In Totonac there is no general word to indicate that a thing smells. The exact shade of smell must be taken into account and a word chosen giving it. Eight distinct groups of stems have been observed pertaining to these many distinctions of smells. Although these stems each have a central "smell" meaning, some also include the idea of taste, desirability, etc. E.g., the stem used for a sour smell is also used for a sour taste. Sometimes the range of meaning of a stem overlaps with another, as in the case of words used in English to distinguish colors.

The phonetic symbolism involved in the play on the velar stops k and q and the fricatives s, š and t cannot be correlated in terms of semantic correspondences. That is, it is not possible to reduce these phonetic similarities to one single sememe. There is no common denominator. It may be noted that a study of these groups will give us a small example of the phonetic symbolism that runs throughout the verb and adjectival stems of Totonac. E.g., šuy 'he skins an animal' and suy 'he peels a potato or something similar'.

Each of the following groups has a basic underlying form whose semantic meaning is rather vague, and the definitions given here are not entirely adequate. The examples used are given in their most common form—as static verbal nouns and also as static adjectives. E.g., mu-kitu'na sa?nat 'the flower is fragrant', mu-kitu'n-sa?nat 'the fragrant flower'.

I. Vegetation and good smells: Basic root mu?-u?n.
   mu-kitu'n 'a pleasant smell as of flowers, food, etc.'
   mu-ksu'n 'smell of mint, parsley, tobacco and other herbs,
   as well as some medicines as Sloane's Liniment, incense'
   mu-qšu'n 'smell of ground hominy (masa) that still smells
   strongly of the lime with which it is made'
   mu-ku'n/mu-ku'n 'smell of fresh vegetables, unripe fruit'

II. Bad smells: Basic root pu?. The final -a in this group and
groups III-VI is a stem formative suffix.
   pu-ka'ta 'smell of human excrement, rotten things, a drunk­
   ard's breath, pulque'
puʔkṣa 'smell of a skunk or fox, bad meat, manure and certain plants as papaquelite'
puʔqṣa 'smell of mold, mushrooms, etc.'

III. Medicinal and aromatic smells: Basic root ha-
haʔkṣa 'smell of alcohol, camphor, hot peppers when toasting, dust sprinkled with rain or water'
haʔqṭa 'smell of urine, wet ashes, certain medicines, Fuller's Earth'
haʔqṣa/hakṣa 'smell of citrus fruit skins, the pods and green beans of the guaxi tree'

IV. Body and animal smells: Basic root -un-
skunka 'metallic smells, mice, fish, snakes, coins, damp earth'
squnqa 'dirty feet, strong fish smell'
ṭkunka/tqunqa 'smell of grease or fat, butcher shop'
ṣqunqa 'unsavory food, utensils and dishes that have been used for food'

V. Sour smells: Basic root -uʔt-
škutʔa 'smell of vinegar and other sour smells'
šquʔta 'smell of burnt gunpowder, firecrackers, acrid smell'

VI. Smells that leave a taste in the mouth: Basic root -iʔh-
The alternate -aʔh- is the result of a mechanical phonologic change.
škiʔa/sqaʔha 'a tasty or savory smell, smell of food cooking'
šqaʔha 'smell of burnt gunpowder, firecrackers, acrid smell'

VII. Artificial smell: Basic root ʃiʔ-ʃiʔ.
ʃiʔkiʔn 'smell of perfume or hand soap which although pleasant does not smell right or fit the person who may have that smell. Used of men who use perfume, or of young ladies who use it profusely'

VIII. Air-permeating smell: This one stem does not fall into the same class as the preceding stems and is found only in a verbal usage. It is an active stem always while the previous stems may be either active or static in usage.
kinkalay 'the smell permeates or is traveling in the air, easily perceptible'
It is often used in combination with the verb stem min 'to come'
kinkalamin 'the smell is coming (to us) from somewhere, is brought with the wind'
These smell stems (except the stem kinkala) are used as verb stems in the following different ways:

1. Causitive: With the addition of the prefix ma- and the suffix -i a verb stem is formed which indicates that the subject of the verb in which it appears causes or makes the object indicated in the verb to take on the smell of the original stem. E.g., wa·ʔ a·ʔšuš, ma·skiʔhiy li·waʔt ‘garlic gives food a savory smell’; ma·mu·ʔkluʔni·kan ni·n ‘they are embalming the dead person’

2. Ingressive: With the addition of the suffix -n or -# in the case of the stems ending in -n a verb stem is formed which indicates that the subject of the verb in which it appears gets or is getting into the state of the smell of the original stem. E.g., nalaʔkhaʔ-kšanaʔ ‘you will get to smell like citrus skins (by eating an orange for instance)’; mu·ʔkluʔni·ʔt šaʔnat ‘the flower has become fragrant, taken on a fragrant smell’.

3. Abstractive: With the loss of the stem formative -a and the addition of the suffix -nan we have a resultant verb stem which indicates that the smell of the original stem is in evidence without any object or subject indicated. E.g., pu·ksnan ‘there is the smell of skunk all around’. To make this more abstract, an additional suffix -na is also included. E.g., pu·ksna·nan ‘(we are in a) time of pestilence’.

Interesting usages of these smell stems:

mintaʔ-lakpuʔkša ‘you smell of drink’ (lit. ‘your sameness to something that has that bad smell’)  
ka·ʔmu·ʔkšuʔ ‘flower market’ (lit. ‘extended surface’ plus the smell stem)  
šalakmuʔ-kšuʔ ‘perfume or anything that has been fixed up to smell good’  
li·ma·škuʔti·n ‘leaven’ (lit. ‘instrument which makes sour’)  
puʔkšankiʔwiʔ ‘tree called in Spanish sangre de grado’  
puʔkšankiʔwiʔ ‘tree called in Spanish cedro’

To form a noun indicating the thing itself with such a smell the suffix -nuʔ, -naʔ, -niʔ is added to the stem. E.g., puʔksnuʔ ‘an object that has a skunk smell’.

To exaggerate the intensity of the smell but with a resultant static adjective or noun the suffix -niʔnkaʔ-waʔ is added to the stem. E.g., puʔksniʔnkaʔ-waʔ ‘an intense skunk smell’.—[Herman Aschmann, Summer Institute of Linguistics]