to visual perception; of smells as “compositions” containing “notes” and “sub-tones”, relating them to the sense of hearing; and one even relates smells to the sense of touch by calling them “pungent”. Such synaesthetic borrowing, as well as source-naming, are common among the senses (“sweet voice”, “sharp taste”, “warm colour”, etc.). However, with smells, such source- and step-naming take place in the curious absence of *nomina propria* that would be distinctive of them. Imagine a case of colour anomia in which, when referring to the colour “white”, the subject would be obliged to use a source-name and say, for instance, “(the appearance of) snow”, or a step-name such as “(it looks) cold.” That is precisely what we do with smells each and every time we name them.

What’s in a smell? Pausing to consider synaesthetic borrowing, Aristotle mentions the lack of generic names for smells while adding that “because smells are much less easy to discriminate than flavours, the names of these varieties are applied to smells in virtue of similarity” (Aristotel 9). However, we should add, such an application of step-names to smells “in virtue of similarity” is underpinned – and necessitated – by a blatant “similarity disorder” to deploy Roman Jakobson’s famous term. Smells stand for lexical voids and represent the singular site of a universal linguistic disturbance, *a universal olfactory anomia*. That is to say, we are capable, for the most part, of naming smells in a roundabout metonymical way, typically relating them to the names of their sources. Yet, we are materially barred from directly metaphorically grasping them, such that the signifying function of, say, “smell of” ... “rose” is congruent with the elision of meaning.

The famous case of H. M. provides a prime example of this uncanny proximity between the similarity disorder, as conceived of by Roman Jakobson, and universal olfactory anomia, as proposed here. A glance at the results of testing H.M.’s ability to name common odorants reveals that, in attempting to name them, he displays the standard symptoms of similarity disorder. Instead of qualifying the presented odorant as “cloves”, “mint”, “raspberry”, or “rose”, H. M. qualified them as “Dead fish, washed ashore”, “An acid”, “Carrion, a squirrel”, and “Bad water”, respectively. Once, having

correctly identified a lemon by sight, he sniffed it and remarked, "Funny, it doesn't smell like a lemon!" Consider in this regard the example of an aphasic patient with a similarity disorder who, when asked to simply repeat back a word, cannot bring himself to do it. "Told to repeat the word *no*, Head's patient replied 'No, I don't know how to do it.' [...] he could not produce the purest form of equational predication, the tautology $a = a$: /no/ is /no/ " (Jakobson 102).

The article unpacks this chimeric encounter between a lemon that does not smell like a lemon and a word that cannot be substituted for itself. At the core of this problem lies the notion of reflexive identity, i.e., identity with itself, as the essential characteristic of the classical notion of truth. Smell undermines reflexive identity, enabling us to conceive of an olfactory subject as the point of impossibility of self-identical subjectivity.