

**Mol, Annemarie. 2024. *Eating is an English word*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 191 pp. Pb.: \$25.95. ISBN: 9781478030867.**

Book review by

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There has been a growing interest in news media, podcasts and popular culture in the sensory experience of food and the relationship between food and memory. But when journalists turn to experts on this topic, it is almost always the neuroscientists of various stripes who get the call. This is frustrating for food anthropologists who are convinced that sensing needs to be studied in its various cultural practices, not in a decontextualized laboratory, where knowledge of “flavor perception” seems to be generated. Annemarie Mol’s work has been an important challenge to approaches grounded in neuroscience, as well as consumer marketing and similar fields.

This book collects a number of key articles that she has published over the course of the past 15 years, with various collaborators which not only challenge the universalizing assumptions of these fields (“we all eat”) but go further to ask questions both about the nature of “tasting” and whether sensory experience is really what is going on at all at moments of so-called eating. Mol employs what she calls a material semiotic approach that focuses both on the words we use to talk about activities such as “tasting,” and the practices themselves, embedded in relations with material objects of various kinds. Mol and her collaborators draw from what I would call a neo-Whorfian perspective (or one combined with performative linguistics), to show the ways that seemingly subtle differences between words that are translated as all meaning *eating* or *tasting* mark significant differences in meanings and practices. This is part of a strong critique of the hegemony of English as the language of theory and comparison, and a powerful argument for seeing local languages as equal sources of theoretical insight. As Mol notes in the introduction to the collected essays: “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” (p. 15).

*Eating is an English Word* is made up of five previously published articles and one new chapter, sandwiched between an introduction and conclusion. I had read several of the chapters in their article form, and have used them in my teaching as well. Reading them together allowed me to take in the breadth of Mol’s project to destabilize these universalizing terms that have been used by food studies scholars of different stripes. The most well-known of the previously published works is probably *Chapter two, Mixing Methods, Tasting Fingers: Notes on an Ethnographic Experiment*, which Mol wrote with seven other scholars, a report on a dinner party in which the collective, experts and novices cooked and consumed a meal of viscous substances, deploying, as much as possible, their fingers. This is a beautiful piece that explores some of the colonial assumptions of table manners, while at the same time giving serious treatment to the claim that I’ve heard made especially by colleagues from India that eating with your fingers makes the food taste better, or simply that fingers taste. As with *Chapter four, Talking Pleasures, Writing Dialects: Outlining Research on Schmecka*, Mol’s goal (along with her student Anna Mann, who is co-author in both) is to displace the experience of taste from the common sense or neuroscience insistence that it happens on the tongue, or in the brain. As *Chapter four* illustrates, tasting can happen from anticipation or satiation, that is, in the nose prior to eating, or in the stomach afterwards. Students in my classes schooled in the sensory assumptions of Western academia have typically expressed surprise and delight in encountering these ideas, and those from outside the hegemonic Western tradition an appreciative recognition.

One previously published piece, co-authored with Rebecca Ibanez-Martin, and which I hadn’t previously read, was particularly striking. *Chapter five, Joaquin Les Gusta: On Gut-Level Love for a Lamb of the House*, explores the phrase in the title, which they translate as Joaquin (the lamb) gives great enjoyment to the Galician farm family who cares for him and eventually eats him. Here they take the truism that small farmers care deeply for their animals to show ethnographically how Joaquin is raised with care and devotion, encouraged and expected to develop his own personality. Even when he appears on the plate, he is still Joaquin, still a source of memories and enjoyment. When the ethnographer praises the cook, she responds ““Don’t thank me! Thank Joaquin!... He was such a nice lamb, so good and affectionate. Really, we never had such a nice lamb.”” She adds: ““He would even give kisses to the pig”” (p. 105).

What constantly struck me in reading *Eating is an English Word* was the way that Mol's approach led to rich and often surprising ethnographic observations. The same ethnographic acuity can be found in *Chapter three, Chupar Frutas in Salvador da Bahia: A case of Practice-Specific Alterities*, in which she and her co-author Mattijs van de Port explore the different experiences of "eating" and "sucking" fruit as a way to challenge the universality of the verb "to eat" itself.

*Chapter six, Settling on an Okay Meal: An English Eater between Appeals and Apprehensions*, challenges the concept of "Consumer Choice" through an auto-ethnography provided by co-author John Law, of choosing food for lunch at a roadside restaurant in the midst of a long drive. Once again, the insights from this mundane activity reward the readers, as they take an approach that provides a deep sense of the complexity that goes into seemingly simple decisions about a meal, an approach similar to the one I have been advocating for in understanding cooking. In each of these examples, the ethnographic insights could also benefit from a diachronic approach, comparing, for example, other roadside meals or other lambs (was Joaquin remembered beyond his last meal?). But *Eating is an English Word* throws the gauntlet down to scholars of food, eating, and taste, to look for other ways and other words to approach our subject. I do hope that we pick it up.