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Going after sights, sounds and smells

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It was raining cats and dogs. My husband and I were on holiday in Italy visiting a new part of the country where the climate was unknown to us. We had not taken our raincoats or umbrellas. That morning the sudden heavy rainfall took us by surprise and we got soaked to the skin. Most shops were still closed. As we walked along the silent roads feeling like a fish out of water (ironically), we were suddenly overwhelmed with a strong sweet smell of coffee, and we jointly turned left and entered the space that was emanating the smell that pulled us in. It was not a coffee bar, and there seemed to be nothing in sight to eat or drink. We felt like drowned rats, and we must have looked miserable. The salespersons took pity on us (!) and offered us the best cup of coffee we could have wished for – and it turned out to have, by far, the most expensive smell too!

We had taken shelter from the rain in a shop that sold coffee machines! And a thousand million flavoured coffee beans! We drank the coffee, and before we knew it, we came out of the shop with an expensive coffee machine and packets of flavoured coffee, for which we had not only paid a lot of money, but we now also carried a burden that had to be transported all the way home! I will never forget the effect of that Liberica coffee aroma for as long as I have to care for the coffee machine!

Apart from an experience like that, we are often not aware of the smells and sounds around us, and their effect on us. When walking along a street, a promenade, a beach or a square, we are either absorbed in thought or taken over by the sights. The physical landscape asserts its shape, and verbal and visual communication strategies are much more easily noticeable than the sounds and the smells that are much more transient. The linguistic landscape can have a more evident effect on us, for example, when we notice an advertisement of a product we would like to consume, or of an event we wish to attend. A new shop name, a new billboard, a notice, a warning, a new street sign or a placard, are all examples of the linguistic landscape that tells us stories about the sociolinguistics of the society inhabiting the neighbourhood. A substantial amount of scholarly writing has been published about the linguistic landscape since it started to be taken seriously about 15-20 years ago. Worthy of mention are, for example, Niedt & Seals eds. 2022; Hatoss 2023; Melo-Pfeifer ed. 2023; Krompák & Gorter eds. 2024; Gorter & Cenoz eds. 2025.

On the other hand, smells and sounds have received much less attention. Nevertheless, they are important features in our life, and can have significant effect on the quality of our life. Sometimes, when the smell or the sound are very strong they take us by surprise and we might quiver. When they last long enough, we talk about them. We might even complain about them. On the other hand, we rarely give them attention when they inspire or heal us. Think of silence.

The term 'Soundscape' refers to the collection of all sounds within a specific acoustic environment. Pijanowski et al. (2011) describe three categories of sound: Geophony, i.e. natural sources of sound like wind and water; Biophony, i.e. animal vocalisations; and Anthropophony, which refers to sounds generated by humans like conversation, singing, crying and shouting, and sounds generated by human-made technology like vehicles and machinery. Mitchell et al. (2024) discuss whether soundscape is just a perceptual construct. After all, the perception of sound can be very idiosyncratic, and it is more so than smell.

A 'smellscape' refers to the overall olfactory environment of a specific area, and it encompasses all the smells present in that location and how people perceive them. Smellscape is a phenomenon affected by climatic conditions and human activities, and it is at its maximum capacity in the morning and evening (Wakhede et al. 2023). Smells are normally considered to be pleasant or unpleasant. A person's perception of a smell is naturally subjective, but in general people consider the smell of flowers, forests, fresh soil, food like pastries, and drinks like coffee, to be pleasant. On the other hand, many people consider the smell of sewage, waste and car exhaust as deeply unpleasant. Our relationship with smell can be built around memories, habits, health, and preference, and it is context-dependent. Furthermore, if you like a smell then you will like the place where you smell it (Wakhede et al. 2023; Xiao et al. 2018).

In the context of a scholarly ecological discourse, I would like to carve out some space for soundscape and smellscape concerns. Here are a few questions to the reader for reflection: Which sounds did you hear since waking up this morning? Which of those sounds do you wish to hear more often? Which sounds would you like to eliminate from your context? Which smells are in your environment: at home, at work, on the street, and at other places you frequent? Which smells do you like? Which ones do you find unpleasant? Which sound/s have had a significant effect on your life? Have you experienced any smell that had a noteworthy or consequential effect on you?

In line with this, I noticed the following piece of news published on the 8th of November, 2025, in Malta's main English newspaper *The Times of Malta*:

Scented tree to be at the centre of this year's 'Christmas in the Capital'

So now, we can also smell an artificial Christmas tree in the Capital! Which Christmas smells, sights and sounds do you look forward to?

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