Eating

IS AN ENGLISH WORD

ANNEMARIE Mol

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INTRODUCTION

Contrasting Words

Annemarie Mol

A Taster

Here, to start with, a taster. Please imagine a dinner table—or rather three of them. A meal is about to begin. At the first table the assembled people speak French. As they pick up their utensils, they wish each other *Bon appétit*. *Bon* translates into English as *good*, and *appétit* is appetite, the gusto with which a person may welcome their food. This way of well-wishing stages eating as something that nourishes a body that, ideally, is eager to be nourished. The conversation around the second table is in Dutch. Here the table companions wish each other *Smakelijk eten*. In this phrase the word *eten* evokes the activity of *eating* while *smakelijk* calls up joys to do with appreciating the taste, the *smaak*, of food. This time around, the eating at hand is a matter of savoring the pleasures of the palate. Around table number three, the shared language is Danish, which comes with the mealtime blessing *Velbekomme*. May the food you are about to eat (the word *food* is skipped, it goes without saying) *bekomme*, become, you *vel*, well. This turns eating into incorporating food that may unduly turn out to have adverse effects but that is meant to give those who eat it a pleasant gut feeling and overall perk up their bodies. Hence, from one sentence to another, we shift from the appetite that encourages eating to the taste pleasures that may accompany it to the bodily sensations that follow.

Dictionaries present these phrases—*Bon appétit*, *Smakelijk eten*, and *Velbekomme*—as substitutes for each other, as each other's translations.

Fair enough, if only because this is helpful when you seek advice as to what you might say when you happen to share a meal with speakers of French, Dutch, or Danish. At the same time, the proposition that these expressions are interchangeable obscures the fact that each of them makes something slightly different of *eating*. Put in technical terms: presenting these phrases as each other's translations suggests that they are equivalent, which hides their equivocations.[1] This book turns around such equivocations: It minds the gaps between different ways of wording. At first glance, this seems superfluous. After all, in the anthropological tradition, such gaps have been widely used as entrances into wide-reaching alterities. In the case at hand, the lack of conformity between *Bon appétit*, *Smakelijk eten*, and *Velbekomme* might then be taken to indicate that eating is not a natural phenomenon given with the irreducible needs of the human body but rather a complex, situated practice infused with the intricacies of particular cultures. As, time and again, table companions foreground either their appetite, or the joys of the palate, or the gratifications that food may provide, they cultivate different versions of the bodily practice of eating. This is an argument to which I subscribe. In this book further examples of contrasting configurations of eating follow. But here comes the caveat. Seeking to articulate the differences among French, Dutch, and Danish mealtime blessings has, just now, introduced a fixed point. To allow for a comparison between them, I have argued that *Bon appétit*, *Smakelijk eten*, and *Velbekomme* make something different of eating. But eating is not simply a neutral point of reference. *Eating* is an English word.

The chapters of this book were written over the course of more than a decade. They differ in style and result from collaborations with variously inclined coauthors. However, they all interfere with the dream that English might provide authors with neutral analytic tools. No language can, even if a lot of conceptual effort is put into it. As we further substantiate this argument, we write in a (well-tamed, scholarly) version of English. This, after all, is the dominant language of international academia—to which we hope to make a contribution. To do so, we present situations-and-their-words that do not easily fit with English language conventions.[2] In most chapters, this means that our stories hinge on one or two words imported from other linguistic traditions. There is a chapter that trails the Dutch word *lekker*, which translates as *tasty* but entails a lot more. Another chapter compares *chupar* and *comer*, two ways of appreciating fruit in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. Drawing on ethnographic materials from Vorarlberg, Austria, we explore *schmecka*—almost tasting but not quite, if only be-

cause it implies a positive appreciation. From Spanish we import *gustar*—a fading kind of love, evoked by a lamb, first caringly fostered as a member of the household, then gratefully savored. Two of the chapters do not import terms from elsewhere but play with English words. One of these stretches out *tasting* from something that may happen in the mouth to something that may be done by the fingers—if you eat with your fingers. A final chapter talks about *settling on an okay meal* in a self-service restaurant along a British motorway, interfering with the notion of consumer choice that is all too readily used for what happens on such occasions.

Empirically, all the chapters have to do with what—in English—is called *eating*. More particularly, they are invested in the pleasures—and occasionally the displeasures—that may accompany eating. From the practices we study, we draw lessons about valuing, which in our cases only rarely takes the shape of judging. Instead, taking pleasure, appreciating, counts most. These lessons emerge from both the semiotic specificities and the material arrangements of our fields, in combination. Equivocation is not just a matter of untranslatable words but concerns mismatches between worlds. And while in our ethnographic writing we play with unusual *descriptive* terms, our aim is to challenge the firming-up of *analytic* terms. In our accounts the very division between descriptive and analytic falters—and, concurrently, so, too, does the division between *them* and *us*. In parallel, each chapter tackles other concerns. Trailing *lekker* helps in taking leave of the idea of language as a coherent system, to attune instead to what words may do in situated instances. *Tasting with fingers* offers an occasion to talk about experimental ethnographic methods. Writing about *chupar* and *comer*, we do not enclose these modes of engaging with fruit in two separate boxes—cultures—but rather compare them along different axes, again and again, thus opening up alterities between practices. Unraveling *schmecka*, we question the linguistic neutrality of research questions: While studying *tasting* asks after sensations or perceptions, studying *schmecka* opens up an inquiry into appreciations. The chapter on *gustar* seeks to discuss meat eating in a way that is neither moralistic nor apologetic nor relativist but situated. And as *settling on an okay meal* details the apprehensive musings of a prospective eater, it addresses eating's potentially precarious physicalities. Along the way, a lot is touched on, chewed on, processed. But throughout, my coauthors and I interfere with dreams of a scientific vocabulary built out of solid concepts and, along with that, the hubris of a center that denies its own provinciality. We take leave of Theory with a capital *T*.

Analytic Concepts and Empirical Realities

In the humanities and the social sciences, it is only fairly recently that eating has been granted due attention. Scholars preferred to focus on what they took to be higher pursuits. In the various pyramids that ranked topics from banal to elevated, eating stood low. It was private, not public; a matter of reproduction, not production; something all living creatures do, not uniquely human; and a bodily necessity, not a mental achievement.[3] If food was studied, what stood out was its production, the efforts this involved, and the resources it gobbled up. This engendered dazzling histories of earthly interdependence. Historically, sugar from cane plantations in the Caribbean (with enslaved laborers shipped over from Africa) appears to have fueled the Industrial Revolution in England (where exploited laborers kept going for hours on sweet tea).[4] Such interdependence endures with a vengeance, as mangoes from Peru are sold in Dutch supermarkets and grain from Ukraine finds its way to Ethiopia (or not, leading to famines). At the other end of the market, food allows for consumption. But what is *consumption*? The term fuses buying and eating, obscuring the way in which eating, say, an apple is a quite different activity from buying, say, a bicycle.[5] More recently, research began to background market relations so as to focus on bodily practices to do with eating. How do people in Denmark navigate between eating too little and eating too much? How is it that maize is cherished in Guatemala but considered to be dull, gray food for Kenya's Samburu? And so on.[6]

This book starts from yet a further shift in focus. It does not repeat that eating is an irrevocable human need nor that diverse humans eat in diverse ways. Instead, it insists that *eating* is an English word. The cuts that come with this are by no means self-evident. For instance, the term *eating* contrasts incorporating solid foods with incorporating fluids, which is called *drinking*. Jointly, these modes of incorporation contrast with *breathing*, which involves inhaling and exhaling air. Other linguistic traditions make other cuts—they help to order reality differently. Take *chupar*, which we explore in chapter 3. This is a way of engaging with juicy fruits, which even if they have already passed the lips, may partially emerge again, as pits are spat out and juices spill over one's chin. In Bahia *chupar* contrasts with *comer*, which translates into English as *eating*. Hence, *chupar* is a way of eating, while at the same time it is also other than eating. The Dutch word *eten* is similar to and different from eating in another way. Crucially, it is not just a verb, ostensibly akin to the English verb *to eat*, but also a noun,

translating into English as *food*. A small difference like this may have far-reaching consequences. While writing the grant application that allowed me to do the research that informed this book, I slipped between languages. Inspired by *food* studies, I proposed to study *eating*. This shift from nourishing stuff to the activity of intimately engaging with it was not a move I had carefully thought through. Instead, I just went with the flow of my first language, where *eten* includes both.

Eten, crucially, is not simply a word spoken in my Dutch field, where people wish each other *Smakelijk eten*. The term also helps to shape my thinking. I have not tried to resist such slippages. Quite the contrary: In the chapters of this book, my coauthors and I explore what happens when words pertinent to our fields come to scaffold our writing. In this way, we interfere with the idea that true academic work is marked by a clear distinction between empirical and analytic language. Attempting to enforce this distinction, scholars have often imported analytic concepts into English (or French, or German) from Latin or Greek, or otherwise dressed concepts up in such a way that they sound somewhat artificial. This artificiality signals a break with the messiness of ordinary language. The hope is that using well-crafted, solemn concepts allows academics to distance themselves from common sense. Let me exemplify why this is a problematic strategy by unraveling a concept relevant to the chapters that follow: that of *flavor perception*. The sensory scientists who proposed this term as an alternative to *tasting* suggest that the term *flavor* helps to underscore that humans perceive their foods and drinks not just with their sense of taste but also with their senses of smell, sight, hearing, and touch. The added *perception* was meant to combat an idea that has haunted Western philosophy for centuries, which is that tasting may lead to all kinds of bodily *sensations* but is not a *perception* because it fails to provide a person with knowledge about the outside world.[7] Hence, with *flavor perception*, researchers made space for research into situations where human subjects acquire pertinent knowledge about food objects and their diverse properties.

The critical edge (collaborating senses; the gathering of knowledge) is interesting enough, and *flavor perception* is a fine object of study. But—and this is the moot point—this does not mean that flavor perception occurs everywhere and every time people eat or drink. If ethnographers go looking for it, they may very well hit on quite different realities. An article written by Jinghong Zhang beautifully illustrates this.[8] Hoping to contribute to the anthropology of the senses, Zhang set out to study how *flavor perception* takes shape in a teahouse in Shenzhen, in Guangdong Province,

China. This seemed a suitable site, as the guests of the teahouse invest a lot in learning to recognize the particularities of high-quality oolong teas. To gain insight into the historical background of this practice, Zhang started her research by reading old texts from Mandarin literati explaining how to cultivate the ability to distinguish between different kinds of tea. When subsequently she performed participant observation in the teahouse, she came across quite a few of the cultivation techniques of old, even if her present-day informants had never read the learned texts. But something did not quite fit. While Zhang learned ever more about savoring tea, the answer to her research question eluded her. Gradually, she realized that all kinds of things were going on in the teahouse but not *flavor perception*.

For one, Zhang's interlocutors did not just use their taste, smell, sight, hearing, and touch to discern the properties—the flavor—of the tea. Instead, they sought to attune themselves to the effects a fine tea could have on their entire bodies. In words akin to those used in the Chinese classics, they remarked that the five tastes—sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and spicy—each *nourish life* in their own particular way. The classic sources provide diverse specifications of what this entails. Zhang quotes one, which proposes that sweet nourishes the flesh, salty the pulse, sour the bones, bitter the chi, and spicy the muscles. Zhang's informants, when detailing the tea's nourishing properties, did not provide her with such lists. Instead, they spoke in roundabout ways, using what Zhang calls *abstruse allusions*. This is a fascinating equivocation. For here the point is not just that Chinese words for how tea may affect the human body lack English equivalents but also that, from one language to another, speaking itself is a different kind of activity. English, writes Zhang, favors direct and explicit speech. In the teahouse, by contrast, it is a sign of refinement to speak in creative, ambiguous ways. Hence, when Zhang asked after the meaning of the word *yun*—still hoping that this might come close to *flavor perception*—she did not receive a uniform answer: "During my visits to Chaozhou, I have often heard ordinary people use the word *yun* to praise good quality *dancing* [an oolong tea]. When I asked about its meaning, I was given various glosses. In one response, *yun* was interpreted as *hou di hen shen* 喉底很深, literally 'the feeling in the throat is very deep.' Another vividly explained *yun* as a sensorial process in several steps: one sips the tea and swallows it slowly and soon the lingering flavor arises; when one closes the mouth, the lingering aroma of the tea comes out through the nose, bringing supreme pleasure."[9]

Zhang's informants do not seek to gather knowledge about the oolong tea they are sipping. Instead, they are appreciative of what they call the "su-

preme pleasure" offered by "the lingering aroma of the tea [that] comes out through the nose." Zhang gives some context to explain how welcome this pleasure is. While her informants revitalize classic forms of self-cultivation, they are also twenty-first-century people with stressful jobs. This provides them with a fine income, while making it attractive to spend some of that income relaxing in a good teahouse, away from the buzz and the pressure, gradually learning to luxuriate in the *yun* of *dancing*. If Zhang had clung to her original plan to study *flavor perception* (or if some external authority, like a supervisor, grant giver, or journal editor, had obliged her to do so), she would have missed out on the crux of what was happening in her field site. Only by loosening her original design did she realize that in the Shenzhen teahouse, savoring tea has to do with escaping a fast-paced working life so as to calmly cultivate abstrusely alluded-to, elusive pleasures. *Flavor perception*, then, however spot-on this concept may be in the context where it was coined, is not a neutral research tool, readily transportable everywhere. Instead, it is another English word. It does not fit the reality of a carefully researched Shenzhen teahouse.

Because the analytic terms currently in use in international academia are English—and not, say, Chinese or Dutch—when we stick to them, a lot of realities foreign to current academic English are denied. English analytic terms allow for some articulations and not others. But *English* is not a coherent unity, and English concepts do not necessarily accord with all situations in which people speak English either. British imperialism has spread the language widely, but there are impressive differences between the varieties of English spoken in, say, New Delhi, Sydney, Johannesburg, Washington, and Kingston. Practices differ too. And even British people do not necessarily engage in *flavor perception* when enjoying a meal. Other things are more likely going on, even when they talk about the taste of their food. Sally Wiggins demonstrates this using a corpus of dinner table conversations recorded in northern England.[10] There, a guest may say: "I love what you did with the chicken." The point of this remark is not to share knowledge about the flavors of the chicken but to compliment the cook—who accommodates by responding: "Thank you!" When, less appreciative, a young boy mutters: "Carrots are *yuck*," his table companions do not take this as a fact about the flavor of the carrots but as an explanation of why there is food left on his plate. In a soothing voice, the mother responds: "Oh, do you not like the carrots?" In this way, she shifts the problem from the carrots being *yuck* to the boy not liking them, and from carrots in general to these particular ones, cooked, so that next week

the child may want to try them grated. All in all, around the dinner tables about which Wiggins writes, taste talk does not concern flavors being perceived. Instead, it modulates relations between people.

If *flavor perception* is not present in either Chinese teahouses or English homes, that does not mean the term is vacuous. The reality to which it alludes may very well be organized into being. Anna Mann describes how this occurs in laboratory research into the traits of food objects.[11] The laboratory researchers hope to discover how specific preparation techniques alter how food objects affect the senses. Does the addition of this or that ingredient bring out, or rather conceal, the taste of chocolate in a drink? To answer such questions, trained human subjects receive food objects for inspection. As the subjects probe and rate the samples, nothing should disturb their *flavor perception*. Each individual therefore sits in their own private taste booth, the light is standardized, and there are no potentially disturbing smells around from perfumes, lunch boxes, or other alien sources. Ideally, subjects do not swallow samples but spit them out. In between bites, they neutralize their palate with a sip of water. Their training has taught them to be vocal about what they perceive, and at the start of each new project, they adjust their lingo to each other. All of this underlines that *flavor perception*, while neither a generalized human ability nor simply English, may, with the necessary resources, be orchestrated into being. In laboratories, this is done by standardizing environments and people. Outside laboratories, one may try to bring standardization about conceptually, by using firm analytic terms. But why would one want to do that and, in the process, smother strange and surprising empirical realities?

If in this book we interfere with the distinction between empirical and analytic terms, this is not an argument for ethnographies that stay stuck in the self-understanding of the people in the field. The point is rather to attend to what words *do* both within fields and within research practices. We study words in their guise as ordering devices, part and parcel of the practices in which they figure. Contrasting how different words are being used in different practices is its own way of breaking with what might seem self-evident in any one of them. Experimentally using strange words in one's writing is, in its turn, a way of interfering with things that seem to be self-evident. It is impossible to question an entire vocabulary at once. You need to trust some words to put other words in doubt. But sooner or later, any word may shift from a tool to a topic, from something written offhand to something to dwell on, tinker with, or replace. The words most central to one's research require special attention. This means that someone hop-

ing to study practices of what in English is called *eating* may want to ask questions about this particular English word. What resonates within it, which worlds does it evoke, what alternatives are there for it, what is done otherwise with *other* words? The art is to avoid naturalizing English without simply giving up on it. If by tradition researchers distance themselves from their field by using solid analytic concepts, the alternative technique of contrasting words-and-their-practices estranges different configurations of reality from one another.[12]

Material Semiotic Equivocations

In social and cultural anthropology, comparing cultures by attending to a few crucial words has a long tradition. To anyone who has ever left their language zone, it is obvious that different groups of people speak different languages. Fieldworkers therefore usually start their research with an extensive language course. Being able to talk with the people in one's field directly, without an interpreter, allows researchers to develop a better sense of what matters to those people. Additionally, anthropologists often consider the specificities of languages to contain cues regarding what is at stake in cultures. But then, the fieldwork done, they tend to write articles and books about what they learned in their own languages, or at least in the language they share with their envisioned audience. In this way, *their* reality—that of the people studied—is laid out to *us*: anthropologists, or a wider intellectually interested readership supposedly similar to the author. In the process, *their* linguistic repertoires are translated into *ours* to the best of the anthropologist's abilities, while, in order to transmit an acute sense of *their* otherness, the resulting texts are spiced up with a few untranslatables.[13] In the present book, we build on that tradition. Four of the chapters pivot around one or more non-English words that condense quintessential lessons from our fields. There are, however, a few added specificities. The first is that the contrasts we explore are not just verbal but also physical. They concern the ways in which people materially organize practices that in English are called *eating*.[14] To flag this, we call our inquiries *material semiotic*.[15] The semiosis at stake here is not that of signs (in the form of words or otherwise) that people (and other creatures) use to communicate.[16] Our interest is not in meaning transmitted but in realities (acting and enacted) and appreciations (sought and surprising). Second, in our chapters, the relevant alterities are not straightforward. This

book is written in English. For me and for most of the coauthors, this is our second or third language, and only two of the authors are so-called native speakers. The languages spoken in our fields, by contrast, are not foreign to us—at least to some of us; they are not simply *theirs* but also *ours*. This yields interesting confusions regarding the division between *them* and *us*.

Allow me to give a first indication of these two moves in one go. For this I once again draw on someone else's work. Hunting for research into appreciations to do with eating, I came across an interesting article by Henrietta Nyamnjoh, based on fieldwork with migrants from Cameroon now living in Cape Town, South Africa. On special occasions—a new baby, a marriage, or someone's death—these migrants gather to eat *food from home*.[17] Most of them appreciate foods more readily available in South Africa as tasty enough, but *food from home* offers another kind of pleasure: It provides a sense of belonging. It makes, or so Nyamnjoh tells, the migrants feel connected both to the families they left behind and to each other, offering them a welcome respite from the discrimination that they face in the land where they now live.[18] As Cameroon has a tropical climate and South Africa a temperate one, the necessary ingredients come from afar, sent by family members or bought in the odd shop that sells them. The situation is especially difficult for the men, as most of them lack the skills needed to cook the dishes with which their mothers pampered them. The women tend to have those skills, which obligates them to perform extra tasks but also offers extra power. They are indispensable to gatherings of Cameroonian migrants eating food from home.

Nyamnjoh has a keen eye for detail and also attends to the particularities of the language her informants use. They speak with her in English, as they come from the part of Cameroon where, due to the twists of colonial history, the dominant shared language is English, not French. Nyamnjoh comes from the same region and understands everything being said just fine but realizes that some expressions might puzzle her readers. For instance, Nyamnjoh's informants speak of their eagerness to *touch* food from home. And indeed they literally touch it. *Food from home* they eat with their hands, abandoning the spoons that, in South Africa, they otherwise use and appreciate as easy. Here, from one version of English to another, *touching* continues to be something that fingers do. But then a linguistic differentiation kicks in. In this context, Nyamnjoh explains, the word *touch* is not just a literal allusion to eating with fingers. There is more to it. As she writes in a footnote: "The sentence 'this Christmas I go touch some fufu and eru' can loosely be translated as 'I will prepare a delicious meal

of fufu and eru this Christmas.'"[19] In this turn of phrase, *touching* means something specific to Cameroonian English. Nyamnjoh, familiar with her field, therefore provides her imagined readers, strangers to her field, with a translation.

Translating is less easy when it comes to *fufu* and *eru*. There are no English terms for these dishes, and, like her informants, Nyamnjoh calls them by their Pinyin or Mankon names. Then she tries, once again, to reach out to her readers. The most coveted *fufu*, she explains, is made from fermented cassava, while *eru* is "a wild forest vegetable from the iron leaf family that is cooked in palm oil, with spinach to soften, crayfish, smoked fish, *kanda* [cow skin] and meat."[20] In my Dutch ignorance, I have no idea what this juxtaposition of ingredients amounts to. It goes on. When she mentions *ndole*, Nyamnjoh explains that the dish is prepared from ground blanched peanuts. Again, I am at a loss: I know peanuts, but what does it mean to ground blanch them, and what is involved in their further preparation?[21] There is more: "*achombo* (puff-puff and beans, similar to doughnuts; also known in Mankon as *mukungh me laah*); grilled mackerel; corn-chaff (a mixture of corn and beans); *koki* beans (a black-eyed bean pudding); Jollof rice; *mukungh me mækara* (rice mixed with carrots, green beans, and sweet corn); mixed okra with *egusi* soup (made with ground pumpkin seeds, also called *ndzah koro ne ngèh*); and *achu* (pounded *cocoyam*, also called *médzemé-chu ne ndzah neki*)."[22] You get the point. However detailed they are, these explications work only for readers who—earlier, elsewhere—have had the chance to *touch* these foods and who remember the bodily sensations that followed.

If Nyamnjoh's informants were to read her text, they might appreciate the careful attention she paid to their festive dishes. Fellow Cameroonians, as well as foreign anthropologists (journalists, tourists) who have shared enough meals with Pinyin- or Mankon-speaking people, might recognize these dishes with nostalgia. But all that reaches *me* is that the repertoire of *food from home* is rich: It holds a lot of variety. Further specificities elude me. That is not Nyamnjoh's fault. She could not have helped me by using more, or other, words. Nor is it my fault, for while I try to remedy my ignorance by reading, reading only goes so far, and my ability to sample *other* foods hits upon practical limits. The situation is made more difficult by the fact that, as far as foodstuffs are concerned, Nyamnjoh and I share precious few points of reference. For that is how anthropologists tend to introduce strange things to their readers: by proposing a comparative handhold. Nyamnjoh tries: She says that *achombo* (puff-puff and beans) is similar to

doughnuts. This may help some readers, but I have a hard time thinking of *beans* together with the oversweet *doughnuts* that, decades ago, I ate not in the Netherlands but in the United States. All this signals a break with the classic configuration of anthropology. By tradition, when anthropologists told stories about others, they would anchor their explanations in shared points of reference. In this way, they compared *them* to *us* (often implicitly and without actually studying *us*, but that is another story).[23] Officially, *us* stood for fellow anthropologists, or a broad audience of intellectually interested readers. Implicitly, however, *we* were supposed to be familiar with doughnuts, Christianity, apples, class differences, motorways—what have you. This configuration is fading. Nyamnjoh and I share a scholarly interest in the topic of eating, but when it comes to the practice of eating, she shares more with her informants than with me. This makes it difficult for author and reader to bond in a scholarly *we* considering *their* other but interesting practices.

Anthropology is transforming. Increasing numbers of anthropologists conduct fieldwork with people among whom they were born and raised. They can speak with their informants from day one. The language course they need is rather one that teaches *writing academic English*. For writing in English is what they do. With some luck, this makes it possible to reach an academic audience, qualify for grants, find jobs, and hold on to them. They? *We*. I find myself in this position too. Like Nyamnjoh, I hit on the conundrum that when my writing involves *stuff*, the relevant untranslatables are not just verbal but also material. Which reference points to use? Say I have done fieldwork in a nursing home in the Netherlands and want to describe a meal where the inhabitants were eating *brood*. At face value, there is no problem of translation. The English word *bread* is a fine equivalent for the Dutch word *brood*. However, this linguistic proximity hides that the stuff this word alludes to differs greatly from one setting to the next. I might need to explain to French readers that I am not talking about oblong, airy, baguettes but about loaves, cut into slices. Maybe Danish readers should be warned that the bread served in Dutch nursing homes is less compact than most Danish *brød*. Reaching readers in the United States is more difficult. My limited bodily memory is that all the bread I managed to find when traveling in the United States years ago was spongy and unattractive—but can I write that? It might sound insulting. At the same time, compared to the sourdough loaves of revivalist bakers in San Francisco about which I have read, the standardized, relatively fluffy yeast bread on offer in Dutch nursing homes is most likely bland.[24] Inserting

all the points of comparison I can think of would make my text rather elaborate and still leave out many readers. This is a problem for everyone who writes across differences. But so far authors who share enough of their background with their editors and publishers are allowed to leave the work of *material translation* to their readers, while *other* authors are tasked with engaging in elaborative explanations.[25]

In traditional anthropology, author and reader used to form an *us*, sharing a common tongue, while untranslatables marked the alterity of others, categorized as *them*. Reference points shared among *us* offered a backdrop for comparison that helped in writing about *them*. In present-day anthropology, scholars may be linguistically as well as physically closer to their fields than to their colleagues. Material semiotic equivocations are therefore bound to run right through conversations among academics. Both words and the nonverbal realities they intertwine with—articulate, help to order—may have a hard time traveling. In and of itself, this is not a problem. It rather signals a liberation from the situation of old, in which cozy coteries gossiped about absent *others*. (Can I write *that*? Once again, this may sound insulting.) But now that the circle of authors is expanding, *we* would better be asking some questions about how to put academic conversations on another footing. How might *we* relate to each other without holding on to misguided presumptions as to who *we* are and what *we* share?[26] How to describe practices without alienating the people involved, without turning them into strangers, held at arm's length as *them*? How to pay attention to, and dwell on, the gaps between *words* and *worlds* without enclosing groups of people each in their own cages? And how to respect the ubiquity of equivocations, forgoing the illusion that it is possible to master concepts, be they English or *other*? These questions animate this book.[27]

Language and Words

At first glance, it may seem that equivocations are gaps between what may be said and done in different languages. The notion of *language* is hard to circumvent, and in what I have written thus far, I have resorted to using it. I called the mealtime blessings with which I began French, Dutch, and Danish. I insisted that *eating* is an English word. Nyamnjoh's remarks on the Cameroonian inflection of *touch* indicated variations within English, but this *within* still allows for English to remain an overall container.

To some extent, the existence of languages is real enough. In most of Europe, the rise of nation-states went hand in hand with the normalization of a single so-called proper way of speaking and writing. This or that linguistic variant was elevated to the status of the standard language, while other variants were marginalized and downgraded to dialects. In nineteenth-century France, only those who spoke standard French were allowed to hold jobs as civil servants—too bad for Breton, Occitan, Corsican, and other *patois* of the marginalized provinces.[28] The Netherlands has come to be dominated by the variant originally spoken in Haarlem, a town situated in the most powerful Dutch region, called Holland. The dialect from Limburg, the southern province where I grew up, is considered peculiar by those living farther north and in the northerners' estimation marks the dialect's speakers as backward. The standard version of Danish, in turn, was imposed on governmental affairs and in newly established schools in Greenland when the Danish state colonized it. Analogous impositions took place in many other parts of the world—Cameroon, once the Germans were expelled from it, was encroached on by both English and French. Language imposition is a particular form of violence, among the many others that marked the processes of nation building and colonization. All of this means that languages are real enough. But it also means that they should be acknowledged for what they are: not spontaneous, quasi-natural clusterings of semantic repertoires and grammatical rules but strategically concocted, historical constructions.[29]

The construction of languages not only was a European imposition but also scaffolded decolonizing efforts. An interesting example of this is the crafting of *Bahasa Indonesia* out of *Malay*.[30] The Indonesian archipelago is immensely spread out, and its many peoples speak many vernaculars. For centuries, they had used a variant of *Malay* as a trading language. The Dutch colonizers attuned to that, if only because it spared them the trouble of organizing the comprehensive schooling that might have allowed them to impose Dutch. *Maleis* (as it was called in Dutch) supported colonial rule. Even so, the nationalist movement also used it to unite the inhabitants of disparate islands against the Dutch. Very few people spoke *Maleis* as their first language, so it could be elevated to the status of a national language without any single group ostensibly overriding all the others. A committee of experts added modern words to the classic corpus and called the result *Bahasa Indonesia*. This may be translated into English as Indonesian Language. But here is the intriguing twist: The word *bahasa* only came to mean *language* in the process of transforming *Maleis* into *Bahasa*

Indonesia. *Malay* had no word for language. Ariel Heryanto recounts that the committee of experts tasked with coding up the language imported *bahasa* from Javanese, where it denoted the ability to speak and behave in accordance with complicated elite mores. *Bahasa* was something that only people of higher standing could have, quite like the English *cultivation*. To turn *bahasa* into an equivalent of *language*, it was cut loose from the stifling hierarchies of traditional Javanese court life. Thus, when it became politically independent, Indonesia had both a language and a word for it.

But if languages have been invented, it may be possible to *disinvent* them too. Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook make a case for this.[31] They are weary of schooling practices in which people learn foreign languages by memorizing a vocabulary and the concomitant grammar. This practice performs *a language* as an abstractable, coherent linguistic system, separated from such activities as thanking, negotiating, calling for help, soothing, well-wishing, and so on. They criticize the expertise on which committees of experts—in Indonesia and elsewhere—relied: the discipline of linguistics. When linguistics emerged in the early twentieth century, it tried to live up to the then-dominant model of science. In line with that, linguists set themselves the task of studying a stable object. The erratic things that people say in the course of their daily activities did not qualify. Those verbal utterings were considered too fluid (volatile, happenstance) to lend themselves to serious academic research. Hence, from its start, linguistics disentangled a coherent system of signs from what, in that process, it disqualified as mere instantiations. Founding father Ferdinand de Saussure, who worked in French, decreed that linguistics should study *langue*, language, shifting aside daily parlance, *parole*, as a messy assemblage of words. Only more recently have linguists like Makoni and Pennycook argued that linguistics should let go of this predilection for abstracted systems—indeed, should disinvent language and turn to words-in-practice instead. In line with that, we do not study *langues* in their alleged coherence but as the situated *paroles* that we come across in our fields. To accentuate this, every chapter is centered on one or two words. And it is not their generalized meaning we are after. Instead of putting our trust in dictionaries, we explore what words do—how they order, what they evoke—in the specific situations where we encounter them.

Sometimes, we take a shortcut. For instance, earlier, I wrote that in English *eating* differs from *drinking*, while both words jointly contrast with *breathing*. A remark like that suggests that the words *eating*, *drinking*, and *breathing* are all part of a semiotic network that exists in English, as if this

were a language existing separately from its practical instantiations. In the chapters to follow, this happens a few times as well, but we try to avoid it. We rather try to situate the words that we detail in specific places and practices.[32] To exemplify: *Brood* and *brød* do not differ between Dutch and Danish but between sites and situations somewhere in the Netherlands or Denmark. And while around the breakfast table in the nursing home *brood* is food to be eaten, in the bakery next door it is a product that holds a variety of ingredients and must be sold in a friendly way. Moreover, we do not just unravel how words cut up realities but also what they achieve. Sometimes they refer. In a laboratory, when research subjects tasked with *flavor perception* talk about *sweet*, this says something about the properties of a sample under investigation. But when a speaker of French wishes her table companions *Bon appétit*, she rather tries to bring a pleasurable situation into being. A child remarking that carrots are *yuck* provides an excuse for not eating them. And a migrant who states that, this Christmas, she will *touch food from home* expresses her hope for future enjoyment. People do all kinds of things with words.[33]

In the present book, we do such things in writing. The material substrate that carries across our semiosis consists of letters and ,?;"—punctuation—on a page. Interestingly, the conventions of formatting these marks carry linguistic theories within them. It was only in the final stages of editing this book that it became fully clear to me that what we hope to say is, at least to some extent, in tension with conventional ways of formatting. I was instructed to use *italics* to insist on the *word*-character of words (*eating* is a word) and "quotation marks" to denote *concepts* ("flavor perception" is a concept dear to laboratory scientists). I was asked to, on balance, accept words for what they are—I eat an apple; forgo insisting on the linguistic specificity implied—I *eat* an apple (and do not *chupar* or *touch* it); and swallow my doubts about how words help to shape reality (for instance, by dividing up humans into *women* and *men*). At the same time, the argument of the book is that all words make specific cuts and may be doubted; that concepts are on a par with other words; and that the *word*-character of words deserves enduring scholarly attention. So what to do? After quite a bit of juggling, the present text has far fewer markers than its earlier versions. I have used quotation marks only to flag instances when my coauthors and I quote others, whether their speech or their writing. In chapter 2, especially, italics are used for sentences directly copied from our fieldnotes. In other chapters, all non-English words are in italics—and so, too, throughout this book are words that need extra attention, whether this is

to stress their importance, to mark their word or concept character, or to encourage you, then and there, to doubt their salience even more than that of other English words.

Equivocal Conversations

Other scholars engage in quests similar or closely related to the one that we undertake in this book. For instance, in the introduction to the edited volume *Changing Theory: Concepts from the Global South*, Dilip Menon writes: "Not all conceptions are translatable across cultures and this gives us occasion to think about the hubris of the universal assumptions of our academic practices."[34] Menon wants to leave universal assumptions behind. He calls on his colleagues to break with the habit of using concepts emerging from what he calls *Euromerican historical experience* in scholarly work that seeks to describe societal configurations in the rest of the world. Menon lists a few examples: *democracy*, *modernity*, *capitalism*, *class*, *history*, *ethics*, and *politics*. Why should these terms be salient everywhere? As a counterstrategy, Menon has invited colleagues working in diverse settings in the Global South to introduce one or more relevant *other* terms. This makes for interesting texts centered around, for instance, *naam*, *rantau*, *ardhaniswara*, *pajubã*, *nongquayi*, *asabiyya*, *musafir*, and *dãdan*. These terms allow the authors Menon has assembled to tell *other* stories, nonuniversal, situated. To mark the otherness at stake and add together their various situated sites, they call on the contrast between the Global South and Global North. This is fair enough, and helpful in that it may strengthen scholars from the Global South who seek to write in/on their own terms.

From where I stand, however, I likewise have a problem with such terms as *democracy*, *modernity*, *capitalism*, *class*, *history*, *ethics*, and *politics*. My problem is not just with where on earth these terms come from but also with what on earth they attend to. That the social science concepts on Menon's list have been elevated into passe-partouts has helped to push aside a great number of concerns, not just in the Global South but also in the Global North. Take the pleasures involved in eating, drinking, and breathing. These have been all too easily excluded from serious research as too private, too corporeal, too female, or too frivolous. Insofar as eating, drinking, and breathing were studied at all, this was as human needs, necessary for earthly survival. There has been little attention to the pleasure, relief, consolation, apprehension—and so on—that may accompany these activ-

ities. In the twin to the present book, *Eating in Theory* (2021), I argue that typecasting *the human* as *a thinker* is not particularly helpful in times of ecological crisis and then make suggestions for how our theoretical reflexes might change if we take our cues from eating. In the present book, we take a different path. Like Menon, we want to move beyond the would-be universals currently congealed as academic concepts. However, the language in which these concepts are cast is not generally that of the Global North, nor is it Euro-American at large. It is rather a particular version of academically tamed English. Adjacent European languages and their practices do not necessarily align. They are different. They allow for different things to be done; they do things differently. A bit. Just a bit. But opening up these slight differences might make the Global North just that bit less onerous. It might undermine the pretentions of the would-be universals of academia by showing that they do not reach very far. Not only do they fail to capture realities in China, Cameroon, South Africa, or Brazil; they do not even suit practices where people speak Dutch, Spanish, or the dialect of Vorarlberg. Added to this, they also stifle, betray, and discipline practices where people speak English.[35]

Menon, while eager to make space for *Southern Theory*, does not have the illusion that the Global South forms a happy unity. If different linguistic traditions meet, equivocations are inevitable. Menon's proposition, therefore, is to altogether reject the ideal of commensurability. This, he asserts, will not lead to an "anarchy of diversity" because "if we imagine the departure we are making as the beginning of a set of conversations across traditions (which are themselves internally differentiated), then a more provisional approach becomes possible."[36] That sounds akin to what we are trying to do here. We, too, foster equivocations, seek to open things up, and forgo attempts at closure. The model for scholarship with which we work is neither one of true or false representations, nor one of arguments that may be won or lost. Instead, it is one of ongoing conversations in which one voice may amplify, question, enrich, deflect, or refract another.

And if this book seeks to foster conversations, it also emerges from them. These were mostly long-term collaborative processes in which one author helped to shape the other—by challenging them, advising them, puzzling them, and, crucially, offering them surprises. Such surprises may come from having grown up in, or having been immersed in, other practices; from having been raised in another language; but also from bringing in other concerns, other audiences, other literatures. Each of us partici-

pates in different worlds, but we all enjoy engaging in encounters, crafting temporary, shifting overlaps. And if *I* am a coauthor of every chapter of this book, this is, thanks to the various others involved, a somewhat different *me* each time. Hence, this book gradually grew from a series of conversations, while every new chapter builds on—and diverges from—the one that, written earlier, preceded it.

Chapter 1, about the Dutch term *lekker*, I wrote alone, but it is organized as a conversation with Marilyn Strathern, who imported words from her Melanesian field site to analyze her field in England. Chapter 2, about *tasting with fingers*, was written by seven authors. In this multivocal text we presented our field notes in the first person singular yet did not individualize the authors. Across our varied differences, Anna Mann, myself, Priya Satalkar, Amalinda Savirani, Nasima Selim, Malini Sur, and Emily Yates-Doerr joyfully took on a spirited collaboration. My Amsterdam colleague Mattijs van de Port asked his friends in Bahia to feast on fruits, to *chupar*, in front of his camera. He and I engaged in lively discussions about his footage and wrote a shared text, combining his phenomenological gaze with my post-Foucauldian antihumanism. With Anna Mann, I had many conversations while she worked on her doctoral thesis and I was her supervisor. When, afterward, we jointly wrote about *schmecka*, I often found myself jotting down things she had said years earlier. Rebeca Ibáñez Martín and I were similarly fascinated by *gustar*, but we needed many years to attune our sensitive text to the concerns of commentators on earlier versions and to the potential objections of imagined readers. The chapter I wrote with John Law results from a decade-long conversation about why—despite our intellectual proximity—research into eating appealed to me and made him apprehensive.

The conclusion to this book I wrote alone, but the coauthors of the earlier chapters all left their traces there, and many of them actively commented on it. It draws out a few lines that connect the diverse chapters. For one, it makes explicit how in the earlier chapters we deal with social differences and why we forgo the use of well-vested academic terms like *class*, *race*, and *gender*—yet more English words. All too easily, these terms are made to travel as residual universals, while what they mean in different sites is riven with specificities. These deserve to be either unpacked or left out but not black-boxed in quick asides and unstudied presumptions. Then I fold back to the theme that all the chapters share: valuing and more particularly appreciating. In English there is a close connection between tasting and testing, while academic researchers readily equate valuing with

judging. Our investigations, by contrast, dwell on such things as encouraging others to enjoy their food, the pleasures of eating with fingers, the gratification following from accepting the generous invitation of juicy fruits to bite into them, rewarding lunches shared with others, love for both an animal and its meat, and, finally, the careful avoidance of discomfort. They move valuing beyond judging, widening it out to appreciating. The gratitude that accompanies appreciative eating, we contend, is not an emotion hidden inside a person but a relational engagement. Finally, the conclusion comes back to our knowledge politics. Attending to material and semiotic untranslatables does not enclose people and their words in separate cages. Instead, only by caring for equivocations may *we* stop distantiating ourselves from *them* and hope to engage in conversations.

However, before that conclusion, there are still many pages to go. For now, then, let me express the hope that reading the chapters that follow offers you insights, reconfirmations, surprises, inspiration, new ideas of your own, and some intellectual pleasure to savor.

Notes

Introduction: Contrasting Words

1 The term *equivocation* I here use in line with Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectival Anthropology."

2 Certainly, others before us have signaled that there are problems with the dominance of English as an academic language. See, for example, Descarries, "Language Is Not Neutral." The topic remains urgent since the problem is ongoing and deserves to be addressed in relation to a wide range of specific cases—here that of valuing in practices to do with what in English is called *eating*.

3 For an exploration of the way theoretical terms (notably *being*, *knowing*, *doing*, and *relating*) come to shift if we seriously attend to eating, see the twin to this book, Mol, *Eating in Theory*.

4 For this story, see Sidney Mintz's magnificent *Sweetness and Power*.

5 This topic is further unraveled in chapter 6. For the case of apple eating, see Mol, "I Eat an Apple."

6 For Denmark, see Christensen, Hillersdal, and Holm, "Working with a Fractional Object"; for Guatemala, see Yates-Doerr, *Weight of Obesity*; and for maize in Kenya, see Holtzman, *Uncertain Tastes*.

7 For this history, see Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*.

8 Zhang, "'Sense of Life.'"

9 Zhang, "'Sense of Life,'" 56.

10 Wiggins, "Construction and Action."

11 Mann, "Sensory Science Research on Taste."

12 For this technique, see also Laurent et al., "Excreting Variously"; and Vogel, "Juxtaposition."

13 The problem is not simply word-for-word translations but also different ways of categorizing the world. For example, while the Spanish word *carne* translates into English as *meat*, in Guatemalan markets, one may buy *carne de soja*—not a *carne* that comes from animals but soy that forms the centerpiece of a meal. See Yates-Doerr, "Does Meat Come from Animals?"

14 A good example of realities lived differently is the case of sleep medication provided, to no avail, to people who fear for their soul when they sleep too deeply. Bonelli, "Ontological Disorders."

15 For an early use of this term, see Haraway, "Game of Cat's Cradle"; for a later twist, Law, "On Sociology and STS."

16 Technically speaking, we are building not on the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce but, rather, on that of Algirdas Julien Greimas. For an attempt to include nonhumans in the semiotics of Peirce, see Kohn, *How Forests Think*. For the widening of the semiotics of Greimas to nonhumans, see Latour and Bastide, "Essai de science-fabrication"; and, with a further twist and in English, Latour, "Politics of Explanation."

17 Nyamnjoh, "Food, Memory."

18 This resonates with other research on food and belonging. See, for example, L. Law, "Home Cooking"; and Bailey, "Migrant Suitcase."

19 Nyamnjoh, "Food, Memory," 38n10.

20 Nyamnjoh, "Food, Memory," 28.

21 An early reader, asked to comment on this chapter, tells me that this one is easy: *Ground* is the result of grinding, and *blanching* involves removing the skin. Maybe I should have realized that, but I did not. This indicates the limits of my knowledge of both English and peanuts.

22 Nyamnjoh, "Food, Memory," 28.

23 For this story, see Latour, "Comment redistribuer le grand partage?"

24 About such US bread, see Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*.

25 That English is the dominant language of so-called international academia creates a lot of extra work for those for whom it is not their first language; see Ammon, *Dominance of English*; and Curry and Lillis, "Problematizing English." In this book I do not dwell on that work but foreground issues of content.

26 For an interesting collection of essays on this question, see Chua and Mathur, *Who Are "We"?*

27 This interference is modest and only a beginning. For it is not just *words* that deserve questioning but also the *styles* of academic writing. For an in-road into the latter, see Bonelli, "Eating One's Worlds."

28 On the normalization of the French language, see Canguilhem, *On the Normal*. For how this still plays out in twenty-first-century France, with a focus on Corsica, see Candea, *Corsican Fragments*.

29 For a more extensive analysis along these lines, see Pennycook, *Language as a Local Practice*.

30 For the issue of language in the Dutch colonization of what is now Indonesia, I draw on Dorren, *Babel*. What I write here about the issue of language in Indonesian decolonization I learned from Heryanto, "Then There Were Languages."

31 Makoni and Pennycook, *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages*.

32 Once again, our concern is not with signs—that is, with techniques of communication—but with ordering; we are oriented on what may be said-and-done. Among our theoretical ancestry here is the notion of *discourse* as presented in Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*. This at least suggested studying words-and-things together as being jointly ordering and ordered, but it inherited a system/structure from linguistics that here we try to take leave from.

33 The allusion is to J. Austin, *How to Do Things*.

34 Menon, "Changing Theory," 26.

35 The second twin book—of a triplet, as it were—is an edited volume, also published as a journal issue, Mol and Law, "On Other Terms." It assembles texts that introduce non-English terms and concomitant realities from Brazilian Portuguese, Russian, Hungarian, Arabic, Sámi, Chinese, and Japanese languages, leaping over geographic gaps and mobilizing diverse cases to convey the point that non-English terms do things differently and do different things.

36 Menon, "Changing Theory," 22.

Chapter 1. Language Trails: *Lekker* and Its Pleasures

This chapter was earlier published as Annemarie Mol, "Language Trails: 'Lekker' and Its Pleasures," *Theory, Culture and Society* 31, nos. 2–3 (2014): 93–119.

1 The first iteration of this chapter was written as a contribution to a special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* in which others, too, wrote about, with, or for Strathern.

2 The names are fictions. I mobilized this same fieldwork fragment—dating from 2008—in a text that more extensively explores what *good food* may be in the nursing home with an eye on the questions to do with care; see Mol, "Care and Its Values." Dieke Martini did additional fieldwork into eating and drinking in nursing homes that helped me to refine my analysis. I first learned about eating and drinking in the nursing home from Alice Stollmeyer. See Harbers, Mol, and Stollmeyer, "Food Matters."

3 Strathern, "Binary License."

4 Mol, "One, Two, Three," 113.

5 Strathern, "What Is Politics?," 125.

6 As the insistence on specificities pervades Strathern's work, I might footnote a passim here. But for the argument and the example of the coast and the hillsides, and the image of fractal divisions, see Strathern, *Partial Connections*. For an exposition on differences within an Essex village in the 1960s, see Strathern, *Kinship at the Core*. At the time she did not dwell on the trope of the fractal yet, but retrospectively it is easy to see such an image at work already.