# *SMELL AS MEANS OF COMMUNICATION ACCORDING TO GEORGE ORWELL:* "THE ROAD TO WIGAN PIER"[1]

***Abstract****: This article aims at exploring smell perceptions as stimuli in the process of communication, important factors in influencing or even determining one's perception/understanding/decoding of the message transmitted by their means. A passage from* "The Road to Wigan Pier" *has been chosen to illustrate George Orwell's view about how class barriers, even hatred, in England used to be expressed through smell.*

***Keywords****: smell, communication, barrier, opposition.*

Scents have been associated with human emotional response ever since Theophrastus of Athens (his study entitled *Concerning Odours* first published in 1926 is one of the earliest treaties on smell). However, sociologists consider that the social functions of smell have long been neglected, although anthropologists included it in their observations early in the beginning of the 20th century. Therefore, such an approach should take into consideration aspects such as the symbolic meanings or interpretations of scents, the perception of perfume-wearing by people and correspondingly the dynamics of smell-manipulation.

According to the criterion of meaning, the differences between the terms used here to refer to smell are the following: *odour* signifies "a distinctive smell, especially an unpleasant one" such as *the faint odour of damp,* although *odour of sanctity* means "a sweet odour reputedly emitted by the bodies of saints at or near death" or "a state of holiness"; *scent* is defined as "a distinctive smell, especially one that is pleasant": *the scent of freshly cut hay,* synonymous with *fragrance* or with *perfume* when it refers to "a liquid that you put on your skin to make it smell pleasant" or simply "a sweet or pleasant smell" (***Longman Exams Dictionary*, 2006).

As far as communication[2] is concerned, from its many definitions, we find it relevant for our purpose here to single out the following: the process of transmitting stimuli in order to change other persons' behaviour.[1]

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[2] It finds its origin in the Latin word "communes" which means "common", "belonging to all", that is everything you have or try to have in common with another person. Therefore, communication has been defined as a process of transmitting and receiving messages between two persons. There are numerous ways and types of communication, from the simple talk on the telephone to the advertisements in mass media. But what is more interesting is the fact that we communicate even when we do not intend to do it (there is an answer in silence, too). The idea is that the aim of communication is always the same: to transmit a message to the receiver. Likewise, there are numerous definitions of communication. Here are some of the most known ones: the process of exchanging information among individuals, using a common system of symbols, signs or behaviours; the process of transmitting stimuli in order to change other persons' behaviour; the totality of processes by which a person's mind can influence another's etc. To put it simply, the process of communication means *who* transmits, *what* he/she transmits and *to whom* he/she transmits, *the channel* used to transmit and *the effects,* therefore the succession of these operations of *encoding, decoding, recoding* carried out by the *sender* and the *receiver*. Nevertheless, no matter how simple it may look, it is a complex process which is singularised in different contexts that can determine its efficiency.
There are also situations when the message is not encoded or decoded correspondingly from various reasons:



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At this point, we might as well take a closer look over the historical evolution of fragrances or perfumes[2]. Scientists in sensory physiology and emotional psychology have suggested that there is a close relationship between emotional configuration and fragrance preferences[3]. Bearing in mind that the sense of smell is the one that depends most on a connection with other senses, one should not be surprised to realize that our choice of fragrance is very often determined by our psychological and emotional needs.

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- the sender did not address the right *audience* (the target audience is not correctly identified or known well enough);
- the receiver and the sender do not share the same level of understanding;
- the means of transmitting the message were not the right ones or there were *noises* along the channel that distorted the message. There are external noises (sights, sounds and other stimuli in the environment that draw the receiver's attention away from the message), internal noises (the receiver's attitude or feelings) or semantic noises (the unintended meanings aroused by certain symbols inhibiting the accuracy of decoding).

The process of communication is a continuous one that implies and reverses the roles of the two actors: sender and receiver. The essence of efficient communication lies in transmitting and understanding the *feedback* (in fact, another message, this time sent by the receiver; it is an essential element of the process as it help the sender know if and how his own message was received), expressing and re-expressing the message as adequately as possible. Another important aspect in the process of communication is the level of understanding and of education of the two actors – a huge gap between them will lead to considerable efforts in decoding the message.

[1] Human communication operates on a system of stimuli belonging to some important language categories: verbal language; paranormal language (meanings beyond words, stimuli and signals transmitted by voice tone, volume and rhythm); body language (signals transmitted by position, physiognomy, pantomime, gesticulation, look etc.). Another important factor in the process of communication is *perception;* it represents the way a person decodes or interprets the information received from the outside; in other words, we have our own representations of the exterior world, our own way of understanding everything that the received information represents. Odours, scents, fragrances, perfumes, smells in a word, are the stimuli that can influence one's perception of the message transmitted by their means.

[2] According to the Bible, Three Wise Men visited the baby Jesus carrying myrrh and frankincense as gifts. The Ancient Egyptians used to burn incense called *kyphi* (made of henna - a flowering plant the reddish-brown substance of which has been used since antiquity to dye skin, hair, fingernails, leather or wool), myrrh, cinnamon and juniper as religious offerings. They soaked aromatic wood, gum and resins in water and oil and used the liquid as a fragrant body lotion. They also perfumed their dead and often assigned specific fragrances to deities. Their word for perfume has been translated as "fragrance of the gods" and they considered perfumes "foods that reawaken the spirit." After the fall of Rome, perfume was primarily an Oriental art. It spread to Europe in the 13th century when the Crusaders brought samples from Palestine to England, France and Italy. Europeans discovered the healing properties of fragrances during the 17th century: doctors treated plague victims covering their mouths and noses with leather pouches holding pungent cloves, cinnamon and spices they thought would protect them from the disease. Then perfumes came into widespread use among the monarchy members. King Louis XIV of France used it so much that he was called the "perfume king." His court contained a floral pavilion filled with fragrances and dried flowers were placed in bowls throughout the palace to freshen the air. Royal guests bathed in goat milk and rose petals, they were often doused with perfume, also sprayed on clothing, furniture, walls and tableware. It was at this time that Grasse, a region of southern France became a leading producer of perfumes.

[3] Recently, the international fragrance compounding house "Haarman and Reimer" has done much research on the psychological impact of perfumes.



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Obviously, the symbolic meaning of smell is widely extended[1]. Smells can draw cultural boundaries or create social distance; they can represent a warning signal, a status symbol, a perception or impression-management technique etc. Constance Classen argues that olfactory classifications stem from differentiating structures of class, race and gender:

> "Odours are symbolically employed by many cultures to serve as identifying marks of different classes of beings. [...] As a rule, the dominant group in a society ascribes to itself a pleasant or neutral smell within this system of olfactory classification." (Classen, 1993: 101-102)

In the 1930s, George Orwell set out to learn about the English working class, spending time living among the poor in the mining towns from northern England. *The Road to Wigan Pier*[2] is an account of his experiences, as well as his general reflections on class and the challenge facing socialism. According to Tom Hopkinson, "it is clear that Orwell largely failed to make the close contact with the working class which was the purpose of his journey" (Tom Hopkinson, 1991: 279).

In the early part of this work[3], Orwell showed an exaggerated, sometimes an undignified humility toward the working class. Nevertheless, the writer had no problem about feeling himself inferior to his subject matter and the guilt Orwell expressed over his expensive education and middle-class background served to embarrass readers rather than to win sympathy for those whose life he described in those pages.

In the second section, there is much that is interesting about the writer's own life, but again Orwell seemed to misconceive the way in which good relations between classes come into being, and are, on the whole, maintained; in other words, how to accept as naturally as we can the position we find ourselves, while being ready to accept changes that are for the general benefit. He touches on his own background as an Eton-educated snob and on his life-changing experience as an agent of imperialism in Burma, before moving on to general observations, on topics such as the use of **cleanliness** to reinforce class barriers and the common mismatch between social and economic status.

Orwell's depiction of the working class suggests that it is the symbolic interpretation of odour, rather than odour itself, that carries social meaning. In the construction of one's identity, the smell of 'the other' is naturalized as something *mysteriously different* through *discourse***.** There is about it an unavoidable potential of social exclusion that is conveyed by, or expressed through, one's body, in terms of **physical attraction** or **repulsion.** Hence, our attempt to illustrate by means of a passage from *The Road to Wigan Pier* how class-barriers, more often than not hatred, used to be expressed in England through **smell,** in George Orwell's view.

> "Here you come to the real secret of class distinctions in the West - the real reason why a European of bourgeois upbringing, even when he calls himself a

[1] The burning of incense in churches is an example of a ritual where *group identification* occurs through smell.

[2] It takes its title from a North Country joke: 'pier' suggests seaside, holidays while 'Wigan' is an island town whose pier is a derelict wharf on a canal. It is made up of his usual blend of immediate impressions with past personal experience, but in this case the blend is particularly uneasy.

[3] This work was published as a "choice" of the Left Book Club which had at the time thousands of members and some influence. It appeared with a foreword by Victor Gollancz, who on behalf of himself and of his fellow selectors, criticized strongly the work he was recommending.



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> Communist, cannot without a hard effort think of a working man as his equal. It is summed up in four frightful words which people nowadays are chary of uttering, but which were bandied about quite freely in my childhood. The words were: **The lower classes smell**. That was what we were taught - the lower classes smell. [...] And in my childhood we were brought up to believe that they were dirty. Very early in life you acquired the idea that there was something subtly repulsive about a working-class body; you would not get nearer to it than you could help. [...] And even 'lower-class' people whom you knew to be quite clean - servants, for instance - were faintly unappetizing. **The smell of their sweat, the very texture of their skins, were mysteriously different from yours**." (Orwell, 2001: 119-120)

Thus, we "learn" that the *secret of class distinction* was connected to the bourgeois physical perception of the people belonging to the lower classes (the way it was "seen through the eyes of another"), more exactly to their smell. Moreover, the respective perception and the correspondingly differentiating reaction were part of the education; it was an inculcated idea early since childhood.

Because Orwell lacked historical sense and could not allow for the element of time that dominates every human 'calculation', he wanted an immediate 'resolution' to all class distinctions; this was to be obtained by identifying himself (just as other middle-class people were doing) with the manual worker, not merely with the political aspirations but with his choice of 'pictures' and tastes in food.

The initially diametrical opposition between 'selfhood'/sameness and 'otherness', between the integrated and the marginalized, between the desirable and the undesirable can thus be rendered by the olfactory contrast between *foul* - *dirty* - interpreted as *vice,* and *fragrant* - *clean***,** the correspondent of which is *virtue.* Yet this contrast is not universal; although it may be true that some odours are liked or disliked by people of all cultures, 'foul' and 'fragrant' must be understood and analyzed within their cultural context - just as the absence of smell can be perceived as pleasant or disturbing, depending on the specific social environment. Therefore, the opposition does not remain statically diametrical; it is rather contextually variable if not relative altogether; it works both ways.

To put it differently, what Orwell asked for was not "real contact", but identification. Although in its line of argument, the book is misguided (and marred by resentful criticism of the Labour party, of the middle-classes, of the working man who has made money), it was a natural reaction from a man of sympathy and courage to the sight of close quarters of honest, capable men living on a pittance in enforced idleness because their country's financial system could not see how to make profit from their labour.

In *The Road To Wigan Pier,* George Orwell criticizes socialism, while also offering solutions and suggestions to the then current problems of socialism. Victor Gollancz wrote in the foreword: "What is indeed essential, once that first appeal has been made to "liberty" and "justice," is a careful and patient study of just how the thing works: of why capitalism inevitably means oppression and injustice and the horrible class society which Mr. Orwell brilliantly depicts: of the means of transition to a Socialist society in which there will be neither oppressor or oppressed. In other words, emotional Socialism must become scientific Socialism - even if some of us have to concern ourselves with what Mr. Orwell, in his extremely intellectualist anti-intellectualism, calls "the sacred sisters": Thesis, Antithesis and Synthesis." (Gollancz, Victor, *Foreword*, *The Road To Wigan Pier*, p. XXiii).

Here Orwell tells a story of his early boyhood, when he felt that lower-class people were almost subhuman, that they had coarse faces, hideous accents, gross



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manners and that they hated everyone who was not like themselves. This rejection somehow results from the time before the war - IWW - when it was impossible or at least very dangerous for a well-dressed person to go through a slum street. Whole quarters were considered unsafe because of hooligans. Nevertheless one's rejection of the lower-class also has physical roots. Thus children of the middle-class were always taught that the working-class smelt. And this was obviously an impassable barrier, because no feeling of like and dislike is so fundamental as a physical feeling[1].

The point to be made refers to the main thing Orwell criticises: middle-class communists and socialists often speak against their own class, although they evidently have the behaviour and manner of a middle-class person (they have a good education, they own a family house and they may hold a managerial or professional position).

**George Orwell: *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937)**
**Excerpt from Chapter 8**

"[...] I was very young, not much more than six, when I first became aware of class-distinctions. Before that age my chief heroes had generally been working-class people, because they always seemed to do such interesting things, such as being fishermen and blacksmiths and bricklayers. I remember the farm hands on a farm in Cornwall who used to let me ride on the drill when they were sowing turnips and would sometimes catch the ewes and milk them to give me a drink; and the workmen building the new house next door, who let me play with the wet mortar and from whom I first learned the word 'b'; and the plumber up the road with whose children I used to go out bird-nesting. But it was not long before I was forbidden to play with the plumber's children; they were 'common' and I was told to keep away from them. This was snobbish, if you like, but it was also necessary, for middle-class people cannot afford to let their children grow up with vulgar accents. So, very early, the working class ceased to be a race of friendly and wonderful beings and became a race of enemies. We realized that they hated us, but we could never understand why, and naturally we set it down to pure, vicious malignity. To me in my early boyhood, to nearly all children of families like mine, 'common' people seemed almost sub-human. They had coarse faces, hideous accents, and gross manners, they hated everyone who was not like themselves, and if they got half a chance they would insult you in brutal ways. That was our view of them, and though it was false it was understandable. For one must remember that before the war there was much more overt class-hatred in England than there is now. In those days you were quite likely to be insulted simply for looking like a member of the upper classes; nowadays, on the other hand, you are more likely to be fawned upon.

[…] But there was another and more serious difficulty. Here you come to the real secret of **class distinctions** in the West - the real reason why a European of bourgeois upbringing, even when he calls himself a Communist, cannot without a hard effort think of a working man as his equal. It is summed up in four frightful words which people nowadays are chary of uttering, but which were bandied about quite freely in my childhood. The words were: ***The lower classes smell.*** That was what we were taught - *the lower classes smell*. And here, obviously, you are at an impassable barrier. For no feeling of like or dislike is quite so fundamental as **a physical feeling**. Race-hatred, religious hatred, differences of education, of temperament, of intellect, even differences of moral code, can be got over; but **physical repulsion** cannot. You can have an affection for a murderer or a sodomite, but you cannot have an **affection** for a man whose breath stinks — habitually stinks, I mean. However well you may wish him, however much you may admire his mind and character, if his breath stinks he is horrible and in your heart of hearts you will hate him. It may not greatly matter if the average middle-class person is brought up to believe that the working classes are ignorant, lazy, drunken, boorish, and dishonest; it is when he is brought up to

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believe that they are dirty that the harm is done. And in my childhood we were brought up to believe that they were dirty. Very early in life you acquired the idea that there was something subtly repulsive about a working-class body; you would not get nearer to it than you could help. You watched a great sweaty navvy walking down the road with his pick over his shoulder; you looked at his discoloured shirt and his corduroy trousers stiff with the dirt of a decade; you thought of those nests and layers of greasy rags below, and, under all, the unwashed body, brown all over (that was how I used to imagine it), with its strong, bacon-like reek. You watched a tramp taking off his boots in a ditch - ugh! It did not seriously occur to you that the tramp might not enjoy having black feet. And even 'lower-class' people whom you knew to be quite clean - servants, for instance - were faintly unappetizing. **The smell of their sweat, the very texture of their skins, were mysteriously different from yours.**

Everyone who has grown up pronouncing his aitches and in a house with a bathroom and one servant is likely to have grown up with these feelings; hence the chasmic, impassable quality of class-distinctions in the West. It is queer how seldom this is admitted. […]

Meanwhile, *do* the 'lower classes' smell? Of course, as a whole, they are **dirtier** than the upper classes. They are bound to be, considering the circumstances in which they live, for even at this late date less than half the houses in England have bathrooms. Besides, the habit of washing yourself all over every day is a very recent one in Europe, and the working classes are generally more conservative than the bourgeoisie. But the English are growing visibly cleaner, and we may hope that in a hundred years they will be almost as clean as the Japanese. It is a pity that those who idealize the working class so often think it necessary to praise every working-class characteristic and therefore to pretend that dirtiness is somehow meritorious in itself. Here, curiously enough, the Socialist and the sentimental democratic Catholic of the type of Chesterton sometimes join hands; both will tell you that dirtiness is healthy and 'natural' and cleanliness is a mere fad or at best a luxury.* They seem not to see that they are merely giving colour to the notion that working-class people are dirty from choice and not from necessity. Actually, people who have access to a bath will generally use it. But the essential thing is that middle-class people believe that the working class are dirty […] and, what is worse, that they are somehow inherently dirty. As a child, one of the most dreadful things I could imagine was to drink out of a bottle after a navvy. Once when I was thirteen, I was in a train coming from a market town, and the third-class carriage was packed full of shepherds and pig-men who had been selling their beasts. Somebody produced a quart bottle of beer and passed it round; it travelled from mouth to mouth to mouth, everyone taking a swig. I cannot describe the horror I felt as that bottle worked its way towards me. If I drank from it after all those lower-class male mouths I felt certain I should vomit; on the other hand, if they offered it to me I dared not refuse for fear of offending them - you see here how the middle-class squeamishness works both ways. Nowadays, thank God, I have no feelings of that kind. A working man's body, as such, is no more repulsive to me than a millionaire's. I still don't like drinking out of a cup or bottle after another person - another man, I mean; with women I don't mind - but at least the question of class does not enter. It was rubbing shoulders with the tramps that cured me of it. Tramps are not really very dirty as English people go, but they have the name for being dirty, and when you have shared a bed with a tramp and drunk tea out of the same snuff-tin, you feel that you have seen the worst and the worst has no terrors for you.

I have dwelt on these subjects because they are vitally important. To get rid of class-distinctions you have got to start by understanding how one class appears when seen through the eyes of another. It is useless to say that the middle classes are 'snobbish' and leave it at that. You get no further if you do not realize that snobbishness is bound up with a species of idealism. It derives from the early training in which a middle-class child is taught almost simultaneously to wash his neck, to be ready to die for his country, and to despise the 'lower classes'.

* According to Chesterton, dirtiness is merely a kind of 'discomfort' and therefore ranks as self-mortification. Unfortunately, the discomfort of dirtiness is chiefly suffered by other people. It is not really very uncomfortable to be dirty - not nearly so uncomfortable as having a cold bath on a winter morning."



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