BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

How do we describe smells?

This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Neil
Hello, this is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Georgie
And I'm Georgie. In English, there are many ways to describe smells. Poet Michael Rosen wanted to find words describing bad smells, and asked listeners of his BBC Radio 4 programme Word of Mouth for some suggestions.

Michael Rosen
Fusty, reeking, toiking, honking, humming, funky…

Neil
Smells are everywhere, whether they're bad smells like rotten eggs and sweaty feet, or pleasant ones like lavender and freshly baked bread. What smells do you especially like or dislike, Georgie?

Georgie
Well, I really enjoy the smell of leather, but something I really love is the smell of rain, which has a name. Do you know it, Neil?

Neil
Erm, I don't think I do actually.

Georgie
It's called petrichor. It's that smell of the ground just after it's rained.

Neil
Mmm.

Georgie
Neil, what about you? Which smells do you like?

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Neil
Well, I don't think you can beat the smell of a freshly opened packet of ground coffee.

Georgie
Ooh, that's a good one. In this episode, we'll be learning the language of smells using some useful new words and phrases. And remember, you can find all the vocabulary plus a quiz and worksheet on our website, bbclearningenglish.com.

Neil
But first, I have a question for you, Georgie. One smell many people love is the smell of old books and the sentimental feeling it gives them for second-hand bookshops. In fact, there's even a word for it, but what is it? Is it:

a) vellichor,
b) petrichor, or
c) nidor?

Georgie
Well, we already know that petrichor is the smell of the ground after rain. I'm going to go with a) vellichor.

Neil
Well, we'll find out at the end of the programme. Listening to Michael Rosen's list – funky, reeking, humming and the rest – you might think English is good at describing smells, but in fact, all those words really mean is bad smelling.

Georgie
In English, we often describe smells by comparing them to other objects. For example, something nice might smell like a rose, while something bad might smell like rotten eggs, but there are few words to describe the actual smell itself.

Neil
Oxford University psychologist Asifa Majid has researched the subject of smell extensively. Here, she tells Michael Rosen a little of what she's found out on BBC Radio 4 programme Word of Mouth.

Asifa Majid
So, if we think about things like **stinky** or **fragrant**, they're definitely telling us that something is good or bad. But unlike colour terms, it doesn't really seem to be

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about the object it's describing. It seems to be a **subjective** thing. I could say, "Oh this perfume you think is really **fragrant**, I think is **stinky**," and both can be true.

Georgie
Describing smell is not like describing other senses. I might think a perfume is **stinky**, an adjective meaning bad smelling, while Neil might find the same perfume **fragrant**, meaning pleasant smelling. Both can be true. The point is that neither **stinky** nor **fragrant** say anything specific about the perfume's actual smell.

Neil
With our sense of taste, it's different. Words like spicy, sweet or salty create a common idea that we can all agree on, but that's not the case for smells. Asifa thinks this is because, unlike tastes and colours, smell words are **subjective** – they're based on personal opinions and feelings rather than objective truth.

Georgie
This might explain why our attitude to talking about smells is so different. Here's Asifa again, sharing some examples of how we talk about smells with BBC Radio 4.

Asifa Majid
So, if we compare how often people talk about **visual** things, or **auditory** things, or tastes or smells, what we find is we talk a lot about what we see and very rarely about what we smell. Young children in the UK are often interested in the sense of smell and they'll remark on it, and the parent will **shut it down**. They'll say, "That's disgusting! Put it down."

Georgie
Asifa's research shows that, here in the UK at least, people talk about **visual** or **auditory** things much more than they talk about smells. The adjective **visual** means related to seeing, and **auditory** means related to hearing. The adjective for things related to smelling is olfactory.

Neil
Maybe this is because of how we're raised by our parents. When children start talking about smells, especially unpleasant ones, parents often react by **shutting** the conversation **down**. The phrase to **shut something down** means to stop it.

Georgie
Along with other European languages, English doesn't have much vocabulary dedicated to the different qualities of actual smells. There are many ways of

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talking about smells, especially unpleasant ones, but only a few words which describe actual smells themselves. A good example of a word which does this is musty – a damp, stale smell you might find in an old bookshop. And Neil, that reminds me of your question.

Neil
That's right. I asked you what the word is, which means the smell of old books.

Georgie
I said it was vellichor.

Neil
Well, Georgie, you are absolutely right.

Georgie
Yay!

Neil
Petrichor, as you said earlier, is the smell of the earth after rain. And nidor is the smell of cooking meat and fat. OK. It's time for a recap of the vocabulary we've learned. The adjective **stinky** means foul smelling, while the adjective **fragrant** means pleasant smelling.

Georgie
Subjective things are based on your own personal opinions and feelings rather than objective facts.

Neil
The adjective **visual** describes things related to seeing, while **auditory** means related to hearing. Things related to smelling are called olfactory.

Georgie
And finally, the phrasal verb to **shut something down** means to stop it. Once again, our six minutes are up, but there's still time to head over to our website, bbclearningenglish.com, for a quiz and worksheet containing all the vocabulary we've discussed. See you again soon! But for now, it's goodbye.

Neil
Goodbye!

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VOCABULARY

stinky (also: reeking, honking, humming, miffy, funky)
(informal) having a bad smell

fragrant
having a sweet or pleasant smell

subjective
based on your own personal opinions and feelings

visual
related to seeing

auditory
related to hearing

shut (something) down
stop something

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